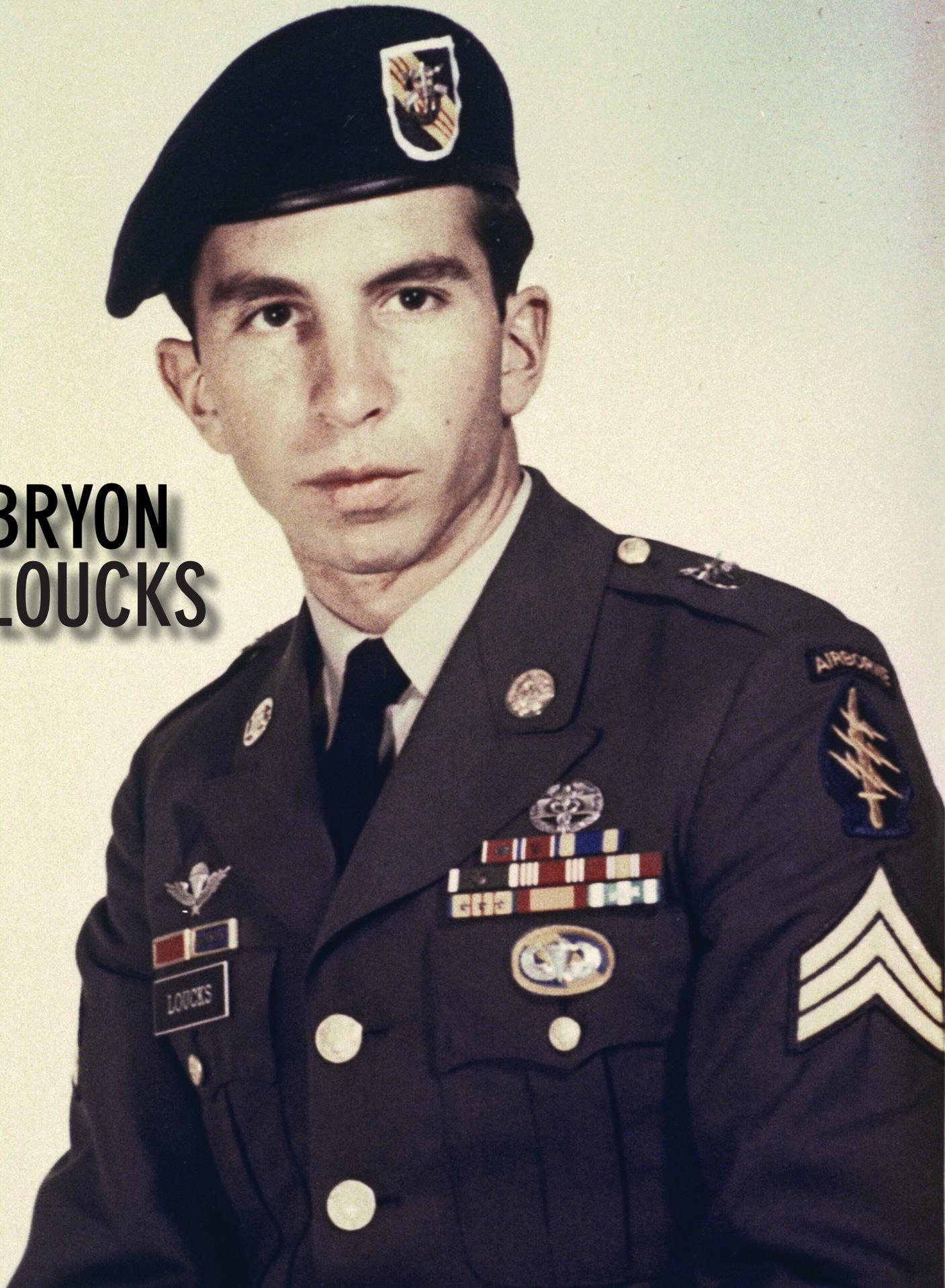


**BRYON  
LOUCKS**



# BROTHERS IN ARMS

**A**rmy 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Timothy Michael Lang of Spokane, a Washington State University graduate with a boyish smile, was the first of 1,124 Washingtonians killed in combat or missing in action in Vietnam between 1963 and 1975. Lang was a helicopter pilot. Risky business. You never knew what was lurking in the jungle canopy. Officially classified as a military “adviser,” Lang died at the age of 26 on August 30, 1963, when his chopper was hit by small arms fire in the Iron Triangle northwest of Saigon. His name is Line 3 on the right side of Panel I on the Washington State Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the manicured lawn of the state Capitol. If you visit, you could say, “Hello, Tim. Thank you for your service.”

Five more Washingtonians died in 1964. Twenty-six in 1965. Then hundreds more with each new grind-it-out year as the war escalated. The toll was 188 in 1968, the year the fabled light at the end of the tunnel was revealed to be a highballing train—the Tet Offensive. The U.S. and its allies regrouped to win that battle, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy, but it lost the home front public relations war. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara warned Lyndon Johnson a few months earlier, “There may be a limit beyond which many Americans and much of the world will not permit the United States to go. The picture of the world’s greatest superpower ... trying to pound a tiny, backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed is not a pretty one.” The draft call for 1968 was 302,000, up 72,000 from the prior year.

