

Operation Tailwind

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Operation Tailwind
Part of the [Vietnam War](#)




SOG Hatchet force loads up for Operation Tailwind

Date 11 September to 13 September 1970
Location Southeastern Laos
Result U.S. victory

Belligerents

 Hatchet Force of MACV-SOG

 Elements of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN)

Commanders

Eugene McCarley Unknown

Strength

16 Americans,
110 Montagnards

Casualties and losses

16 wounded (U.S.),
3 killed, 33 wounded (Montagnards) At least 54 killed

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Vietnam War

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Dong Xoai – Starlite – Gang Toi – Ia Drang –
Hastings – Masher/White Wing – A Shau – Xa
Cam My – Duc Co – Long Tan – Attleboro –
Cedar Falls – Tra Binh Dong – Bribie –
Junction City – Union – Hill 881 – Union II –
Ong Thanh – Dak To – 1st Tet – Khe Sanh –
1st Saigon – Hue – Lang Vei – Lima Site 85 –
Kham Duc – Speedy Express – Dewey
Canyon – 2nd Tet – Hamburger Hill –
Binh Ba – Cambodia – Snuol – FSB Ripcord –
Tailwind – Chenla I – Son Tay Raid – Lam Son
719 – Chenla II – Ban Dong – FSB Mary Ann –
Easter '72 – 1st Quang Tri – Loc Ninh –
An Loc – Kontum – 2nd Quang Tri –
Phuoc Long – Ho Chi Minh – Ban Me Thuot –
Xuan Loc – Truong Sa – 2nd Saigon – SS
Mayaguez

Air operations

Ranch Hand – Pierce Arrow – Barrel Roll –
Pony Express – Flaming Dart –
Rolling Thunder – Steel Tiger – Arc Light –
Tiger Hound – Bolo – Igloo White –
Commando Hunt – Menu – Freedom Deal –
Linebacker I – Linebacker II – Shed Light

Operation Tailwind was a covert incursion into southeastern Laos by a company-sized element of United States Special Operations Forces (Hatchet Force) of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam Studies and Observations Group (MACVSOG or SOG), conducted between 11 September and 13 September 1970 during the Second Indochina War. The purpose of the operation was to create a diversion for a Royal Lao Army offensive and to exert pressure on the defenses of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN).

Nearly 30 years later, a CNN/Time Magazine report claimed sarin nerve gas had been used by U.S. forces during Tailwind, kicking off a controversy that ended in the retraction of the claim by both news organizations and a purging of staff members responsible for it.

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[edit] Operation

For more details on the covert organization, see [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam Studies and Observations Group](#).

During late 1970 the overall U.S.-supported military effort in the covert war in the Kingdom of Laos was foundering. Operation *Gauntlet*, a multi-battalion Royal Lao Army offensive that was to determine the fate of Paksong and the strategic Bolovens Plateau, was failing. A call went out to SOG's Saigon headquarters asking if the highly-classified unit could insert an element near Chavane and disrupt PAVN defenses. Colonel John Sadler, SOG's commander, replied in the affirmative, even though none of his cross-border reconnaissance teams had ever operated so deep in Laos. Indeed, the target area was 20 miles (30 km) beyond the unit's authorized area of operations.

The mission was launched by three platoons of Command and Control Central's (Kontum) Hatchet Company B and two U.S. Air Force Pathfinder Teams. The 16 Americans and 110 Montagnards, under the command of Captain Eugene McCarley were heli-lifted from a launch site at Dak To to a landing zone (LZ) in a valley 60 miles (100 km) to the west, near Chavane. The distance to the target was so great that the men were lifted by three U.S. Marine Corps CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopters, escorted by 12 AH-1 Cobra gunships.

McCarley then called down airstrikes on enemy troop dispositions and equipment caches. The North Vietnamese responded by trying to concentrate their forces, but the U.S. troops kept on the move, even at night.

On the morning of the third day the Americans overran an enemy bivouac and killed 54 PAVN troops. Why the enemy had not fled was a quandary until members of the Hatchet Force discovered a bunker buried beneath 12 feet of earth. Inside they found a huge cache of maps and documents. They had overrun the PAVN logistical headquarters that controlled all of Laotian Route 165. Two footlockers were quickly filled with the intelligence haul, and the Hatchet Force then began to look for a way out. The North Vietnamese were closing in, but McCarley, instead of moving toward an LZ large enough for the extraction of the entire force, dropped off elements at three separate (and smaller) landing zones, catching the North Vietnamese unprepared.

