

THE UNTOLD TRUE STORY OF MAD DOG SHRIVER:

Mad Dog led dozens of covert missions into Laos & Cambodia until his luck ran out.

By Maj. John L. Plaster, USAR (Ret.)

There undoubtedly was not a single recon man in SOG more accomplished or renowned than Mad Dog Shriver.

Mad Dog! In the late 1960s, no Special Forces trooper at Ft. Bragg even breathed those top secret letters, "S-O-G," but everyone had heard of the legendary Studies and Observations Group Green Beret recon team leader, Sergeant First Class Jerry Shriver, dubbed a "mad dog" by Radio Hanoi. It was Jerry Shriver who'd spoken the most famous rejoinder in SOG history, radioing his superiors not to worry that NVA forces had encircled his tiny team. "No, no," he explained, "I've got 'em right where I want 'em -- surrounded from the inside."



Fully decked out, Mad Dog was a walking arsenal with an imposing array of sawed-off shotgun or suppressed submachine gun, pistols, knives and grenades. "He looked like Rambo," First Sergeant Billy Greenwood thought. Blond, tall and thin, Shriver's face bore chiseled features around piercing blue eyes. "There was no soul in the eyes, no emotion," thought SOG Captain Bill O'Rourke. "They were just eyes."

By early 1969, Shriver was well into his third continuous year in SOG, leading top secret intelligence gathering teams deep into the enemy's clandestine Cambodian sanctuaries where he'd teased death scores of times. Unknown to him, however, forces beyond his control at the highest levels of government in Hanoi and Washington were steering his fate.

The Strategic Picture Every few weeks of early 1969, the docks at Cambodia's seaport of Sihanoukville bustled with East European ships offloading to long lines of Hak Ly Trucking Company lorries. Though ostensibly owned by a Chinese businessman, the Hak Ly Company's true operator was North Vietnam's Trinh Sat intelligence service. The trucks' clandestine cargo of rockets, smallarms ammunition and mortar rounds rolled overnight to the heavily jungled frontier of Kampong Cham Province just three miles from the border with South Vietnam, a place the Americans had nicknamed the Fishhook, where vast stockpiles sustained three full enemy divisions, plus communist units across the border inside South Vietnam -- some 200,000 foes.

Cambodian Prince Sihanouk was well aware of these neutrality violations; indeed, his fifth wife, Monique, her mother and half-brother were secretly peddling land rights and political protection to the NVA; other middlemen were selling rice to the NVA by the thousands of tons. Hoping to woo Sihanouk away from the communists, the Johnson Administration had watched passively while thousands of GIs were killed by communist forces operating from Cambodia, and not only did nothing about it, but said nothing, even denied it was happening.

And now, each week of February and March 1969, more Americans were dying than lost in the Persian Gulf War, killed by NVA forces that struck quickly then fled back to "neutral" Cambodia.

Combined with other data, SOG's Cambodian intelligence appeared on a top secret map which National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger studied aboard Air Force One at Brussels airport the morning of 24 February 1969. Sitting with Kissinger was Colonel Alexander Haig, his military assistant, while representing the president was White House Chief of Staff H.R. "Bob" Haldeman. During the new administration's transition, President Nixon had asked Kissinger to determine how to deal with the Cambodian buildup and counter Hanoi's "fight and talk" strategy.

While President Nixon addressed NATO's North Atlantic Council, those aboard Air Force One worked out details for a clandestine U.S. response: The secret bombing of Cambodia's most remote sanctuaries, which would go unacknowledged unless Prince Sihanouk protested. When Air Force One departed Brussels, Kissinger briefed President Nixon, who approved the plan but postponed implementing it. Over the coming three weeks, Nixon twice warned Hanoi, "we will not tolerate attacks which result in heavier casualties to our men at a time that we are honestly trying to seek peace at the conference table in Paris." The day after Nixon's second warning, the NVA bombarded Saigon with 122mm rockets obviously smuggled through Cambodia. Three days later, Nixon turned loose the B-52s on the Fishhook, the first secret Cambodian raid, which set off 73 secondary explosions.

A Special SOG Mission Not one peep emanated from Phnom Penh or Hanoi and here was a fitting irony: For four years the North Vietnamese had denied their presence in Cambodia, and now, with U.S. bombs falling upon them, they could say nothing. Nixon suspended further B-52 strikes in hopes Hanoi's negotiators might begin productive discussions in Paris, but the talks droned on pointlessly.

To demonstrate that America, too, could "talk and fight," President Nixon approved a second secret B-52 strike, this time against a target proposed by General Creighton Abrams with Ambassador Bunker's endorsement: COSVN, the Central Office for South Vietnam, the almost mythical Viet Cong headquarters which claimed to run the whole war. An NVA deserter had pinpointed the COSVN complex 14 miles southeast of Memot, Cambodia, in the Fishhook, just a mile beyond the South Vietnamese border. The COSVN raid was laid on for 24 April.

