

# Lieutenant General William P. Yarborough

by Kenneth Finlayson

**WHEN** Lieutenant General William P. Yarborough passed away on 6 December 2005, he left a remarkable legacy of innovation, creative intellectual energy, and professional accomplishment. In a career that spanned thirty-seven years of service to the Army, and more as a civilian consultant and lecturer, LTG Yarborough made an indelible mark in the airborne, psychological warfare, and special operations arenas. The visible signs of his impact on the Army special operations forces community—the Green Beret, the Yarborough Knife, and the Parachutist Badge—are the physical manifestations of a career made noteworthy by his insatiable pursuit of improved doctrines and equipment for the soldiers with whom he served. As described by Brigadier General John Mulholland, Commanding General of United States Army Special Forces Command, “He was one of our titans.”<sup>1</sup>

LTG Yarborough graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1936. Among his classmates were William Westmoreland, Creighton Abrams, and Benjamin O. Davis. His first assignment was in the Philippines where he served with

the 57th Infantry, Philippine Scouts. In 1940, he returned to the United States to Fort Benning, Georgia, where he joined the 501st Parachute Infantry as a company commander and test officer in the fledgling Provisional Parachute Group.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly thereafter, while awaiting his Russian visa to be assigned as a military attaché in Moscow, he received orders to report to England as the airborne planner on the staff of Major General Mark Clark. The staff was engaged in planning Operation TORCH, the Allied invasion of North Africa. Yarborough later recalled, “I was picked by General Mark Clark to become part of the London Planning Group to address airborne operations.” In the early years of the war, Yarborough was one of the few officers with sufficient background in airborne operations and Clark intended to conduct an airborne “insertion” as part of the invasion. “I suppose because I was extremely enthusiastic about airborne operations, and maybe having been one of the early officers in this activity, he felt I was qualified to do this.”<sup>3</sup>

Joining Clark’s staff at #1 Cumberland Place, London, in July 1942, Yarborough was caught up in the feverish planning for the invasion. The first U.S. combat parachute assaults ultimately proved to be some of the longest and the most complex airborne operations of the entire war. Operation TORCH called for the Parachute Task Force led by Colonel William C. Bentley Jr., Army Air Corps, to fly 1,500 miles at night from England across Spain and the Mediterranean Sea to airdrop on the airfields of Tafaraoui

*Major General William P. Yarborough models the first version of the Army’s jungle fatigues.*



*57th Infantry Distinctive Unit Insignia*



*Operation Torch included two parachute jumps around Oran, Algeria.*

and La Senia near Oran, Algeria. Major Yarborough was to be the “eyes” of MG Clark and accompany the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Edson D. Raff.<sup>4</sup>

It was during the pre-invasion training and the chaotic operations in Algeria that Yarborough formed his strong opinions about the role of airborne and Ranger forces. These opinions became part of his core philosophy and he applied them in his later assignments. “Paratrooper is a frame of mind . . . Being surrounded by the enemy doesn’t in the least mean that the game is up.”<sup>5</sup>

He saw the distinct roles of the Rangers, the airborne, and what would eventually become Special Forces in the operations behind the lines:

*When we first began the parachute units, when we had the 501st Parachute Battalion, we considered that more in the line of a combination of Ranger–Special Forces than we did straight-leg infantry arriving by air. The philosophy we built into those outfits was that wherever you land, you are liable to land in the wrong place. It’s a coin flip. You are to do the kind of damage to the enemy that you are trained to do and don’t let it worry you that you may end up in two’s and three’s or a half a dozen.<sup>6</sup>*

MG Clark next sent Yarborough back to the United States, ostensibly to command a battalion in the 101st Airborne Division. Major General Matthew B. Ridgway, the commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, rather summarily diverted him to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. In retrospect, Yarborough felt his experience in airborne operations was being ignored by the planners of the 82nd. As a result, he deployed to Tunisia for the airborne assault into Sicily with a significant chip on his shoulder. “I was sort of a young man’s prima donna, felt kind of dumped on, and my feelings were hurt . . . I was assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 504th, which I commanded and went back overseas with the 504th. [COL] Reuben Tucker was the Regimental Commander and he had been an old friend

of mine, but I was so intractable and so impossible that even Reuben Tucker felt that he had a burr under his saddle.”<sup>7</sup>

