



Donald D. Blackburn

and the 77th Special Forces Group (Airborne): Training the Trainers

By Eugene G. Piasecki

When Brigadier General (retired) Donald Dunwody Blackburn began his military career on 22 September 1940 he had no idea what the future held for him. Commissioned in the Infantry, Second Lieutenant Blackburn was assigned to the black 24th Infantry Regiment at Fort Benning, Georgia as a battalion communications officer. At the end the Louisiana Maneuvers of 1941, Blackburn learned that he had “volunteered” for duty in the Philippine Islands. Landing in Manila on 4 October 1941, he was stationed at Camp Holmes as the senior instructor/ advisor to the Headquarters Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, Philippine Army. This role lasted until 8 December 1941 when the Philippines were attacked by Japan’s armed forces.

As American and Philippine Army units executed War Plan ORANGE 3 (WPO3) retreating to the Bataan Peninsula, 1LT Blackburn was reassigned to the 11th Infantry Division, Philippine Army as the communications officer. There he met Major Russell W. Volckmann, the Division Intelligence Officer (G-2). When American and Filipino forces on Bataan were ordered to surrender to the Japanese, Volckmann and Blackburn told the 11th Division Commander they did not plan to surrender, slipped through Japanese lines in the jungle, and headed for the mountains of North Luzon to avoid capture.¹ Skirting Japanese Army patrols, avoiding Filipino spies and informants, and while battling tropical diseases, Blackburn and Volckmann started a form of irregular warfare which would later be called “Special Operations.” The guerrilla army organized by Volckmann and Blackburn became the U.S. Army Forces in the Philippines, North Luzon (USAFIP-NL). Blackburn’s USAFIP-NL 11th Infantry Regiment, comprised of Igorot tribal fighters and nicknamed “Blackburn’s Headhunters,” persistently attacked and harassed the occupying Japanese Army from 1943 until General Tomoyuki Yamashita surrendered to American forces in August 1945.

At the end of World War II, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Blackburn returned to the United States to serve in a variety of command and staff assignments. After being an instructor in the Department of Military Psychology and Leadership, at the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, he was a plans officer in NATO with the Allied Forces Northern Europe in Oslo, Norway. Completing his NATO assignment in 1956, he was sent to Fort Jackson, South Carolina where he commanded the 3rd Training Regiment. This was followed by service with the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), Vietnam in 1957 as the Senior Advisor to the Commanding General, 5th Military Region (Mekong Delta). Perhaps Colonel Blackburn’s most challenging assignment began in October 1958, when he assumed command of the 77th



U.S. Army Forces
in the Philippines,
North Luzon Patch



LTC Donald D. Blackburn second row far left as an instructor at USMA in the Department of Military Psychology and Leadership, 1951.



COL Blackburn, 3rd Tng Regt Cdr (Aug 1956 to Jun 1957) and BG James W. Couatts, Deputy Training Center Commander, Ft Jackson, SC.

Special Forces Group (SFG), Airborne at Fort Bragg, North Carolina from COL Irwin A. Edwards.

The situation that greeted the new 77th SFG commander was not good. The Special Forces Commander faced a unique set of challenges that tested his leadership, experience and training skills more than any other unit. The purpose of this article is to explain how COL Donald D. Blackburn established a training program that prepared the 77th Special Forces Group to accomplish its wartime missions.

The problems Blackburn encountered were related to how Special Forces came to be. In 1951, Brigadier General Robert A. McClure became Chief of the U. S. Army Psychological Warfare Division (PWD). The PWD's mission was to provide General Staff supervision of all psychological warfare and special operations activities.² To ensure psychological operations remained separate from special operations, BG McClure formed a separate Special Operations Division (SOD) in the PWD with the mission to formalize the U. S. Army's unconventional warfare capability called Special Forces.³ Manning the SOD were three World War II veteran officers specifically recruited by BG McClure. Colonel Wendell W. Fertig and Lieutenant Colonel Russell W. Volckmann had been guerrilla leaders/ commanders in the Philippines Islands, and Colonel Aaron Bank had served with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in Europe and Asia. While the PWD was struggling to gain Army acceptance, America's first overseas priority was the defense of Western Europe. The U.S. Army training programs were focused on accomplishing that mission. Special Forces were created to support that national priority.

