

A Most Unusual Sea Commando



By Col Michael Haas, USAF, ret.

“If you go, I go.” The intense Vietnamese Sea Commando spoke quietly, his dark eyes never leaving those of the American SEAL officer standing in front of him. Kiet’s terse pledge set the stage for what became the most intense and costliest rescue mission of the entire Vietnam War. Against the most incredible odds and with the even more incredible valor of two Navy SEALs—one American, one Vietnamese—the effort succeeded.

Top Image: Petty Officer Third Class Kiet Van Nguyen, Republic of Vietnam Navy *Lien Doi Nguoi Nhai* (LDNN/UDT), *Biet Hai* (Sea Commando/SEAL) and the U.S. Navy Cross. (photos Kiet collection and DoD)

Petty Officer Third Class Kiet Van Nguyen US Navy Cross, RVN Bronze Star (2 OLC), Purple Heart (2 OLC)

“Due to Petty Officer Kiet’s coolness under extremely dangerous conditions and his outstanding courage and professionalism, an American aviator was recovered after an eleven-day ordeal behind enemy lines. Kiet’s self-discipline, personal courage, and dynamic fighting spirit were an inspiration to all.”

The above is the citation to accompany award of the U.S. NAVY CROSS for Extraordinary Heroism.

Second only to the Medal of Honor, the Navy Cross is the highest valor award America can legally bestow on an allied combatant not serving in U.S. military. ¹ Some 496 Navy Crosses were awarded during the Vietnam War: 124 to US Navy recipients; 369 to US Marine Corps recipients; Republic of Vietnam Navy recipients . . . *one*.

But the cost was dear. In five days, 14 South Vietnamese and Americans were killed, five aircraft lost, sixteen seriously damaged, two would-be rescuers captured, and two more left evading capture behind enemy lines. ²

Other Vietnamese SEALs (*Beit Hai*) ³ and American airmen possessing extraordinary courage and skill, had already made this commitment to rescue the downed American airman. Their broken bodies now lay scattered across the battlefield or in hospitals. As for their own hastily assembled rescue team, Kiet was all that remained from the original five Sea Commandos who volunteered for the high-risk mission only seventy-two hours earlier. Two had been wounded, and the other two had simply refused to continue in the face of such appalling odds.



It was 12 April 1972, and the fifty-three-year-old U.S. Air Force navigator the two were determined to rescue had been on the run for ten exhausting days after a surface-to-air missile (SAM) destroyed his aircraft. The only member of his crew to survive the explosion, **Lt. Col. Iceal**

¹ Equivalent to the Navy Cross is the Distinguished Service Cross awarded by the U.S. Army and Air Force.

² "Thomas R. Norris", NavySEALs.com, <https://navyseals.com/ns-overview/notable-seals/thomas-r-norris/>

³ The Vietnamese Special Warfare forces went through a variety of name changes during the war, including frogmen, maritime commandos, 'soldiers who fight under the sea,' Sea Commandos, Biet Hai, and LDNN. US Navy SEALs generally referred to them as SEALs or LDNNs.

'Gene' Hambleton parachuted directly into the path of a moving nightmare; later dubbed the North Vietnamese Army's (NVA) "Easter Offensive."

[For this massive attack] . . . 'the NVA committed 14 regular divisions, 26 regiments, and more than 600 tanks. Protecting all this was a vastly expanded anti-aircraft system that traveled along with invading forces. The flak weapons included 23, 37, 57, 85, and 100 mm guns. Supplementing the familiar SA-2 surface-to-air missiles were deadly man-portable SA-7 *Strela* heat-seeking missiles.⁴

The rampaging NVA had succeeded in downing several ground attack aircraft in the opening hours of its unprecedented attack. Subsequent attempts to rescue those airmen lucky enough to have ejected from their stricken aircraft had only added to the toll of lost men and aircraft.

By anyone's reckoning, Hambleton was the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time. From a previous assignment Hambleton had Top Secret access to Strategic Air Command's operations and was an expert in SAM countermeasures. The North Vietnamese may have possessed information about his presence in Vietnam, and his capture would have been a huge intelligence bonanza for the Soviet Union.

Helicopter Rescue Terminated

With aircraft losses mounting daily and no observable reduction in the ferocity of the NVA's air defenses, the US Seventh Air Force headquarters in Saigon finally terminated all further attempts at helicopter rescue on 7 April. For Hambleton (and subsequently another downed airman) still evading behind enemy lines, the termination order left them with only the most improbable hope for rescue: The seemingly suicidal prospect that a small commando team infiltrating into the teeth of this communist offensive, could somehow snatch them from the very grasp of the NVA surrounding them on all sides.

The critical situation drove a flurry of high-level decisions that led, in a matter of hours, to the formation of a handpicked rescue team comprised of a Marine Corps officer, US Navy SEAL, and five volunteers from the Vietnamese Navy's elite *Biet Hai* ('Sea Commandos'); including tough, six-year combat veteran Petty Officer Kiet Van Nguyen.⁵ From that moment on, the seven men would need every bit of luck, stamina, and courage they could muster for the frightening events about to confront them.