Apprised of the upcoming B-52 strike, Brigadier General Philip Davidson, the MACV J-2, thought that instead of just bombing COSVN, a top secret SOG raiding force should hit the enemy headquarters as soon as the bombs stopped falling. He phoned Colonel Steve Cavanaugh, Chief SOG, who agreed and ordered the Ban Me Thuot-based Command and Control South, CCS, to prepare a Green Beret-led company of Montagnard mercenaries for the special mission.

At CCS, the historic COSVN raid fell upon its most accomplished man, that living recon legend, Mad Dog Shriver, and Captain Bill O'Rourke. Though O'Rourke would command the company-size raiding force, Shriver equally would influence the operation, continuing an eight-month collaboration they'd begun when they ran recon together.



"Ready to insert deep into Cambodia on a covert operation, "Mad Dog" carries his trusty suppressed Grease Gun, Gerber fighting knife and plenty of grenades." (Photo by Medal of Honor winner, Jim Fleming)

Mad Dog -- the Man and the Myth

There was no one at CCS quite like Mad Dog Shriver. Medal of Honor recipient Jim Fleming, who flew USAF Hueys for SOG, found Shriver, "the quintessential warrior-loner, anti-social, possessed by what he was doing, the best team, always training, constantly training." Shriver rarely spoke and walked around camp for days wearing the same clothes. In his sleep he cradled a loaded rifle, and in the club he'd buy a case of beer, open every can, then go alone to a corner and drink them all. Though he'd been awarded a Silver Star, five Bronze Stars and the Soldiers Medal, the 28-year-old Green Beret didn't care about decorations.

But he did care about the Montagnard hill tribesmen, and spent all his money on them, even collected food, clothes, whatever people would give, to distribute in Yard villages. He was the only American at CCS who lived in the Montagnard barracks. "He was almost revered by the Montagnards," O'Rourke says.

Shriver's closest companion was a German shepherd he'd brought back from Taiwan which he named Klaus. One night Klaus got sick on beer some recon men fed him and crapped on the NCO club floor; they rubbed his nose in it and threw him out. Shriver arrived, drank a beer, removed his blue velvet smoking jacket and derby hat, put a .38 revolver on a table, then dropped his pants and defecated on the floor. "If you want to rub my nose in this," he dared, "come on over." Everyone pretended not to hear him; one man who'd fed Klaus beer urged the Recon Company commander to intervene. The captain laughed in his face.

"He had this way of looking at you with his eyes half-open," recon man Frank Burkhart remembers. "If he looked at me like that, I'd just about freeze."

Shriver always had been different. In the early 1960s, when Rich Ryan served with him in the 7th Army's Long Range Patrol Company in Germany, Shriver's buddies called him "Digger" since they thought he looked like an undertaker. As a joke his LRRP comrades concocted their own religion, "The Mahoganites," which worshipped a mahogany statue. "So we would carry Shriver around on an empty bunk with a sheet over him and candles on the corners," recalled Ryan, "and chant, 'Maaa-haa-ga-ney, Maaa-haa-ga-ney.' Scared the hell out of new guys."

Medal of Honor recipient Fleming says Shriver "convinced me that for the rest of my life I would not go into a bar and cross someone I didn't know."

But no recon man was better in the woods. "He was like having a dog you could talk to," O'Rourke explained. "He could hear and sense things; he was more alive in the woods than any other human being I've ever met." During a company operation on the Cambodian border Shriver and an old Yard compatriot were sitting against a tree, O'Rourke recalled. "Suddenly he sat bolt upright, they looked at each other, shook their heads and leaned back against the tree. I'm watching this and wondering, what the hell's going on? And all of a sudden these birds flew by, then a nano-second later, way off in the distance, 'Boom-boom!' -- shotguns. They'd heard that, ascertained what it was and relaxed before I even knew the birds were flying."

Shriver once went up to SOG's Command and Control North for a mission into the DMZ where Captain Jim Storter encountered him just before insert. "He had pistols stuck everywhere on him, I mean, he had five or six .38 caliber revolvers." Storter asked him, "Sergeant Shriver, would you like a CAR-15 or M-16 or something? You know the DMZ is not a real mellow area to go into." But Mad Dog replied, "No, them long guns'll get you in trouble and besides, if I need more than these I got troubles anyhow."

Rather than stand down after an operation, Shriver would go out with another team. "He lived for the game; that's all he lived for," Dale Libby, a fellow CCS man said. Shriver once promised everyone he was going on R&R but instead sneaked up to Plei Djerang Special Forces camp to go to the field with Rich Ryan's A Team.