A Special Forces Office was created at the Psychological Warfare (PSYWAR) Center on Smoke Bomb Hill, Fort Bragg, NC. On 19 May 1952, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 10th Special Forces Group (SFG), Airborne was established to accommodate the volunteers. Personnel authorizations for Special Forces came from the deactivated Airborne Ranger Companies

in Korea. Colonel Aaron Bank, assigned as the SF Department Chief at the PSYWAR Center, became the commander of the 1,700 man 10th Special Forces Group on 19 June 1952.⁴

During the 10th Group stand-up, three significant decisions between February and September 1953 affected the new Special Forces volunteers. First, five groups totaling ninety-one Special Forces-qualified soldiers were ordered to the 8240th Army Unit in Korea to serve as advisors with the United Nations Partisan Infantry



COL Blackburn, 77th Special Forces Group command photo. Patch, airborne tab, and parachute wing background reflect the 77th colors of teal and gold.



BG Robert A. McClure, Chief of the U.S. Army Psychological Warfare Division (PWD), Department of the Army, 1951.



COL Wendell W. Fertig led the civil government and guerrilla army on Mindinao, PI from 1942 through 1945 during the Japanese occupation.



COL Russell W. Volckmann, WWII Commander of the USAFIP-NL, was one of the earliest members of the Special Operations Division of the PWD.



COL Aaron Bank, assigned to Special Operations Division of the PWD, assumed command of the 10th SFG on 19 June 1952.

Forces, Korea (UNPIK). Second, the majority of men in Special Forces training would be assigned to the 10th SFG and deploy overseas to Germany in November 1953. Third, those volunteers not selected for either Korea or Germany would remain at the PSYWAR Center at Fort Bragg. They would constitute the U.S. Army's second Special Forces Group.⁵

This second group, designated the 77th SFG, Airborne, was created in August 1953. Like the 10th SFG, it would be a major subordinate unit of the Psychological Warfare (PSYWAR) Center and School. Since the 10th SFG was to be stationed in Germany, its focus was on special operations in Europe. The 77th SFG became the global Special Forces response force.⁶ When activated on 22 September 1953, Lieutenant Colonel Jack T. "Black Jack" Shannon the former deputy SF Department Chief, became the 77th SFG Commander. LTC Shannon, formerly WWII OSS and the 10th SFG's original Deputy Commander, created the 77th motto: "Any Thing, Any Time, Any Place, Any How."

From 1953 to 1958, the 77th SFG was commanded by WWII airborne officers. The second 77th SFG commander, COL Edson D. Raff, was one of its most renowned and controversial commanders. Raff's reputation began as commander of the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR). His battalion made the first U.S. combat parachute assault into North Africa in 1942 as part of Operation TORCH.

COL Raff had left the 77th SFG and was the PSYWAR Center Commander in 1954 when wearing the Green Beret came to a head. The beret issue became so heated that Lieutenant General (LTG) Paul D. Adams, the XVIII Airborne Corps Commander, intervened. The First Special Service Force (FSSF) paratrooper and staunch airborne advocate banned the beret on Fort Bragg. Adams relieved COL Raff from command of the PSYWAR Center and School after he continued wearing his beret. Despite LTG Adams' order and COL Raff's relief, 77th SFG soldiers wore berets when training off Fort Bragg.⁷ The situation would not be resolved until President John F. Kennedy approved the



10th Special Forces Group soldier stands by the unit sign on Smoke Bomb Hill, Fort Bragg, NC, 1953.