Petty Officer Kiet

For the twenty-seven-year-old Kiet, luck, stamina, and courage had been the key to his survival long before he met the Americans. Born in 1945 near Saigon, Kiet had grown up in a tumultuous culture torn apart in the aftermath of World War II. In such violent times both

⁴ "The Easter Halt", *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, Sep 1, 1998.

<https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/0998easter/>

⁵ For a more detailed description of Vietnamese Naval Special Forces see an article by Ken Conboy

<https://ngothelinh.tripod.com/History.html>

communists and anti-communists alike tested every young man's political loyalty and physical toughness, often long before he finished his primary schooling.

For Kiet, however, there was never any question of his crossing over to the communists. The healthy son of a staunchly anti-communist, middle-class family, graduation from high school in 1963 simply meant that his youthful desire to be a sailor could at last be fulfilled with his **enlistment in the navy**. This he promptly did, immediately coming face-to-face with the combat realities of life and death in a navy already long at war. Following his graduation from basic training in 1964 as a Seaman/Gunner, Kiet was assigned to the Mekong Delta region south of Saigon. One of the most hotly contested areas in South Vietnam, the fertile Delta was to be his home and nearly his grave site during the next two years of hard fighting.

Kiet reported to the **21st River Assault Group**, a unit located far up the My Tho River in the central delta. The area had been a communist stronghold since the First Indochina War, when the Viet Minh successfully fought French and Vietnamese government troops to a standstill in a series of battles for control over the region. Known by the Vietnamese as "The River of Nine Dragons," the Mekong and its tributaries provided the main supply route for the Viet Cong (VC) operating in the Delta throughout all of the Second Indochina War.

As Kiet quickly discovered, the danger was most acute when the armed patrol boats left the main rivers to search the smaller streams and tributaries. And this was exactly what happened to Kiet the first time he was wounded. With his boat caught squarely in the killing zone of a cleverly hidden VC ambush, Kiet frantically sent a red stream of machine gun tracer rounds back toward the incoming fire.

Without warning a single bullet slammed into his steel helmet, snapping his neck back before slamming him to the deck. Incredibly, the bullet fragments that passed through the front of the helmet did nothing more than put a nasty gash on his forehead before spinning around the curve of the helmet to expend themselves. Thoroughly shaken, bleeding, and dazed but not seriously harmed, Kiet was able to resume his duties for the next patrol.

Months later he was again wounded when his boat was caught in yet another ambush. This time ricocheting bullet fragments inside his gun tub tore into his right shoulder and arm with a searing pain, leaving him helpless to return fire at the most critical moment of the battle. Though surviving another close call to make a complete recovery, the wounds left a lengthy web of scars as the unwanted memento of close quarters combat in the Delta.

The defensive nature of the riverine combat, the feeling that more often than not the boats and their crews were little more than bait for an ambush, did not sit well with the aggressively minded Kiet. Two years of river combat had left him with two Purple Hearts, three Bronze Stars, and enough scar tissue to send him looking for another way to fight; something that would make him the hunter rather than the hunted. And in fact, there was such a unit, a highly classified organization that was then looking for combat-experienced adventurers just like this young man.

Coastal Security Service (CSS)

Kiet's reassignment orders sent him north to the coastal port city of Danang, to an organization operating under the deliberately mundane and misleading cover name "Coastal Security Service," or simply CSS. This secretive naval force had been carrying out top-secret operations in North Vietnamese waters since its formation in April 1964; earlier still under different names. It was a remarkable organization, commanded by an even more remarkable intelligence officer, Colonel Ngo The Linh. Born in North Vietnam, Linh had been forced to flee south in 1949 after his anti-communist views made him an assassination target.

The communists would pay dearly for letting Linh escape, as he would go on to become one of their most deadly foes as a military intelligence chief in South Vietnam. Operating under a series of alias for his own protection, Linh had, by the late-1950s, developed an extremely close working relationship with CIA operative William Colby. This cooperation extended to the covert maritime operations needed to insert both Linh's and Colby's agents and saboteurs into North Vietnam. This relationship remained essentially unchanged when, in 1964, US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara ordered the CIA to transfer control of its covert operations in North Vietnam to the US Military Command-Vietnam (MACV) headquarters in Saigon. Linh had simply followed suit by establishing the CSS as the new cover organization needed to continue the maritime program under US military direction.

To manage its new responsibilities MACV established the "Studies and Observations Group" (**MACV-SOG**), which directed Linh's CSS as Operation 31 within its organization. But despite its longish military acronym, the highly classified SOG did not answer to the four-star general commanding MACV. Rather it reported to and took orders from the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington. Its operating costs were buried in the US Navy's annual budget and each of its missions outside South Vietnamese territory required prior White House-approval. In reality, CSS was operating as SOG's private navy when it sortied forth into North Vietnamese waters. And thus, the CSS was fighting in this role when it became embroiled in one of the most controversial events in the entire war.

