

The Army a Dozen Years Ago

POW Raid's Leader Was Once Flack for STRAC

By James Meagher

It was more than the usual reminiscence of someone who sees an old Army buddy make news. When Col. Arthur D. Simons showed up on television and in the newspapers—the man who had led the courageous but futile attempt to rescue American GIs from a North Vietnamese prison—I thought about what had happened to him, his Army, and the country in the 12 years since I had served with him.

Let me confess a few things right off. First, Colonel Simons and I weren't buddies. I liked him, and I have reason to believe he did not dislike me. But when I knew him, he was a lieutenant colonel and I was a second lieutenant. We weren't buddies.

Second, when I say we "served" together, I don't mean to conjure up a picture of the kind of tough combat outfit Colonel Simons has served in for most of his career.

Wanted Special Forces Assignment

When I knew him, Colonel Simons was public-information officer—the PIO—for Fort Bragg, N.C., heading a staff whose mission was to keep the public informed—or, if policy so dictated—uninformed about the Army's doings at that sprawling military post. I had been assigned to serve my two-year active-duty hitch in PIO work because I had studied journalism and had acquired some newspaper experience. Colonel Simons, a career soldier who also had a journalism degree, didn't know "how in the hell" he had gotten the job. And all the time I knew him—less than a year—he was looking toward the day when he could get out of that office, away from the typewriters and stencil duplicators and back to something that looked like the real Army.

More specifically, this World War II veteran who had led a Ranger battalion in the Pacific in World War II, wanted in the worst way an assignment to the Army Special Forces.

Colonel Simons, it turned out, was a good PIO. And he had the job at a particularly tough, and interesting, time for the Army and for those of us who were called on to serve, however temporarily, as its propagandists.

That's what came to mind when I watched Colonel Simons on television, talking to the press and apparently not enjoying it very much. He didn't consider dealing with newsmen much fun in the old days, and here he was, facing them again, describing a mission that failed.

Back at Fort Bragg 12 years ago, Colonel Simons was around 40. It was his first assignment to Bragg, a post populated mostly by airborne soldiers. The post headquarters, where we were assigned, also served as headquarters for the 18th Airborne Corps. The corps included the 82nd Airborne Division, also stationed at Bragg, and the 101st Airborne Division, stationed at Fort Campbell, Ky., and in those days commanded by a promising young major general named William C. Westmoreland. Most of the soldiers at Bragg and Campbell considered themselves the Army's elite.

Also at Bragg was something called the Special Warfare Center, a mysterious



collection of units training for a wide variety of off-beat tasks—including counterinsurgency.

Counterinsurgency. That was the mission of the Special Forces—the outfit Colonel Simons, with his Ranger experience and newly acquired airborne training, yearned to join. The Special Forces weren't allowed to wear green berets in those days, and not many Americans knew about them. But the men considered themselves the most elite of the Army's elite.

In those days, though, the Army itself was hardly the darling of the nation's defense. The glamor was all with SAC—the Air Force's Strategic Air Command. As Michael Malloy recounted in this newspaper last week, the Eisenhower Administration had put most of the country's defense eggs into the basket of massive retaliation, relying on long-range bombers and missiles to deter potential aggressors.

Enter STRAC

This didn't leave much of a role for the Army. The Army and its sympathizers—including a lot of liberal Democrats—insisted that the Eisenhower-Dulles strategy meant the United States could respond to aggression only with a nuclear attack. There could be no response to small-scale aggression—"brush fire" wars. The Communists could nibble away at the Free World with impunity.

So the Army brass began a campaign to reverse policy. The service's public-relations experts in the Pentagon passed the word that if the Air Force could glamorize SAC, the Army would glamorize STRAC—the Strategic Army Corps. This outfit was under the command of the 18th Corps headquarters and would include the 82nd and 101st divisions, along with a couple of nonairborne, "straightleg" divisions—the 1st and the 4th.

STRAC, in theory, was highly mobile. Air Force troop carriers would be able to ferry STRAC units of varying sizes to any-

where in the world—and ferry them in a hurry—if the United States found it necessary to intervene in some crisis or other. An Asian brush-fire war, for example.

STRAC was more than just a public-relations stunt. It was a deadly serious strategic concept. But it was also, as the military correspondent for the Chicago Tribune wrote, a "paper tiger." Many of the Army's STRAC units were poorly trained and undermanned, far from able to rush off to put out any brush fires. And the Air Force didn't have the planes to carry those well-trained units the Army had. So we Army propagandists had a selling job.

We didn't do a bad job. Our office was full of men who knew a lot about the "media"—though we didn't use the word in those days. Most of us weren't real soldiers—mostly two-year draftees and ROTC graduates—but Colonel Simons respected us because we seemed to know what we were doing. Whenever STRAC would stage war games, we would rush out and cover them as if they were real wars. We lured some big reporters to Fort Bragg to write about STRAC. Feature stories about STRAC's commanding general, a colorful paratroop veteran named Robert F. Sink, began showing up in this magazine and that.

Transfer Comes Through

Colonel Simons worked harder than any of us. He no doubt believed in the concept we were trying to sell, but the job frustrated him and bored him. I suspect that he eventually found the war in Indochina, where he would serve on several assignments, also frustrating—along with the political debate that has accompanied it at home. But I really don't know for sure; I never discussed politics with him, although I do recall a passing, uncomplimentary reference to the late Sen. Joseph McCarthy—delivered in characteristic, imaginative Simons profanity.

Eventually Colonel Simons got the transfer he wanted, to the Special Forces Group at Bragg. It was not a touching farewell; he was happy to "get the hell out of the bloody place."

I hadn't seen him since—not until he showed up at that Pentagon news conference. But between then and now, the concept the Army press agents of those days were trying to sell was adopted by a new Democratic Administration.

John F. Kennedy brought Army Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, a big flexible-response man, out of retirement and installed him in the White House. The Special Forces donned green berets and gained celebrity. The air cavalry, the ultimate in Army mobility, became an important ingredient in the new Army. Conventional forces became respectable again, and among unconventional forces, counterinsurgency was the big thing.

The new Army's big assignment, it turned out, was Vietnam. Now Richard Nixon is trying to lead the nation out of that brush-fire war. No more Vietnams, he says, and that old debate about strategy, weapons, and forces is upon us again.

Maybe the nation really isn't back where it was a dozen years ago, but to men like Arthur Simons—tough, dedicated, and eager to volunteer for the dirty jobs—it has probably been a frustrating dozen years indeed.