77TH SFG Commanders:

Lieutenant Colonel Jack T. Shannon
 • September 1953 to November 1953

Colonel Edson D. Raff
 • November 1953 to December 1954

Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin F. Delameter
 • December 1954 to March 1955

Lieutenant Colonel Bayard W. Hart
 • March 1955 to May 1955

Colonel William J. Mullen
 • May 1955 to May 1956

Lieutenant Colonel Noel A. Menard
 • May 1956 to June 1957

Colonel Julian A. Cook
 • June 1957 to January 1958

Colonel Irwin A. Edwards
 • January 1958 to October 1958

Colonel Donald D. Blackburn
 • October 1958 to August 1960

77th DUI created by LTC "Black Jack" Shannon.

Green Beret for Special Forces soldiers on 12 October 1961.

Taking command of the 77th in October 1958, COL Blackburn inherited the beret problem. Blackburn recalled: "The Special Forces, to a large extent, had created incidents such that they were denied the wearing of the Green Beret. So, this was having some impact. They were still griping about it. It was a period where the troops were sitting around eating rather than really doing something. I used to tell them that I felt they were a bunch of eaters and weren't doing anything."⁸ The WWII guerrilla leader soon discovered he had more important matters to resolve.

COL Blackburn focused his attention on the 77th SFG's readiness to perform its wartime mission. He saw two very important training shortfalls. First, the special operations doctrinal concepts developed by COL Russell W. Volckmann in the Philippines during World War II used to justify Special Forces had been largely ignored.

Instead command-directed requirements conflicted with SF training. Second, and of most concern, the 77th SFG officers and soldiers had little knowledge about basic infantry. They could not perform their primary wartime mission: organize, direct, train and advise conventional company and battalion-sized units.⁹ COL Blackburn recruited Lieutenant Colonels Magnus L. Smith, Arthur D. "Bull" Simons, Lucien E. Conein, and Patrick B. Ward to get the 77th SFG up to standard and add impetus to a soon to be established accelerated training program.¹⁰ Then he looked for opportunities in the U.S. Army to correct the SFG training deficiencies. COL Blackburn's criteria were simple. Activities selected would support his desire to prepare Special Forces soldiers to perform their wartime tasks. The 77th SFG would only accept missions that provided realistic Special Forces training.

Blackburn's initial remedy was linked to his experience as the Commander of the 3rd Training Regiment at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. At Blackburn's request, the Army agreed to provide him two companies of soldiers from either the Infantry or Basic Combat Training (BCT) Centers ready to begin Advanced Individual Training (AIT). Blackburn tasked a B Team and all its A Teams to conduct AIT for them.¹² The performance by the SF Company and Teams showed that their instructional skills were either "very rusty" or non-existent. Worse, they were not as ready to conduct their wartime mission as they believed they were. Increased group missions prevented repetition of this AIT training, but Blackburn still persisted seeking other training opportunities to improve the readiness of the 77th Special Forces Group.¹³

The majority of Blackburn's proposals ultimately benefited the Army, but his priority was to get the 77th SFG ready for war. Security assessments of industrial plants and military facilities in the United States and overseas were proposed to the Army. Redstone Arsenal, Alabama, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and the Presidential retreat at Camp David, Maryland were offered. Of the three, Camp David was the greatest challenge. Camp David's U.S. Marine security forces, armed with live ammunition, were not informed that Special Forces soldiers would attempt to enter the facility. The Special Forces soldiers were not told the guard force carried live ammunition. After using some extremely creative diversions, the team got inside Camp David, and left a note for President Dwight D. Eisenhower in his mailbox.¹⁴ Later, during the White



77th Special Forces Group DUI



SF Shoulder Patch first issued to the 77th SFG with its original teal blue and gold Airborne tab.

