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Force Recon Command: A Special Marine Unit in Vietnam, 1969-1970

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nian hostage rescue attempt to the evacuation of the U.S. embassy in Mogadishu, Somalia, in January 1961, and implicitly answers his own question: "A verdict remains to be seen."

The clear worth of this short and readable book to career military officers of all levels lies in the hope that they will heed its lessons and learn from the mistakes it records when responding to the similar challenges they will clearly face in coming years.

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Lee, Alex. *Force Recon Command: A Special Marine Unit in Vietnam, 1969-1970*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1995. 296pp. \$29.95

Throughout its history, the Marine Corps has prided itself on being an elite fighting organization within the American armed forces. The concept of having small, specialized units within the Corps (an "elite within the elite") has always been the subject of some debate. The prevailing attitudes on this subject within its senior leadership led to the formation and eventual disbandment of the Raider and Parachute battalions during World War II. Marine reconnaissance units today, though not direct descendants of these formations, are in a similar position. Funding, manpower constraints, and the view of "the men at the top" have a great deal of impact on these units, as reflected by the recent reduction of amphibious reconnaissance assets within Marine divisions.

Lieutenant Colonel Lee's book is an insightful, hard-hitting memoir of his

experiences as the commanding officer of the Third Force Reconnaissance Company during its combat operations in the northern I Corps area of Vietnam from 1969 to 1970. In many ways, this book goes well beyond a personal account. As the dust jacket states, "This frank and absorbing chronicle traces the evolution of Marine small unit reconnaissance from its origins in World War II, analyzes its use and abuse in Vietnam, and offers . . . lessons learned from a career dedicated to an elite within the elite." Lee not only describes the daily operations of the Third Force Reconnaissance Company but writes in great detail about reconnaissance doctrine within the Corps, the various types of missions that his unit conducted, and his efforts to create a cohesive and technically proficient combat unit. His position as the commanding officer gave Lee an acute insight into how the war in Vietnam was conducted at the most senior levels. He is quite candid about his battles with the bureaucracy of higher headquarters, which often did more to inhibit Third Force Reconnaissance Company from performing its missions than did the North Vietnamese army.

Lee is eminently qualified to comment not only on the reconnaissance community but on the Marine Corps in general. He served in the Corps for twenty-seven years as an infantryman and held command billets from the platoon to battalion level. In addition to the Third Force Reconnaissance Company, he led two rifle companies in combat operations in Vietnam. Much of his knowledge and experience in the field of reconnaissance doctrine, operations, and techniques was the result of his tour as the reconnaissance equipment research and development officer at Quantico, Virginia, prior to his assumption of command of Third Force.

The reputation of the Marine Corps reconnaissance community was shaped by the men and exploits of the Vietnam War. In this regard, I believe Lee's book has something for all military professionals. For the small unit leader, from team leader to company commander, it offers insight into building a tough, cohesive unit in a fluid combat environment. For those serving in reconnaissance units today, Lee gives firsthand knowledge of the training, mission planning, and employment of reconnaissance teams. Also, he shows how little the Marine Corps changes: the same battles fought then in regard to manpower, modern equipment, and correct employment of forces are still being fought today. For senior commanders and staff members, there are valuable details concerning the support requirement of and planning considerations for intelligence collection assets; for the national security community, there are particularly insightful comments dealing with the employment of ground reconnaissance units on the operational and strategic level, during a period when the United States commitment in Vietnam was on the decline. Finally, for the historian, Vietnam enthusiast, and former recon Marine, there is Lieutenant Colonel Lee's story itself, which intertwines well written history, humor, and a bit of the "old Corps" to produce an account that is brutally honest, entertaining, and a significant contribution to the field of military history.

Some readers might find Lee glib in his praise of his unit. However, unlike such authors as the "rogue warrior," Richard Marcinko, Lee also freely criticizes his own merits and failings as a leader. Above all, in both the introduction and conclusion he explicitly states

his purpose for writing this book. "The people of the United States of America . . . failed those gallant men . . . by permitting them to be vilified upon their return home. Those who served in Vietnam were characterized as personifications of evil, and the nation ignored the honor . . . and the bravery that they exhibited in a war that was not to be won. The men of Third Force Reconnaissance Company . . . have now passed on into history, unremarked and unremembered by a nation that should not be allowed to forget that some men willingly go forth to risk both their lives and their honor when the bugles call."

STUART R. LOCKHART
Captain, U.S. Marine Corps

Donahue, James C. *Mobile Guerrilla Force: With the Special Forces in War Zone D*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1996. 228pp. \$28.95

James Donahue served with the Green Berets in Vietnam. *Mobile Guerrilla Force*, his second book based on his experiences there, focuses on operation BLACKJACK 31, a legendary Special Forces (SF) mission conducted in early 1967. The Mobile Guerrilla Force (MGF) was a special operations strike unit created by the U.S. Army's 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), manned predominantly by indigenous troops and led by American Green Berets. This distinguished the MGF from the common SF experience in Vietnam. Generally, as with the Civilian Irregular Defense Group program, indigenous units were led by South Vietnamese Special Forces personnel; U.S. Special Forces troopers served as advisors. Sergeant James Donahue was an assistant