

40 S.O.F. MAGAZINE

By Barrett Tillman

One morning in 1984 Jeff Cooper called, suggesting that I talk to Bob Brown of *Soldier of Fortune* about the Bren Ten pistol that Jeff was promoting. Since I had contributed to SOF and participated in its matches, I ventured that I'd like to hear more.

Next thing I knew, that Yosemite Sam voice was in my ear. "Tillman? Brown. I guess you heard from Cooper. Are you interested?"

The details were, um, intriguing. I would go to El Salvador with an SOF team to initiate the Bren Ten to combat, then return (!) to write an article about it. As Bob later admitted, "Cooper and I had three criteria: we needed a good enough shooter, we needed a good enough writer – and we needed somebody dumb enough to do it. So we said, LET'S CALL TILLMAN!"

Much as I appreciated Jeff and Bob's confidence (I was less certain of their rationale!), it never happened. The Bren was plagued with 10mm ammo and magazine problems that were only solved after the El Sal option lapsed.

Nonetheless, that nascent episode represented *Soldier of Fortune* in microcosm: a hands-on approach to innovative, front-line journalism.

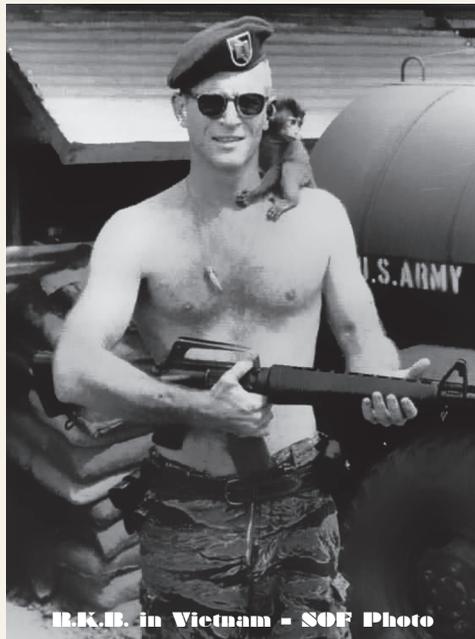
SOF popped its first literary cap in July 1975 with a format that set the trend for the next three decades. Robert K. Brown is a former Special Forces captain and Vietnam vet with a master's in political science and jump wings from half a dozen nations. He's also a natural entrepreneur who saw a niche and moved to fill the void.

The magazine began on little more than a shoestring and a hunch. Living in Boulder, Colorado, Brown perceived an unfilled market and presold 4,000 subscriptions that paid for the printing of the first issue. Billed as "The Journal of Professional Adventurers," SOF caught on almost immediately.

SOF recruited a network of freelance correspondents who provided on-the-ground coverage of conflicts from Rhodesia to El Salvador to Afghanistan to Burma and many intermediate stops. Consequently, military intelligence operatives began subscribing (or taking home copies in plain brown wrappers) because Bob's boys in the bush covered events that the mainstream media overlooked.

Bob Brown believes in participatory journalism – the kind that Geraldo can only dream about. SOF provided the U.S. Government with its first AK-74, obtained in Afghanistan, and fetched home with 5,000 rounds of 5.45 x 39mm ammo to boot.

A few SOFers like to portray themselves as knuckle-dragging mercs, but that's for show. Some are deceptively accomplished individuals: one owns a law degree from Harvard; another used more C4 explosive than anyone outside the U.S. government.



R.K.B. in Vietnam - SOF Photo

"Slay dragons, do no never, never, give u

The byword is professionalism. For instance, a 1983 report describing the work of a 12-man SOF team in El Salvador covers 47 pages. It includes weapons maintenance, zeroing M60s, sound discipline on ambush, field medicine and sanitation. But it wasn't all guns and gear. One of the salient recommendations was geopolitical: "It is suggested that the Government of El Salvador would gain more support in North America if more publicity were given to the fact that in a nation of five million people, one province has had 90,000 individuals who have fled communist areas. Aid given to these and other displaced persons by the government should also be publicized."

The ultimate authority on RKB is, of course, RKB himself. He never expressed it better than in a 1986 editorial: "For the last decade, I've been humping a rifle and a camera around the world's combat zones. I've hunted terrorists with the Rhodesian African Rifles and fired up a Russian fort in Afghanistan with the mujahideen. I've searched for POWs in Southeast Asia and survived a Sandinista rocket barrage alongside Nicaraguan Contras. Between firefights, takeovers and insurgencies, I manage to put out a magazine.

He added, "We are not content to just tell the story. To the best of our ability, we also help equip, aid and train the world's anti-communist freedom fighters. We make no apologies about