Here’s an important thing you’ll learn if you interview a lot of Vietnam veterans, especially those who saw heavy combat: They’re proud of their soldiering. They talk about



The Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the Capitol campus at Olympia.



North Vietnam's Tet Offensive is highlighted, together with the Ho Chi Minh Trail. *National Archives*

the unbreakable bonds formed by men at war. And most believe they could have won this one if the press, pundits, politicians and “radicals” hadn’t convinced the American public it was a rotten lost cause. If you beg to differ, well, you weren’t doing the fighting and dying.

African Americans, fully integrated into the services for the first time, were disproportionately drafted and under-represented in the officer corps and Special Forces. Yet as racial strife erupted back home, war correspondents noted that even some Deep-South white soldiers discovered the idiocy of racism while fighting side by side with blacks. It was, after all, the “same mud, same blood.”

Some troops anesthetized their fear and cynicism with readily available drugs, especially during the dispiriting final years of the war. A few went totally off the rails and “fragged” incompetent or vainglorious officers. The My Lai massacre tarred Americans with a broad brush. Photos of American medics tending to Vietnamese civilians caught in the crossfire seldom made the front pages.

Bryon Loucks, a Special Forces soldier from Port Angeles, remembers coming home on a burial detail for a friend. He was walking through Los Angeles International Airport in his Green Beret and Class A greens when a young woman and several friends spat on him and called him a baby killer. “I was totally embarrassed. I just turned and walked away—went into the bathroom and hid out for a while. Afterward, I was walking along the mezzanine when a worker a level below me started up a jackhammer. Instinctively, I hit the floor. So I went back in the bathroom and waited in there for about three hours before I caught my flight.”

Coming home could be more confusing than Vietnam. Three million American soldiers served in Vietnam.



*John Hughes Collection*



American soldiers scramble out of a chopper. *Pat Swanson collection*

There were no ticker-tape parades, just a few thousand “Support Our Boys In Vietnam” buttons. The Associated Press reported on February 13, 1968, that grieving mothers and widows of soldiers killed in Vietnam were being subjected to a barrage of “detestable” anti-war mail.

THE LAST Washingtonian to die in Vietnam was Marine Corps Pfc. Daniel Andrew Benedett, a member of the Class of 1964 at Auburn High School. Benedett’s fate is historically significant, for he was killed in the last official battle of the Vietnam War. It occurred on May 15, 1975, after an American container ship, the *SS Mayaguez*, was seized by Khmer Rouge gunboats off the coast of Cambodia. With the fall of Saigon imminent, the ship was carrying containers from the U.S. Embassy. Benedett was part of an assault force organized to retake the vessel and rescue its crew. Hailed as a success by President Ford and the Pentagon, the costly mission also serves as a metaphor for a protracted, divisive war. An intelligence report on the true strength of the enemy wasn’t relayed to the attack force—“bad intel” in the parlance of the military. Pfc. Benedett and 12 other rescuers died when their helicopter was shot down en route. Closure, of sorts, came 38 years later when the remains of Benedett and his comrades were identified. They were buried together, in one casket, at Arlington National Cemetery, Section 60, Site 10360. Benedett is also memorialized close

to home. On Line 28 on the left side of Panel 16 of the Washington State Vietnam Veterans Memorial you'll meet a brave Marine who died at 19. *Semper Fi*.

The other names on the wall are an American tapestry: Alakulppi, Dalrymple, Duffy, Enrico, Kessinger, McQuade, Moriwaki, O'Leary, Ozuna and Spinelli. There's a Nixon and, of course, a John Smith.

Army Pfc. Lewis Albanese, born in Italy but raised in Seattle, was among eight Washingtonians awarded the Medal of Honor for "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity beyond the call of duty." On December 1, 1966, as his platoon came under intense close-range fire, the 20-year-old former Boeing worker crept along a ditch to pick off six enemy snipers, according to the citation for the medal. Out of ammo, he killed two more in hand-to-hand combat before being mortally wounded. Fondly remembered by classmates and friends, "Louie" was a handsome kid, his dark hair swept back Frankie Avalon-style during his days at Franklin High School. Google him and you'll find a classic 1960s snapshot. There's Louie posing alongside a cool '57 Pontiac hardtop. Albanese is the only Italian-born American to receive the Medal of Honor during the Vietnam War. A street in his ancestral home in Italy is named in his honor. In Olympia, you'll find his name on Line 21 on the right side of Panel 3. His cousin, Army Sergeant Luigi Albanese, was killed in action two years later at 19. He's Line 17 on the right side of Panel 7.

