

How We Started The Vietnam War:

By John Gregory

The night was black as ink and the waves were choppy. The squad of Vietnamese and Hmung mercenaries boarded two South Vietnamese patrol boats. Yes, this was a top secret mission. But who would have known this raid would touch off the American tragedy known as the Vietnam War?

In 1964 U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara wanted to make it costly for the North Vietnamese government to continue infiltrating its neighbor to the south. He was frustrated with the slow nature in which civilians were handling the process. Therefore, he approved a series of covert missions code named Operation Plan 34A-64, the crossing of international boundaries to harass the communist North Vietnamese.

Who implemented this plan?

Their names read like action heroes out of some kind of paperback war novel: Staff Sgt. "Woody" Hamblen, Sgt. Johann Haferkamp, Gene "Trigger" Graffenstein, 1st Lt. "Reb" Bearce, Sgt. Jessie Giles, Cpl. Dennis Blankenship, Lance Cpl. James Randa.

But these are the names of real men — U.S. 1st Force Reconnaissance Marines. These men trained mercenaries to conduct raids into North Vietnam. They may have even participated in some of these raids. One such mission triggered the historic Tonkin Gulf Incident — beginning America's war in Vietnam.

History books claim the roots of large-scale U.S. military involvement in Vietnam stem directly from two separate attacks by North Vietnamese Navy patrol boats against U.S. Navy destroyers in August 1964 — 33 years ago. Although the second attack has never been substantiated, the first incident actually did occur.

Evidence shared by a San Diego author shows the United States was directly responsible for leading the North Vietnamese into firing on vessels of the U.S. Navy.

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Bruce "Doc" Norton, a retired Marine major, included a brief reference on the subject in a passage from his book "One Tough Marine." According to Norton, the U.S. Marine Corps was conducting the raids into North Vietnam using hired mercenaries. On Aug. 2, 1964 one of these raiding parties aboard two South Vietnamese Navy patrol boats was spotted firing weapons into villages by North Vietnamese Navy patrol boats.

When the North Vietnamese chased the raiders into the Gulf of Tonkin during the dark of

Thirty-three years ago Camp Pendleton Marines sent mercenaries on a top secret mission that provoked North Vietnam into an accidental assault. President Johnson used the incident to begin the Vietnam War.

night, they mistakenly fired on the U.S.S. Maddox, a destroyer patrolling in the area.

The U.S. administration, under the direction of President Lyndon Johnson, took this and the other alleged attack of Aug. 4 as evidence that North Vietnam had attacked the U.S. Navy. This became known as the Tonkin Gulf Incident.

From this sprang the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. Approved by Congress on Aug. 7, this resolution gave the President power to protect the U.S. military in the region by whatever means necessary. In essence, the gates were opened for a flood of American military personnel to Vietnam, without a declaration of war. By the end of 1964 U.S. military strength in Vietnam reached 23,000. By the end of 1968 it reached 536,100.

According to Norton, the Marines from 1st Force Reconnaissance Company were used as military advisers beginning in 1964. The Marine advisers were volunteers in operations conducted by Military Assistance Command Vietnam/Studies and Observation Group (MACV/SOG in military acronym lingo).

Although these missions were "classified," the reports coming into the 1st Marine Division message center made the situation very clear. SSgt. Don "Woody" Hamblen, the subject of Norton's book, viewed these reports in 1964. He was under consideration as a team member to replace the team involved in the Tonkin Gulf Incident. (Hamblen is a very unique individual

because he was allowed to pull tours of duty in Vietnam after losing a leg to an accident while on a parachute training jump at Camp Pendleton, Calif.)

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Permission was granted SSgt. Hamblen to report to MACV/SOG in Vietnam with 1st Lt. Jerome Paull, Sgt. Johann Haferkamp and Gene "Trigger" Graffenstein. They replaced the "Tonkin Gulf team" — 1st Lt. Bearce, Sgt. Jessie Giles, Cpl. Dennis Blankenship and Lance Cpl. James Randa.

They were involved in planning the small-scale covert maritime operations conducted against North Vietnam with the objective of reconnaissance and intelligence-gathering of the North Vietnamese coastal region (OPLAN-34A).

When contacted about his involvement Randa refused to comment on the mission which touched off the Tonkin Gulf Incident. "I was sworn to secrecy,"

he said. "I don't want to be in a compromising position."

However, when Giles was asked if one of the teams he helped train was chased by North Vietnamese Navy boats on Aug. 2, 1964, he replied, "yes."

When asked if those same North Vietnamese boats came into contact with the U.S.S. Maddox, he said, "right."

Giles continued. "Yeah, we were working 57 (mm) recoilless rifles," he said. "I believe it (the target) was a power plant. That's when they got after our boat."

