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Here's a story I wrote on George Quamo last year for the Albany Times Union and the Khe Sanh Marines magazine.
 Thought you might want it.

Major George Quamo: An American hero

"You have never lived until you have almost died. For those who have fought for it, life has a special flavor the protected will never know."

Special Operations motto

By TOM HAGGERTY

Since Sept 11, Americans have become familiar with the term "Special Forces" and the role they are playing in Afghanistan and Iraq.

It wasn't always that way, as the story of a young man from Averill Park, N.Y., will attest. So secret were the missions of America's Special Forces in Vietnam in the 1960s that even now, decades after the war, many "official" accounts have never been made public. Most were reportedly destroyed even before the war ended in 1975.

The name George Quamo is etched on the Rensselaer County Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Troy, N.Y., and of course, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington.

But few outside of the select group of men who served with him know anything about the extraordinary heroism and leadership Quamo exhibited there.

"I still receive phone calls from guys who served under him," said his brother James Quamo, now of Spencerport, N.Y. "Some of them even cry telling me how they felt about my brother."

Major George Quamo was a highly-decorated Army Green Beret who served in MACV-SOG (Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Studies and Observation Group, formerly known as the Special Operations Group) from 1963 until his death in 1968. About 2,000 people served in SOG during the Vietnam War. It was an all-volunteer organization composed of some of the nation's best military personnel - Green Berets, Navy Seals, and Air Force Air Commandos.

SOG took its orders directly from Washington where a small staff operating under the acronym SACSA (Special Assistant to the Chairman for Special Activities) coordinated information and orders from the Joints Chiefs of Staff, White House and Central Intelligence Agency. Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the theater commander in Vietnam, did not have complete authority over SOG, but was kept fully informed of its missions, both before and after, and often sat in debriefings. Covert operations in Southeast Asia were entirely a CIA mission in its early years, but in 1964 it was turned over to the Department of Defense and SOG was established. To maintain secrecy, SOG's budget was hidden in top-secret Navy appropriations.

SOG teams performed some of the most dangerous and heroic missions of the Vietnam War, including cross-border reconnaissance and lightning "Hatchet Force" attacks on North Vietnamese positions along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in North Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. SOG teams were also involved in recovering downed U.S. pilots, making prisoner of war rescue attempts and penetrating deep into Laos and Cambodia to lead guerrilla

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forces they had trained in South Vietnam. Some SOG troops were also trained for HALO insertions, high-altitude, low-opening parachute jumps. The activities of SOG teams reportedly diverted some 100,000 North Vietnamese troops from the front lines, thereby saving thousands of American lives throughout the war.

SOG recon teams suffered 100 percent casualties in 1967, the highest casualty rate of any U.S. unit since the Civil War. It also recorded the highest kill ratio in modern military history, 150 to one, with a high of 158 to one in 1970.

Of the 17 Congressional Medals of Honor awarded to Special Forces troops in Vietnam, SOG troops received 10 Medals of Honor, the highest number of any comparable unit of its size in the history of American warfare.

The most highly decorated soldier in American history, Sergeant first-class Robert Howard of Opelicka, Ala., was a member of SOG and received the Medal of Honor, Distinguished Service Cross, Silver Star and eight Purple Hearts. Howard was nominated for the Medal of Honor three times in 13 months, a feat unequaled in American history, and many who witnessed his heroics felt he should have won the medal all three times. His leadership and bravery earned Howard a direct commission to the rank of captain in 1970 and he retired a full colonel in 1995.

SOG troops received more than 2,000 individual awards for heroism in Vietnam, including 23 Distinguished Service Crosses, the nation's second highest award. In the aftermath of the battle of Lang Vie, 24 Special Forces members were awarded a Medal of Honor, a Distinguished Service Cross, 21 Silver Stars and a Bronze Star. On April 4, 2001, nearly 30 years after it ceased operations, MACV-SOG was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation during ceremonies at Fort Bragg, N.C. The Presidential Unit Citation is the nation's highest unit award and given only to those units that display extraordinary heroism under fire. It is equal to the individual award of the Distinguished Service Cross.

Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub, who commanded SOG from 1966 to 1968, said the unit was the "most incredible collection of courageous and professional soldiers that has ever served this nation."

