

HOW TWO SLY SEALS OUTFOXED 30,000 NVA

VIETNAM



M16-19: Great
acceleration
Just hell to fly

HAL MOORE RETURNS TO IA DRANG

(and embraces old enemies)

PLUS:

Helicopter assault
decimates Viet Cong
battalion at An Ba

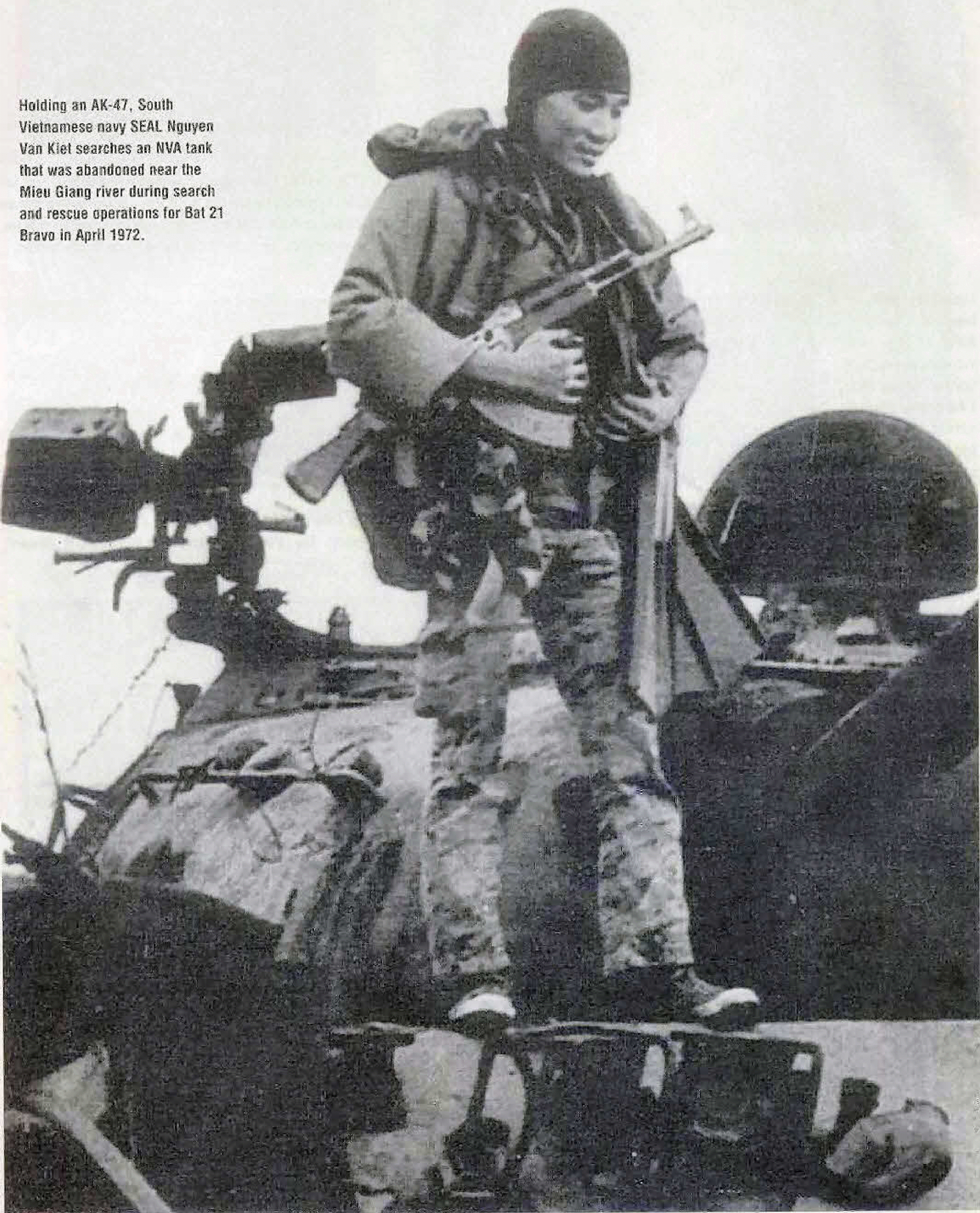
Medal of Honor hero:
Congress didn't care
about GIs in Vietnam

Was military money
better than dollars?

