

JFK

VISITS FORT BRAGG

A Photo Essay

by Charles H. Briscoe



President John F. Kennedy was welcomed by the Pope Air Force Base commander and LTG Thomas J. H. Trapnell, the Third U.S. Army commanding general.

President John F. Kennedy's trip to Fort Bragg, NC, on 12 October 1961 is remembered on Smoke Bomb Hill because it has become associated with his approval of the Green Beret for U.S. Army Special Forces (SF) soldiers. During his visit, the 35th President directed that SF wear their berets. While obeying that order was a pleasure, SF unit leaders on Smoke Bomb Hill had to scramble to get everyone in the proper uniform. By following the sequence of events on that day, this essay will dispel some mythology about the president's visit to Fort Bragg and set it in context with the ongoing Berlin crisis and the Cold War.

President Kennedy began the day by officially mobilizing 23,000 Army Reservists and federalizing twenty-eight Air National Guard flight squadrons for the Berlin crisis.¹ On the way to Fort Bragg on 12 October 1961, President Kennedy stopped at Chapel Hill to address 30,000 students, faculty and staff at the University of North Carolina and to receive an Honorary Degree of Laws. Then, he returned to the Raleigh-Durham Airport to board a four-engine turboprop VC-118, an Air Force-VIP converted version of the Douglas DC-6 *Skymaster* commercial airliner, to come to Pope Air Force Base (AFB).²

The paratroopers, weaponry, vehicles, helicopters, and equipment of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions were arrayed in ranks along the runways and taxiways of Pope AFB when President Kennedy arrived. Accompanying him on the VC-118 were Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of the Army Elvis J. Stahr Jr., the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), General (GEN) Lyman L. Lemnitzer, the Army Chief of Staff (CSA), GEN George H. Decker, and an entourage of Pentagon generals. Airborne color guards held unit colors with Presidential Unit Citation (PUC) streamers next to the reviewing stand.³

After receiving a 21-gun salute from a battery of M-101A1 105mm light howitzers, President Kennedy 'trooped the line' with Lieutenant General (LTG) Thomas J.H. 'Trap' Trapnell, the Third U.S. Army commander.⁴ They inspected the paratroops from his Lincoln *Continental* convertible. The president got out to talk with the soldiers several times before returning to the reviewing stand for remarks.⁵

After an Air Force fighter bomber flyover and a small firepower demonstration, President Kennedy addressed only the "famous 82nd Airborne Division" and emphasized that their last overseas duty was in Berlin at the end of World War II. Then, he complimented and congratulated the men of the Armed Forces "who have been both soldiers and diplomats at the edge of the Iron and Bamboo Curtains for 16 years."⁶

Unheard by almost all Army special warfare soldiers were the president's words that pertained to them. Conventional warfare was not mutually exclusive from nuclear warfare:

*"Just because you give a soldier a pistol does not mean that you are doing away with the artillery. The purpose is to give this nation all the tools — not just some of the tools — that it needs to protect freedom... we are paying more attention to the growing threat — and the growing exercise — of conventional warfare which includes guerrilla warfare, anti-guerrilla warfare, counter-insurgency action, and psychological warfare. I look forward to hearing and seeing the report and demonstrations of the Special Warfare School here at Fort Bragg. In this particular field we are sharing our knowledge and our weapons with our friends from all over the world and, at the same time, we are drawing upon their knowledge and experience and skills to improve our own."*⁷

Making unconventional warfare an integral part of the conventional forces' mission had been adroitly accomplished by the CSA, GEN Decker. He had presciently followed President Kennedy's guidance. In less than four years Army and Marine ground forces were fighting to stop the spread of Communism in South Vietnam.⁸

LTG Trapnell joined President Kennedy to review the vehicle-mounted paratroopers of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions as they paraded.⁹ After the review, the Commander-in-Chief and LTG Hamilton L. Howze, the XVIII Airborne Corps commander, got into the two convertibles that led a caravan of cars to McKellar's Pond. While Brigadier General (BG) William P. Yarborough, commander of the U.S. Army Special Warfare Center, waited at the pond, the presidential caravan drove down roads flanked on both sides by saluting SF soldiers, standing proudly in fatigues and wearing green berets.¹⁰