It was precisely because the White House controlled CSS missions, that President Lyndon Johnson was one of the first Americans to know about the CSS raid that provoked North Vietnamese torpedo boats into attacking two US Navy destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin. In the days that followed the attack, Johnson chose not to share this classified CSS activity with Congress. He did, however, use the North Vietnamese response (to the CSS) in his successful attempt to secure congressional passage of the so-called "Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. And though this "incident" proved significant to the political expansion of the war, it was of relatively little interest to Kiet as he reported for duty to the CSS in the summer of 1966.

Kiet served with the Danang-based raiding craft ('PTFs') for a full four years. During this time the crews conducted harassment attacks on coastal positions and attacked small North Vietnamese craft attempting to smuggle weapons and agents into South Vietnam. The attacks were quick, violent affairs—usually over within minutes—as the thin-hulled PTFs had neither the firepower nor protective armor to engage in duels with coastal defenses.

Kiet completed a remarkable seventy-two such missions, earning the Vietnamese Navy's Special Missions Medal for his courage and unwavering endurance in the face of such repeated risks. Even more remarkable, he finished his sixth straight year of frontline combat by volunteering for an even more hazardous mission: Service with the navy's elite *Lien Doi Nguoi Nhai (LDNN)* — "soldiers who fight under the sea."

LDNN Selection and Training

The small number of US Navy SEALs working in SOG's Naval Advisory Detachment in Danang referred to their Vietnamese counterparts as "*LDNNs*," or simply SEALs, like themselves. But regardless of their description, one distinctive commonality of SEALs everywhere in the world is the punishing selection course that pushes every would-be SEAL to and sometimes over, the brink of total physical and mental exhaustion. In this regard the South Vietnamese Navy was certainly no different than what the US Navy expected of its SEALs.



Photo: LDNN/UDT insignia (Kiet collection)

The three-month long *LDNN* initial selection training took place at the Vietnamese naval base at Cam Ranh Bay. With neither the time nor the resources to waste on training men who could not perform under the twin burdens of extreme fear and fatigue, the first phase of training was dedicated exclusively to weeding out all but the most determined of the already carefully selected volunteers. This merciless phase culminated in the notorious "Hell Week" that mirrored the same nightmare of legend begun years earlier in the US Navy's Underwater Demolition Team training.

While Kiet was amongst those who discovered what his true mental and physical limits were, he was definitely in the minority of his class. Of the 155 handpicked volunteers who started the first phase, more than one hundred quit or were ejected before the end of Hell Week. Only after satisfying themselves that they had identified human material worthy of their training efforts, did the instructors begin teaching the remaining class the unconventional warfare skills that would prove critical to their survival in combat.

These core skills included night and close-quarters combat techniques, raids, ambushes, prisoner snatches, martial arts, Scuba diving, and mastery of US and communist-bloc

weapons. At the completion of the course Kiet was one of only thirty-two left standing from those who had reported for training some twelve weeks earlier. Mentally hardened and now at a peak of physical fitness and confidence, Kiet returned to the Mekong Delta with an *LDNN* unit operating in the extreme southern tip of South Vietnam, the Ca Mau Province. Though seemingly a remote location of little interest to either the government or the communists, Ca Mau was in fact one of the oldest and most dangerous communist bastions in the country.

Assigned to the Mekong Delta

Ca Mau's value to the communists was found in its geographic proximity to Cambodia, an officially "neutral" country long used by the North Vietnamese as a base for seaborne infiltration of men and materiel into South Vietnam. Moreover, much of Ca Mau's western region featured the forbidding U Minh Forest, a wild, dark mass of rivers, swamps and impenetrable forest into which government forces rarely ventured. Old veterans remembered the French dropping 500 paratroops into U Minh in 1952, the battalion subsequently vanishing forever in mangrove swamps said to be the largest in the world outside the Amazon.⁶

The same description held for the Nam Can Forest farther south in the Ca Mau. And it was directly into the heart of this VC-controlled, U Minh-Nam Can axis, that Kiet's SEAL platoon was sent.

Operating from the river town of Nam Can and therefore known simply as "the Nam Can *LDNNs*," Kiet and his teammates concentrated on intelligence gathering and eliminating the local Viet Cong infrastructure. Often operating in civilian clothes, the Vietnamese SEALs fanned out from Nam Can across Ca Mau in search of the always-elusive VC, coordinating their efforts with local police units while developing their own informants as well. Particularly useful to the *LDNNs* were the *Chieu Hoi*, the VC defectors whose knowledge of the Ca Mau terrain and local VC infrastructure provided invaluable intelligence. From such sources Kiet and his teammates soon put together target folders on the communists they would either assassinate or capture for the interrogations that would lead them to their next target. But as Kiet also quickly learned, the dangerous business of using informants from within the enemy's ranks was a game both sides could and did play.

