

Before there were 'Night Stalkers,' these daredevil pilots got US special operators to their missions deep behind enemy lines

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Bettmann/Getty Images The door gunner in a UH-1B Huey gunship fires on Vietcong positions during a search-and-destroy mission in the Mekong Delta, January 23, 1968.

US commandos fought a covert war in the jungles of Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War.

Their operations were supported by dedicated Air Force, Navy, and Army fixed-wing and helicopter units.

Those pilots and crews flew high-risk missions deep into enemy territory to support US special operators.

While the US was waging a conventional war in North and South Vietnam, American commandos fought a covert war in the jungles of Southeast Asia for eight years.

Operating under Military Assistance Command Vietnam-Studies and Observations Group (MACV-SOG), Army Green Berets, Navy SEALs, and Air Commandos conducted highly classified operations in Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam — where US troops weren't supposed to be.

SOG operated mainly in small recon teams — usually six to 10 special operators — that went behind enemy lines to track, identify, or sabotage North Vietnamese units and supply lines.

Although their small numbers afforded them stealth, they faced attack from hundreds or thousands of enemy troops if they were compromised.

In such situations, their only chance of survival came from the air.

Air Warriors



US Air Force/Capt. Billie D Tedford A US Air Force Bell UH-1P with the "Green Hornets" of the 20th Special Operations Squadron in Laos in 1970.

SOG's [covert nature](#) meant that only a few people could support its operations. That task went to dedicated Air Force, Navy, and Army fixed-wing and helicopter units, in addition to some exceptionally brave South Vietnamese pilots and crews.

The Air Force's 20th Special Operations Squadron, the "Green Hornets," and the Army's 101st Airborne Division's "Black Angels" Huey helicopter gunships were some of the best.

From 1964 to 1972, these and other units worked with SOG and conducted some [jaw-dropping operations](#), but their approach to supporting the highly secretive SOG had differing levels of rigor.

Green Hornet pilots were all experienced commissioned officers with several hundred flight hours under their belt, whereas the Army also used warrant officers who tended to be younger and less experienced.

"The only training process to support MACV-SOG [operations] was on-the-job training and a willingness to be involved in these very dangerous missions, as they were always on a volunteer basis," Roger Lockshier, a crew chief and door gunner with the Black Angels, told Insider.



US Army/Sgt. James K. F. Dung US Army Bell UH-1D helicopters airlift US soldiers during a search-and-destroy mission in South Vietnam, 1966.

When it came to gunners, the Green Hornets recruited experienced crew chiefs and helicopter mechanics and specialists with munitions and weapons.

"All volunteers and highly experienced in their respective disciplines. I personally had been a Huey crew chief for four years prior to going to the 20th. Crew chiefs usually flew [as] Right Gunner, Weapons guys on the left," Alfonso Rivero, a Green Hornet gunner, told Insider.

All Green Hornets had to pass a physical exam from a flight surgeon, graduate from the Pacific Air Force Jungle Survival School in the Philippines, receive a top-secret security clearance. Once in the unit, pilots and gunners had to be certified for SOG operations.

New Green Hornet pilots assigned to both transport and gunship helicopters had to conduct several training flights under the supervision of a qualified pilot, known as a Flight Examiner, Rivero said.

"After the trainer determined the subject was sufficiently proficient, a final Check Flight took place. If passed, the trainee would be certified by the Flight Examiner," Rivero added.

Firepower equaled survival



US Air Force/Capt. Billie D Tedford Bell UH-1P helicopter gunships from the US Air Force's 20th Special Operations Squadron in Cambodia, around 1970.

SOG recon teams often raced to their landing zones with hundreds or thousands of enemy troops just a few moments behind them. The firepower aboard the helicopters picking them up could be the difference between life and death.

The helicopters had to put down a near-constant rate of fire to keep the enemy at bay and deny them the pleasure of killing or capturing the SOG commandos at the last moment, as the commandos exposed themselves to scramble aboard the helicopters. To achieve that, Army and Air Force choppers rolled in with lots of guns.

"There were several configurations for weaponry throughout the Vietnam War, but during my time, 1967 and 1968, the most common configuration was with one 7.62 mm mini-gun and one seven-shot rocket pod mounted on each side of the aircraft," Lockshier said.

Lockshier — who has written about his hair-raising experiences in the book "[We Saved SOG Souls: 101st Airborne Missions in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos During the Vietnam War](#)" — and others in his flight platoon each used a 7.62 mm M-60, often firing it with one hand, or "free-hand style."



Bettmann/Getty Images A helicopter landing zone cleared in heavy Vietnamese jungle by a 15,000-pound bomb dropped by a C-130 cargo plane, March 6, 1971.

A less common configuration for Huey gunships featured a 19-shot rocket pod mounted on each side of the aircraft with a 40 mm cannon on the nose and the two M-60 machine guns used by the crew chief and door-gunner, Lockshier added.

"This configuration was called an Aerial Artillery Platform but more commonly called a 'Hog Gunship,' due to the hoglike appearance to the aircraft the nose cannon created," Lockshier said.

In its gunship configuration, the UH-1P helicopter "carried two rocket pods, each loaded with seven 2.75-inch folding-fin aerial rockets. In addition, two pintle-mounted GAU-2B 7.62 mm mini-guns were operated by the door gunners. The maximum load held by the electric-motor-assisted ammo cans was a total of 12,000 rounds," Rivero said.

The loadout on helicopters in the troop-transport configuration was reduced so the SOG recon team could fit. These Hueys were called "Slicks" because they lacked external armament.

On such missions, the Hueys had only two door gunners, each with M-60 machine guns, but they also carried rope ladders and McGuire or STABO rigs — [special gear used to lift recon teams off the ground](#) without the helicopter landing.



AP Photo/Horst Faas A US Army helicopter gunner leans out while firing on enemy positions as US troops board the helicopter, in South Vietnam, April 4, 1965.

Although "Slicks" could get crowded, the Green Hornet's powerful T-58 engines had no issue carrying a full recon team plus the Air Commandos.

"Our most effective weapon was by far the mini-guns, which could provide the very close support to the teams on the LZ. We could often fire within feet of the team and do it safely. We never had a friendly-fire incident. With rockets, the level of accuracy was somewhat lesser," Rivero added.

SOG had a 100% casualty rate, meaning all its members were either wounded, some of them multiple times, or killed in action. Many who made it back owe their lives to the pilots and crew who supported them.

"SOG rotorheads were the unsung heroes of the eight-year secret war. Time and again their heroics and aviation skills saved the lives of SOG recon teams" and larger SOG units, known as Hatchet Forces, that conducted direct-action missions said John Stryker Meyer, a legendary Green Beret who served two tours in SOG and [has written](#) about his experiences.

These helicopter pilots and crews have had a lasting impact. Today's Air Commandos can trace their lineage back to Vietnam, and the Army's world-famous [160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment](#), the "Night Stalkers," drew its first pilots and crews from the 101st Airborne Division.