Three months of rehearsals, construction, and site preparation preceded the Army Special Warfare demonstration. McKellar's Pond was dredged to accommodate amphibious vehicles. A rappel tower, a 'slide for life' apparatus, and a dirt road around and behind the reviewing stands were constructed. A full dress rehearsal for the CSA, GEN Decker, and several generals from Washington did not go well six weeks prior. Considerable revamping of the program was directed, and BG Yarborough provided GEN Decker regular status reports.¹¹

RIGHT | Aerial photo of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions in formation on Pope Air Force Base (AFB), NC, awaiting the visit of President John F. Kennedy on 12 October 1961.

Late Thursday morning, 12 October 1961, BG Yarborough welcomed the 35th President, Secretary McNamara, GEN Decker, and the distinguished guests at the reviewing stand. Then, M52 5-Ton Semi-tractor Trucks towing displays mounted on their 12-Ton double-axle Trailers ('cattle cars') each stopped momentarily in front of the grandstand, 'Rose Bowl parade float style.' This allowed BG Yarborough to reinforce the narrator's dialogue. First, team members of an Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) in succession explained their position title, duties, and language qualifications.¹² Then, four 'people' display trailers covering Special Warfare School curriculum, the elements of counterinsurgency (COIN), the international student program, and a Civic Assistance scene stopped in succession.¹³ They were followed by a trailer-mounted display of soldiers operating a portable printing press and loading an artillery shell with Psychological Warfare (Psywar) leaflets. Two M-820 5-Ton 6X6 Truck Expansibile Print Vans, brought up the rear, signaling the transition to action-oriented activities.¹⁴

SF soldiers fought hand-to-hand to demonstrate unarmed combat techniques. Two SF medics controlled the descent of a stretcher-bound 'wounded' soldier down the 60-foot rappel tower before two other Green Berets followed in 'single brake' rope rappels. Another soldier traversed McKellar's Pond on the 'slide for life' cable, glissading into the water. Explosions, smoke grenades, and firefight simulators across the pond signaled a guerrilla attack as an SF ODA carrying rucksacks camouflaged with pine boughs 'double-timed' past the president. The demonstration of SF insertion methods consisted of soldiers paddling two seven-man inflatable rubber boats (RB-7s) while SCUBA team personnel hopped from the stern of a 5-ton amphibious 'truck,' a wheeled lighter, amphibious resupply, cargo (LARC) rigged with a plywood silhouette to look like a patrol boat. Two military freefall (MFF) instructors with civilian Para-Commander parachutes splashed into the pond.¹⁵ A look to the future followed.

Research and development potentially for use by SF was explained. A twin-engine CH-37 *Mojave* medium lift helicopter flew over the pond carrying a sling-loaded CONEX container. A little more exciting was a Bell Aircraft engineer strapped into a 125-pound Rocket Belt, who fired his rockets in a LARC and jetted towards President Kennedy stirring up a great plume of water. The pilot landed, saluted the Commander-in-Chief, and strode away. The demo finale consisted of an L-19 *Bird Dog* dropping commemorative leaflets upon the assembled caravan of cars.¹⁶ Then, forty minutes after the demo started, LTG Howze spirited the president and his entourage off to Sicily Drop Zone (DZ).