U.S. Col. Hal Moore's
7th Cavalrymen fought
bravely hard to defeat
thousands of North
Vietnamese in
November 1965.



Holding an AK-47, South Vietnamese navy SEAL Nguyen Van Kiet searches an NVA tank that was abandoned near the Mieu Giang river during search and rescue operations for Bat 21 Bravo in April 1972.



Unsung Hero in the Amazing Rescue of Bat 21 Bravo

South Vietnamese SEAL Nguyen Van Kiet's courage and cunning got a downed airman past 30,000 NVA troops and earned him the U.S. Navy Cross

BY JOHN B. HASEMAN

When Lieutenant Colonel Icaal "Gene" Hambleton was shot down just south of the DMZ on April 2, 1972, he ejected at 31,000 feet and left behind an exploding aircraft and his five fellow crew members. Alone in enemy-held territory, the 53-year-old U.S. Air Force navigator (call sign Bat 21 Bravo) had a head full of highly sensitive information that would make him a prized catch for the Communists, and the Air Force was not about to leave him behind. *Bat*21*, the popular 1988 film starring Gene Hackman and Danny Glover, tells the dramatic story of Hambleton's rescue, but while the Hollywood movie is full of intrigue and suspense, it does not tell the whole story—the more remarkable, true story.

It is a little-known fact that a South Vietnamese navy SEAL—Nguyen Van Kiet—received the U.S. Navy Cross in 1976 for his actions on April 13, 1972, the day he and U.S. Navy SEAL Tom Norris rescued Colonel Hambleton. Kiet is one of only two Vietnamese servicemen who were presented with the United States' second-highest award for heroism. His citation reads, in part: "*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.*"

The citation describing Kiet's heroism is surprisingly general because when he received the award in 1976 the details surrounding his actions in the operation were still classified. In fact, the movie *Bat*21* was adapted from William Anderson's 1983 book *Bat-21*, which, while based on actual events, was written as a work of fiction because the mission details were still secret. Although they touch on some of the truths of the mission, neither the book nor the film mentions Kiet or Norris or any of the SEALs' involvement.

The information was declassified in the late 1980s, and it reveals the full extent of Kiet's role in the military's rescue of Bat 21 Bravo. Petty Officer Third Class Kiet, part of a five-man South Vietnamese Sea Commando team from Da Nang, had volunteered for the dangerous assignment 12 days into the mission. He was the only commando to accompany Lt. j.g. Norris, from SEAL Detachment 158, on the daring infiltration up the Song Mieu Giang to Hambleton's position. Norris, one of the few U.S. Navy SEALs remaining in Vietnam and serving his second tour, had also volunteered for the mission. The pair of them, Kiet at 5 feet 5 inches, and Norris at about 5-foot-9, would try to do on the ground what the Air Force had been unable to do in the air for more than a week. For a navy SEAL, it was the mission of a lifetime.

Nguyen Van Kiet was born March 23, 1945, near Saigon. He entered South Vietnam's navy in 1963 and first trained as a patrol boat crewman and gunner. His early assignments were in the Mekong Delta and then Da Nang. In 1970 he volunteered for a joint U.S.-Vietnamese Navy SEAL/Sea Commando unit. From 1970 to 1973, he was assigned to a Studies and Observation Group (SOG) Pilot Search and Rescue Team, the same small SEAL/underwater demolition team advised by Norris.

The rescue of Bat 21 Bravo and of one other airman who was also shot down April 3—Lieutenant Mark Clark (call sign Nail 38 Bravo)—was not only the largest air and ground search-and-rescue (SAR) operation of the entire Vietnam War, but it was also the most costly in lives lost and aircraft damaged or destroyed. This amazing operation was launched in the middle of the North Vietnamese invasion of Quang Tri Province. With the Easter Offensive, 30,000 North Vietnamese soldiers, supported by artillery and armor, had swarmed into the province south of the DMZ as



Alongside Lt. Tom Norris, Kiet receives the Navy Cross in 1976.

American forces withdrew. They destroyed most of the South Vietnamese 3rd Infantry Division, newly formed to replace the receding American forces, and overran half of Quang Tri Province. The United States relied on B-52 bombers and other American air power to support the beleaguered South Vietnamese, and between April and June 1972, 6,000 B-52 missions were launched. Leading one of those B-52 airstrikes was Icaal Hambleton, who flew as navigator in a Douglas EB-66 electronics warfare plane designed to jam enemy radar and communications to clear a path for the bombers.