During the operations in Sicily, Yarborough ran afoul of MG Ridgway on several occasions. His actions and attitude caused him to be relieved by Ridgway. When his unit reached Palermo, he was told to report to the commanding general. Ridgway told him, “Your services are no longer required. You’re a pain in the a—, excuse me, but you go back to Mark Clark and tell him that he should find another job for you.”<sup>8</sup> In retrospect, Yarborough said, “I had paid the price for my high-spirited stupidity. Challenging authority in [that] way . . . no outfit can work on that basis . . . It was with me, not Ridgway or Tucker.”<sup>9</sup>

Eventually Yarborough was given command of the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion and led that unit during the fighting around the Anzio beachhead. His leadership style epitomized the “spit and polish” of the airborne and was in stark contrast to that of another elite unit commander, Colonel William O. Darby of the Rangers. “I had known Darby before and had a high regard for him. But mixing paratroopers and Rangers was like mixing oil and water. Here we went in for the traditional esprit of the soldier based on the customs of the service, even in the shell holes. Every man shaved every day no matter what. Our people looked sharp. I required it and they took pride in the parachute uniform and the badge they had. Darby’s guys looked like cutthroats. They looked like the sweepings of the bar rooms.”<sup>10</sup>

Contrasting his unit and Darby’s, Yarborough explained the differences between elite units and how



*82nd Airborne Division shoulder patch*



*504th Parachute Infantry Regiment pocket patch*



*Lieutenant Colonel Yarborough and Major General Mark Clark in Italy. Clark brought Yarborough to England to be his airborne planner for Operation TORCH.*

leadership approaches and specialized techniques are required to effectively lead each. “Darby and I used to sit around and talk about this phenomenon and we both agreed that one should approach leadership from two points of view when we have an extraordinary kind of a mission to perform. One was the traditional one, which I preferred, and the other was his approach which offered only blood, sweat, and tears for the right kind of guy.”<sup>11</sup>

With the end of war, Colonel Yarborough faced a situation entirely different from leading paratroopers in combat. His next assignment was as the Provost Marshal of the American forces in the divided city of Vienna, Austria.<sup>12</sup> He moved from the hot war against the German *Wehrmacht* to the Cold War against the Soviet Union. His experiences in Europe over the next decade helped to shape his perception of unconventional warfare and codify his perception of the role of Special Forces.

Post-war Austria and its capital city of Vienna were

*Troops of the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion landed on 22 January at Anzio. Lieutenant Colonel Yarborough's battalion was in combat for seventy-three days at Anzio.*



divided among the four Allied powers—Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States—like in Berlin. As the American Provost Marshal, COL Yarborough dealt daily with the problems of rebuilding Austria amid the turmoil of U.S. Army demobilization and the intransigence of the Soviets. Yarborough recognized from the beginning of his tour the need to have highly-qualified soldiers in the ranks of his constabulary force. These men were required to deal with the most sensitive and highly charged situations on a daily basis. Maturity and intelligence were critical for Constabulary troops.

However, soldiers of this caliber were not readily available. Yarborough recalled, “The American troops that had been in combat were pretty well behaved and pretty amenable to discipline, but when the replacements began to come in and the occupation troops began to arrive, then crimes of all kinds began to rise on the part of the Americans.” In an effort to improve the quality of his force, Yarborough explained his case to the Adjutant General of the American Forces, asking that “in view of the fact that Vienna was a political sharp edge, . . . that it was essential that we send ideal representatives of the country so we wouldn’t be judged on the basis of individuals who had no right to act or speak for the country.” His request fell on deaf ears. “I was told in no uncertain terms, ‘You take your share of the people just like everyone else’.”<sup>13</sup>

His experiences in post-War Vienna and a subsequent assignment in 1958 as the commander of the 66th Counter Intelligence Corps Group in Europe were instrumental in shaping Yarborough’s intellectual development in

*Colonel Yarborough as the Provost Marshal for the American Forces in Vienna.*



*509th Parachute Infantry Battalion shoulder patch*



American Armed Forces  
Vienna shoulder patch



U.S. Army Special War-  
fare Center and School  
shoulder patch

American, British, French, and Soviet Military Police patrol in Vienna. Yarborough knew that high-quality troops had to be assigned this sensitive mission.



the area of unconventional warfare. He read widely on guerrilla warfare and actively sought information and intelligence on insurgencies worldwide. This stood him in good stead when he arrived at Fort Bragg in 1961 to take command of the U.S. Army Special Warfare Center.

