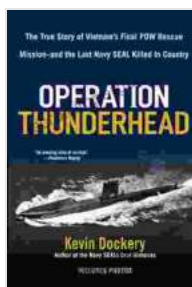


# The Harrowing True Story of Vietnam's Final POW Rescue Mission and the Last Navy SEAL Killed in Action

In the annals of military history, Operation Ivory Coast stands as a testament to the indomitable spirit of those who serve their country in the face of unimaginable danger. This daring rescue mission, carried out by a small team of U.S. Navy SEALs, had a profound impact on the course of the Vietnam War and the lives of countless individuals.

## The Prisoners of War

As the Vietnam War raged on, thousands of American soldiers found themselves held captive by the enemy. Conditions in the POW camps were often horrific, with prisoners subjected to torture, starvation, and disease. By 1970, over 600 American POWs languished in enemy hands, their fate unknown.



## Operation Thunderhead: The True Story of Vietnam's Final POW Rescue Mission--and the last Navy Seal Killed in Country by Kevin Dockery

★★★★☆ 4.4 out of 5

Language : English  
File size : 771 KB  
Text-to-Speech : Enabled  
Screen Reader : Supported  
Enhanced typesetting : Enabled  
Word Wise : Enabled  
Print length : 324 pages



Among these prisoners was Lieutenant Colonel William "Bill" Nolde, a highly decorated fighter pilot who had been shot down over North Vietnam in 1965. For five long years, Nolde endured unimaginable hardships, including solitary confinement and brutal interrogations. Despite the torture, he refused to break, becoming a symbol of resilience and hope for his fellow POWs.

## **Operation Ivory Coast**

In September 1970, intelligence reports reached the U.S. government indicating that Nolde and other American POWs were being held at a heavily guarded prison camp in Son Tay, North Vietnam. Determined to bring the POWs home, the U.S. military quickly assembled a team of Navy SEALs to carry out a daring rescue mission.

The SEALs, led by Lieutenant Commander James Stockdale, were handpicked for their exceptional skills and unwavering commitment to the mission. For months, they trained tirelessly, meticulously planning every detail of the rescue operation.

## **The Raid**

On the night of November 20, 1970, eight HH-3E Jolly Green Giant helicopters, carrying the SEAL team and a support crew, took off from Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base in Thailand. Their mission was to infiltrate the Son Tay prison camp, neutralize enemy forces, and rescue the POWs.

The raid began at 02:30 local time when the helicopters approached the prison camp. Amidst heavy enemy fire, the SEALs leaped from the aircraft and stormed the camp. Within minutes, they had secured the perimeter and begun searching for the POWs.

## **The Tragedy**

Tragically, the SEALs discovered that the POWs had been moved to another location just days before the raid. Despite conducting a thorough search, they were unable to locate the prisoners.

As the SEALs prepared to withdraw, they came under heavy enemy attack. During the ensuing firefight, Lieutenant Commander James Stockdale was captured by the North Vietnamese. Despite being held as a POW for another seven years, Stockdale maintained an indomitable spirit and later became a Medal of Honor recipient.

In the chaos of the withdrawal, one SEAL, Petty Officer First Class Michael Thornton, became separated from his unit. Although he fought valiantly, Thornton was killed in action, becoming the last Navy SEAL to die in the Vietnam War.

## **Aftermath**

Despite the tragic loss of Petty Officer Thornton, Operation Ivory Coast was hailed as a success. The raid demonstrated the courage and professionalism of the Navy SEALs and raised morale among both the POWs and the American people.

The failed rescue attempt also put pressure on the North Vietnamese government to release the remaining American POWs. In 1973, as part of

the Paris Peace Accords, all American prisoners of war were finally returned home.

## **Legacy**

The story of Operation Ivory Coast and the sacrifice of Petty Officer Michael Thornton serves as a powerful reminder of the indomitable spirit of those who serve our country. Their bravery, resilience, and unwavering commitment to their mission continue to inspire generations of Americans.

In 2016, the U.S. Navy commissioned a guided-missile destroyer, the USS Michael Monsoor (DDG-1000), in honor of Petty Officer Thornton. The ship serves as a floating tribute to his heroism and the legacy of Operation Ivory Coast.

The story of Operation Ivory Coast and the last Navy SEAL killed in Vietnam is a gripping tale of courage, sacrifice, and the indomitable spirit of those who serve our country. It is a story that deserves to be told and retold for generations to come.



## Further Reading

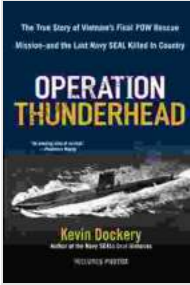
- The Last Man Out: The True Story of Operation Ivory Coast, the Rescue of 5 POWs, and the Death of One American Soldier Our Book Library
- Operation Ivory Coast: The Untold Story of America's Daring Mission to Rescue POWs from Vietnam Our Book Library
- The Last Navy SEAL: The Life and Legacy of Michael Thornton Our Book Library

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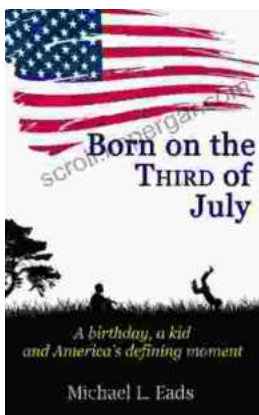


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