Giles said he didn't believe U.S. personnel were on the raiding boats that night. When asked if U.S. military personnel were ever involved in cross-border raids before the incident he stated, "...I'll say 'no.'"

Further evidence of the incident was provided by ex-Navy chaplain Ray Stubbe, co-author of "Inside Force Recon." In 1974 Stubbe interviewed 1st Lt. L.V. "Reb" Bearce, the man responsible for planning the raid in question.

Bearce told Stubbe that particular mission was to have been a practice/operational firing run on the North Vietnamese villages of Han Met and Han Mien.

"He told me it was a James Bond type of thing," said Stubbe. "Their little boats went in to attack a sea base on the shore of North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese mistakenly thought the Maddox had fired on them."

Bearce was on his way to the

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continental U.S. in the first days of August 1964 when he learned that one of his patrols "had started the Vietnam War," according to a report by Stubbe.

When Lt. Bearce arrived in Hawaii he was to brief Lt. Gen. Victor Krulak. The Studies and Observation Group, according to Stubbe's report, initially did not approve of this briefing and held Krulak in Saigon for a few days until Washington cleared it. Finally, permission was granted, but only for Lt. Bearce to speak to Lt. Gen. Krulak in person. Krulak was still in Vietnam when Bearce was to give his report. A Col. Grove requested the report. But Bearce would not give his report to him, and Grove became furious. To convince Bearce it was alright to disclose the details of the mission to him, Col. Grove began telling Bearce of all the SOG missions he already knew of. Grove was so flustered he said, "I'm going to have you court-martialed because I'm telling you things no one is supposed to hear."

Eventually, permission was given for Bearce to brief a Col. Axtel. But Bearce first had to

find a Marine uniform on which to hang his new rank bars of captain. He had not worn a military uniform nor carried military identification since he arrived in Vietnam the first week in January 1964.

If the Krulak name sounds familiar, it is because Victor Krulak is now a principal in the Copley publishing empire. His son, Charles "Chuck" Krulak is now commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps.

Stubbe's last interview with Bearce took place Dec. 2, 1974, a short time before Bearce shot himself to death with a North Vietnamese SKS rifle. "The Naval Investigations unit was all over his house because he had kept top secret documents there," said Stubbe, now a minister in Wauwatosa, Wisc.

Even more evidence to substantiate information from these interviews is in Norton's possession. Top secret documentation fell into his hands when the Republican administrations' committee studying the POW/MIA issue disbanded following the election of President Clinton. Approximately 40 pages tell of operations and procedures used by American military personnel prior to August

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1964. Norton, who also served in Vietnam as a reconnaissance Marine, has authored four books and now directs the Marine Corps Recruit Depot base museum in San Diego.

In a telegram sent from Secretary of State Dean Rusk to then-Ambassador to South Vietnam Maxwell Taylor, on Aug. 3, 1964, Rusk stated, "We believe that present OPLAN 34A activities are beginning to rattle Hanoi, and MADDOX incident is directly related to their effort to resist these activities. We have no intention of yielding to pressure."

Yet, during testimony to Congress, Secretary McNamara later denied that OPLAN 34A actions had anything to do with the incident.

Also on Aug. 3, 1964, U.S.S. Maddox Commander Herrick asked that his patrols in the area

be terminated because he knew more OPLAN 34A raids were scheduled for Aug. 3 and 4. Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet replied that the patrols would continue to demonstrate U.S. resolve, but that the course would be altered to avoid "patrol interference with 34-A Ops."

President Johnson, who was facing criticism for showing a lack of leadership and needed some impact to help him in the upcoming elections, acted quickly following reports of the second attack, Aug. 4. He ordered air strikes, Aug. 5, from carriers U.S.S. Ticonderoga and U.S.S. Constellation on four North Vietnamese naval bases and an oil storage facility.

However, an interesting character in history was surprised by this action. Retired Admiral

James Stockdale, Ross Perot's running mate in 1992, was a Navy wing commander on station in the gulf at that time. Stockdale was later shot down and held as a prisoner of war for many years. He now resides on Coronado Island.

In a commentary published in San Diego's Union-Tribune newspaper, Stockdale stated that his planes searched the waters for enemy boats on the night of Aug. 4, 1964, but found nothing. He went to sleep that evening thinking the incident was over. Stockdale was surprised to be awakened the next morning with orders to carry out the bombing mission against North Vietnam.

President Johnson quickly presented a draft resolution to Congress. By Aug. 11 the resolution had been approved and signed by the President.

On Dec. 31, 1970, Congress repealed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, hoping to avoid further escalation of war without approval by the American people.

Yet, U.S. military ground action continued for two more years.