*I felt that to some degree I understood the nature of the guerrilla problem. . . This was the period when there was an awakening at the highest level as to the nature of a new kind of threat, which was invading the power structure of the world. This was a kind of 'slow-burn warfare,' a kind of warfare that didn't ignite into hostility until after extensive preparation had been undertaken by irregular forces.<sup>14</sup>*

Yarborough's assumption of command came during the Presidency of John F. Kennedy. This proved fortuitous for Special Forces. A man of wide-ranging intellect served a Commander-in-Chief who recognized the value of the Special Forces as an instrument of national policy. "I think it

[the guerrilla phenomenon] was understood by the President himself. My orders and instructions for the philosophy that was to form the Special Warfare Center, I always believed, came from the President of the United States."<sup>15</sup>

The late 1950s and early 1960s saw the proliferation of insurgencies around the globe. Yarborough recognized, as did Kennedy, that the communist insurgencies in Indo-China were the paradigm of "slow-burn" warfare. In describing this problem, President Kennedy said, the nation faced " . . . another type of warfare, new in its intensity, ancient in its origins—war by guerillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins; war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration instead of aggression; seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him."<sup>16</sup>

Yarborough rejected the notion that Vietnam was a conflict that the Army could deal with in the traditional manner. "I became absolutely convinced through and through that it was essential that only picked men be allowed into those arenas. . . To assume that one could cut out of the vast body of the Army, just an ordinary slice, and send it to Vietnam in an atmosphere that was designed to prey on political differences, on class struggle, on all the intangibles that characterizes Mao's way of warfare, to me was a folly."<sup>17</sup>

In his effort to restructure training at the Special Warfare Center to develop the right kind of soldier for the arena of counter-insurgency, Yarborough drew on his readings of guerrilla warfare by Mao Tse-Tung, Truong Chinh, and Vo Nguyen Giap. He also discussed these ideas with OSS Detachment 101 veteran Roger Hilsman and Air Force Brigadier General Edward Lansdale who worked with the Philippine guerrillas against the Japanese.<sup>18</sup> He was convinced that the instrument to combat guerrilla warfare was the Special Forces soldier and he worked to spread his vision to the rest of the Army.

*In 1961, a board of general officers was convened to come to the headquarters on Smoke Bomb Hill. I was to brief them on my views of Special Warfare. My end product was a plea for a new kind of vision. We needed to develop a new breed of man that could be sent out into the boondocks without supervision, who would continue to carry his nation's objectives in his mind.<sup>19</sup>*

Portraying the Special Forces soldier in much the same way he did the paratrooper—as a highly-trained specialist capable of independently completing his mission—Brigadier General Yarborough began to implement his vision at the Special Warfare Center. Just as he had developed the airborne insignia and parachute uniform as a means to instill pride and esprit, he looked for equipment to provide the Special Forces soldiers a unique identity. He tried to have a Bowie Knife issued to each Special Forces soldier, but that was rejected by the Army. "I mention this because little things like this were looked upon with disdain because our Army, as far back as I can remember, has always rejected the intangible things and gone for the meat and potatoes . . . Well this same kind of philoso-



Brigadier General Yarborough briefing at the Special Warfare Center. He sought a new vision for the conduct of counterinsurgency warfare. The chart depicts the organization of the Special Warfare Center.



President John F. Kennedy's visit to Fort Bragg in October 1961 resulted in the Green Beret becoming the officially recognized headgear of Special Forces.

phy rejects the little things like the kind of intangibles that I was looking for."<sup>20</sup>

His next opportunity came on 12 October 1961 when President Kennedy visited Fort Bragg for a review of the 82nd Airborne Division and Special Forces. The President's military aide, Brigadier General Theodore Clifton, was a West Point classmate and close friend of Yarborough. The two planned to present the capabilities of Special Forces in a series of floats that passed in front of the reviewing stand at McKellar's Pond.<sup>21</sup> In addition, "one of the things that Clifton wanted me to put across most to the President was that these people were the 'PhD's of irregular warfare,' and that their professional cap was the green beret." The Special Forces troops reviewed by Kennedy wore green berets. "When the President went back home that evening, I got a telegram from the White House mentioning that the green beret would now be a mark of excellence among the Special Forces. So there wasn't a thing that the Army could do."<sup>22</sup>