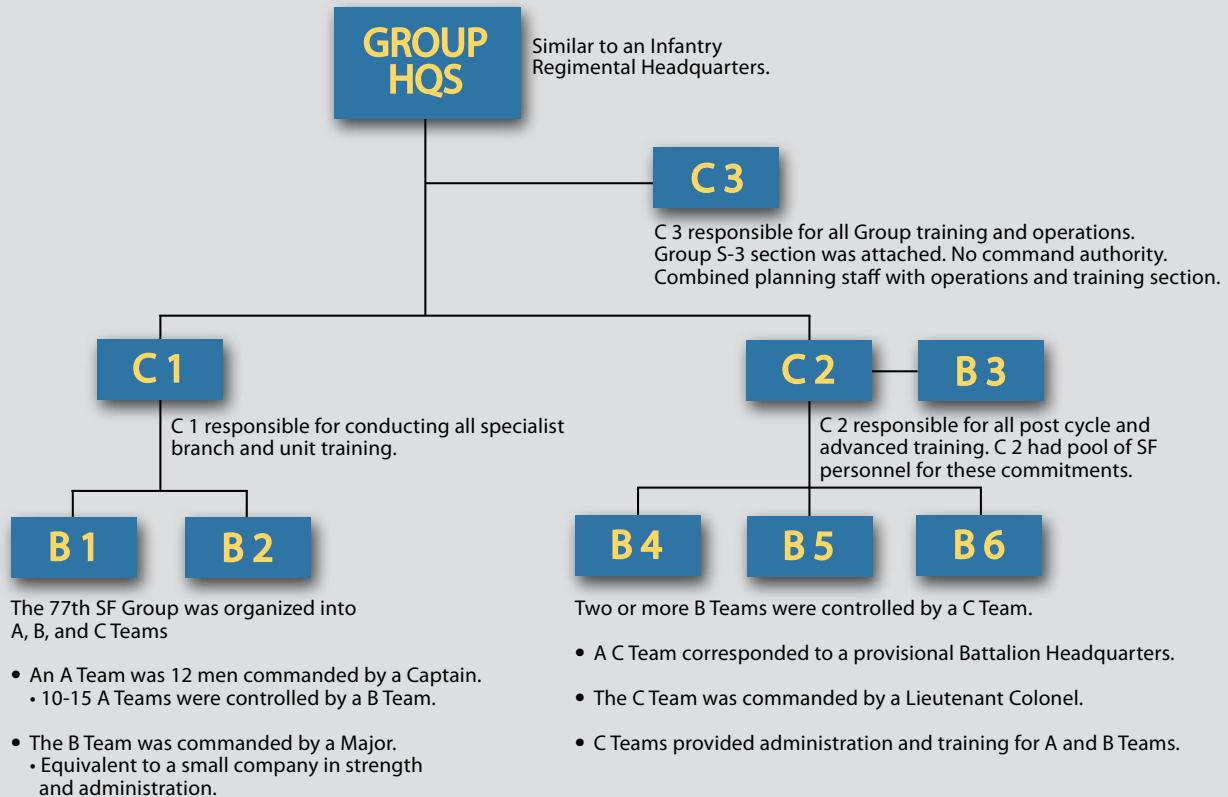


Parachute badge issued to the 77th SFG with its teal blue and gold colors.



Jungle Expert Badge awarded until 1979 for completing the Jungle Warfare School and Jungle Operations Training Course at Fort Sherman, Panama Canal Zone.

77th SFG Organizational Chart October 1958



Panama Canal Zone Governor William Everett Potter, 1956-1960 was USMA Class of 1928, and a WWII Corps of Engineers veteran.

Potter, a retired Major General and WWII veteran, thought it would be a good test of the Canal Zone's security procedures.¹⁶ Major (MAJ) William A. Dickinson and Captain (CPT) David Chung of the JWTC helped LTC Magnus Smith and his men prepare for Exercise BLACK PALM.

Exercise BLACK PALM began on 17 September 1959, with LTC Smith's 77th SFG teams infiltrating into the

House debrief, the Special Forces were challenged to do it during the winter when the trees were bare and snow covered the ground. They succeeded and left another note in the Commander-in-Chief's mailbox.¹⁵ The Camp David successes encouraged Blackburn to propose a more complex operation.