Tim, Andrew, Louie and Luigi are forever young. Bob Dylan, whose songs are so essential to the soundtrack of the '60s, brought it all back home:

*May you build a ladder to the stars  
And climb on every rung;  
May you stay forever young ...*

In all, 58,193 Americans died in Vietnam, of which 25,493 were under 21 and 46,141 under 25. At last count, 1,600 are still missing in action. The search for remains is ongoing—a dog tag, a fragment of DNA.

Another 150,000 American soldiers were wounded, many with invisible scars. Half a million suffer from PTSD. Agent Orange is also taking its toll. In all, the U.S. sprayed more than 20 million gallons of herbicides over Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos to destroy the jungle cover and the crops feeding the enemy.

Bryon Loucks, now a 72-year-old tree farmer in bucolic Lewis County, saw it all. He lost a friend and mentor—one of the bravest of the brave—and part of his youth in Vietnam. Loucks couldn't talk about it for decades. Their shared story is one you need to hear.

FOR STARTERS, you pronounce Bryon like "Brian" and Loucks like "Lowks." Otherwise, he's uncomplicated—on the surface at least. He and his wife Donna, both Weyerhaeuser Company retirees, own and operate an award-winning tree farm.

Loucks grew up in Port Angeles, the son of a police officer and a nurse. Born in 1945, Bryon is the oldest of six. His mom quit work when the kids started arriving. He remembers “an ideal childhood,” with the Olympic National Park as a backdrop and the Strait of Juan de Fuca on their doorstep. He was an outdoorsman from an early age, fishing, hunting, hiking, skin-diving. With a cop for a dad, messing up wasn’t an option in a small town. “Jasper Loucks was a salt-of-the-earth kind of guy—a straight arrow. If he had caught the chief of police speeding, he would have given him a ticket. And if his kids did anything wrong, there was trouble.”

Loucks, like so many Vietnam vets, graduated from high school in 1964. Living at home, he spent two years at the local junior college. “I was mostly fumbling because, like a lot of young kids, I was immature. I didn’t know how to study. I didn’t know what I could do or what I really wanted to do. That was a time when the military said, ‘If you change your major you’re eligible for the draft. And if you fall below a 2.5 grade-point average you’re eligible for the draft. And if you don’t carry 15 hours of credits you’re eligible for the draft.’ *I hit all three.*”

Loucks resolved to enlist in the Air Force, imagining himself as a jet pilot. “Sorry son,” the recruiter said. “You’re wearing glasses.” He told the Navy recruiter he wanted to be in underwater demolition. A sinus issue squelched that. The Army needed helicopter pilots, but 20-20 vision was its prerequisite, too. “That’s when I started to get really discouraged. Then I heard the song about the Green Berets.” It was a No. I hit in 1966 for Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler, a Special Forces medic who appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Sadler deserved a medal—or at least a promotion—for writing a hit song about the Vietnam War:

*Fighting soldiers from the sky  
Fearless men who jump and die  
Silver wings upon their chest  
These are men, America’s best  
One hundred men will test today  
But only three win the Green Beret*

“It was an instantaneous decision,” Loucks remembers. “I wanted to be in an elite group like that.” The Green Berets also reminded him of “Sgt. Rock,” his favorite DC comic-book hero when he was a kid. Sarge was a rough, tough old World II veteran “who always was there for his men.”

Three-thousand miles away on Long Island, New York, another police officer’s son, John J. Kedenburg, was also intent on joining the Special Forces. “Disgustingly handsome,” as one high school classmate puts it, Kedenburg was tall and sturdy, a standout athlete and “natural-born leader” who exuded quiet charisma. Enlisting in Brooklyn in 1965, he

left behind a wire-wheeled Austin-Healey sports car and his close-knit Roman Catholic family. His high school friends called him “Jack.” In Vietnam he was John. It was as if he had left his youth behind at 19. No one back home was surprised in 1969 when they learned why he received the Medal of Honor.

BRYON LOUCKS entered the Army in June of 1966. At Fort Ord, they prodded him to apply for officer candidate school because he had two years of college. He was also informed that otherwise qualified applicants with corrected vision were now eligible for helicopter flight school, evidence that demand was outpacing supply. Still coveting a Green Beret, he passed the Special Forces exam. “The big emphasis was on being a team



John J. Kedenburg on a visit home to New York.  
*Kedenburg Family Collection*

player. It was going to be like the Peace Corps with rifles because you were trained to teach indigenous people how to assist our forces.” Loucks has a knack for wry understatement. He describes what he did in Vietnam as being “like James Bond without women.”

“I still really wanted to be in demolitions—to blow things up. But everyone wanted to do that. Demolitions was a six-month course, and it took eight months to get in, which meant I’d have eight months of KP.” He decided to become a medic, mostly because it was the hardest school—not fully realizing *how* hard. What he learned in the next intense year changed the course of his life. Mastering the daunting course work at Special Forces “91-B” medic training school, with cross-training in the 7<sup>th</sup> Special Forces at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, was a huge confidence builder. Combat medics are the original first responders.