Casualties incurred during the operation amounted to three Montagnards killed in action and 33 wounded while all 16 Americans were wounded. Many more men of the Hatchet Force would have died had it not been for the efforts of SOG medic Sergeant Gary Rose, who was recommended for the Medal of Honor for his actions.

Actions taken during the extraction operations later came under fierce dispute. Allegations were made that U.S. aircraft, in an unprecedented reversal of policy and breach of international treaties, had utilized sarin nerve gas ("GB" in US/NATO nomenclature) when North Vietnamese ground troops began to attack the LZs. Indeed, it was not disputed that some chemical agent was utilized, nor that both North Vietnamese and American soldiers struggled against its effects. However, most witnesses, sworn and unsworn, stated categorically that only a potent tear gas (most probably a CN/CS mixture) was used. Others, according to two members of the U.S. media, insisted it was sarin, or a combination of tear gas and sarin.^[1]

[edit] Controversy

On 7 June 1998 a controversial version of the above events was broadcast during the premiere of the Cable News Network's NewsStand CNN & Time in a report entitled *Valley of Death*. The segment alleged that Operation *Tailwind* had been devised simply to eliminate a group of Americans who had defected to the enemy and were holed up in a Laotian village. The broadcast went on to claim that sarin had been utilized during the operation. According to *Valley of Death*, the agent had been sprayed from aircraft twice—once to prep the village and once during the extraction. It also claimed that over 100 men, women, and children had been killed during the attack on the village.

The broadcast (and the ensuing 15 June Time magazine article) seemed to have reliable credentials. Admiral Thomas Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time of *Tailwind*, stated that nerve agents had been used, and not just during this operation. Former SOG Lieutenant Robert Van Buskirk (one of the three platoon leaders) and three of the participating SOG sergeants lent testimony to support the allegations.

Van Buskirk stated that the Hatchet Force was exposed to an LZ when the agent was deployed to drive the enemy back. He also stated that he saw his men (who were not equipped with gas masks) convulsing when the wind blew the agent back upon the LZ. One key point of proof was missing from the broadcast: the North Vietnamese, who had chemical warfare units stationed in southern Laos at the time, made no comment on what would have been a propaganda coup of gigantic proportions.

The reports, which indicated that war crimes had been committed, caused the Pentagon to launch an independent investigation. It concluded the claims made in the program were false. Van Buskirk, it seemed, had forgotten the episode for 24 years and had only recently recalled his repressed memory and was also suffering from psychological problems. Admiral Moorer was 86 years old at the time of the story and living under assisted-care retirement. The difference between nerve gas and tear gas may no longer have been clear to him.

[edit] Fallout

CNN and *Time* magazine then undertook an internal investigation which, after three weeks, concluded that the journalism was "flawed" and the report should be publicly

retracted and apologies made. Two key CNN producers of the report, April Oliver and Jack Smith, were fired outright. Senior producer Pam Hill resigned. Reporter Peter Arnett was reprimanded and soon left for HDNet and then NBC.

The producers, Oliver and Smith, were chastised but unrepentant. They put together a 77-page document supporting their side of the story, with testimony from military personnel apparently confirming the use of sarin. Active and retired military personnel consulted by the media, including CNN's own military analyst, Major General Perry Smith, noted that a particularly strong formulation of CS gas was indeed used during *Tailwind*, but that it should not be confused with sarin, which is categorized as a weapon of mass destruction by the United Nations [1].

In early July 1998, CNN News Group Chairman, President and CEO Tom Johnson issued a statement describing the findings of the internal investigation. He pledged acceptance of the findings and reiterated that the allegations in *Valley of Death* and related reports "cannot be supported." He said there was insufficient evidence that sarin or any other deadly gas was used, nor could CNN confirm that American deserters were targeted or even at the camp in Laos.

After their dismissal from CNN, Oliver and Smith ardently maintained the truth of their work and both brought lawsuits against their former employer. Oliver was the first to settle out of court for a reputed \$3.5 million [2]. Smith fought longer but also eventually settled for an unknown amount [3]. By June 2000, less than two years later, none of the executives responsible for firing the two, including Johnson, remained with CNN.

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