The United States entry into Vietnam put increasing demands on the Special Warfare Center to ramp up the number of Special Forces troops. Yarborough credited his predecessor at the Center, Colonel George M. Jones for this. "Things had been gotten into high gear by my predecessor George Jones, who incidentally is an unsung hero. Jones was a guy who did an awful lot to get Special Forces going. He sold personnel policies to the Department of the Army against their will to allow a grade structure which was out of line with anything the military had known otherwise."<sup>23</sup>

Yarborough structured Special Forces training around his vision of their role in a world increasingly beset with insurgencies. "I didn't see the Special Forces soldier as a direct combat instrument. I saw him as a catalyst that could gather around him those that he would train and lend help to lead, to show the essence of leadership, provide staff instruction and communication skills, and all of that. What he carried in the way of a weapon was not important. As a matter of fact, I felt in some ways if the American had a superior weapon and he was out among guerrilla forces that had something else, his own credibility suffered a little."<sup>24</sup>

In keeping with his philosophy that made the Special Forces soldier the interface between the local population and the Army, Yarborough put increasing emphasis on individual skills training of the detachment personnel. Most importantly, he put a premium on the training of the Special Forces medic, whom he viewed as a crucial element of team interface with indigenous forces. In describing his view of the role of the Special Forces medic, Yarborough said, "the medical man especially had to be trained to a degree that was unknown in Corpsman's channels in the military. . . . The training revolved mostly around making the individual realize there were upper limits to his skills that he was not at liberty to try to transgress. His first charge was that he should do no harm and thereafter treat within the skill level that he had."<sup>25</sup>

At the end of his tour as commanding general of the

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

April 11, 1962

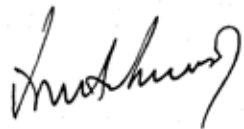
TO THE UNITED STATES ARMY:

Another military dimension -- "guerrilla warfare" -- has necessarily been added to the American profession of arms. The literal translation of guerrilla warfare -- "a little war" -- is hardly applicable to this ancient, but at the same time, modern threat. I note that the Army has several terms which describe the various facets of the current struggle: wars of subversion, covert aggression, and, in broad professional terms, special warfare or unconventional warfare.

By whatever name, this militant challenge to freedom calls for an improvement and enlargement of our own development of techniques and tactics, communications and logistics to meet this threat. The mission of our Armed Forces -- and especially the Army today -- is to master these skills and techniques and to be able to help those who have the will to help themselves.

Pure military skill is not enough. A full spectrum of military, para-military, and civil action must be blended to produce success. The enemy uses economic and political warfare, propaganda and naked military aggression in an endless combination to oppose a free choice of government, and suppress the rights of the individual by terror, by subversion and by force of arms. To win in this struggle, our officers and men must understand and combine the political, economic and civil actions with skilled military efforts in the execution of this mission.

"The green beret" is again becoming a symbol of excellence, a badge of courage, a mark of distinction in the fight for freedom. I know the United States Army will live up to its reputation for imagination, resourcefulness, and spirit as we meet this challenge.



renamed John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center, Major General Yarborough was disappointed that he was not going to Vietnam. Instead, he became the Senior United Nations representative to the Military Armistice Commission in Panmunjom, Korea.<sup>26</sup> His approach to the task of representing the United Nations when faced by the bombastic propaganda and outright lies of his North Korean counterpart, General Pak Chung Kuk, was typical Yarborough. "I felt that research was the thing and I spent all of the time between meetings delving into the back issues of the transcripts and reading the *P'yongyang Times* and listening to broadcasts from P'yongyang and trying to get a fix on the personalities of the people who were opposite me at the table."<sup>27</sup>

Then forearmed with this knowledge, Yarborough turned the tables on the North Koreans on numerous occasions, calling attention to their fabrications and tangling them in the inconsistencies of Marxist doctrines. His actions caused consternation among the State Department officials in the country, but the American soldiers in Korea strongly approved of his actions and encouraged him to stay on the offensive.<sup>28</sup> One of his crowning achievements in this area came near the end of his tenure:



Illustration by Frank Allen

*Brigadier General Yarborough conducting a parachute jump as the Commander of the Special Warfare School.*

