

Billy Waugh, 93, 'Godfather of the Green Berets,' Is Dead

He was a Special Forces soldier during the Vietnam War then worked for the C.I.A., tracking Osama bin Laden in Sudan and fighting in Afghanistan after 9/11.



Billy Waugh in Vietnam in 1970. "He was just one of those guys who wanted to be on the edge of the empire," a former supervisor said. Credit...via Jason Hardy

By [Richard Sandomir](#)

April 14, 2023

Billy Waugh, a near-legendary covert operative who honed his skills in unconventional warfare during the Vietnam War, helped the C.I.A. hunt down the terrorists Carlos the Jackal and Osama bin Laden, and, in his 70s, fought in Afghanistan, died on April 4. He was 93.

His death was confirmed in a statement on Twitter by the Army's First Special Forces Command, which lauded him as having "inspired a generation of special operations." It did not say where he died.

The service website Military.com, using the colloquial name for Special Forces made famous during the Vietnam War, called Mr. Waugh "the unparalleled godfather of the Green Berets" for his long years of service and numerous missions with them. The New York Times once described him as a "former C.I.A. paramilitary officer who seems to have cut quite a swashbuckling path through the 'back alleys,' as they say, of half the world."

"He was just one of those guys who wanted to be on the edge of the empire, as far as he could get, living large and defending his country," Cofer Black, a former C.I.A. counterterrorism chief, who supervised Mr. Waugh, said in a phone interview.

Mr. Waugh, a well-known, colorful and blunt-spoken figure in the intelligence community, was a Special Forces veteran by the time he first arrived in Laos in 1961, in the early days of the Vietnam War, as part of a United States military advisory mission called White Star.

Over parts of a decade in Southeast Asia, he helped train counterinsurgency forces in South Vietnam and Laos. He participated in parachute drops to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which required jumping from aircraft at altitudes of 20,000 feet or more, he said, free-falling in the nighttime to the lowest possible height before popping the chute, to avoid enemy detection.

And he served with the innocuously named Studies and Observations Group of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, a clandestine unit that ran reconnaissance and rescue missions in South and North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

"There was no rest at SOG, only war recon, rescue, sleep," Mr. Waugh told Annie Jacobsen in her 2019 book, "Surprise, Kill, Vanish: The Secret History of C.I.A. Paramilitary Armies, Operators and Assassins."

In June 1965, Mr. Waugh, then a master sergeant, was nearly killed when his team was overwhelmed by North Vietnamese forces in Binh Dinh Province, along the South Vietnam coast. He was shot in the knee, foot, ankle and forehead in a rice paddy. Thinking he was dead, North Vietnamese forces stripped him naked.

“I drifted in and out of consciousness, my body perforated with gunshot wounds, leeches feasting on every open wound with one thought jabbing at my semi-lucid brain,” he wrote in his 2005 autobiography, “Hunting the Jackal.” “Damn, my military career is finished. I’ll never see combat again.”

He was saved by two soldiers, one of them his commander, Capt. Paris Davis. Despite his own gunshot wounds, to an arm and a leg, Captain Davis helped Mr. Waugh crawl to a helicopter.

Those actions by Captain Davis earned him the Medal of Honor, which was belatedly presented to him by President Biden in 2021. Mr. Waugh received the Silver Star.



Mr. Waugh at home in Niceville, Fla., in 2005. After the 9/11 attacks, at age 71, he pleaded to be sent to Afghanistan. He was.

In a summary of the battle that he wrote in 2016, Mr. Waugh recalled Captain Davis’s heroism, saying, “I only have to close my eyes to vividly recall the gallantry.”

William Dawson Waugh was born on Dec. 1, 1929, in Bastrop, Texas, a small city southeast of Austin, to John and Lillian Waugh. His father was a railroad brakeman who died when Billy was about 10; his mother was a substitute teacher.