"They accomplished feats of unbelievable heroism," Singlaub said. "They were just extraordinary young men." MACV-SOG was established on Jan. 16, 1964 and completed its eight-year tour of duty on March 31, 1972. During that time, 10 SOG teams were lost, 14 teams were overrun and destroyed, and more than 300 soldiers were recorded as either killed or missing in action. To this day, 50 members of SOG are still listed as MIA.

In the four years George Quamo served in SOG, he would establish himself as one America's finest warriors. Young, handsome and brilliant, the 5-11, 180-pound Quamo was "tough as nails" and one of SOG's most highly-respected field commanders. He spoke three foreign languages - Laotian, Vietnamese and Thai - and was even an instructor in Vietnamese at the Army language school in Monterey, Calif.

Col. David C. "Bulldog" Smith was one of Quamo's last commanders. A tough, former Army Ranger during the Korean War, Smith served two different tours with Quamo in Vietnam, first as a member of the Green Beret "A" teams in the early 1960s and later as a SOG base commander.

"Bulldog" took over as commanding officer of FOB-3 (Forward Operations Base) of Command and Control North (CCN), located on the outskirts of Khe Sanh in early February of 1968. Quamo served as his executive officer. "George was one of the finest soldiers I ever serve with," Smith said. "He was considered the Lawrence of Arabia of Vietnam. Everyone respected him. The men he served with, the Laotians and the Montagnards. He was an outstanding leader and he led by example. He never asked anyone to do something he couldn't or wouldn't do himself. He was at ease talking with a general as he was talking to a private. He was just a great officer."

About a month after taking over as commanding officer of FOB3, Smith was wounded when a piece of shrapnel from an incoming round struck him in the head. He and Quamo had been planning a top-secret mission where the pair would be inserted deep inside Laos to form a guerrilla force that would attack the North Vietnamese from the rear. After Quamo was reported missing in action in April of 1968, Smith was offered a replacement for the Laos mission. He declined, saying: "I would only go with George."

Born in Lynn, Mass., on June 10, 1940, Quamo was the oldest son of Alexander and Kaliroi Quamo who emigrated from Albania to the United States in the 1930s. The family settled in Lynn and raised four daughters, Yilka, Tefta, Andronika and Marietta and two sons, George and James. The Quamos moved to Averill Park, N.Y., a small community east of Albany, in 1953. The children attended Averill Park High School, with George graduating in 1958. He joined the Army in October of that year.

Quamo, a natural leader (he was president of his high school class and a quarterback on the football team), was considered "one of the Army's brightest young officers." And the "Perfumed Prince," as former SOG sergeant Charles Berg, referred to him, didn't take long to earn the respect of his troops.

Master Sergeant Charles "Skip" Minnicks, at 38, was the oldest team leader in SOG when "this fresh-faced captain" took over the reconnaissance teams in the fall of the 1967. Quamo, 27, was the youngest major in SOG when he was promoted to that rank on Oct. 6, 1967.

"I was madder than hell when he took over," said Minnicks, a highly-decorated SOG veteran of four tours in Vietnam. "And I made no bones about it. I didn't hide my feelings at all. He looked like a kid and I resented him."

"He didn't say anything about it for a few weeks and then one day we were in the jungle somewhere and he pulled me aside. He said: 'We're both in this for same reason. We're both fighting the same enemy. I don't want to fight you, too. We've have to work as a team.'"

"Well, of course, he was right," Minnicks continued. "And I really felt bad about how I had acted."

"But I'll tell you something. I grew to love that man. I would have crawled up inside the barrel of an enemy cannon for him. I mean that. He was one helluva of an officer. I can't say enough about him. He was just excellent."

Operating deep inside enemy lines, SOG teams conducted some 1,398 reconnaissance missions. "Our exploits did not go unnoticed," Minnicks said, "Not one wounded or captured SOG operative was ever returned to us alive. None. George Quamo knew that going in. No quarter asked, none given. His kind of game. He was man's man, a leader and one helluva soldier."

Minnicks and Quamo were both members of "Special Projects," which included developing a guerrilla force to operate in Laos in the Mu Gai Pass area. Quamo commanded four reconnaissance teams, including RT PENNSYLVANIA, which ran more than 20 missions along the Ho Chi Minh trail as well as in Laos and Cambodia. The teams were usually made up of three Americans and four or five Bru guerrilla soldiers.