“It was amazing what they taught us in the space of a year. First phase was basic first-aid. Then we moved on to prescriptions and diagnostic skills. The third phase was on-the-job-training, working in emergency rooms in military hospitals, sewing up a gunshot wound or a stabbing injury. The fourth phrase was a combination of gunshot wounds and amputations. Throughout, it was a crash course in super-super memorization. A doctor might spend a week learning about jaundice. We would spend two hours memorizing everything there was about jaundice. Malaria meant you learned the signs and symptoms, the prognosis, the drugs of choice and the potential complications. Then you moved on to the next disease.

“That rigorous, year-long course truly gave me a tremendous amount of confidence. It taught you everything but brain surgery and heart surgery. The diseases portion was centered on the Vietnam area, because that’s where we were all going.

“For a year I didn’t do anything but study. Once a month it was a movie and a nice meal. Then back to the books. Some of the physicians had never been in a combat theater, so the medics were teaching us all important lessons. Several medical students from Duke University came down to Fort Bragg to take that course, and many flunked out in the third week—not because they were dumb; they just weren’t geared to that level of memorization. Duke made a standing offer that if we passed their entrance exams we would be admitted to medical school.

“Today, when I review some of my notebooks it amazes me how much information we were processing. We jokingly used to say we were qualified to do anything except brain surgery or open heart surgery. And that’s not far off the mark. We were trained to take the place of a physician in a remote situation with large groups of indigenous personnel for extended periods of time. That might even mean amputations or diagnosing diseases and taking action.”

“Doc” Loucks graduated, won his sergeant’s stripes and received orders for Germany. Not what he had in mind. It was now April 1968. Between Basic Training, Advanced Infantry School, Jump School and his Special Forces medical training he had been in Army schools for two years. During his months at Fort Bragg, one group spoken of in tones of near reverence was “C&C,” Command & Control, also known as MACV SOG—short for Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Studies & Observations Group. Loucks had no idea it was a top-secret reconnaissance outfit. In the early years of the war, when the Americans were supposed to be “advisers,” it was a CIA operation. By 1968, it was “the largest clandestine military unit since World War II’s OSS,” answering directly to the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon, “often with White House-level input,” wrote former SOG officer John L. Plaster. Of the estimated 3 million Americans who served in Vietnam, only about 1,200 were chosen for SOG’s cross-border reconnaissance teams.

Loucks phoned the Special Forces go-between at the Pentagon—“Mrs. A”—to see about getting his orders changed to Vietnam. “Mrs. A” felt his wish would be granted. Special Forces medics were in short supply. He told her he wanted to be assigned to C&C or SOG.

“Don’t say those words over the phone!” she ordered.

“OK,” Loucks gulped, chastised and a bit confused. “But get me in if you can.”

A week later, new orders arrived. They were written in typically cryptic military language. Loucks took them to a sergeant major and asked for a translation. Had he been assigned to SOG? “He scanned the orders, looked me in the eye and said, ‘Well, sergeant, I hope you know what you’ve asked for, because that’s where you’re going.’” Loucks would soon learn the unofficial motto of the Special Forces in Vietnam was “You Haven’t Lived



Sgt. Loucks, a combat-ready medic. *Loucks Collection*

Until You've Almost Died."

Bryon is going to tell you the rest of the story—one of the most remarkable of the Vietnam War:

I REMEMBER very little of my first week "in country" other than the fact that most Special Forces soldiers either felt sorry for me because I was headed for SOG or treated me with more respect. Outhouse walls featured the slogan "Caution: C&C May Be Hazardous To Your Health." Soon I was on my way to Forward Operating Base 2, which later that year was renamed CCC or Command & Control Central. It was just outside Kontum in Vietnam's Central Highlands.

SOG's reconnaissance teams, also known as "Recon" or "Spike" teams, were named for states, carpenter's tools and snakes, depending on the camp. I formed Spike Team Washington when I became a "One-Zero," our code for team leader. A team generally consisted of two Americans and four to six Vietnamese or Montagnard troops. (Montagnard is a French word for "mountain people." It's pronounced "mountain yards.") The camaraderie was intense. You've never heard a story about a Special Forces team "fragging" an officer. For one thing, there weren't many officers. Non-coms invariably were in charge. And if an officer joined a team as a junior member he answered to an enlisted man until he was ready to lead. These were tight-knit teams of extraordinary soldiers.

Our operating areas were well behind the lines, usually along the Ho Chi Minh trail. Our radios had a relative short range of five to 15 miles, and we were well outside that distance during our missions. That meant we would have had no communication with our base in South Vietnam if not for C-130 Command & Control aircraft that could pick up our radio signal at night, or a radio relay site in Laos called "Leghorn" that we could sometimes reach. The small forward-air-controller planes that periodically flew over were another possible link to home base.

Because of the covert nature of our work, we went on each mission in a “sterile” format. Our clothing and weapons were nondescript, easily attainable from other countries and likely also to be worn or used by the enemy. We wore no dog tags or memorabilia that could identify us as Americans. We ate what the natives or enemy ate, mostly rice. To this day I don’t like plain rice.