Meeting two local soldiers who had been wounded in World War II inspired Billy, at 15, to hitchhike to Los Angeles to enlist in the Marines; he had heard that he could join

them at that age. But he got only as far as Las Cruces, N.M., where, penniless and without identification, he was arrested. He called his mother, who wired him bus fare home.

“When I got there,” he wrote in “Hunting the Jackal,” “my mother gave me a lengthy lecture and a firm belt whipping. Also, a clear set of orders: Get back in school, or else.”

He enlisted in the Army in 1948 but did not taste combat until he joined the fighting in the Korean War three years later. He rose from private first class to infantry platoon sergeant. “I learned what made men tick, and what combat was all about,” he wrote. “For the first time in my military life, I felt completely at home.”

After his Korean service, he was transferred to Germany, stationed in the Bavarian town of Bad Tolz, where he lobbied successfully to join the elite Special Forces.

He retired from the Army in 1972, with the rank of sergeant major, and worked for two years for the United States Postal Service, sorting mail, which bored him.

Then a call came in 1977 to return to action in a murky assignment — training Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi’s Libyan commandos in infantry tactics — and he jumped at the chance. It wasn’t a C.I.A. job, but one organized by a former agency officer, Edwin Wilson, who would later serve nearly 22 years in prison for selling explosives to Libya before his sentence was overturned.

After the Libyan mission, Mr. Waugh became an independent contractor for the C.I.A. In Sudan in 1991 and ’92, he watched and photographed bin Laden, who, long before he masterminded the 9/11 attacks, was already on the agency’s radar as the founder of Al Qaeda. Mr. Waugh sometimes jogged past bin Laden’s compound.

“At the time,” he wrote, “bin Laden was not considered an especially high-level assignment, and Khartoum was so completely saturated with miscreants and no-good bastards that my hunting wasn’t limited to this one tall Saudi exile.”

Still, as he told the MacDill Air Force Base website in 2011, he came within 30 meters of bin Laden. “I could have killed him with a rock,” he said.

He also tracked down and monitored Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, better known as Carlos the Jackal, taking photographs of him at his apartment in Sudan before French intelligence agents captured him in 1994.

Mr. Waugh boasted that he could have killed Carlos as well. Mr. Black, who was the C.I.A. station chief in Khartoum, didn’t think he was serious.

“Billy was larger than life,” Mr. Black said in the phone interview. “I remember him stating that. ‘Yes, fine, Billy, that’s not your job.’ Sometimes he went off the reservation. He could be a force multiplier, but he could also be a force pain in the ass.”

After 9/11, Mr. Waugh, who was then 71, lobbied to be sent to Afghanistan.

“Billy got a folding chair and set it up opposite the entrance to my office and told my office manager, ‘I’m going to sit here until Cofer talks to me,’” said Mr. Black, who was director of the C.I.A.’s Counterterrorist Center at the time.

Eventually, they talked. Mr. Waugh was still quite fit, and the next day, Mr. Black agreed to send him to Afghanistan, reasoning that his experience in unconventional warfare might help a young commander there.

During two months on Team Romeo, a combined Special Forces and C.I.A. unit whose mission was to root out Taliban soldiers and Al Qaeda terrorists, Mr. Waugh acted as a liaison between the soldiers and the C.I.A. operatives, advised Afghan troops and patrolled defenses.

“I was cold, filthy and stinky,” he wrote about his final days with the team, “but I was one of roughly 150 men who can say they conducted combat on the ground in Afghanistan during the initial — and pivotal — phase of Operation Enduring Freedom.”

He had a wife, Lynn Waugh, who could not be reached. Information on his survivors was not immediately available.

If some of Mr. Waugh’s stories sounded too wild to be true, Ms. Jacobsen and Tim Keown, who collaborated with Mr. Waugh on “Hunting the Jackal,” said that after-action reports and interviews with military personnel familiar with his service had helped them corroborate his accounts.

“For someone whose life was lived in the shadows,” Mr. Keown said in a phone interview, “he was very good about documentation.”