The Bru soldiers were part of the Montagnards or "Mountain people" and were said to have an almost magical ability to detect the presence of others in the jungle. SOG units trained Montagnards, or "Yards" as Americans called them, for guerrilla missions and they became a very trusted ally. The North Vietnamese killed thousands of Montagnards during and after the war. To this day, a number of Special Forces veterans make pilgrimages to Vietnam to bring food and medical supplies to the Montagnards.

More than 8,000 indigenous soldiers served with SOG during the Vietnam War and many performed with great valor. Many were also killed.

Quamo had an "intense dedication" to both American and Bru teammates and by all accounts was an extremely knowledgeable and forceful commander. His intensity and forcefulness are exemplified in an account of an incident written by Rev. Ray Stubbe, the Marine chaplain during the siege of Khe Sanh, for the magazine "Red Clay." (Stubbe later formed the Khe Sanh Veterans Association and helped edit and write articles for "Red Clay" which related stories about the siege. A number of these accounts were about Quamo's SOG teams at FOB-3.) Stubbe wrote: "PENNSYLVANIA observed units of NVA and we knew there was a huge strong force. Part of the NVA plans included the preparation of the Co Roc Massif, a boomerang-shaped mountain just inside the Laos border. Standing atop Co Roc were Major George Quamo and Master Sergeant "Skip" Minnicks. They observed units of the NVA that had moved most of their forces in the area for the attack on Khe Sanh.

"Overhead, a Birdog aircraft circled with its passenger, Col. Harold K. Rose, the SOG commander at FOB-3.

Rose radioed Quamo, 'I want you out of there. I want you out of there now!'

Quamo, dressed in his black uniform - all his men dress in black - simply responded: 'To my knowledge, I am in command at this location. Out.'

Former Marine Capt. Jerry Hudson, who served as an intelligence officer at Khe Sanh, said Quamo was "one super man."

"I had heard all kinds of stories about him before I met him," Hudson said. "He was a legend over there."

"The guys in SOG used to bring back all kinds of information, but because it was all top secret, the information went directly back to the higher ups in Saigon and Washington and then they filtered it back down to the guys in the bunkers. Usually too late."

"George thought a lot of the information should have been given to us right away. The North Vietnamese would move their positions or change tactics by the time we got the information back. So he began giving some of it to us right away."

"He personally went out and ran a phone line between the Special Forces guys and our bunker so I would get information faster."

"I don't know how or where he got his information. All I know is you would see him go through the wire with a couple other guys with heavy packs and he'd be gone for five or six days. He was really something," Hudson said.

"Bulldog" Smith confirmed Quamo "leaked" the information to the Marines, yet did it without compromising SOG's own top-secret orders.

"He (Quamo) would tell the Marine intelligence officer (Hudson) that such and such area is 'hot' or 'if I was in your shoes, I might try this area' 'kind of 'suggesting' targets."

Hudson, by the way, had helped train Special Forces soldiers at the Naval Amphibious Base at Little Creek, Va., in preparation for recon missions that were conducted from submarines near the shoreline both day and night.

Because of his background, Hudson developed a special relationship with SF troops and Quamo in particular.

"We spoke from the same Bible," he said.

Although only a high school graduate, Quamo was a major in Special Forces at age 27. One SOG officer, himself a West Point graduate, thought Quamo so brilliant that he could have "gone through college in a year and half."

Quamo also commanded "Project Elephant," a SOG operation that sent teams into Laos to train guerrilla forces as well as leading insertion missions into North Vietnam. He also led other missions to Co Roc Mountain "while that area was swarming with NVA."

"Sometimes he just defied the enemy to come get us," Minnicks recalled. "One time on Co Roc, he had all four teams up there and there were enemy patrols chasing us all over the place. He led us up a hill and then stood up and defied them to come get us. He was one tough guy."

Master Sgt. Robert Cavanaugh, the leader of recon team OKLAHOMA, who also served with Quamo on cross-border operations in Laos, said the officer had great leadership abilities.

"I often think that if George had lived, he would have become one of the great motivation speakers of our time. He had that kind of effect on people."