Our rifles were predominantly the CAR-15, a shortened, lighter version of the M-16, or the Swedish-K Submachine Gun, a relatively lightweight 9mm semi- or fully-automatic rifle firing a 36-round clip. These weapons were readily available on the international market. For the most part our clothing and gear were not chosen to allow us to infiltrate enemy camps, but rather to give us a few seconds’ advantage if we came in contact with the enemy. “White Russians”—most often Russian advisers—were working with the enemy in areas where we operated, so it was within reason that if we had the appearance of the enemy we might either get away without a firefight or have a chance to open fire first. If we had worn American uniforms it would have been a dead giveaway, so to speak.

It was fairly rare to have a medic on a SOG team. The cost and difficulty of training a medic for such small teams made it not very practical. However, Special Forces operated on the principle of cross training, so individual American team members did have a lot of general medical training. Most of our teammates and all of the indigenous troops called us “Bac Si,” which is Vietnamese for doctor.

While Special Forces medics were trained to save lives, primarily we were a fighting team member just like everyone else. Our basic pack weighed 75 to 80 pounds. Sounds like a lot today, but you must remember we were so far from friendly lines that we had to be equipped to get out of sticky situations.

A soldier involved in a firefight will go through a lot of grenades and ammo in a very short time period. Each team member took up to 20 clips, each one holding 20 rounds. We had additional ammo in our packs. We also carried as many as 10 grenades apiece, plus a couple pounds of a plastic explosive called C-4; 10 “toe-poppers,” small mines to plant along the trail if we were being followed; a claymore mine and variety of smoke grenades and signal flares.



Kedenburg, right, with a Special Forces comrade and indigenous troops.  
*Loucks Collection*

IN THE beginning, I was assigned to room with John Barnatowicz, a member of Spike Team Ohio. He would become one of my closest friends. Unfortunately, Barnatowicz was often gone on missions while I was in camp undergoing training before joining a team. Teams were being inserted and extracted on a near daily basis. Some were gone for one to four days; others went behind enemy lines for five or more days. There was never any real rhyme or reason for who was in the field, on leave or training for the next mission.

Specialist 5 John J. Kedenburg, one door down from us, became my mentor. Though still a few weeks shy of turning 22, Kedenburg was the revered leader of Spike Team Nevada. John was the kind of leader you never forget.

One of the things that made John unique was his genuine concern for others. When you enter combat as a green person you're making mistakes and you're more likely to die. When you've been losing friends in combat, the last thing you want to do is make a new friend. So when the new guys come in, the senior enlisted people want nothing to do with you—until you've proven yourself. John was different. He recognized that we were new and somebody had to help us. A stickler for detail, John spent many hours with me, patiently explaining how to sound-proof equipment with tape; how to pack the array of armament we carried; what rifle to use and its special quirks. In other words, John Kedenburg instructed me on the ins and outs of staying alive.

Most SOG teams were on intelligence-gathering missions in Cambodia and Laos, far from friendly help. Kedenburg was teaching me stealthy lore, such as how to pick out a sleeping location (R-O-N or Rest Over Night) an hour or so before dark on a side hill and in a thick noisy thicket. Then you'd circle back to the spot just at dark. The list of things to learn and do went on for days. When the time came for others to judge my merit on a local area training run, John Kedenburg was there to check my gear and me. I know I wasn't the only one John took under his wing. He was that kind of a person. In every photo from our days in Vietnam, you won't see John grinning or showing off. He's just the essence of cool, with a dashing mustache to go with his Cary Grant chin.



Joe Parnar. Loucks Collection

SOMETIME shortly after that first local training mission I was in the dispensary helping Doc John Probart and his assistant Bac Si, Joe Parnar, when word came in that a team was “inbound and on the ropes.” When a team was in close contact with the enemy and could not find a landing zone, they could ask for a “McGuire Rig” extraction—four 200-foot ropes dangling from the underside of a helicopter. Each rope was coiled-up inside a weighted sandbag and thrown down

through the jungle canopy as the helicopter hovered over the team. The actual McGuire Rig was a harness system that allowed a person to be carried at the end of each 200-foot rope. If Landing Zones were not available we would sometimes rappel out of the helicopter on these ropes using a rope and carabineer system known as the “Swiss Seat.” This process was not without problems, namely:

It was often impossible to try to get a helicopter to hover over your location in single, double or triple canopy jungle while on the run.

If you had wounded to tend to or received a wound while being extracted, it would often lead to individuals falling from the ropes. It took two hands to hang on in the earlier versions of the McGuire Rig. More than one team member was lost from a thousand to 3,000 feet of helicopter elevation. Some of their bodies were recoverable; some became MIA—the dreaded Missing in Action label.

Once the team being extracted was in the McGuire Rig seats, the helicopter would have to lift the team vertically to the top of the jungle canopy before beginning any horizontal movement. If the helicopter—a “ship” in the parlance of the war—came under enemy fire from ground forces, then the team would often be dragged through the jungle canopy as the helicopter tried to continue the extraction and at the same time get away from the incoming rifle rounds. Many friends were lost or seriously injured from being dragged through the jungle canopy.

