



Nick Brokhausen. *We Few: U.S. Special Forces in Vietnam.* Philadelphia: Casemate, 2018. 272 pp. \$32.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61200-580-5.

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Published on H-War (May, 2022)

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We Few: U.S. Special Forces in Vietnam is the most recent account of the activities of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam Special Operations Group (MACV-SOG), published since the turn of the century. Author Nick Brokhausen, who served in the US Army for seventeen years, provides an earthy memoir of his service with MACV-SOG in 1970. Assigned to Command and Control North (CCN), based at Da Nang, Brokhausen participated in operations in southern Laos and northern Cambodia. Focusing on American troops and their indigenous allies, *We Few* provides a grunt's eye view largely divorced from the larger conduct of the war. Brokhausen writes that his work is a tribute to the Montagnard people who allied with the United States, who were rewarded by being "abandoned through political compromise" (p. xiii). As a result, readers should treat it as a memoir rather than a work attempting to provide analysis.

Brokhausen organizes *We Few* both chronologically and thematically, beginning with his return to Vietnam for a second tour of duty and assignment to MACV-SOG as a volunteer seeking to avoid large line infantry formations that he appears to have held in deep contempt. This development was not to Brokhausen's liking since it represented the bleeding edge of American combat operations in Vietnam, in which squad-sized teams con-

ducted reconnaissance missions into southern Laos and northern Cambodia. Each team was led by two or three American personnel and up to nine indigenous troops. The teams used a variety of captured and allied equipment based on the needs of their missions and their own preferences. While in the field, they were supported by forward air control aircraft known as Coveys, which maintained communications with teams, arranged for their evacuation, and coordinated air support.

A brief discussion of combat refusals by line infantry companies provides some context of the war's late stages. Brokhausen blames these events not on the process of Vietnamization and the feeling among some soldiers that they did not want to die in futile efforts to occupy terrain that US forces would soon abandon but on drug abuse and discipline problems in the ranks. His favored course of action against soldiers who refused orders to fight was to discharge them, revoke their citizenship, and deport them. Brokhausen also disdained concerns over racial justice both in the military and among civilian leaders. This sets the tone for how *We Few* depicts regular soldiers in comparison to those who served in Special Forces.

Brokhausen provides a first-person narrative that is at its best when discussing the organization, tactics, training, operations, and culture of MACV-SOG teams. The goals of the small recon-

teams were to gather information, capture prisoners for interrogation, and call in air strikes while remaining clandestine. By the time Brokhausen joined MACV-SOG in 1970, these missions were very short-lived, as North Vietnamese forces increasingly sought to eradicate the teams. This made air support and quick reaction forces available for their extraction increasingly important. While Brokhausen focuses on his experiences with recon teams, he also provides vivid accounts of the activities of the company-sized Hatchet Force units, which conducted larger raids.

Unlike the norm for most US Army formations, recon teams assigned leader roles based on experience in MACV-SOG and tactical skills, not by formal rank. The high operational tempo combined with high casualty rates meant that as soon as a team's junior American member, or One-One, showed that he could lead his own team, he took over one of his own. On average recon team leaders served in that role for about four months. Within the first seven-to-ten days of his arrival in CCN, Brokhausen indicated that other recon teams had suffered four casualties, leading him to estimate that he would survive about ten days.

Once recon teams received a mission order, they went into isolation to prepare for the operation. A day or two of preparation took place, during which the team leader, or One-Zero, performed aerial reconnaissance with a Covey pilot to select landing and extraction locations. The pilots provided forward air control and reconnaissance for the teams on the ground, coordinating air strikes and evacuation. During this time, the One-One worked with the rest of the team to check weapons and equipment. Mission planning took pains to ensure confusion on the part of North Vietnamese troops. During his first mission, Brokhausen's team relied on the activity provided by another team's extraction to deceive enemy forces into believing that American forces had left the vicinity.

His account of his team's second mission provides Brokhausen the opportunity to comment on the difference between sites, contrasting the bases and personnel at Phu Bai and Quang Tri, and additional commentary on tactics used in the field at Quang Tri, the non-commissioned officer in charge (NCOIC) had served as a One-Zero and would not launch missions into the demilitarized zone unless the air support needed to augment the teams was available. Even this level of caution was not enough to protect the small squads; standard procedure had a Bright Light team as a quick reaction force to help rescue teams who came under heavy fire, but in this case, a single Bright Light team was insufficient to retrieve their comrades requiring Brokhausen's team to almost immediately follow to provide additional assistance. This incident is enlightening in its depiction of combat tactics and the harsh realities these soldiers faced. Brokhausen recounts his attempts at battlefield medicine while his indigenous subordinates executed wounded enemies rather than capturing them because they were unable to secure them for transport to American facilities.