Quamo's finest moment came at Lang Vei when he led a heroic rescue of the Special Forces unit that was overrun by a North Vietnamese tank attack on Feb. 7, 1968. The outpost, located some nine miles from Khe Sanh, came under a surprise attack, although SOG observers had been warning of tank tracks and NVA troop movement for several days.

Quamo was in Khe Sanh when he heard accounts of the battle over the radio. He immediately went to the commander of the 26th Marines, who had been under siege themselves at Khe Sanh, and asked for help to relieve the Special Forces at Lang Vei. The commander, Col. David Lounds, denied the request, saying it would cost too many American lives. Maj. Gen. Rathvon Tompkins, the 3rd Marine Division commander, also recommended Lang Vei should be abandoned. The Marine commanders feared a large relief force to Lang Vei would be annihilated by a North Vietnamese ambush.

A livid Quamo then took things into his own hands. He quickly rounded up 14 Special Forces volunteers and about 30 Bru tribesmen and asked them to help rescue their embattled comrades. Minnicks quoted Quamo as saying: "We may not be come back, but we've got to help these guys get out of there."

He then contacted Marine CH-46 helicopter pilots and told them to "get ready to fly" and that the order had come from their commander. Harve Saal, who served with Quamo and would later write a four-volume account of SOG, said: "George just scalliwaged those guys and told them 'you have to do this because your boss said so.'"

Quamo's persistence saved the lives of 14 surviving Special Forces soldiers at Lang Vei. Years later, Quamo is referred to in the book "Night of the Silver Stars" as making a "heroic" rescue at Lang Vei. Already awarded two Silver Stars and a Bronze Star for bravery on previous missions, Quamo would be awarded the Distinguished Service Cross posthumously for "exposing himself to a tremendous volume of enemy fire" at Lang Vei.

"He was the last man to leave the landing zone," the DSC citation reads. "Major Quamo's intense dedication to his men, his coolness in battle and his extraordinary courage are in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Army."

"I really believe he should have been awarded a Medal of Honor for getting those guys out of Lang Vei," Minnicks reflected. "He saved their lives."

Former "Hatchet Force" Platoon Sgt. Stephen "Tim" Kirk, who was awarded a Bronze Star at Lang Vei, recalled Quamo's leadership:

"I remember him standing out there in the LZ (landing zone) like George Patton. He was totally in control of directing everything in the midst of all that incoming."

A month and half later, on April 14, 1968 Quamo disappeared and the mystery of his disappearance has baffled many who served with him. His last days begin with Col. Roy A. Bahr taking command of FOB-3 on March 25, 1968. Quamo was also Bahr's executive officer.

"I was the last living person to see him alive," Bahr said.

"I only knew him for about a month, but he was one of the most impressive officers I ever met. The men loved him and would do anything for him. He was so young, yet so impressive. It was a shame we lost him."

Rev. Stubbe quotes Bahr in an article in "Red Clay."

"I was 37, going to be 38, and I see George Quamo. He's a major and he's 27 years old. And this guy is sharp. I mean he was outstanding. I walked around 'I'm the new boss, and this guy, he's almost God to these people, because he's such a good man. He had gone into Laos and brought out a whole bunch of Bru just as the siege (of Khe Sanh) began. He had such empathy with all the Montagnards, particularly the Bru people"

Bahr said he and Quamo coordinated strikes and patrols outside the perimeter around Khe Sanh, which was surrounded by as many as four divisions of NVA.

"We then heard the Marines were going to abandon Khe Sanh and I knew there were some 45,000 NVA in the area," Bahr said. "We only had a few Special Forces troops (about 30). It would have been suicide to stay."

Bahr said he drew up an evacuation plan and had the unit's intelligence officer, S2 Hammond Salley, type up the plan because it was so sensitive.

Bahr said he knew Quamo had not had any R&R in some time, so he asked him to deliver the top-secret papers to Danang and take a few days of R&R. He then walked Quamo down to the airstrip and watched him get into a U-17, a fixed-winged aircraft that reportedly was "contracted" to the CIA. The plane, registered to Nationalist China so it could not be traced back to the U.S. if shot down, was piloted by two Vietnamese pilots. The plane

made a single contact with a radar control center located on Monkey Mountain near Danang and was never heard from again.