Once the team was successfully extracted, the helicopter often would have to fly more than 30 minutes before reaching a friendly base camp. If the flight lasted beyond 20 minutes your legs would go to sleep. Once back on ground, walking was impossible or extremely painful. On at least one occasion I had this unsettling experience.

Everyone in camp who did not have a critical job would run to the Landing Zone when word came in that a “team was inbound on the ropes!” It was always a frantic time. The news on whose team it was passed from friend to friend. It wasn’t long before everyone knew that this time it was Kedenburg’s team.

When the helicopters arrived we got the devastating news that John had given his seat to another team member, an indigenous soldier. John was still missing and not responding to radio calls. That was 50 years ago. It’s hard to share something I tried to forget



A McGuire Rig extraction. *Loucks Collection*

for more than 20 of those years. Our group was highly classified and we were ordered not to talk about our experiences. In 1990, SOG was finally declassified. To the best of my recollection here's the rest of the story:

John Kedenburg was the "One-Zero" of a team that had been involved in a running firefight for much of that day. Pursued by a large contingent of North Vietnamese soldiers—500 by one estimate—the team took cover in a bomb crater and set up a defensive position. One member of the team was killed in the firefight and another was missing, but John managed to direct the first rescue helicopter to their location. When three members of his team were aboard, he called in the second chopper. Together with his remaining three team members, John was in his seat and waiting for the hovering helicopter to begin the extraction. Just then, the missing team member burst from the brush. In a matter of seconds Kedenburg was out of his harness and directing that soldier to take his place. It was the instinctual action of a "One-Zero" imbued with a sense of responsibility for everyone on his team. The helicopter crew chief and door gunner reported seeing John running into the brush at the edge of the extraction zone, firing in all directions, as they were lifting off.

All this happened in a swirl of confusion. News that John was still on the ground was not received by the Air Force forward air controller or the U.S. Air Force jets scheduled to begin a bombing run John had requested once his team was extracted.

WHENEVER a team member was killed and had to be left behind or reported missing in action, a larger force would be organized to attempt a rescue or recover the body of a soldier killed in action. Sometimes we were looking for downed pilots. These were "Bright Light Missions."

Because of my close association with John, I immediately volunteered for the mission to find him. Even though I was as green as they come—a "strap hanger"—I was probably accepted for the mission because of my medical training, plus the fact that I was in training to join one of the teams.

The team leader was Sherman Batman—his real last name—a career soldier who had plenty of team experience. Mike Tramel, another of Kedenburg's good friends, joined us, together with 10 or 12 Montagnard troops. I spent much of the afternoon and evening getting my medical bag in shape and packing all my gear, just as John had instructed me.

John's teammates had been extracted from an area pockmarked with B-52 bomb craters. It was along a low elevation ridge. We believed we could get three helicopters in on one of the craters if they went in one at a time.

It worked. We managed to find a large crater that was close to the previous extraction point. With the help of a Special Forces soldier named Gerald Denison—code name "Grommet"—riding in a forward air control plane we were able to make our way

right to the place where John was last seen.\*

There was no sign of the enemy, so we began our search.

We found John's body within 100 yards of the extraction point. Heartsick, we used our Swiss Seat ropes to pull the body away from its position in case it had been booby-trapped with a grenade. We searched John's gear for his crypto book, maps and mission notes. When we found the codebook we knew the enemy was not aware John had been left behind when the other team members were extracted.

The conclusion we drew from John's wounds and the fact that the enemy had not taken the valuable code book and radio was that bombs from our own jets had killed him. Every soldier knows that "friendly fire" tragedies occur in the heat of battle. In this case, communications were poor; there was a lot of confusion; everything happened fast. Moreover, the jets were doing exactly what John had previously requested. He had been running from the enemy and felt that they were close enough to request a bombing run as he was being extracted. None of this diminishes his heroism. It enhances his selflessness.

After recovering John's body and gear, we proceeded to the landing zone and placed plastic explosives on the trees that bordered the crater to allow a helicopter to land and depart fully loaded. Since I was the new guy and trained to heal versus blowing things up, I was assigned to one of the listening posts just outside our bomb crater. I remember how quiet everything was in front of me. I was on my stomach, looking through all the limbs, brush and ground debris when something fell in front of me with a thud, way too close for comfort. The next thing I remember is being sprawled inside the bomb crater as a major firefight erupted all around me. Evidently a North Vietnamese Army soldier had thrown some kind of concussion grenade as I was knocked unconscious and had lots of powder burns and minor shrapnel wounds to my face. It would be weeks before I could shave without a lot of pain.

In e-mail conversations decades later, Sherman Batman said he went looking for me when I failed to return with the others stationed at listening posts. He found me unconscious and somehow dragged or carried me back to the main bomb crater. When I came to, I asked what I could do. They told me to start throwing hand grenades. I'm not

\* Denison was a "Covey Rider," a coveted job that required someone who had proven calm and cool under fire. Covey Riders rode in the passenger seat, assisting the pilot—the "Covey"—with team communications. The pilot was also the forward air controller. He had to handle five or more radio frequencies at the same time. The Covey Rider concentrated on the team on the ground. That was often challenging, especially if the fellows on the ground were scared. Sometimes two or three teams would be in trouble at the same time.