On more than one supposedly secret mission, Kiet's squad found the enemy waiting in ambush for them along a trail briefed in advance only to the *LDNNs*. At other times their squad would attack a Viet Cong camp, only to discover that it had been evacuated hours or even minutes before their assault began. Clearly the enemy was getting information from someone within the *LDNNs*, but who? Beyond the obvious tactical dangers in the field, the mere suspicion of such a "mole" in the small group had the potential to tear apart the all-critical trust built up amongst the men.

⁶ "Meanwhile, Closing the Circle on Vietnam", *The New York Times*, Mar 13, 2004.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/13/opinion/meanwhile-closing-the-circle-on-vietnam.html>

Not until three days after their platoon finished its tour in the Delta and departed, did Kiet learn that the incoming platoon had somehow uncovered the traitor. And it was in fact an *LDNN*, an individual who had been attached to their team upon its arrival in Ca Mau a year earlier. Left behind when Kiet's platoon departed, the man had subsequently been attached to the incoming *LDNN* team, in which he had been quickly exposed. As was invariably the case when such double agents were uncovered, the man simply disappeared, most likely after a brutal interrogation session.

As Kiet's platoon finished its Delta tour, he was already looking ahead to a goal he had harbored since his days aboard the PTFs: A return to the friends he had made in his four years with the Coastal Security Service. This time he would serve with them as a fully qualified *Biet Hai* Sea Commando.

Return to Coastal Security Service – as a Sea Commando

The **Sea Commando training** took place at Ten Sha Danang, an old French fort on the peninsula extending out from the major port of Da Nang. And though the three-month-long course did not include the infamous Hell Week of *LDNN* training, it still presented another hellish round of training that left less than half of the original starting class present for graduation day. Despite his now seven years of combat experience, the last with the *LDNNs*, Kiet was treated no differently than any other Sea Commando volunteer as he struggled through the demanding training. Surviving the first, "gut-check" phase of training, he again went through a strenuous series of tactical field training classes in raids, ambushes, camouflage, prisoner snatches, silent killing techniques, and combat swimming. Kiet emerged from this latest selection course in late-1971, a combat-hardened veteran with mastery in an ever-growing list of lethal skills. He was just twenty-five years old.

The CSS that Kiet returned to had undergone major changes during the short year he had served with the *LDNNs* in the Delta. Political decisions in Washington during that year led to the prohibition against further PTF forays north of the 17th parallel separating North from South Vietnam. While the boats assumed other missions in South Vietnamese waters, the *Biet Hai* Sea Commandos had been transferred to MACV-SOG "Operation 80."

Operating under the cover name "Joint Personnel Recovery Center (JPRC)," Operation 80 had been established in 1966 to coordinate and conduct the rescue of downed allied pilots, other American POWs, or the remains of those listed as Missing-in-Action. Such missions were given the codename "Bright Light." To conduct these specialized missions the JPRC formed two platoon-size teams, each with the cover name "Combat Ranger Platoon" to disguise its real mission. It was to the Danang-based platoon that Kiet was assigned following completion of his Sea Commando training in late-1971.

As good as the JRPC program looked on paper however, not one American POW had ever been rescued by a Bright Light team. And by the year Kiet reported to his platoon, American involvement in Southeast Asia had evolved from that of large-scale ground combat to one limited almost exclusively to that of an air war. In fact, as part of the steady American

withdrawal from Southeast Asia, MACV-SOG itself had been ordered to cease operations effective the end of March 1972; official disbandment effective thirty days later. From that date forward the MACV-SOG mission was to be assumed by its Vietnamese counterpart, the Strategic Technical Directorate. Such was the state of affairs within SOG when, on 2 April 1972, the loss of Lt Col Hambleton set in motion an incredible saga.

Largest Single Air Rescue Attempt of the War

During the ensuing days the US Air Force mounted what became the largest single air rescue attempt of the war; not only for Hambleton but for the airmen who were shot down trying to rescue him. But the harder the airmen tried to penetrate the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive to rescue Hambleton, the more men and aircraft it lost. Initial attempts quickly cost half-dozen aircraft, leaving nine dead airmen and two others captured after being shot down. And still, Hambleton—radio call sign **Bat 21 Bravo**—continued to evade the enemy all around him.

So too did **1st Lieutenant Mark Clark**, the rear seat observer in an OV-10 observation aircraft shot down on 3 April while attempting to coordinate the rescue of Hambleton. Fortunately for both men, they were able to use their survival radios to maintain contact with their would-be rescuers in the skies above. Through this communications channel the airmen above were able to guide the two from one place to another, thus avoiding the densest concentrations of the continuously moving enemy forces. The rescuers also used the radios to provide encouragement and hope to the desperate and physically weakening airmen.