An airborne firepower demonstration awaited. It began with a pair of Air Force F-104 *Starfighters* screaming overhead to drop bombs and napalm. After the aerial bombardment, a 600-man airborne infantry battalion from the 101st Airborne Division filled the sky in a mass tactical parachute assault from C-130 *Hercules* transports. Vehicles and artillery followed the personnel drop. After talking with some 101st Airborne soldiers, President Kennedy and his group headed back to Pope AFB to return home to Washington, DC.¹⁷

Three months' work produced a highly supervised and well-rehearsed 'dog and pony' military capabilities show for President Kennedy on 12 October 1961. BG Yarborough had addressed the Commander-in-Chief's challenge to incorporate Special Warfare into the Army mission sets and make COIN simple. This visit placed SF in the vanguard of America's fight against 'Wars of National Liberation' threatening developing nations worldwide. Though the 'lion's share' of the Commander-in-Chief's time (4 ½ hours) had been devoted to the national strategic ready force (XVIII Airborne Corps), great lasting impressions of SF were made.¹⁸ The visit to Fort Bragg in 1961 by the charismatic JFK will be long remembered by Army Special Operations veterans and the Fort Bragg/Fayetteville communities. ▲



HOW THE DAY PLAYED OUT...



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ARRIVAL AND REVIEW

- 1 The 35th President received a 21-gun salute from a battery of M-101A1 105 mm light howitzers.
- 2 President Kennedy 'trooped the line' of paratroopers with Lieutenant General (LTG) Thomas J.H. Trapnell, the Third U.S. Army commander, from his 'signature' Lincoln *Continental* convertible.
- 3 A battery of truck-mounted MGR-1 *Honest John* surface-to-surface nuclear-capable rockets can be seen behind the soldiers.



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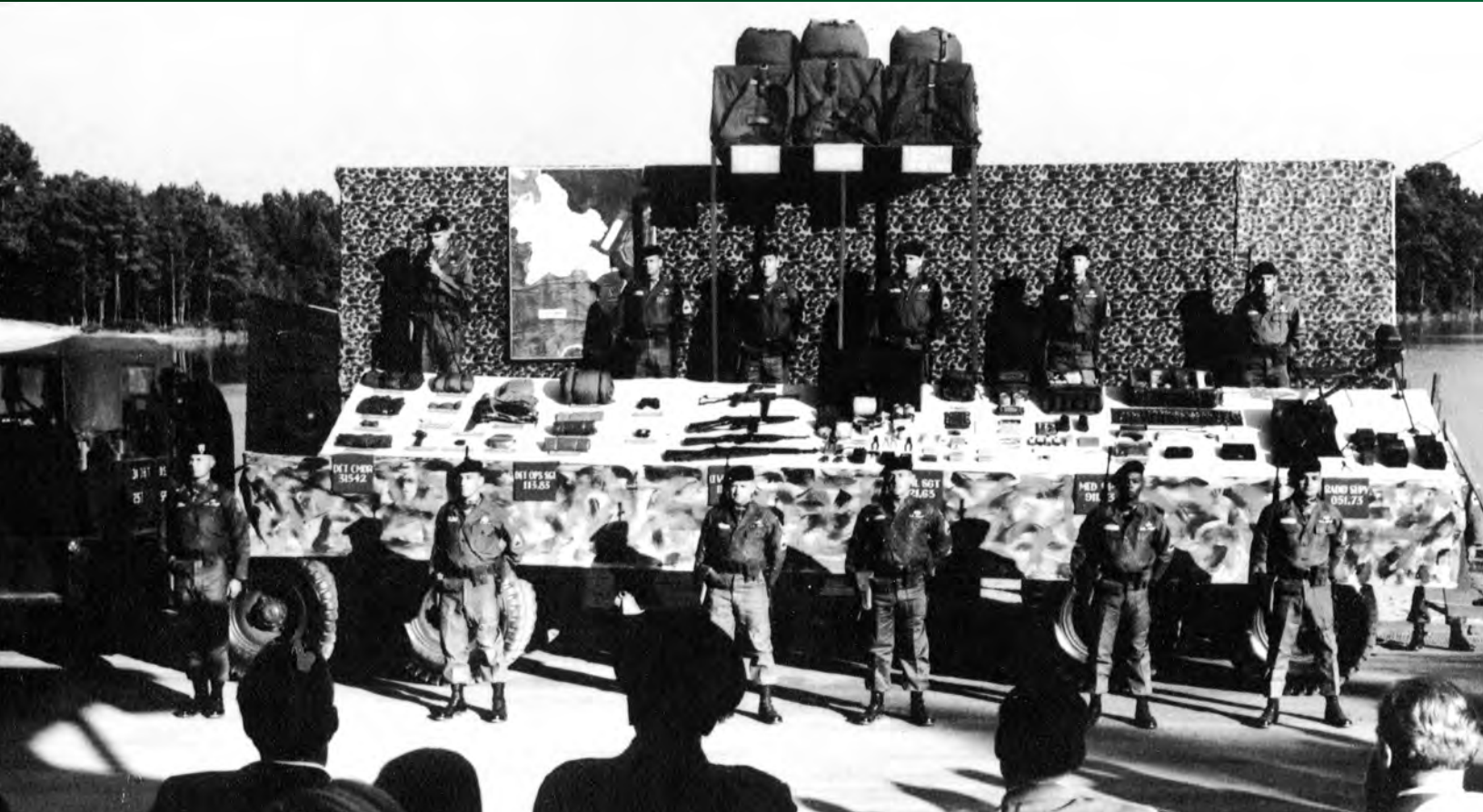
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PASS IN REVIEW