The Spike Team Washington patch designed by Loucks. Loucks Collection



Loucks with indigenous members of Spike Team Washington. *Loucks Collection*

sure how many I threw, but it wasn't very many before one hit a tree or some other obstacle and bounced back toward the bomb crater. Luckily, it landed outside and no one was injured. Someone shouted, "Get those grenades from Loucks, and get them to someone that can throw!" Which was a very logical order! Losing that job didn't bother me in the least as I still couldn't understand why I was so groggy and weak. By this time we had injured comrades and I was busy treating the wounded. For 30 years I could not understand why I did not remember the first part of the fire-fight and why I was so weak when it came time to throw grenades. The call to Sherman Batman 20 years ago cleared up that little mystery. I am eternally thankful to Batman for saving my life.

I remember hearing "Grommet's" voice over the radio. "Oh my God," Denison said, "I can't believe how many forces there are around you!" I also have a distinct memory of hearing "GI, today you die!" in what would be best described as a cheap megaphone broadcasting enemy propaganda in broken English. I often wonder if my mind was playing tricks on me since Batman has no such recollection, though he was a lot busier than me.

The firefight lasted for hours. We lost four brothers in arms and everyone was wounded at least once. It's ironic but the injuries were of two extremes: You were either dead or wounded so superficially that you could continue fighting. In some ways it's almost as if I wasn't there as a medic because I have virtually no recollection of treating anyone for a life-threatening wound.

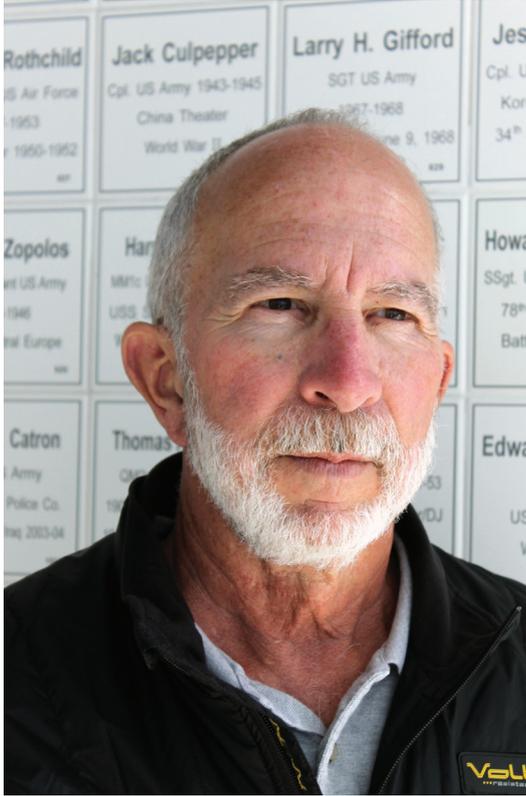
Although the helicopter gunships and Air Force jets did a lot to help our desperate situation, it was the Air Force “Sky Raiders” and their cluster bombs (CBUs) that really saved our bacon. In no way do I want to devalue the actions or help the helicopters and jet aircraft provided. However, when those vintage propeller-driven planes would come in with a load of CBUs they would clear an area for at least 100 yards. The Sky Raiders, which had seen action in World War II and Korea, could carry the equivalent of their own weight in bombs. Flying at slower speeds and lower elevations, they dropped their bombs with amazing accuracy. Everyone I ever ran into in Studies & Observation worshiped the ground the Sky Raider pilots walked on—or, more aptly, the skies they flew. It’s a sad commentary that some in the U.S. Air Force did not feel the old planes could do a proper job, opting instead for modern jet aircraft. Our ground troops were fighting enemy troops, and we wanted the Sky Raiders!



Loucks with his gear. *Loucks Collection*

IN MY LIFE I’ve had a number of role models. In Vietnam, I often thought about “Sgt. Rock,” one of my favorite comic book characters growing up. During that first tumultuous baptism by fire, I was convinced there was no way I was going to come through alive. We were totally surrounded by enemy troops. Numerous attempts to extract us had failed. The number of enemy killed by us and the air component must have been staggering. Yet they kept coming in greater numbers. Although I was so afraid I could taste the fear clotting in my throat, I distinctly remember thinking to myself, “What would Sgt. Rock do in this situation?” For me the response was, “They may get me, but I’ll take a few with me.” It sounds corny now all these years later, but Sgt. Rock was there with me on that day to give me the courage to overcome my fears and fight as a team member against incredible odds.

