

MACV RECONDO School

MACV Recondo School was a product of the 5th Special Forces Group, created expressly for the purpose of training soldiers from all the free-world forces in the art and science of long-range reconnaissance techniques.¹³⁶ General William Westmoreland formally approved the school's creation in a message to the 5th Special Forces Group commander of 4 September 1966. The facilities and instructor group in Nha Trang had previously been used to train reconnaissance teams for Project DELTA, a Special Forces and South Vietnamese Army enterprise that had conducted special operations in Viet Cong-controlled areas since late 1964.

The course taught at MACV Recondo School was three weeks in length, with 260 hours of classroom and field instruction. It was made available to all free-world forces, resulting in the attendance of Vietnamese, Korean, Australian, Thai, and Republic of the Philippines soldiers and airmen, along with personnel from all branches of the US Armed Forces. The typical class size was 60 students, with a new class intake every two weeks. Due to the high academic and physical demands of the course, the dropout rate over time was about 30 percent. Graduates returned to their parent units and were then subject to being re-assigned to a LRRP/LRP/Ranger unit for the remainder of their in-country time.

The prerequisites for attendance at MACV Recondo School were listed in USARV Regulation 350-2:

- Must be a volunteer and possess a combat-arms MOS.
- Must have been in country for one month and have six months' retainability after graduation.
- Assignment to a LRRP unit is anticipated.
- Must be proficient in general military subjects.

Because non-graduates and graduates alike returned to their parent units, it was in the best interest of units to fill their quotas with carefully selected students. On the other hand, many LRRP soldiers were not afforded the opportunity to attend MACV Recondo School. General Peers, 4th Infantry Division commander, briefing other senior commanders on LRRP issues in September 1967, stated that “due to the quotas for the school and to the rapid turnover of personnel, only about one out of every five of our [4th Infantry Division] LRRP personnel ever attend the Recondo School.”¹³⁷

Students arrived at the school with their personal assigned weapon and load-bearing equipment (LBE), and with a prescribed number of loaded magazines and hand grenades. The school provided a standard issue of required special equipment, along with a 30-pound sandbag. The sandbag was carried in the student's rucksack at all times and was subject to being weighed by any instructor at any time. Students were formed into five-man teams and assigned an instructor/adviser, who advised and evaluated the team throughout the course.

Every morning began with physical conditioning before breakfast. In September 1967, this meant a modest period of calisthenics followed by conditioning marches in week one. The marches began at a distance of two miles on Monday and increased to seven miles on Saturday, with a required completion time of under 90 minutes for the 7-mile march. Students carried their rifles and wore all of their LBE with rucksack, four full 1-quart canteens, and their sandbag for these marches. Students who failed to make the grade physically were returned to their units after the first week. Physical conditioning during

the second week employed a formation run in place of the forced march, and the weapons, LBE, and rucksacks with sandbags were left in the barracks.

MACV Recondo School's curriculum contained the following major subject blocks and time allocation in the spring of 1967:

- Administration-15:00
- Physical Training-14:20
- Medical-3:30
- Communications-8:30
- Intelligence-4:40
- Patrol Training-62:40
- Weapons Training-15:10
- Air Operations-18:30
- Combat Operations-112:40
- Land Navigation-15:30
- Quizzes, examinations, and critiques-6:30
- Commandant's Time-13:00

Of the total 288 hours, 45:30 was concurrent training in patrolling, weapons training, and air operations.¹³⁸

The first week of formal instruction was conducted in a classroom on the school compound. The second week was spent in training areas outside the compound on practical subjects, such as weapons firing, tower and helicopter rappelling, and other field activities. The third week was spent in preparing and conducting an actual instructor-led combat patrol in a relatively safe jungle environment. These patrols occasionally made contact with enemy forces and resulted in the wounding and death of both US and enemy personnel.

Upon completion of MACV Recondo School, graduates were awarded a certificate with a Recondo number and a Recondo patch to wear on their right pocket while in country, then were sent back to their parent unit for possible assignment to a LRRP/LRP/Ranger unit.¹³⁹

While the typical Recondo School class was comprised of enlisted and NCO personnel from all services and a few foreign army's, company-grade officers were also permitted to attend. The list of graduates by class shows on average two or three lieutenants and the occasional captain in a graduating class of 40-45 students.

All seating in the school was set aside in October and November 1967 to train personnel for the LRP companies of Company E (LRP), 20th Infantry (I Field Force) and Company F (LRP), 51st Infantry (II Field Force) in four truncated classes. A total of 333 personnel were trained, but did not complete all the requirements for graduation and therefore were not awarded Recondo numbers.

MACV Recondo School graduated 2,700 US students and also trained the 333 additional personnel mentioned above, for a total of about 3,000 US personnel between September 1966 and December

1970.¹⁴⁰ But the school's training impact was far greater than sheer numbers. The training conducted in LRRP units around the country was inextricably linked to MACV Recondo School training. Most units required their soldiers to have demonstrated aptitude and ability to conduct LRRP operations before they sent them to Recondo School. These units conducted training to qualify soldiers for LRRP duty and also to prepare them for success at Recondo School, based on their knowledge of its physical- and academic-training standards. This pre-screening provided the Special Forces instructors at Nha Trang with better students, and undoubtedly raised the standard of Recondo School graduates.

MACV Recondo School, in turn, with its comprehensive and detailed classroom and field curriculum and rigorous physical conditioning, defined a common set of TTP for all LRRP units in Vietnam, irrespective of their mission or operating terrain. The importance of this common set of standards cannot be overemphasized. Graduates left Nha Trang with their mental and physical rucksacks full of knowledge of the intimate details of LRRP activities. They took back to their units the paper handouts used by the school in academic instruction.¹⁴¹ They incorporated sandbags in their unit physical conditioning training.¹⁴² Primarily as a consequence of Recondo School training, every LRRP unit in Vietnam spoke a common language of long-range patrolling.