When an NVA surface-to-air missile (SAM) connected with Hambleton's EB-66, he landed near a busy highway on a Communist supply route between the DMZ and the Song Mieu Giang, injured in his rocket-seat ejection. With a ripped finger, a body peppered with shrapnel and a compressed spine that left him limping in pain, he hid as thousands of invading NVA troops, armor and artillery swarmed through the area of the shootdown supported by the largest concentration of anti-aircraft weaponry of the entire war.

All aircrews carried a survival radio that could operate in either beeper or voice mode, and Bat 21 Bravo's beeper now transmitted a loud, piercing tone to relay that he was shot down. Every few seconds he would operate it to listen for a sign that someone had heard his

'Thousands of NVA, armor and artillery swarmed the area, supported by a huge concentration of anti-aircraft weaponry'

emergency signal. He soon established voice communication, and rescuers were on their way.

Darrel D. Whitcomb's 1998 book *The Rescue of Bat 21* recounts in detail the extent of the aerial and ground attempts to rescue Hambleton in the middle of a ground battle between two Vietnamese armies. The NVA was aware of the huge rescue operation and committed an intensive array of anti-aircraft weaponry to damage and destroy U.S. helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, inflicting heavy casualties among their crews.

Just minutes after Bat 21 Bravo landed in his parachute, the helicopter Blueghost 39 flew in to rescue him but encountered extremely heavy enemy fire, not knowing the area was in NVA hands. The chopper was shot down, and all crew members were killed or captured. The next day, two other fliers, Lieutenants Mark Clark (Nail 38 Bravo) and William Henderson, were shot down in their OV-10 while flying overhead protection for Hambleton. Both airmen ejected to safety, but while Clark hid in the south bank of the Mieu Giang and awaited rescue, Henderson was quickly captured by the North Vietnamese.

FOR TWO MORE DAYS, hundreds of airstrikes were called in to try to subdue the NVA gunners. It was dangerous work, but the American aircrews refused to leave their comrades behind.

SEAL Rescue of Hambleton (Bat 21 Bravo) and Clark (Nail 38 Bravo) April 2-14, 1972



The 13-day ordeal to rescue the downed airmen begins with failed helicopter attempts and ends with Kiet and Norris' successful infiltration up the Song Mieu Giang. At the time Bat 21 was shot down, the Air Force was not aware that some 30,000 NVA troops had crossed the DMZ into Quang Tri Province.



PHOTO BY GUY LOUIS C. WATKINS JR. COURTESY OF TOMA WATKINS

Petty Officer Kiet and U.S. Navy SEAL Norris in Dong Ha immediately following the Bat 21 rescue mission. Kiet was the only member of the joint U.S.-Vietnamese navy SEAL unit to accompany team leader Norris on the desperate last attempt to reach Lt. Col. Icaal Hambleton on the night of April 13.

On day 5 of the SAR operation, April 6, rescuers called in 42 airstrikes to clear the way for another helicopter to attempt a pickup, first of Hambleton and then Clark. All requested targets had been struck and the area was quiet, but as Jolly Green 67 came to hover near Bat 21 Bravo, it began to take ground fire from all quarters and was hit. It caught fire, broke apart and crashed just south of Nail 38 Bravo's position, killing all six airmen aboard. The next day, an OV-10 (call sign Covey 282) flying in support of the mission was shot down near the Blueghost 39 crash site, adding two more injured airmen to the rescue list.

By April 9, the Air Force's situation was dire. Eight aircraft had been destroyed, 14 Americans were dead, two had been captured and two were unaccounted for. General Creighton Abrams issued a directive forbidding any more helicopter attempts. The SAR task force was pulled out of the area and another "cheaper" mission was devised on the ground using the navy SEALs—U.S. Lieutenant Norris, ARVN Petty Officer Kiet and four other Vietnamese commandos. The concept of the operation was for the joint U.S.-Vietnamese navy team to swim up the Song Mieu Giang, while the two downed airmen were cryptically directed step-by-step to move to the riverbank and float downstream for rescue.