*One of the cases where I felt that humiliation or ridicule was an effective tactic stemmed from their introduction of three spies up the Han River in a homemade submarine. The submarine ran aground on a sandbar in the Han River and our security forces succeeded in killing two and capturing one, and capturing all of the equipment. I took the equipment and the submarine, a miniature submarine,*

*Brigadier General Yarborough envisioned the Special Forces medic as a key member of the Special Forces team and worked to upgrade the skill levels in medical training.*





*Eighth U.S. Army shoulder patch*



*The United Nations shoulder patch worn by members of the Armistice Commission.*

put a dummy in the wet suit of one of the dead infiltrators, put the North Korean flag in his hands, put him in the conning tower of the submarine and hauled the whole thing up to Panmunjom where I had it on display out in front of the meeting room, knowing full well that Pak Chung Kuk would deny the whole thing, but I had the evidence there. People were wandering around and beginning to laugh about it, even the North Korean soldiers. Well, I left this thing until the last part of the meeting, going through a lot of other materials, counteraccusations, and whatever leading up to the big punch. In doing this, I went through the history of the submarine . . . all the way up to nuclear submarines. I said, 'now this remarkable piece of North Korean ingenu-

ity shows that you people have really come a long way. If you had kept it simple like my imperialistic forebears did in the Civil and Revolutionary Wars, the thing might have made it.' Pak Chung Kuk didn't know what to make of it and finally he said, 'The next time you come in here, somebody's going to come in with you in a white coat. Obviously, you are off your rocker.' And then when we went outside to see the submarine there, his embarrassment was very great indeed.<sup>29</sup>

After his Korean tour, General Yarborough was assigned to the Army General Staff in November 1966 as the Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Operations with Army special operations as his responsibility. Next he became the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, and in July 1968, returned to Korea and to command I Corps. He worked diligently to improve the defense fortifications of the UN forces and elevated the morale and esprit of the troops in his command. He ended a distinguished military career as the Deputy Commander in Chief and Chief of Staff of United States Army Pacific Command. He retired on 31 July 1971 and returned to the Fort Bragg area to live in Pinehurst, North Carolina.

In retirement, he wrote on a variety of military topics and became a consultant to a number of government boards and organizations. He detailed his experiences in early World War II in his book, *Bail Out over North Africa: America's First Combat Parachute Missions 1942*. He wrote the sections on Low Intensity Conflict and Unconventional Warfare for the *International Military and Defense Encyclopedia*. Yarborough was a regular contributor to *Special Warfare* magazine and other publications well into his eighties.<sup>30</sup>



*The North Korean mini-sub at Panmunjom. Note the man in the wetsuit in the conning tower.*

LTG Yarborough held true to his core beliefs concerning leadership and the role of special operations. Always a proponent of those measures that generated esprit and enhanced morale, he wrote and spoke widely on the ethical, moral, and professional commitment required of Army service. When contacted in retirement by General Richard Stilwell for his thoughts on the Army's proposed Regimental System, Yarborough responded: "The U.S. Army's enormous computer-based capacity to cope with the nuts and bolts of personnel, supply, and logistics is not in question. On the other hand, the Army has failed to recognize, nurture, honor, and safeguard those innumerable intangibles which have meant even more than pay to generations of soldiers."<sup>31</sup>

LTG Yarborough was recognized for his life-long dedication to the Army and Special Operations in 2000 when he received the Bull Simons Award from the United States Special Operations Command. Today's graduates of the Special Forces Qualification Course each receive a fighting knife fittingly called the Yarborough Knife in recognition of his contributions to the command. General Bryan D. Brown, Commanding General of United States Special Operations Command, noted, "He worked diligently to increase the professional and academic standards of the JFK School, resulting in the development of courses that are still relevant today. His foresight was instrumental in the success of today's spe-