During a short leave stateside in 1968, fellow Green Beret Larry White hung out with Shriver, whose only real interest was finding a lever action .444 Marlin rifle. Purchasing one of the powerful Marlins, Shriver shipped it back to SOG so he could carry it into Cambodia, "to bust bunkers," probably the only levergun used in the war.

And the Real Jerry Shriver Unless you were one of Mad Dog's close friends, the image was perfect prowess -- but the truth was, Shriver confided to fellow SOG Green Beret Sammy Hernandez, he feared death and didn't think he'd live much longer. He'd beat bad odds too many times, and could feel a terrible payback looming.

"He wanted to quit," Medal of Honor winner Fred Zabitosky could see. "He really wanted to quit, Jerry did. I said, 'Why don't you just tell them I want off, I don't want to run any more?' He said he would but he never did; just kept running."

The 5th Special Forces Group executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Charlie Norton, had been watching SOG recon casualties skyrocket and grew concerned about men like Mad Dog whose lives had become a continuous flirtation with death. Norton went to the 5th Group commander and urged, "Don't approve the goddamn extensions these guys are asking for. You approve it again, your chances of killing that guy are very, very good." But the group commander explained SOG needed experienced men for its high priority missions. "Bullshit," Norton snapped, "you're signing that guy's death warrant."

Eventually 5th Group turned down a few extensions but only a very few; the most experienced recon men never had extensions denied. Never.

"Mad Dog was wanting to get out of recon and didn't know how," said recon team leader Sonny Franks, though the half-measure came when Shriver left recon to join his teammate O'Rourke's raider company. And now the COSVN raid would make a fitting final operation; Shriver could face his fear head-on, charge right into COSVN's mysterious mouth and afterward at last call it quits.

Into COSVN's Mouth The morning of 24 April 1969, while high-flying B-52s winged their way from distant Guam, the SOG raider company lined up beside the airfield at Quan Loi, South Vietnam, only 20 miles southeast of COSVN's secret lair.

But just five Hueys were flyable that morning, enough to lift only two platoons; the big bombers could not be delayed, which meant Lieutenant Bob Killebrew's 3rd Platoon would have to stand by at Quan Loi while the 1st Platoon under First Lieutenant Walter Marcantel, and 2nd Platoon under First Lieutenant Greg Harrigan, raided COSVN. Capt. O'Rourke and Mad Dog didn't like it, but they could do nothing.*

Nor could they do anything about their minimal fire support. Although whole waves of B-52s were about to dump thousands of bombs into COSVN, the highly classified Cambodian Rules of Engagement forbade tactical air strikes; it was better to lose an American-led SOG team, the State Department rules suggested, than leave documentable evidence that U.S. F4 Phantoms had bombed this "neutral" territory. It was a curious logic so concerned about telltale napalm streaks or cluster bomb fins, but unconcerned about B-52 bomb craters from horizon to horizon. Chief SOG Cavanaugh found the contradiction "ridiculous," but he could not change the rules.

The B-52 contrails were not yet visible when the raiding force Hueys began cranking and the raiders boarded; Capt. O'Rourke would be aboard the first bird and Shriver on the last so they'd be at each end of the landing Hueys. As they lifted off for the ten-minute flight, the B-52s were making final alignments for the run-in. Minutes later the lead chopper had to turn back because of mechanical problems; O'Rourke could only wish the others Godspeed. Command passed to an operations officer in the second bird who'd come along for the raid, Captain Paul Cahill.

Momentarily the raiders could see dirt geysers bounding skyward amid collapsing trees. Then as the dust settled a violin-shaped clearing took form and the Hueys descended in-trail, hovered for men to leap off, then climbed away.

Then fire exploded from all directions, horrible fire that skimmed the ground and mowed down anyone who didn't dive into a bomb crater or roll behind a fallen tree trunk.

From the back of the LZ, Mad Dog radioed that a machinegun bunker to his left-front had his *(Greg Harrigan and I had been boyhood friends in northeast Minneapolis.) men pinned and asked if anyone could fire at it to relieve the pressure. Holed up in a bomb

crater beneath murderous fire, Capt. Cahill, 1st Lt. Marcantel and a medic, Sergeant Ernest Jamison, radioed that they were pinned, too. Then Jamison dashed out to retrieve a wounded man; heavy fire cut him down, killing him on the spot.

No one else could engage the machinegun that trapped Shriver's men -- it was up to Mad Dog. Skittish Yards looked to Shriver and his half-grin restored a sense of confidence. Then they were on their feet, charging -- Shriver was his old self, running to the sound of guns, a True Believer Yard on either side, all of them dashing through the flying bullets, into the treeline, into the very guts of Mad Dog's great nemesis, COSVN.

And Mad Dog Shriver was never seen again.