On April 10, Norris and his team took shelter in a battered bunker on the south bank of the Mieu Giang and completed their rescue plans. They set out to retrieve Clark first. They would not be in

direct radio communication with Clark or Hambleton, but would be able to relay information back to Marine Lt. Col. Andy Anderson, who was in charge of the SEAL team. The team infiltrated up-river under cover of darkness. For both Hambleton and Clark, their submersible URC-64 radios were the most important pieces of survival equipment in their possession.

Lieutenant Clark, who was from Idaho, received his cryptic instructions to float down the river to rendezvous with the commandos: "When the moon goes over the mountains, become Esther Williams and get in the Snake and go from Boise to Twin Falls." Norris spotted Clark at around 2 a.m., but with an enemy patrol between them, he had to let Clark float quietly by.

In the clear again, Norris swam after Clark but was unable to find him. The SEAL returned to his team and together they began a thorough search in and around the river rapids and heavy undergrowth. Finally, as dawn approached, they found Clark hiding on the riverbank. With one prize in hand, they worked their way back through enemy territory to their bunkered command post. After coming under heavy NVA rocket and mortar fire, they managed to get Clark moved to safety.

Colonel Hambleton's situation was more precarious. Injured by his rough landing, and exhausted after more than a week spent evading the enemy, he was under cover about a mile from the river. Airborne controllers told him to make his way to the "Suwannee"

[illegible]



"It was my duty," Kiet later said. "Lieutenant Norris was the best of the best of Navy SEALs. I knew that Hambleton desperately needed our help. And the rest of the Vietnamese commandos from my team were out [of the operation], which was a difficult situation for Tom. So I volunteered to continue the rescue with Tom and told him that 'If you work I work. If you go home I go home'."

AT NIGHTFALL ON THE 13TH, THE TWO SEALs dressed up as NVA soldiers and moved up the Mieu Giang to a bombed-out village, where they found a usable sampan. Huddled in the small boat, they paddled silently upriver throughout the night, deep into enemy territory, past NVA positions and rumbling tanks. Heavy fog concealed them but also made accurate navigation nearly impossible. In the clear again, they soon realized they had overshot their objective and were directly under the Cam Lo bridge, with NVA forces crossing right over their heads.

The two men quickly turned around, undetected, and headed downstream, sweeping the shore for Bat 21 Bravo. Finally they spotted him, hidden by some bushes and lying in the mud on the south side of the river, awake but partly delirious. During his 12 days on the ground, he had lost 45 pounds and suffered from a broken wrist and the bad water he had con-

The Cam Lo River bridge marks the spot where Kiet and Norris, traveling the fogbound river in a sampan and disguised as NVA soldiers, realized they had overshot Bat 21 Bravo's position and had to turn around. While under it, the pair of SEALs could hear enemy troops and tanks crossing above them.

sumed. But he was alive. Norris got on the radio and notified everyone that they had their golfer and were coming out.

Norris and Kiet helped Hambleton into their sampan and, with dawn bearing down on them once again, covered him with bamboo and began paddling swiftly downriver. A gantlet of NVA troops discovered the interlopers and repeatedly took them under fire. Norris requested airstrikes, and the combination of the airstrikes and covering fire from South Vietnamese forces on the river's south bank provided some protection.

Then, from nowhere, a North Vietnamese patrol started shouting and running after the three men. According to Kiet's Navy Cross citation, "[Kiet] calmly continued to keep the enemy confused as [he and Norris] successfully evaded the patrol." Farther

on, a North Vietnamese soldier with a machine gun opened fire on them. Kiet's courage never faltered. "Thinking first of the pilot [Hambleton], he quickly pulled the sampan to safety behind a bank and camouflaged it while airstrikes were called on the enemy position."

"The fighters set up a low bombing pattern...and worked over the village with tremendous accuracy until the positions were obliterated," wrote Whitcomb, a former Air Force officer who flew missions in Vietnam, including support for the Bat 21 rescue effort. "The last thing they dropped was their M47

'Kiet calmly continued to keep the enemy confused as he and Norris successfully evaded the NVA patrol'

smoke bombs. This created a curtain that Norris [and Kiet] could then use for cover." Kiet and Norris got back into the sampan and made a dash to their small outpost, where they carried Hambleton ashore, gave him first aid and then called for an armored personnel carrier to evacuate them. The APC carried Hambleton, Norris, Kiet and the other two Vietnamese SEALs back to Dong Ha.