The 77th SFG did it during jungle warfare training at Fort Sherman in the Panama Canal Zone. COL Blackburn gave the Governor of the Panama Canal Zone, Mr. William Everett Potter, his training concept. Governor

Canal Zone by parachuting from C-47 cargo planes, paddling small rubber assault boats onto the Atlantic beaches, and by truck. The mission was "to reorganize and train guerrilla forces to attack objectives in the Canal Zone." "Partisans" were recruited from a reinforced company of the 1st Battle Group, 20th Infantry.¹⁷ COL Blackburn only told Governor Potter that the "attacks" would come by land, sea and air and their approximate times. Based on this, Canal Zone security managers took extra precautions and mobilized additional Canal reserve security personnel, police officers and some U.S. Army elements. Despite these precautions all attacks/penetrations were successful.¹⁸ Exercise BLACK PALM clearly pointed out vulnerabilities in the Canal Zone security plan. Though BLACK PALM was one of the most difficult missions assigned to the 77th SFG, LTC Smith was confident: "With the accomplishment of our tasks, I feel sure our organization is capable of handling any given assignment."¹⁹ With his command time drawing to a close, COL Blackburn expanded the 77th SFG roles in Field Training Exercise (FTX) LITTLE BEAR in Alaska, FTX BRIGHAM YOUNG in Utah and added a rotation at the Jungle Warfare Training Center in Panama. To improve individual training, Captain (CPT) Elliott P. "Bud" Sydnor and Master Sergeant (MSG) Richard J. "Dick" Meadows were sent as exchange soldiers with the British 22nd Special Air Service (SAS) Regiment on

18 January 1960 for a year.²⁰ FTX BRIGHAM YOUNG proved to be the most realistic training.

FTX BRIGHAM YOUNG evolved from a conversation between COL Blackburn and the State Adjutant General of Utah, Major General (MG) Maxwell E. Rich. MG Rich wanted to upgrade the quality of his Special Forces people in Utah and expand the units. He asked the 77th SFG personnel to train the Special Forces there in Utah. In return he would support and maintain the training camp for the 77th SFG.²¹ The 77th SFG could train during the week and demonstrate what they learned to the National Guard SF teams on the weekends. To show his commitment, MG Rich moved World War II buildings from Hill Air Force Base in Ogden, Utah to house the 77th SFG at Camp Williams. Utah Air National Guard airplanes shuttled the 77th SFG 2,800 miles, non-stop to and from Camp Williams. The 77th SFG winter training commenced with a parachute assault on 4 January 1960.

On Friday 12 February 1960 during a training inspection, COL Blackburn was caught in an ambush. Riding in a truck convoy, Blackburn and his party were captured by 77th SFG troops led by Major (MAJ) Harry H. Jackson. "COL Blackburn praised the troops for the effectiveness of their ambush and for their work during the previous two weeks."²²

COL Blackburn had been accompanied by LTC Noble L. Riggs, the Utah troop commander. Blackburn's observations enabled the 77th SFG to improve Phase Two-winter training. Blackburn suggested enlisting and integrating the Utah Highway Patrol, local sheriffs, jeep patrols, and local civilians into the exercise. Civilian

77th Training Events 1960:

FTX LITTLE BEAR:

(4 January - 16 February 1960) Sixth U.S. Army, Alaska. 2 A Teams (Captain Fritz Bernhausen and Captain John W. Hazlett) served as aggressors and SF training cadre after receiving six weeks of training at the U.S. Army Mountain and Cold Weather School, Fort Greeley, Alaska.