Late in the afternoon after many returns for rearming and refueling, the Sky Raiders made enough passes that we were able to get three helicopters into the landing zone to extract the team. For some reason the decision was made to send me out with the first helicopter with our dead. The ship was loaded and I was the only live team mem-



Loucks at the Veterans Memorial Museum in Chehalis.  
*John Hughes Photo*

ber on board. It was a sobering moment. As the ship was lifting off I was sitting on the floor with my legs outside and my feet on the skids as I fired my rifle into the surrounding jungle. The door gunners evidently could not see anything because they were not shooting. I was yelling and screaming over the prop wash. "Shoot!" I shouted. Then both door gunners opened up with their M-60 machine guns.

Pretty soon I felt a terrible pain in my crotch. I just knew I had been shot through the butt. By then I was inside the ship, bent over at the waist and pointing to my behind as one door gunner looked on. "Blood? Blood? Blood?" I yelled. The door gunner couldn't figure out what was wrong but shook his head. Then I saw a pile of M-60 gun casings on the floor where I had been sitting. Instinctively I knew what had happened. In the excitement of battle I hadn't realized that the hot shell casings from the machine gun had built-up in my lap and crotch. I ended-up with first-degree burns to my inner thigh. Once I knew what

had happened I slumped down on the body bags and slept until we arrived back at camp.

We had lost some of our Montagnard team members, and all of our American team members were wounded. Worst of all, our close friend John Kedenburg was dead. But we had retrieved his body and the vital crypto books.

FOR THE ACTIONS John Kedenburg took in getting his team out of a dire situation during a running firefight, and for making the supreme sacrifice of giving his seat to another comrade, John was posthumously awarded our nation's highest award for valor, the Congressional Medal of Honor. John has not been forgotten as there is a Special Forces Association Chapter named in his honor. I am one of many former friends who become emotional every time we see John's name in one of our military history books. What he taught me surely saved my life.

I've talked to many former soldiers who remember how hardened we became in combat. During the Vietnam War there was no time to mourn for John or a score of other

friends. In order to survive we became callous about death, trying to cover our despair in dark humor about someone “Buying the Farm” or numerous other euphemisms for the reality of death.

When I came back from Vietnam some nine months later it was on a stretcher in a hospital aircraft. For over a year I was so hardened to life in general that I began to feel I was no longer capable of feeling the emotion of love. I knew I loved my parents and family, yet I had extreme difficulty in showing any feelings. For me it was meeting a girl who would become my wife and lifelong partner that helped me get over the feelings of not being capable of loving someone. Now 50 years later, if I see a dead cat along the road I get emotional just thinking about the possibility that a child has lost a family pet. Tears I still have trouble showing but I know they are there.

I don't know if any of this will help anyone else, but for me it has been a struggle to put it all down on paper. I still feel I have not done a proper job of describing what we did, the difficulty of doing what we did, how proud we are of what we did as a group and finally how it's the best among us in life who ironically seem to be taken first. John was a mentor to many other young and inexperienced team members. That's the kind of person he was.

After the Bright Light Mission that recovered John's body, I served on a number of teams until being named to the coveted “One-Zero” position of a new team I named “ST Washington.” I wrote to the Secretary of State back home, Ludlow Kramer, and told him about my team. He sent me a Washington state flag.

I'm proud of what we did. But I can't think of anyone I influenced like John Kedenburg influenced me and others like me. His life ended at 21 a half century ago. Mine has been long and eventful—all the more so for his example. My wife Donna and I are honored to be active in the remarkable Veterans Memorial Museum at Chehalis, a labor of love for countless volunteers and donors.

The events John Hughes and I have related here took place in the southeast corner of Laos on June 13-14, 1968. In an effort to make the story as accurate as possible I spoke with fellow teammates and others involved. There may still be errors. If so they can be laid at my doorstep and no one else's.

Here is what matters most: John Kedenburg's heroism is as immortal as the brotherhood of soldiers. I'll never forget him.

**Editor's Note:** In the 1990s, an erroneous news story about MACV SOG—the secret Studies & Observations Group in Vietnam—prompted the Secretary of Defense to declassify a raft of records for a rebuttal. That opened the door for a dozen books based on oral histories and other first-hand accounts. Bryon Loucks' tribute to John Kedenburg adds new details to the record of the SOG teams operating along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in 1968.

**John C. Hughes & Bryon Loucks**  
**Legacy Washington**  
**Office of the Secretary of State**

## SOURCE NOTES

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The Washington State flag Loucks received from Secretary of State Lud Kramer. *Loucks Collection*

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*1968: The Year That Rocked Washington* looks back at 1968 and its impact on Washington state through the stories of some remarkable people who lived through it. On college campuses, the campaign trail and evergreen peaks, Washingtonians were spurred to action. It was the year when Vietnam, civil rights, women’s liberation and conservation coalesced—the year when tragedy led the 6 o’clock news with numbing regularity. 1968 changed us in ways still rippling through our society a half century later. *1968: The Year That Rocked Washington* features a collection of online stories and an exhibit at the Washington State Capitol in the fall of 2018. Legacy Washington documents the activism and aftershocks of a landmark year in world history. [www.sos.wa.gov/legacy/sixty-eight/](http://www.sos.wa.gov/legacy/sixty-eight/)