Though obviously aware of the savage fighting taking place to the north of Danang, Kiet had no idea at that time of the costly and **futile attempts to rescue Hambleton and Clark**. With the entire South Vietnamese front threatening to crack under the hammer blows of the NVA, the fate of two downed airmen was an issue largely lost in the thunder of the offensive. But what Kiet did note as he ordered a beer one night at the Sea Commando club on base, was the intense discussion taking place in a far corner of the dark bar. Moving over to the group he quickly learned that a rescue mission of some sort was about to take place, and volunteers were needed at a briefing scheduled to take place the following morning.

When asked years later what motivated him to volunteer for a mission with such an improbable chance of success, Kiet's laconic reply was simple: "I felt confident we could succeed, given our tactics."

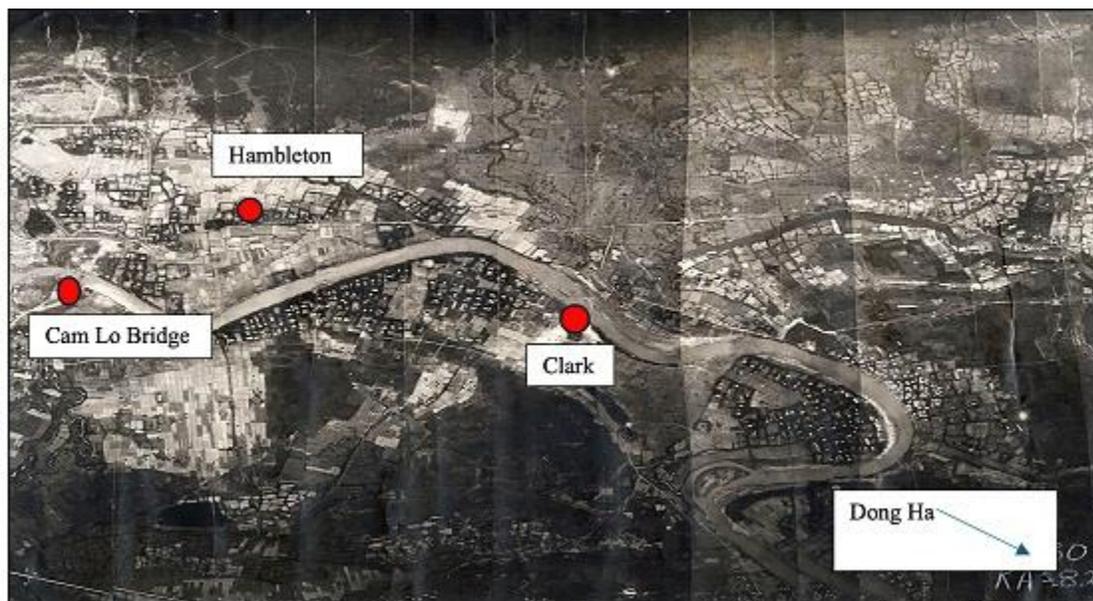
That morning Kiet and the others assembled in the base Operations Room to be briefed by US Marine Corps **Lt. Col. Andy Anderson**, director of MACV-SOG's previously described Operation 80. With him was another American, **Lieutenant Tom Norris**, a SEAL assigned to the Naval Advisory Team then working with the Strategic Technical Directorate in Danang. Anderson briefly described the failed helicopter attempts to rescue the downed airmen, making sure that

the Vietnamese understood the dangers involved in any rescue attempt by land. Five volunteers were needed, and no time was available for the customary planning and team training that would normally precede such a complex, high-risk operation.

Rescue Team Assembled

One officer and four enlisted Sea Commandos were chosen, Kiet making sure that he was one of the four. Short hours later a team consisting of Anderson, Norris, Sea Commando leader Lt. Vu Ngoc Tho, and four enlisted Sea Commandos boarded a helicopter in Danang for the eighty-five-mile-long flight north to Quang Tri city. From there the team traveled by armored personnel carrier to the beleaguered forward outpost that would serve as their mission launch point.

Located along Highway 9 some two miles west of the town of **Dong Ha**, the small, battered outpost sat astride the eastward flowing Cam Lo River that would figure so prominently in the dramatic events to follow. Defended by two squads of hungry, dispirited Vietnamese Rangers and their frightened lieutenant, the battle-littered camp seemed more of a graveyard in the making than a fighting position. Less than two hundred yards outside perimeter stood the hulks of three NVA tanks that had nearly overrun their position only twenty-four hours earlier. Speaking in Vietnamese, Anderson was forced to use the carrot-and-stick method—extra rations along with the threat to shoot anyone attempting to desert—to ensure that the outpost defenders stayed at their posts while the rescue attempt was in progress. Both to coordinate the rescue and keep a sharp eye on the Rangers, Anderson directed the operation from the outpost as the rescue progressed.



Map: Courtesy of U.S. Air Force Museum – annotated by author. [Click here](#) for larger image.