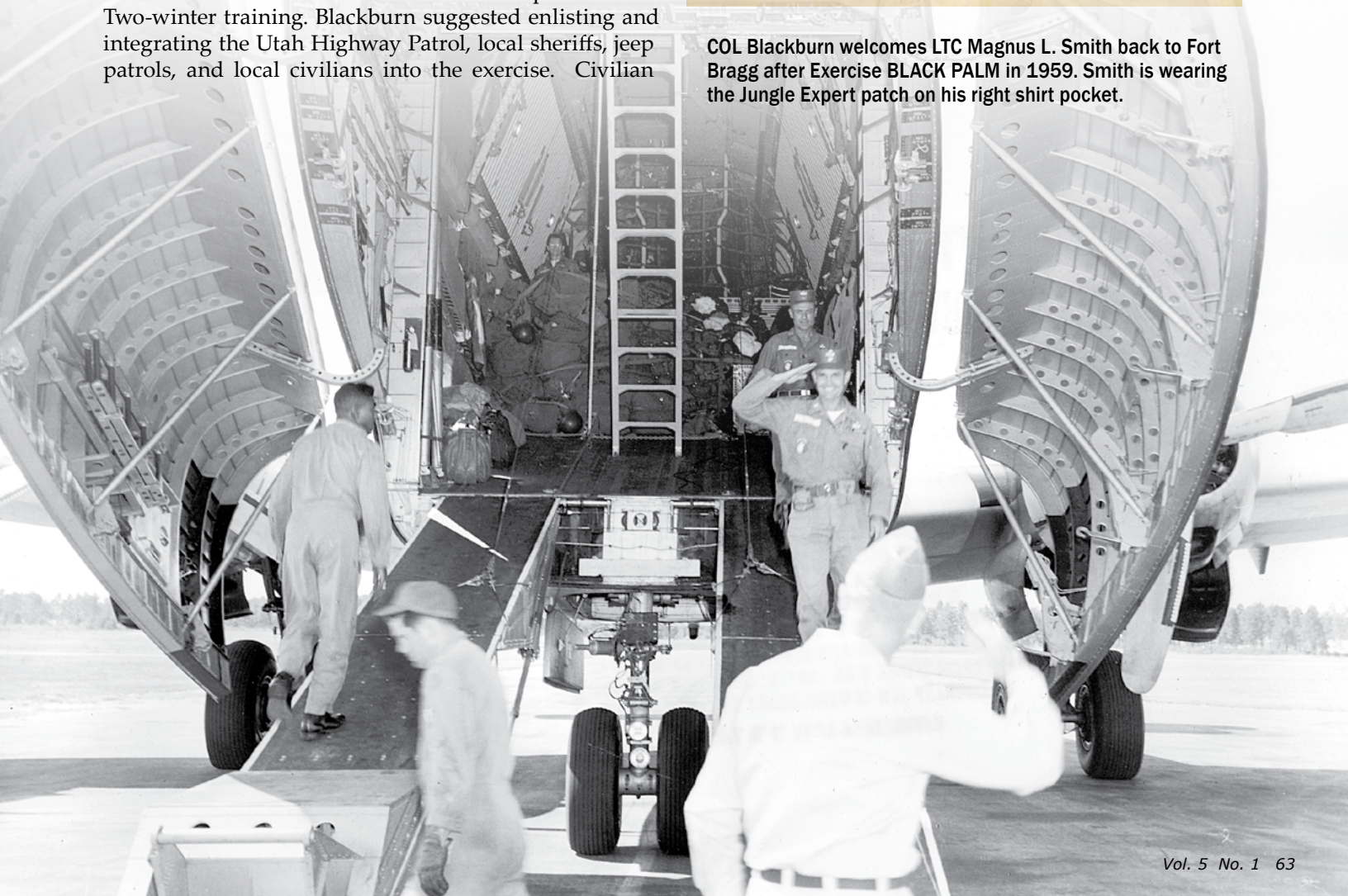
FTX BRIGHAM YOUNG:

(4 January - April 1960) Two phases/Camp Williams, UT. 150-175 men trained per phase. FTX began with 2800 mile, non-stop flight [733rd Troop Carrier Squadron (Reserve)] from Pope AFB to infiltrate Camp Williams, Utah by parachute to support the 133rd Special Forces Operational Detachment (SFOD), Utah ARNG, Fort Douglas, Utah. 77th SFG ODAs of 8-9 men conducted desert and snow cross-country movement, land navigation, ground and aerial resupply in snow, winter survival, medical evacuation and first aid, and reconnaissance and security with the 133rd SFOD.

