

Caleb DuBose

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Colonel Lackey: An Odyssey of Service

“I grew up a dreamer,” says Colonel Tony Lackey, describing his attitude as a young man of Statesville, North Carolina. He was then unaware that his future would include involvement in military ventures such as the Phoenix Project, a controversial program which gathered intelligence for the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces during the Vietnam War. These dreams he alludes to began to take shape during Lackey’s earliest years, which were spent admiring his father’s jump boots and becoming fascinated with other aspects of military life. Col. Lackey recalls that he was an average student during his grade school and high school years. After gaining acceptance to The Citadel, he left home and entered Lesesne Gateway for the first time “with the idea of going into the Army— nothing else.”

Col. Lackey speaks fondly of the years he spent at The Citadel, but he does not deny that they tested and challenged him in a big way. He describes his four years as a cadet as “the

crucible” that helped him turn his steady work ethic into a career in the United States Army. However, Lackey’s career almost went in a different direction. Fortunately, his mother showed him a little bit of tough love. During Lackey’s sophomore year, he contemplated leaving The Citadel to go to Parris Island and join the Marine Corps, to which his mother replied, “Don’t come home until you’ve straightened yourself out and you kinda know who you are and where you’re going.” This apparently had a sobering effect on Lackey, because shortly after that conversation, he decided he would finish school and pursue a career in the Army as planned. After a great experience at ROTC summer camp, Lackey took on some more demanding leadership roles within the Corps of Cadets and held them until his graduation in June of 1961.

At the onset of Lackey’s career in the field of Military Intelligence, the United States became involved in the Cuban Missile Crisis. As a young Lieutenant, Lackey was involved in imagery and aerial surveillance, which required him to do wet-readings on essential information regarding enemy positions, annotate and interpret surveillance images, brief the command group, and aid in the preparations for parachute assaults.

Lackey received an excellent efficiency report after his involvement in these operations and was encouraged to explore his options. After taking a language aptitude test at the Pentagon, Lackey was sent to Monterey to be immersed in Vietnamese for the entire year that is most known for the assassination of President Kennedy. This would mark the beginning of his involvement with the Vietnam War, which, for him, began as a Liaison Officer in the planning cell for Special Forces camps in Vietnam. After spending a week or two in an Okinawa hospital being treated for some form of blood disease, Lackey was told he would be returning to Vietnam for a second tour. During this tour, Lackey was promoted to Captain and was the Assistant S2 in charge of imagery and surveillance for the sea detachment in three Corps Special Forces. His

responsibility was to provide imagery and reconnaissance assets, as well as aerial surveillance assets.

The first major battle, and arguably the biggest, took place during this tour. For the first time, the main force Viet Cong attempted to create a division-size force, which consisted of three regiments that had all come together in an attempt to take a critical town. Lackey flew over this fight, and he deemed it “the damndest flight you’d ever see.” He was able to see the Viet Cong being engulfed in napalm. This battle produced two Medal of Honor recipients, Marvin Shields and Charles Q. Williams, who “took a 3.5 rocket launcher with and four or five rounds, slipped through the Viet Cong, through the attacking force, in between the berms, around houses, and knocked out a .50 caliber machine gun.” Col. Lackey’s aerial photographs were used to support their recommendations. He calls this a small contribution, but it is one he is proud of. This was also the first instance in which Lackey participated in an attack in which people were killed and was directly involved in the decisions that lead to those deaths.

After that tour, Lackey taught Combat Intelligence for a year before being picked up by Delta Force, the in-country national surveillance and reconnaissance organization created to support the South Vietnamese forces. Lackey aided Delta Force in obtaining strategic intelligence in the border areas of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and in the war zones throughout Vietnam. Lackey says, “You had to have a force that you could rely upon... that put American eyes on the target. That’s why Delta was created.” Lackey was the first Intelligence officer to ever work in Delta.

Lackey asserts that he “wasn’t out fighting VC with my knife in my teeth or anything like that,” but during his service as the senior intelligence officer for the 5th Special Forces group,

Lackey became involved with the Phoenix Project, which led into some of the crucial decisions made in the war. The Phoenix Project was a set of plans and programs that sought to attack and destroy the Viet Cong's political infrastructure in South Vietnam. This project was, and still is, looked on with a degree of scrutiny because it was classified and shrouded in mystery. Lackey's role in this project was to collaborate with his staff and write the plan for the Special Forces group that would influence the final decisions made in the Vietnam War. Lackey's final actions of this tour contributed to the dismantling of a group that Lackey refers to as the VC's version of SEALs, a group called "sappers" that had been conducting underwater missions and placing explosives on ships in some of Vietnam's biggest ports.

Col. Lackey returned to Vietnam in '71 as an Infantry Officer, the position he says he wanted all along, and participated in the Easter Offensive. He states that this was probably the most exciting time of his career and admits that he almost got out of the Army after that. But Lackey remained in the Army and returned to The Citadel to serve as a TAC Officer and earn his Master's Degree. Following this interim period, Col. Lackey commanded the 66th MI brigade, "which was the echelons above Corps Brigade in Europe 1984 to 1986," during the years in which Gorbachev became the head of the Soviet Union. Lackey and his team observed nuclear sites on the other side of the Iron Curtain, watching for indications of war.



Lackey then became involved in counter-terrorism operations formed to combat the rise of terrorism that began in the '70's. During the Iranian Hostage Crisis, he took charge of Special

Ops Hybrid Unit of Special Forces and Intelligence soldiers. With this unit, Col. Lackey was involved in conflicts in El Salvador, the Panama Invasion, and Desert One. The end of Desert One marked Lackey's 30th year of military service, and this was the year he decided to retire from the Army. Soon after his retirement, a Colonel recommended Lackey for induction into the Military Intelligence Hall of Fame. He became the 233rd member of this distinguished group, but he remains humble, stating that "there are a lot of people that deserve to be in the MI Hall of Fame besides me." Lackey returned to the classroom, teaching at Burke High School for one year and then teaching Political Science at The Citadel for a number of years after that. After an extensive career that is worthy of respect and admiration, Col. Lackey now resides in Charleston, with his wife, Kay, where he now has time to work on his golf game and pause in humble reflection.