With the Rangers obviously ready to fold at the first sign of danger and the two downed pilots in growing peril every hour they remained behind enemy lines, the rescue team prepared to move out immediately after nightfall. From previous instructions received over their individual survival radios, both Hambleton and Clark had been guided southward toward the Cam Lo River, at which point they had gone into hiding to await further instructions. Even though Hambleton had been on the ground longer, Clark's closer position—a mile upstream from the outpost—led to his selection as the object of the rescue team's first attempt that night.

The Rescue of Clark

The plan was as simple as it was daring. Norris would lead the Sea Commandos on a mile-deep infiltration through the NVA lines before setting up an observation point along the south bank of the river. On his cue a signal would be sent from Anderson to Clark, directing the airman to enter the river to begin floating downstream toward the waiting rescue group. As he came abreast the waiting team Clark would be pulled from the river, then escorted back to the outpost.

It was a simple plan but dangerous in the extreme, as NVA positions and moving foot patrols were directly in the team's path from the moment it left the outpost. The mere cracking of a branch underfoot, the kicking loose of small stones, a sliver of light as the moon came out from behind a cloud to expose the team, any of these could lead to the immediate annihilation of the entire group. With no backup support, no escape route, and no hope of nighttime air support to keep the enemy at bay, the risks were simply beyond calculation. Yet despite these incredible odds the plan worked . . . almost.

With the team in place and on signal from Anderson, Clark slipped into the dark river waters, still thinking clearly enough to don a mosquito head net from his survival kit to mask the profile of his head as he began floating down river. But almost immediately a small tree branch sticking out of the water snagged the activation cord to the inflation bottle on his life preserver. The bottle promptly worked exactly to government specifications, nearly giving Clark a heart attack as it instantly inflated his preserver with a loud pop. From that moment on, any part of the preserver showing above water revealed the preserver's two, DayGlo Orange air bladders.

The rescuers finally saw Clark coming toward them in the early morning hours of 10 April. But what they also saw at the same moment froze them in place. Fate had just intervened in the worst way, in the form of a small NVA patrol moving between the team and the river. While easy enough to dispatch the patrol with the firepower carried by the Sea Commandos, such an act would have been suicidal, as it would have instantly exposed both the team and Clark to the enemy surrounding them.

To the team's immense relief, the NVA moved away from the river without seeing or hearing Clark coming downstream past them. Norris immediately entered the river to swim after Clark but was unable to overtake the pilot before the airman floated out of sight into the darkness further downstream. Returning to the team, Norris radioed Anderson of the situation and

advised him to direct Clark to pull up along the south bank until the team could catch up with him.

Following Anderson's instructions, Clark hid in shallow water behind a small, sunken sampan, shivering as he waited for his rescuers to emerge from the dark. What Clark hadn't been told was that Vietnamese were part of the rescue team. And this fact nearly brought calamity to the mission as Kiet had taken the point-man position for the team as it moved down river.

Much to Clark's alarm the first figure to emerge from the dark immediately in front of him was a Vietnamese carrying the NVA's standard issue assault rifle. And the AK-47's barrel was pointing right at him. Pointing his .38 cal revolver straight at the approaching figure, Clark hesitated even as his finger tightened on the revolver's trigger. In the same moment Kiet caught sight of Clark, instantly realizing the frightened airman's intent.

Freezing in mid-stride, Kiet held his breath as time seemed to stop altogether. Every survival instinct in his body screamed at him to shoot Clark before the American shot him. Images from six years of combat rushed through his brain, images of seeing friends die because they hesitated to fire, because they made the unrecoverable mistake of killing before being killed themselves. If their position was to be compromised by the sound of a gunshot, better it be Clark lying in his own blood than himself. A wounded man would have no chance of making it back to the outpost once the NVA rushed to the scene to begin chasing the team back from where it had come. Unconsciously, Kiet's finger tightened on the trigger.

A moment later Norris came forward to speak softly to his fellow American, first ensuring that he put his own weapon behind him and took off his hat to give Clark a good look at his Caucasian face. Moments later the team resumed its return journey toward the outpost with Clark in tow. It was a trip made even more hazardous than the outbound leg, as the team had to elude NVA patrols while escorting an exhausted airman with no training in silent night movement. But now fate favored the team with a safe return to the outpost just as dawn was breaking. Equally important, the first sign of light also helped the jittery defenders identify the group as it approached their perimeter. Hours later an armored personnel carrier evacuated Clark to the rear, just before calamity struck.

Perhaps the stunning barrage was simply part of the NVA offensive raging around the outpost. Or perhaps enemy soldiers observing the small base had noted Norris and Sea Commandos returning with their prize in the early dawn light. In either case the communists hit the Dong Ha outpost with an intense combination of artillery, rockets, and recoilless rocket fire. Several Rangers went down with serious wounds in moments and again, Anderson was forced to keep panic from overtaking the defenders by threatening to shoot deserters.