JUNGLE WARFARE TRAINING CENTER:

(3 March 1960) Fort Sherman, Panama Canal Zone. 10 officers and 85 enlisted men underwent survival training and conducted jungle combat operations.

COL Blackburn welcomes LTC Magnus L. Smith back to Fort Bragg after Exercise BLACK PALM in 1959. Smith is wearing the Jungle Expert patch on his right shirt pocket.





Left-Smoke grenades “disabled”
convoy vehicles during an ambush
on 12 February 1960.



Defense units from Logan to Morgan, Utah were also asked to be counter-guerrilla elements against the Special Forces.²³ As late as 1983, Brigadier General (retired) Blackburn supported working with the National Guard and Reserves to improve Special Operations training.²⁴ Afterwards, the 77th SFG prepared for significant organizational changes.

On 6 June 1960, the 77th SFG became the 7th SFG.²⁵ COL Blackburn led the 7th SFG until August 1960 before relinquishing command to COL Irwin A. Edwards, who had passed the 77th to him in October 1958. The former SFG commander went to the National War College before being assigned to the Army Staff. There, he served in the Special Warfare Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff for Force Development (ACSFOR). Until his retirement on 30 June 1971, BG Blackburn remained involved with Special Forces. Most significantly, he commanded the U. S. Military Assistance Command-Vietnam Studies and Observation Group (MACV-SOG), and was the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (SACSA) in the Department of Defense. After serving as the Vice-President of BDM Corporation for nine years, BG Blackburn finally retired in July 1981, but his opinions and expertise on unconventional warfare were solicited long after retirement.

Epilogue

Blackburn’s guerrilla experience in the Philippines during World War II and his stint as a Basic Combat Training Center Regimental Commander at Fort Jackson, SC provided the basis

for his strategy to upgrade the combat readiness of the 77th SFG. Knowing Special Forces had highly-qualified and skilled soldiers, he realized that until they were prepared to train others, their unique skills would be wasted. Blackburn emphasized the “crawl, walk, run” approach and used performance-oriented training to improve the 77th SFG. Blackburn knew that until each Special Forces trainer could accomplish the Group’s wartime mission, time, resources and opportunities would be wasted. How well Blackburn’s training methodology worked was demonstrated in 1960 when the 77th SFG received orders to conduct Operation HOT

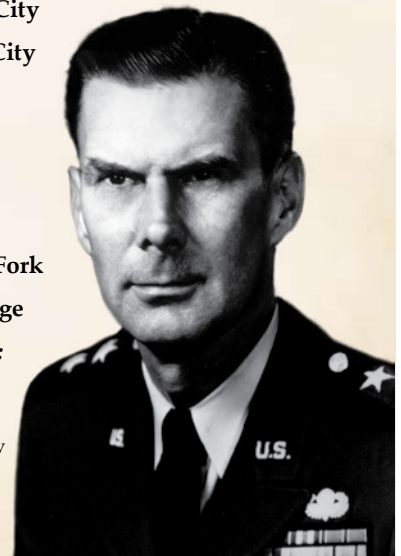
Major General Maxwell E. Rich

Major General Maxwell E. Rich served as the Adjutant General of Utah from 1953 to 1964. A veteran of WWII, MG Rich graduated from the 101st Airborne Division Jump School at Fort Campbell, KY on 2 April 1957. During MG Rich’s service, the following Special Forces units were organized in the Utah National Guard as of 1 July 1959:

133d SFOD (Abn) (Tm FD)	Salt Lake City
135 th SFOD (Abn) (Tm FC)	Salt Lake City
134 th SFOD (Abn) (Tm FC)	Murray
138 th SFOD (Abn) (Tm FC)	Bountiful
136 th SFOD (Abn) (Tm FC)	Ogden
137 th SFOD (Abn) (Tm FC)	Ogden
140 th SFOD (Abn) (Tm FB)	American Fork
139 th SFOD (Abn) (Tm FB)	Saint George

Special Improvements for Special Forces:
Camp W. G. Williams \$15, 259.46

Source: Summary of the Operation of the State Armory Board for the period 1 July 1959 to 30 June 1960.
Major General Maxwell E. Rich, The Adjutant General, Utah Army National Guard.