Petty Officer Kiet received his Navy Cross on April 6, 1976, at the Sand Point Naval Air Station in Seattle, Wash., with Tom Norris in attendance. For his part in the rescue of Lieutenant Clark and Lt. Col. Hambleton, Lieutenant Norris was given the nation's highest award—the Medal of Honor. Kiet's Navy Cross nonetheless represents the highest award for which he was eligible, since United States law does not authorize the Medal of Honor to persons not in the U.S. military. The only other South Vietnamese serviceman awarded the Navy Cross was Tran Van Bay, who received it posthumously in 1967 for covering an enemy grenade with his body and saving the lives of several U.S. Marines.

Besides the U.S. Navy Cross, during his South Vietnamese navy career Kiet also earned three Vietnamese Bronze Stars for heroism and two Vietnamese wound medals. Shortly after the rescue operation, Kiet completed U.S. Navy underwater demolition team (UDT) and SEAL advanced training in the Philippines. He was later involved in combat operations from the DMZ to Ca Mau at the southern tip of Vietnam, and was badly wounded during an NVA attack on the Rach Gia naval base. After recovery from his last wounds, he was reassigned as a training NCO at the Cat Lai Vietnamese navy SEAL training base near Saigon. As NVA forces neared Saigon in 1975, and Cat Lai came under intense enemy rocket attack, the base was ordered evacuated and most naval personnel there escaped by ship down the Saigon River.



COURTESY OF NGUYEN VAN KIET

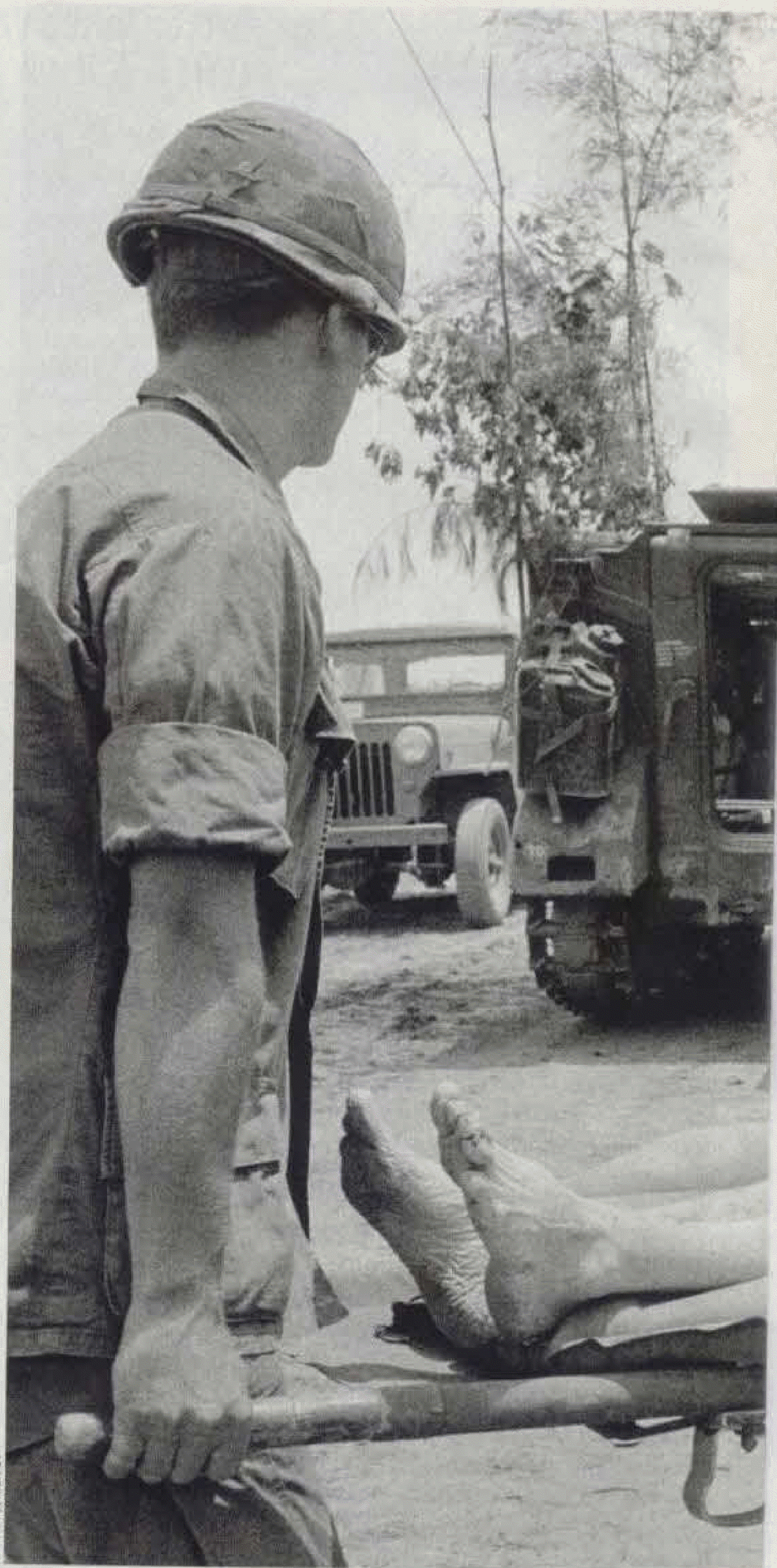
Nguyen Van Kiet and his wife, Thuy, at a Veterans Day event in Auburn, Wash., in 2006.