But in thus exposing himself to enemy fire, **Anderson joined the ranks of the wounded** himself, as did the highly regarded Lt. Tho and another *Biet Hai* Sea Commando. That left only Norris, Kiet, and the two remaining *Biet Hai* for the attempt to bring in Hambleton that night. And given the reaction of the Vietnamese Rangers at the outpost during the shelling, the team could only

wonder whether upon their return from the Hambleton rescue attempt it would be North or South Vietnamese soldiers occupying their sanctuary.

Rescue of Hambleton

The **second night's attempt** brought not only failure to link up with Hambleton, but also a rebellion by two of the *Biet Hai* against continuing the attempt in the face of such overwhelming odds. Having reluctantly infiltrated nearly twice as far behind enemy lines on this second night, again completely surrounded by NVA, the two Sea Commandos were kept in line only by Norris's caution to them that they would all be safer by staying together as a group until they returned to the outpost. This was accomplished by dawn the next morning, after which Kiet and Norris used a sampan to paddle upriver for a **last-ditch effort to locate Hambleton in broad daylight**. That too failed but still their luck held, for despite their obvious exposure to detection they returned without incident.

Later that day that the two reluctant Sea Commandos abruptly withdrew themselves from any further attempts to rescue Hambleton. Knowing that any attempts to change their mind would prove futile, Norris then turned to Kiet to ask him whether he was willing to accompany him for yet a fourth infiltration behind enemy lines that night. As noted earlier, Kiet's affirmative answer set the stage for the finale in a drama that could not possibly continue much longer without a tragic ending.

A Fourth Infiltration Behind Enemy Lines

The two SEALs set out at midnight, again using a sampan to move upstream in search of the now sick, thoroughly exhausted Hambleton. After ten days on the ground the navigator was too weak and disoriented to even float down the river as Clark had done. This time Kiet and Norris would have to go still further into NVA territory to reach the airman they sought.

Their weapons hidden in the bottom of the sampan, Norris paddled quietly while Kiet sat in the bow. Slowly the sampan moved along the riverbank, gliding from shadow to shadow. Like a hunted animal—which indeed they were—Kiet and Norris strained to see into the night, heads turning back and forth to help ears detect any unusual sound as they smelled the night air for the dangerous presence of humans. Every human sense was in a hyperactive state, waiting with dread for the moment when the darkness would erupt in a shattering burst of machine gun fire.

The chance that Kiet could bluff their way through any NVA challenges should they suddenly be detected was thin indeed. But if detected it was their only option, for the two could hardly hope to shoot their way out of a fight once caught on the river by the numerous NVA in the area. Enemy troops and vehicles near the river could be heard moving about in the night, an obvious sign that no stretch of the waterway could be considered safe for even a moment.

A fortuitous, timely fog bank moved in over the river as they moved westward, a blessing that further hid them from enemy view. But in emerging from the far side of the mist the two were

shocked to find themselves almost directly under the Cam Lo bridge across which NVA soldiers were moving. Instantly aware that in the fog they had somehow passed Hambleton's position along the riverbank, they froze in position as the current pulled them back into the protective fog cover and downstream toward Hambleton. Slowly, quietly, their search for Bat 21 Bravo continued as dawn began stripping away the protective cover of darkness.

Bat 21 Bravo Found

Three hundred yards downstream they spotted the airman, huddled on the riverbank and obviously in severe distress from exhaustion. But to their horror the delirious and desperate Hambleton began waving and shouting into the night to make sure his rescuers saw him. Quickly the two reached their man to quiet him down, Norris quickly checking him for serious injuries and slipping a life jacket over him while Kiet stood guard in the event the commotion had attracted any nearby NVA.

After gently placing Hambleton in the bottom of the sampan and covering him with a bamboo mat, Kiet and Norris resumed their homeward bound journey. With the growing dawn increasing their danger of detection, an even more frightening danger occurred as the delirious Hambleton began to babble loudly despite efforts by the two to quiet him. The unmistakable sound of an American voice in enemy territory could only have an effect similar to that of chumming the ocean waters in a shark infested area. Only minutes later the sharks arrived, in the form of three NVA suddenly emerging on the riverbank to begin shouting in their direction.

Glancing back quickly Kiet could make out the white star emblem on the belt buckle of one NVA, the symbol of an officer with the authority to have the others fire on the sampan. In what may have been the only reason the vulnerable sampan was not instantly riddled with machine gun fire, the NVA officer obviously recognized Kiet's Vietnamese features as he turned back toward their group.

Not daring to respond to the NVA officer's shouts and realizing the futility of shooting at the group, Kiet simply turned his gaze back to the front and kept paddling. Seconds passed like hours as he waited for a bullet in the back. Then another lucky break as they reached a sharp bend in the river, and heavy foliage blocked the sampan from the view of those on the riverbank behind them. A moment later a heavy machine-gun to their front suddenly fired directly at their sampan.

Now clearly visible in the early morning light, Kiet and Norris had no choice but to quickly pull under the small protection afforded by the near riverbank. As Kiet steadied the sampan, Norris called in an air strike that quickly succeeded in silencing the gun. Just as important, the attacking aircraft also dropped smoke bombs along the riverbank, allowing the sampan to escape down river under the pall of smoke that hid them from further detection.