- 1 President Kennedy addressed the “famous 82nd Airborne Division,” emphasizing that their last overseas duty was in Berlin at the end of World War II. Then, he stressed that “conventional warfare included guerrilla warfare, anti-guerrilla warfare, counter-insurgency action, and psychological warfare.”
- 2 A battalion in the 82nd and 101st Airborne Division wore winter overwhites and carried rucksacks, skis, and snowshoes.
- 3 Vehicular elements of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions passed by the reviewing stand to conclude the presentation of troops. In the background is an airborne infantry battalion wearing winter overwhites and carrying winter gear.



McKELLAR'S POND: SPECIAL WARFARE DEMONSTRATION

A Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) displayed its organic weaponry and communications equipment on a trailer-mounted display. Half of the ODA 'double-timed' alongside the trailer until it momentarily stopped for a moderator to explain the organization and mission of the basic SF element. Three other trailer demonstrations showed:

- 1 U.S. Army Special Warfare School instructors in period uniforms to depict education and training over the years.
- 2 Instructors portrayed the three elements of counterinsurgency: security, isolation, and destruction.
- 3 Psychological warfare soldiers showed artillery shells packed with 'Safe Conduct Passes' to be fired into enemy lines.



SPECIAL FORCES CAPABILITIES DEMONSTRATION

Special Forces soldiers demonstrate:

- 1 A rappel litter carry down the face of the 60-foot tower built by McKellar's Pond.
- 2 A Special Forces soldier traverses the pond on a 'slide-for-life' cable before dropping safely into the water.
- 3 Special Forces wearing SCUBA gear jump into McKellar's Pond from a plywood silhouette patrol boat while an SF team paddles alongside in RB-7 rubber boats.



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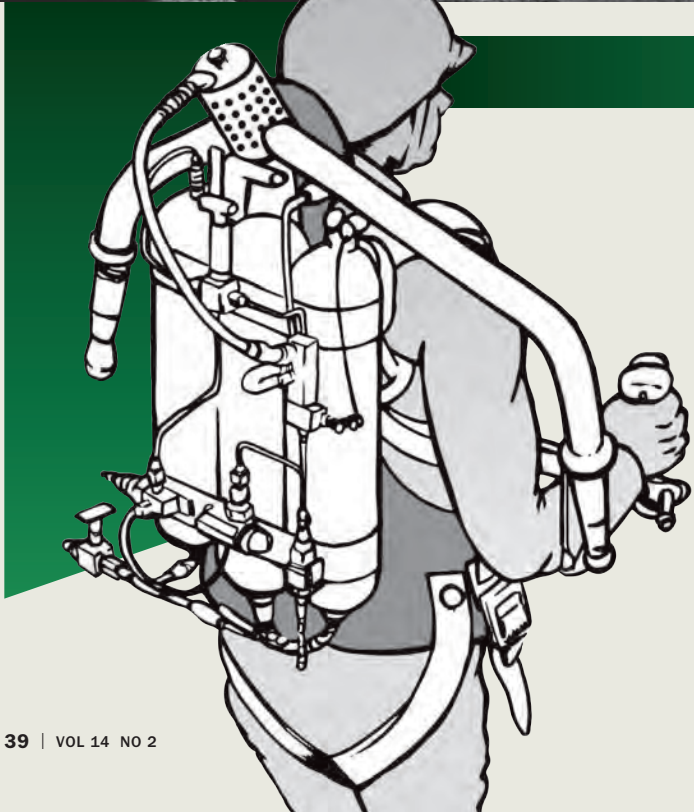
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ROCKET BELT