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Kiet went first to Guam, then Camp Pendleton. He was sponsored by a retired teacher in the small community of Forks, Wash., where he lived for 11 years while working in a lumber mill. He became an American citizen in 1984 and moved to Seattle, where he worked for the Boeing Corporation for almost 20 years before retiring in 2005.

ACTIVE IN THE AMERICAN special operations community, Kiet is a lifetime member of the UDT/SEAL Association, the 75th Ranger Regiment Association, the Special Forces Association, the Special Operations Association, the Legion of Valor and the Republic of Vietnam Special Forces Association. In 2001 the Special Forces Association named him Member of the Year, and in 2002 the Military Order of the World Wars presented him with its Silver Patrick Henry Medallion for patriotic achievement.

Lieutenant Norris stayed on in Vietnam, working with SOG and South Vietnamese naval commandos, and took part in many dangerous reconnaissance missions along the coast. In October 1972, only six months after the rescue of Bat 21 Bravo, he was badly wounded in one such operation and rescued under intense enemy fire by another SEAL. For saving Norris, Engineman First Class Michael Thornton received the last Medal of Honor earned in the Vietnam War. Norris spent three years recovering from his griev-



AP PHOTO: NICK UT

Norris looks on (Kiet is out of camera range) in Dong Ha as an exhausted and injured Lt. Col. Hambleton (Bat 21 Bravo) is carried on a stretcher to a waiting medevac helicopter, his 13-day rescue ordeal finally over.

ous wounds and was medically retired from the Navy. In April 1976, Norris was presented the Medal of Honor by President Gerald R. Ford for his part in rescuing Hambleton and Clark. In 1979 he joined the FBI, where he had a distinguished career dealing with terrorism and counterterrorism issues. Tom Norris is now retired and lives in northern Idaho.



Lieutenant Colonel Iccal Hambleton retired from the Air Force a year after his rescue and lived in Arizona, where he continued to be an avid golfer. He died in September 2004.

Almost 35 years after the momentous events of April 1972, reflecting on his comrade-in-arms, Tom Norris described Nguyen Van Kiet as "a solid operator, somebody you could count on." He explained: "I lost confidence in the other two men on the team, but not Kiet. He volunteered to go with me. We would not have been successful without him." True to Kiet's Navy Cross citation, "His self-discipline, personal courage, and dynamic fighting spirit

were an inspiration to all; thereby reflecting great credit upon himself and the Naval Service." ☆

John Haseman (U.S. Army, ret.) served two assignments in Vietnam and is a frequent contributor to Vietnam Magazine. Colonel Haseman wishes to thank author Darrel D. Whitcomb (Colonel, U.S. Air Force, ret.) and the staff of the Texas Tech University Vietnam Center for assistance in researching this story. For additional reading, see Darrel D. Whitcomb's The Rescue of Bat 21, and Bat-21 by William C. Anderson.