The Fight Continues At the other end of the LZ, Jamison's body lay just a few yards from the crater where Capt. Cahill heard bullets cracking and RPGs rocking the ground. When Cahill lifted his head, an AK round hit him in the mouth, deflected up and destroyed an eye. Badly wounded, he collapsed.

In a nearby crater, young Lt. Greg Harrigan directed helicopter gunships whose rockets and mini-guns were the only thing holding off the aggressive NVA. Already, Harrigan reported, more than half his platoon were killed or wounded. For 45 minutes the Green Beret lieutenant kept the enemy at bay, then Harrigan, too, was hit. He died minutes later.

Bill O'Rourke tried to land on another helicopter but his bird couldn't penetrate the NVA veil of lead. Lieutenant Colonel Earl Trabue, their CCS Commander, arrived and flew overhead with O'Rourke but they could do little.

Hours dragged by. Wounded men laid untreated, exposed in the sun. Several times the Hueys attempted to retrieve them and each time heavy fire drove them off. One door gunner was badly wounded. Finally a passing Australian twin-jet Canberra bomber from No. 2 Squadron at Phan Rang heard their predicament on the emergency radio frequency, ignored the fact it was Cambodia, and dropped a bombload which, O'Rourke reports, "broke the stranglehold those guys were in, and it allowed us to go in." Only 1st Lt. Marcantel was still directing air, and finally he had to bring ordnance so close it wounded himself and his surviving nine Montagnards.

One medic ran to Harrigan's hole and attempted to lift his body out but couldn't. "They were pretty well drained physically and emotionally," O'Rourke said. Finally, three Hueys raced in and picked up 15 wounded men. Lieutenant Dan Hall carried out a radio operator, then managed to drag Lt. Harrigan's body to an aircraft. Thus ended the COSVN raid.

A Time for Reflection Afterward Chief SOG Cavanaugh talked to survivors and learned, "The fire was so heavy and so intense that even the guys trying to [evade] and move out of the area were being cut down." It seemed almost an ambush. "That really

shook them up at MACV, to realize anybody survived that [B-52] strike," Col. Cavanaugh said.

The heavy losses especially affected Brig. Gen. Davidson, the MACV J-2, who blamed himself for the catastrophe. "General," Chief SOG Cavanaugh assured him, "if I'd have felt we were going to lose people like that, I wouldn't have put them in there."

It's that ambush-like reception despite a B-52 strike that opens the disturbing possibility of treachery and, it turns out, it was more than a mere possibility. One year after the COSVN raid, the NSA twice intercepted enemy messages warning of imminent SOG operations which could only have come from a mole or moles in SOG headquarters. It would only be long after the war that it became clear Hanoi's Trinh Sat had penetrated SOG, inserting at least one high ranking South Vietnamese officer in SOG whose treachery killed untold Americans, including, most likely, the COSVN raiders.

Of those raiders, Lt. Walter Marcantel survived his wounds only to die six months later in a parachuting accident at Ft. Devens, Mass., while Capt. Paul Cahill was medically retired. Eventually, Green Beret medic Ernest Jamison's body was recovered.

But those lost in the COSVN raid have not been forgotten. Under a beautiful spring sky on Memorial Day, 1993, with American flags waving and an Army Reserve Huey strewing flower petals as it passed low-level, members of Special Forces Association Chapter XX assembled at Lt. Greg Harrigan's grave in Minneapolis, Minn. Before the young lieutenant's family, a Special Forces honor guard placed a green beret at his grave, at last conferring some recognition to the fallen SOG man, a gesture the COSVN raid's high classification had made impossible a quarter-century earlier. Until now, neither Harrigan's family nor the families of the other lost men knew the full story of the top secret COSVN raid.

But the story remains incomplete. As in the case of SOG's other MIAs, Hanoi continues to deny any knowledge of Jerry Shriver.

Capt. O'Rourke concluded Mad Dog died that day. "I felt very privileged to have been his friend," O'Rourke says, "and when he died I grieved as much as for my younger brother when he was killed. Twenty some-odd years later, it still sticks in my craw that I wasn't there. I wish I had been there."



Green Berets of Chap. XX, Special Forces Assoc. & the Harrigan family gather for 1995 memorial service at the Minneapolis grave of young Lt. Greg Harrigan, killed in the top secret SOG raid on COSVN in which Mad Dog became MIA. (Photo-John Murphy)

There remains a popular myth among SOG veterans, that any day now Mad Dog Shriver will emerge from the Cambodian jungle as if only ten minutes have gone by,

look right and left and holler, "Hey! Where'd everybody go?" Indeed, to those who knew him and fought beside him, Mad Dog will live forever.

(This article is derived from Maj. Plaster's book, SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam, published by Simon & Schuster.)