



Shadow Commander: The Epic Story of Donald D. Blackburn-Guerrilla Leader and Special Forces Hero

Mike Guardia

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The fires on Bataan burned on the evening of April 9, 1942—illuminating the white flags of surrender against the nighttime sky. Woefully outnumbered, outgunned, and ill-equipped, battered remnants of the American-Philippine army surrendered to the forces of the Rising Sun. Yet amongst the chaos and devastation of the American defeat, US Army Captain Donald D. Blackburn refused to lay down his arms.

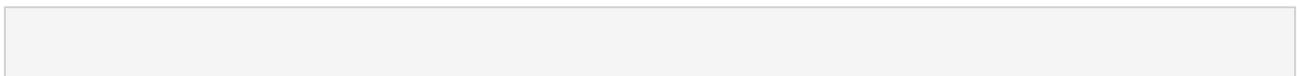
With future Army Special Forces legend Russell Volckmann, Blackburn escaped from Bataan and fled to the mountainous jungles of North Luzon, where they raised a private army of more than 22,000 men against the Japanese. Once there, Blackburn organized a guerrilla regiment from among the native tribes in the Cagayan Valley. “Blackburn’s Headhunters,” as they came to be known, devastated the Japanese 14th Army within the western provinces of North Luzon and destroyed the Japanese naval base at Aparri—the largest enemy anchorage in the Philippines.

After the war, Blackburn remained on active duty and played a key role in initiating Army Special Forces operations in Southeast Asia. In 1958, as commander of the 77th Special Forces Group, he spearheaded Operation White Star in Laos—the first major deployment of Army Special Forces to a country with an active insurgency. Seven years later, Blackburn took command of the highly classified Studies and Observations Group (SOG), charged with performing secret missions now that main-force Communist incursions were on the rise.

In the wake of the CIA’s disastrous Leaping Lena program, in 1964 Blackburn revitalized the Special Operations campaign in South Vietnam. Sending cross-border reconnaissance teams into Cambodia and North Vietnam, he discovered the clandestine networks and supply nodes of the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail. Taking this information directly to General Westmoreland, Blackburn received authorization to conduct full-scale operations against the NVA and Viet Cong operating in Laos and Cambodia. In combats large and small, the Communists realized they had met a master of insurgent tactics—and he was on the US side.

Following his return to the United States, Blackburn was appointed “Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities,” where he was the architect of the infamous Son Tay Prison Raid. Officially termed Operation Ivory Coast, the Son Tay raid was the largest prisoner-of-war rescue mission—and indeed, the largest Army Special Forces operation—of the Vietnam War.

During a period when United States troops in Southeast Asia faced guerrilla armies on every side, it has been little recognized today that America had a superb covert commander of its own, his guerrilla skills honed in resistance against Japan. This book follows Donald D. Blackburn through both his youthful days of desperate combat against an Empire, and through his days as a commander, imparting his lessons to the newly realized ranks of America’s own Army Special Forces.



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