1-3 Bell aircraft engineer Harold Graham (inset) demonstrated the 'Rocket Belt' [Small Rocket Lift Device (SRLD)] to President Kennedy at McKellar's Pond, Fort Bragg, NC, on 12 October 1961. The 125-pound rig with five gallons of hydrogen peroxid allowed the pilot to clear a 27 foot obstacle, but flight time was limited to 21 seconds. Graham launched from a LARC (Lighter, Amphibious Resupply, Cargo, 5 ton).

4 A CH-37 *Mojave* medium helicopter demonstrated its external sling-load carrying capability with a CONEX storage container.

FAREWELL TO COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF

1 Brigadier General (BG) William P Yarborough talked with President Kennedy following the 12 October 1961 special warfare demonstration at McKellar's Pond. The visit had been arranged by the president's aide-de-camp, Major General (MG) Chester V. 'Ted' Clifton, a West Point '36 classmate.



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2 This Psychological Warfare (Psywar) leaflet, sketched by Specialist Four (SP4) Bruce R. Armstrong, 3rd Psywar Det (Reproduction), 1st Psywar Battalion (Broadcast & Leaflet), was scattered over President's Kennedy's cavalcade by an L-19 *Bird Dog* aircraft.

3 LTG Hamilton L. Howze, Commanding General, XVIII Airborne Corps, escorted President Kennedy from the reviewing area at McKellar's Pond.



1-3 **L to R** | Defense Secretary Robert A. McNamara, Army Chief of Staff GEN George H. Decker, President Kennedy, and Army Secretary Elvis J. Stahr Jr, await the airborne mass tactical jump at Sicily DZ on Fort Bragg. The mass tactical parachute assault was preceded by Air Force F-104 *Starfighters* dropping bombs and napalm. After the parachute jump President Kennedy was briefed by paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division near the Sicily Drop Zone viewing stand.

Special thanks go to Ms. Eva Davis, archivist at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum and Ms. Roxanne Merritt, curator of the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Museum for providing itineraries, photos, leaflets, and other documentation.

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Charles H. Briscoe has been the USASOC Command Historian since 2000. A graduate of The Citadel, this retired Army special operations officer earned his PhD from the University of South Carolina. Current research interests include Army special operations in Latin America, the Congo, and the Lodge Act.