*I Corps shoulder patch*



*U.S. Army Pacific Command shoulder patch*

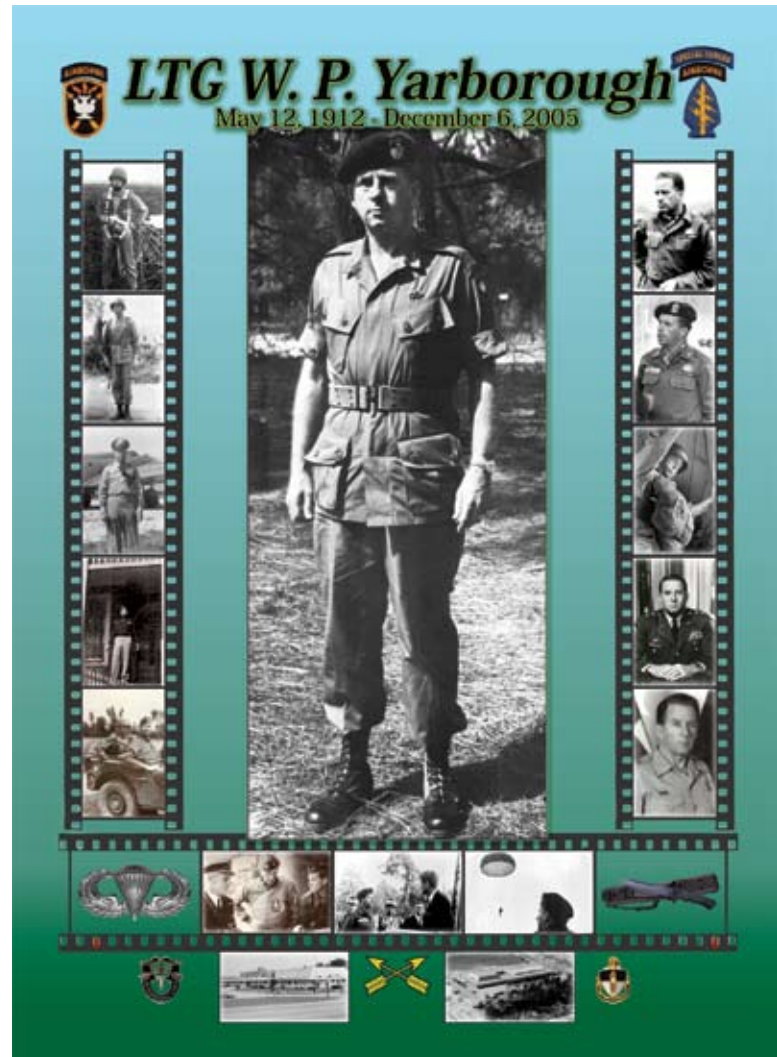
cial operations soldiers.<sup>32</sup> Truly a thinking man's soldier, LTG William P. Yarborough was one of the renowned figures of the special operations community. ♣



The serial numbered Yarborough Knife that is awarded to each graduate of the Special Forces Qualification Course.

## Endnotes

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- 2 William P. Yarborough, *Bail Out Over North Africa: America's First Combat Parachute Missions 1942* (Williamstown, NJ: Phillips Publications, 1979), 15.
- 3 William P. Yarborough, interview by Colonel John R. Meese and Lieutenant Colonel Houston P. Houser, 28 March 1975, Southern Pines, NC, transcript, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, 5-6.
- 4 George F. Howe, *U.S. Army in World War II, Mediterranean Theater of Operations, Northwest Africa: Seizing the Initiative in the West* (Washington DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1957), 212; Yarborough interview, 28 March 1975.
- 5 William P. Yarborough, letter to Mr. Tierney, 15 April 1974, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 6 Yarborough interview, 28 March 1975, 12-13.
- 7 Yarborough interview, 28 March 1975, 38.
- 8 Yarborough interview, 28 March 1975, 38.
- 9 Yarborough interview, 28 March 1975, 39.
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- 11 Yarborough interview, 28 March 1975, 54.
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- 14 Yarborough interview, 21 April 1975, 2.
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- 16 William P. Yarborough, "General Yarborough Reflects," *Special Forces: The First Fifty Years* (Tampa FL: Faircount LLC, 2002), 138.
- 17 Yarborough interview, 21 April 1975, 8.
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- 20 Yarborough interview, 21 April 1975, 9.
- 21 Yarborough interview, 21 April 1975, 12.
- 22 Yarborough interview, 21 April 1975, 12-13.
- 23 Yarborough interview, 21 April 1975, 19.
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- 27 Yarborough, interview, 23 April 1975, 5.
- 28 Yarborough, interview, 23 April 1975, 10.
- 29 Yarborough, interview, 23 April 1975, 11-12.
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- 32 Henry Cunningham, "General was a Pioneer in Special Operations," *Fayetteville Observer*, December 8, 2005.



Special commemorative poster created by Earl J. Moniz of the USASOC History Office.