COL Blackburn's change of command 10 August 1960 on Smoke Bomb Hill, Fort Bragg, NC, was the only time he authorized the wear of Green Berets. (water-damaged photo)

FOOT (later changed to WHITE STAR) in Laos and to establish Ranger training centers in the Republic of South Vietnam to create Ranger companies for their army. These two missions were the first serious counterinsurgency (COIN) assistance operations in Southeast Asia. 📌

Eugene G. Piasecki, a retired Special Forces officer, is a government contractor who has been with the USASOC History Office since 2006. He earned his Master's Degree in military history from Norwich University. Current research interests include Army special operations during the Korean War, Army special operations in Somalia and the History of Camp Mackall.

Endnotes

- 1 Brigadier General (retired) Donald D. Blackburn, former Commander, 77th Special Forces Group, interviewed by LTC Robert B. Smith, 1983, Carlisle Barracks, PA, Senior Officers Oral History Program Project 83-9, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, 68.
- 2 Alfred H. Paddock, Jr. *US Army Special Warfare. Its Origins Psychological and Unconventional Warfare, 1941-1952* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1982), 84.

LTC Noble L. Riggs, Commander of Utah Army National Guard forces, (center) during Exercise BRIGHAM YOUNG with Soldiers.



- 3 Paddock, *US Army Special Warfare*, 119.
- 4 Paddock, *US Army Special Warfare*, 148-149.
- 5 Alex F. Wojcicki, consulting editor. *Special Forces, The First Fifty Years* (Tampa, FL: Faircount LLC, 2002), 71.
- 6 Brochure entitled: *77th Special Forces Group Airborne*, layout and composition by 1st Loudspeaker and Leaflet Company, printed by 3rd Reproduction Company, Fort Bragg, NC, undated, 2, BG Donald D. Blackburn Collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. **The 77th SFG was activated by General Order 73 dated 22 September 1953.**
- 7 Alex F. Wojcicki, consulting editor. *Special Forces, The First Fifty Years*, 72.
- 8 Blackburn Interview, 1983, 305.
- 9 Blackburn Interview, 1983, 306.
- 10 LTC Ian D. W. Sutherland (retired). *1952/1982 Special Forces of the United States Army* (San Jose, CA: R. James Bender Publishing, 1990), 254.
- 11 Brochure entitled: *77th Special Forces Group Airborne*, layout and composition by 1st Loudspeaker and Leaflet Company, printed by 3rd Reproduction Company, Fort Bragg, NC, undated, 5-6, BG Donald D. Blackburn Collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 12 Blackburn Interview, 1983, 307.
- 13 Blackburn Interview, 1983, 307.
- 14 Blackburn Interview, 1983, 310.
- 15 Blackburn Interview, 1983, 311.
- 16 Blackburn, Interview, 1983, 308.
- 17 "77th Special Forces Home After Exercise Black Palm," newspaper unknown, 1959, BG Donald D. Blackburn Collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 18 Blackburn Interview, 1983, 309.
- 19 "77th Special Forces Home After Exercise Black Palm." USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 20 "77th and England to Exchange Four Men This Month," newspaper unknown and date of publication January 1960, BG Donald D. Blackburn Collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 21 Blackburn Interview, 1983, 312.
- 22 George A. Sorensen, "Troops Trap C.O. in Forest Ambush," *The Salt Lake City Tribune*, 13 February 1960, BG Donald D. Blackburn Collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 23 Sorensen, "Troops Trap C.O. in Forest Ambush."
- 24 Blackburn Interview, 1983, 315.
- 25 Bart Hagerman, ed., *USA Airborne 50th Anniversary 1940-1990*, (Paducah, KY: Turner Publishing Co., 1990), 340-341.