The deadly drama that seemed to hang over each minute of the mission seemed almost evil in its reluctance to let go. Even as the two beached their sampan in front of the outpost, the NVA again opened fire on them, generating a mad scramble for the perimeter as the defenders gave

them covering fire. Seeing that Hambleton was unable to walk, much less run, the two Sea Commandos that had stayed at the outpost rushed out to help carry the helpless man to safety.

Exfil Back to Outpost

But “safety” was very much a relative term as the small outpost was immediately hit by another mortar and rocket attack. Only when it finally lifted did an armored personnel carrier reach the site to retrieve Hambleton and the rescue team for the trip back to Dong Ha. From there the group was immediately flown back to the Sea Commando base at Danang. After eleven and a half days behind enemy lines, Lt. Col. Hambleton had been rescued under extreme circumstances that to this day beggar belief.



Photo: Lt. Thomas Norris stands in the background at center as Lt. Col. Icel “Gene” Hambleton (on stretcher) is taken to a waiting M113 armored personnel carrier to be evacuated. (U.S. Department of Defense photo). [Click here](#) for a larger image.

Postscript

In recognition of his extraordinary courage and skill, **Lieutenant Thomas R. Norris** was subsequently awarded the **Medal of Honor**. Petty Officer Kiet Van Nguyen became the only Vietnamese sailor ever to be awarded the Navy Cross, America’s second highest award for valor. The war continued for both men, exacting in different ways the full measure of heartache from those who pursue the warrior’s path through life.

Seven months after the famous rescue of Bat 21 Bravo, **Lt. Norris was severely injured** while leading another combat mission with the Vietnamese *LDNNs*. The other SEAL accompanying Norris, Engineman Second Class Michael Thornton, saved Norris' life in circumstances so hazardous that Thornton himself would later receive the Medal of Honor for his actions that day. In what may be the only time in American history, one warrior received the Medal of Honor for saving the life of another Medal of Honor recipient. It would be hard to imagine another statistic or story that underscores so dramatically the terrible lethality awaiting those willing to fight on that extreme level of human performance known as "The Edge."



Photo: The two SEALs after their return to the Forward Observation Base mission launch site. (Kiet collection)

Kiet remained with the *Biet Hai* throughout the remainder of 1972, before returning to the *LDNNs* the following year as an instructor at the Cat Lai naval base near Saigon. There he remained until the final climatic year of the war. As Saigon itself was overrun by the NVA in 1975, Cat Lai too came under heavy artillery fire. Unable to return to Saigon to retrieve his family, he barely escaped with his life aboard a South Vietnamese Navy ship that subsequently transferred him to a US Navy vessel then at anchor at the nearby port of Vung Tau. Aboard LST 502, Kiet experienced one last drama just as the ship began to weigh anchor for the voyage to the Philippines.

Saigon Falls, Safety of U.S. Warship, Refugee, and Finally to the States

Many Americans will remember the chaotic scenes shown on television as the last remnants of South Vietnam's military flew aboard helicopters out to sea in search of US ships that would retrieve them. The helicopters landed on the decks of US aircraft carriers until there was no

more deck space, or simply ditched in the sea nearby. Kiet watched too, from the crowded deck of the LST, as one of these helicopters ditched into the water near his ship. As the LST slowly began to move out to sea the pilot suddenly surged to the surface, struggling hard to stay afloat and with no hope of reaching the ship and safety. Quickly sizing up the situation, Kiet moved to provide that hope.

Leaping over the rail Kiet hit the surface hard, then began swimming toward the floundering pilot. Upon reaching the man he grabbed hard, then began pulling him back toward the LST as the Vietnamese aboard ship let out a roar that caught the attention of the crew. To everyone's surprise the ship's captain stopped the vessel's engines. Ordering the ship's small boat lowered, the captain sent the boat to retrieve the hard swimming Kiet and his pilot. Kiet's war was finally over.

Kiet and thousands of other Vietnamese were transported via ship, first to the Philippines and then to the United States to start their new lives in America. It was not an easy transition for the refugees. But while in a refugee camp in southern California Kiet was able to make his plight known to Norris, who quickly responded with critical help to an old friend. In the fall of 1998, the UDT-SEAL Association bestowed another honor on Kiet, making him an Honorary Lifetime Member of that elite group. Today, Kiet lives with his wife Thuy in a small town near Seattle, Washington.

About the Author: During his Army service Col Haas served in airborne, Ranger, and Special Forces units, prior to attending rotary wing flight school in 1968. Thence followed a Vietnam tour as a flight platoon commander, air assault pilot, in III Corps. He subsequently entered the Air Force to fly in the 20th Special Operations Squadron, command the 1730th Pararescue Squadron, and complete tours in the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Air Staff. He is a graduate of the Naval Postgraduate School.

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