The gallows humor and scrounging activities form a persistent thread through *We Few*. After a post-mission drinking game involving a prohibited concoction known as "bandit brandy," Brokhausen awoke in a Danang military hospital morgue drawer, wearing a toe tag labeled "Killed in Action" and "Bomb Concussion." His apparent resurrection frightened both Brokhausen and the morgue attendant who discovered him. This ridiculous aspect also frames the scrounging Brokhausen and his cohorts engaged in during his tour of duty in MACV-SOG. On one occasion, abetted by the Vietnamese sergeant responsible for maintaining it, they stole an Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) M-3 Halftrack. Brokhausen presents this theft as a caper worthy of a war film in the mode of *Kelly's Heroes* (1970), arguing that anyone could steal a jeep, but stealing this ar-

mored vehicle and repainting it in Afrika Corps logos was something special.

The value of this work is greatly diminished by Brokhausen's regular use of racialized and gendered language and descriptions that may well have been both current and acceptable during the late 1960s or early 1970s. Since it is unlikely that similar language would be acceptable in the professional environments that Brokhausen worked in after leaving the army, they appear to serve primarily to create a sense of authenticity for his narrative. Despite this, Brokhausen's respect for Montagnards and their abilities in combat is evident throughout the text.

Other memoirs cover similar aspects of the MACV-SOG experience but with a wildly different perspective and tone. For example, Thom Nicholson served as the executive officer of a Special Forces A-team in 1966 during his first tour of duty in Vietnam, followed by an assignment as a company commander in CCN during 1969. Like *We Few*, Nicholson's *15 Months in SOG: A Warrior's Tour* (1999) is a deeply personal, episodic memoir. Both works discuss tactics and portray the personalities and challenges soldiers serving in MACV-SOG faced, but Nicholson's account does not strive to prove its authenticity to readers using almost caricatured language in the way Brokhausen's memoir sometimes does. John L. Plaster's memoir, *Secret Commandos: Behind Enemy Lines with the Elite Warriors of SOG* (2018), traces the full course of service possible for soldiers assigned to SOG, starting with his arrival at Fort Campbell Kentucky for basic training in 1967 through service in the recon teams of CCN, followed by duty as a Covey rider in 1970. Plaster's service in CCN overlapped with that of Brokhausen, whose more colorful activities also appear in *Secret Commandos*. The broad scope of Plaster's work and less idiosyncratic style of writing may make it more palatable for some.

Readers seeking a comprehensive history of MACV-SOG to accompany Brokhausen's memoir

would be well served by turning to Robert M. Gillespie's *Black Ops, Vietnam: An Operational History of MACVSOG* (2011), which traces American use of Special Forces in Southeast Asia from OPLAN-34A in 1964 through the final deactivation of MACV-SOG and its successors in March 1973. Gillespie details MACV-SOG operations, changes to its structure, and the ways the organization's mission and focus changed over the course of the war, providing a framework that makes more personalized accounts like *We Few* comprehensible to non-specialists. Richard H. Schultz Jr.'s *The Secret War against Hanoi: Kennedy's and Johnson's Use of Spies, Saboteurs, and Covert Warriors in North Vietnam* (1999) similarly provides a useful complement to *We Few* with a highly readable narrative. Like Gillespie's work, *Secret War against Hanoi* traces the development of US Special Forces, but it departs from the operational focus to also include detailed accounts from soldiers who served in MACV-SOG. As a result, it provides needed context to more limited memoirs like that provided by Brokhausen by presenting an overview of how Prairie Fire teams like RT Habu met increasingly aggressive and larger North Vietnamese Army formations even as American forces continued to withdraw from Vietnam.

We Few is best suited for readers who are interested in a colorful narrative about the exploits of the men who served in MACV-SOG that devotes significant space to the United States' indigenous allies in Vietnam. Historians may find it useful for its detailed discussion of the attitudes of soldiers serving in US Special Forces and their relationships with indigenous allies in Southeast Asia and for its discussions of the challenges these small units faced. While Brokhausen does a good job of capturing the increasingly frenetic pace of operations in CCN as Vietnamization of the war increased from 1970 onward, readers will either need to carefully read the dust jacket to find this date or already be familiar with the chronology of the conflict to understand this context.

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Citation: Chris Levesque. Review of Brokhausen, Nick. *We Few: U.S. Special Forces in Vietnam*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. May, 2022.

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