Prior to leaving Khe Sanh, someone had discovered a strange cylinder in FOB-3 with Chinese markings. It had been discovered about Feb. 1, but Quamo decided to bring it to Danang to be assessed. Some have theorized the cylinder might have been some sort of ordnance that might have been shot or exploded while on the aircraft. Minnicks said it was an "unexploded artillery round that Major Quamo wanted examined."

And then there's the story of "Bulldog" Smith and the top-secret plan to go deep inside Laos with Quamo. Both would be declared missing in action - even to their families. They would then train and command a guerrilla force inside Laos which would then launch an attack on the Viet Cong from the rear.

When Quamo was declared missing in action, Smith became angry because he thought Quamo had undertaken the mission without him.

"I was madder than hell, because I thought he had taken off without me," Smith said. He didn't believe the report that his executive officer and friend was missing in action because it was exactly the cover story they were both supposed to have used for the actual mission.

"I finally went to General Westmoreland and he told me, George was really missing."

An extensive search was undertaken as soon as Quamo's plane was reported missing, including a naval search. Since Danang was near the sea, it was thought the plane might have drifted out to sea and crashed. Six years later, on June 26, 1974, Vietnamese woodcutters discovered the wreckage in a dense jungle area and the remains of Major Quamo and the two pilots were discovered and identified. The jungle had apparently swallowed up the plane on impact.

Bob Donaghue, a former Special Forces radio sergeant who served with Quamo and visited the crash site years later, said the plane had crashed into a mountain on top of a tunnel that was used by the NVA.

"George was real hard charger and a great commander," Donaghue said. "I loved the guy."

"Our CO was 'Bulldog' Smith," Donaghue continued. "Tears still come to his eyes whenever he talks about Major Quamo."

"I asked my brother to be the best man at my wedding," James Quamo remembered. "He said he couldn't make it and that he felt bad about. He said he had to do something important and couldn't talk about it. I got married on April 13, 1968, and he was killed on April 14, 1968."

The remains of Major George Quamo were flown back to the United States and he was buried in Arlington National Cemetery on Oct. 21, 1974, as his family and several Army officers and soldiers looked on. There were no bands, no generals and no parades. He died at age 27, a very "special" soldier.

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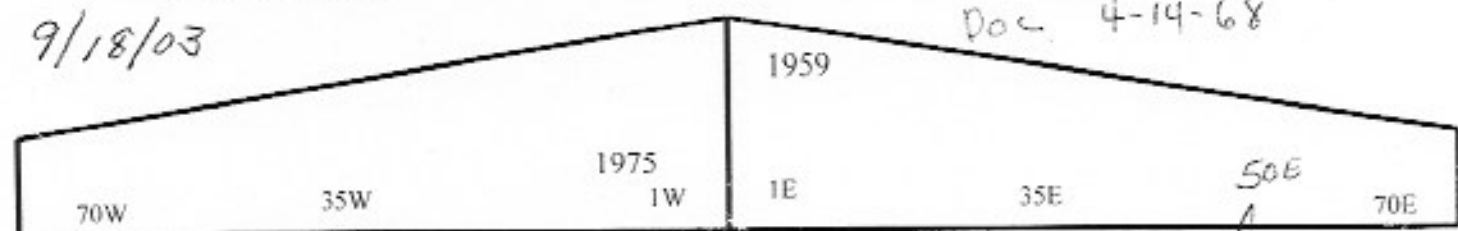
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COHOES TRAVELING
MEMORIAL

9/18/03

Panel 50E Lin 1

Doc. 4-14-68



Panel and line locations on the Wall

Panel numbers are on the bottom of every panel. Names are arranged in chronological order of the date of casualty, beginning at the center on panel 1E, under 1959, down panel 1E, then moving right towards 70E, then from 70W to 1W. The Wall tells a story of the day to day personal tragedy of war, yet the wrap-around effect provides a closure, like a wound that is closed and healing. Within a given day the names are arranged alphabetically.

Line number count down from the top of each panel. On the straight edge of the names on each panel there is a dot every 10 lines. Several names have been added since the Wall was built in 1982. Those names were placed as close to the correct position as possible. MIA's are also listed on the Wall.

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