Endnotes

- 1 Donald A. Carter, "The U.S. Military Response to the 1960-1962 Berlin Crisis," at <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/.../1961-berlin-crisis/.../us-military>, accessed 7/12/2018; "Berlin Crisis" at <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/berlin.htm>, accessed 7/12/2018; President John F. Kennedy, "Remarks to 82nd Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, 12 October 1961" at <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPOF-036-003.aspx>, accessed 6/19/2018; "New York Times Chronology (October 1961) – John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum" at <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/New-York-Times-C...> Accessed 6/21/2018. On 17 August 1961, Secretary of the Army Elvis J. Stahr Jr. announced a freeze in service for more than 84,000 enlisted men whose time in service was scheduled to end between 1 October 1961 and 30 June 1962. He also extended the tours of Army personnel in Germany and Japan by six months. Carter, "The U.S. Military Response to the 1960-1962 Berlin Crisis" cited above.
- 2 U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center & School. Audio Visual Department. Video entitled "President Kennedy's Visit to Fort Bragg, NC in honor of LTG Yarborough's 90th Birthday" 12 May 2002. USASOC History Office, Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited as JFK Visit video; "United States Presidential & VIP Aircraft, Air Force One, Marine One" at <https://www.airplanesofthepast.com/united-states-presidential-aircraft.htm>, accessed 6/29/2018.
- 3 JFK Visit video. Lieutenant General (LTG) Hamilton L. Howze commanded XVIII Airborne Corps at the time. Major Generals (MGs) Theodore J. Conway and C.W.G. Rich commanded the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, respectively.
- 4 JFK video. LTG Thomas J.H. 'Trap' Trappnell, the Third U.S. Army commander, survived the Bataan 'Death March,' the O'Donnell and Cabanatuan POW camps in the Philippines, and the sinking and disablement of two POW hell ships bound for Japan. He eventually was liberated from Hoten POW Camp in Manchuria in August 1945 by Russian forces. The former 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment commander was instrumental in suppressing the rebellion of 80,000 Chinese and North Korean POWs at the Koje-do Island camps in May-June 1952, as the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team (RCT) commander. Twice a division commander (82nd Airborne and 4th Armored), twice a corps commander (I Corps and XVIII Airborne), and the Third U.S. Army commander twice, Trappnell also led the Military Advisory Assistance Group (MAAG), Vietnam, from 1952 until the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. He was nominated to hold the rank of General (GEN) in retirement. Adam Bernstein, "Army Gen. Thomas Trappnell," *The Washington Post*, 15 February 2002 at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2002/02/15/army-gen-thomas-trappnell/da8...> accessed 7/18/2018; "Gen. Thomas J.H. Trappnell Dies," *Huron Daily Tribune*, 13 February 2002 at <https://www.michigansthumb.com/news/article/Gen-Thomas-J-H-Trappnell-Dies-7359947>, accessed 7/18/2018.
- 5 JFK video.
- 6 JFK video.
- 7 President John F. Kennedy, "Remarks to 82nd Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, 12 October 1961."
- 8 Christopher K. Ives, *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam: Military Innovation and Institutional Failure, 1961-1963* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 60; Charles R. Schrader, *History of Operations Research in the United States Army, Volume II: 1961-1973*, 254-255.
- 9 JFK video.
- 10 JFK video.
- 11 Retired Major Raymond P. Ambrozak, unpublished notes on President John F. Kennedy's 1961 Visit to Fort Bragg (2016). USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. McKellar's Pond was dredged, a circular dirt road was constructed for the cavalcade of 5-ton tractor trucks pulling flatbed trailers with displays explaining Special Warfare, a rappelling tower was built, and a 'slide for life' apparatus was stretched across the pond.
- 12 JFK video.
- 13 JFK video. These elements had been researched by Brigadier General (BG) Richard D. Stillwell, the Special Assistant to the Chief of Staff, Army, General George H. Decker, on behalf of the Secretary of the Army, Elvis J. Stahr, in support of President John F. Kennedy's directive to the military services to inculcate Special Warfare into their mission sets. Ives, *US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam*, 60; Schrader, *History of Operations Research in the United States Army, Volume II: 1961-1973*, 254.
- 14 JFK video.
- 15 JFK video.
- 16 Specialist Four (SP4) Bruce R. Armstrong, 3rd Psywar Detachment (Reproduction), 1st Psywar Battalion (Broadcast & Leaflet) did the artwork on the leaflet dropped during President John F. Kennedy's visit to Fort Bragg, NC, on 12 October 1961. SP4 Armstrong and Private (PVT) George M. Clark did the sketches used in *Pictorial Story of the Special Forces Soldier* [Ft Bragg, NC: 3rd Psywar Det (Repro), 1st Psywar Bn (B&L), 1962] as well Armstrong, Clark, SP4 Gary C. Wallace, and SP4 Gilbert G. Early, *Pictorial Story of the Psychological Warfare Soldier* [Ft Bragg, NC: 3rd Psywar Det (Repro), 1st Psywar Bn (B&L), 1962].
- 17 JFK video.
- 18 JFK video.

