

# In Vietnam, 'Enemy' Scouts Fought Alongside US Soldiers

By R.W. Trewyn

The early success of U.S. Army Special Forces on horseback in Afghanistan is legendary more than two decades after the fact. They were trailblazing in innumerable ways, and from descriptions by those involved, most of it was made up as they went along.

As one might expect, the U.S. Army Special Operations Command is using those irregular warfare experiences from Afghanistan, as well as Iraq and elsewhere, to update today's training to ensure key lessons learned aren't lost. Many of the most critical lessons relate to partnerships and associated human dynamics.

Accounts by those commanding the earliest forays into Afghanistan make it clear that advice from leaders of Northern Alliance fighters was essential, much of that gained from insights of Taliban combatants who switched sides. They possessed intimate knowledge about the enemy and terrain on which the battles would be fought, which was pivotal to the early victories.

Reading about this brought to mind something similar in Vietnam that I experienced a half-century ago. Back then, a small percentage of Viet Cong guerrilla fighters and North Vietnamese Army troops who had surrendered volunteered to serve with U.S. forces in the field. Within most U.S. Army units, these former enemy combatants were called Kit

Carson scouts, and we had two of them with Company D, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard), 199th Light Infantry Brigade.

## 'Open Arms'

These individuals came out of what was called the Chieu Hoi Program. Chieu Hoi was an "open arms" initiative during the war designed to allow enemy soldiers to willingly stop fighting—to surrender—with the promise that they would receive fair treatment from allied forces after doing so. Amnesty, money and other inducements were offered.

Chieu Hoi was in place from 1963 to the end of U.S. involvement in 1973, and during that time, nearly 200,000 adversary fighters opted into the program. The scout component didn't come into existence until 1966, initially with the U.S. Marines. It proved that having former Viet Cong providing intelligence in the field was hugely advantageous, so it was opened to all U.S. infantry units.

However, it took a couple of years, until the end of 1968, to get the total number of scouts to a little over 1,500. That was because every Kit Carson scout had to choose this hazardous duty, then they had to be vetted rigorously and trained. It was a slow process.

The scouts' key to success was assigning them to U.S. Army units serving in the same region where the individuals had operated as enemy combatants. They knew where the Viet Cong would set up ambushes and

booby traps, and where the enemy might hide. The scouts also knew who the Viet Cong were in the area.

Clearly, this was similar to Afghanistan decades later, when having former Taliban linked to the Northern Alliance and U.S. Army Special Forces troops in the field proved valuable.

## Amazing Stories

The 199th Light Infantry Brigade was allocated some of these volunteers in Vietnam late in 1968. I got acquainted with two Kit Carson Scouts, Chaum and Long, soon after my arrival in country in January 1969.

I do not know what their full Vietnamese names were, but it was eye-opening to hear their stories.

Chaum had been a member of the Viet Cong and Long had been with the North Vietnamese Army. I'm not sure when either declared "chieu hoi"—"I surrender"—and came over to the U.S. side, but their value was apparent immediately ... particularly, Chaum's.

His commitment to the cause—defeating the communists—was easy to understand, too.

He hadn't been a Viet Cong guerrilla fighter based on political ideology, nor had he volunteered to fight with the Viet Cong. He was a draftee, like me, but his circumstances were different than mine. Chaum didn't receive his draft notice in the mail like I did.

In Chaum's case, the Viet Cong visited his village one night when he was barely in his teens.

They beat him and dragged him out of his family's hut, unconscious, thereby drafting him into service for their cause.

Chaum figured out how to get even once his chieu hoi to the American side was accommodated. His willingness to fight against his kidnapers was never in doubt.

Chaum was always in the middle of the action, and there was no question that he was fighting on the side he wanted to be on. He could have taken fewer chances with his life if that were not the case.

### **Nighttime Excursions**

Now and then, when Delta Company was operating in the field, our company commander would allow Chaum to put on his civvies and head to a nearby hamlet for a social night out.

Chaum's nighttime escapades bordered on Superman-like. He always had a .45 caliber pistol under his shirt, and you never knew who or what he might come back with the next day.

One morning, he returned with area Viet Cong tax collectors at gunpoint. Eight of them at once ... all by himself.

I can't imagine there was anything in a 1960s Army training manual to suggest an infantry company commander might consider giving a former enemy combatant the night off to fraternize in a nearby village, especially with hostiles in the area.

That seems inconceivable, but in irregular warfare, flexibility is vital. Unit leaders in the field must have sufficient latitude to make calls they deem appropriate.

It worked for Delta Company in Vietnam. It worked for Special Forces in Afghanistan.

### **Resident Joker**

The contributions of our other scout in Vietnam, Long, were different. Long was from near Hanoi in North Vietnam, but he was not a warrior. Had he been from the U.S., he likely would have qualified as a conscientious objector. Long couldn't seem to handle the concept of fighting in any way, shape or form. Why he volunteered for perilous Kit Carson Scout duty made little sense, but he likely had few, if any, other options. North Vietnamese were despised in South Vietnam.

Long was a valued ally nonetheless.

He was a natural comedian. Even though he spoke almost no English, Long could crack us up in nothing flat. It helped take the edge off during some difficult times. When the terrain and lack of sleep are kicking your butt, laughter is an awesome cure-all. It allows you to keep putting one foot in front of the other when you're ready to drop. Long kept us going.

U.S. Army soldiers become selfless brothers in combat, and Chaum and Long became our brothers too. They were one of us.

But there was a difference. We could go home when our tour of duty was up. Chaum and Long could not. Technically, Chaum could, but as a marked man unless and until South Vietnam won the war. Long, being from North Vietnam, made going home impossible.

What would happen to them?

Four years later, American combat troops weren't in Vietnam any longer, and two years after that, the Vietnam War was lost. My question from 1969 became a worst-case scenario.

### **Hoping for the Best**

Almost certainly, if Chaum and Long were captured, they would have been executed. I can only hope they made it out of Vietnam somehow, the only real option in 1975 being by boat. There's no way they would have been invited onto the U.S. Embassy roof, the well-telvised evacuation site for many.

The Vietnamese boat people became a tragic reality at the end of the war, but escaping the country that way didn't mean salvation for those aboard. Images of dead bodies on those boats became a recurring reality.

Nevertheless, my fantasy still today is that Chaum and Long were among the lucky survivors who escaped somehow. I hold out hope that they had the chance to live in freedom somewhere in the world. Chaum and Long earned it.

And, finally, whether recognized widely or not, Kit Carson Scouts were trailblazing over a half-century ago for today's Special Forces. The partnerships and related human factors being emphasized in their training now proved advantageous in the Vietnam War long ago.

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