

The Green Berets Play War in Detroit

Wilmot

1966

Sept. 11th the Green Berets came to town.

They got together for a little show at the foot of Woodward, about two dozen of them in the bright sunshine. Maybe 150 Detroiters turned out to see the military elite, vaunted in press and song.

The first thing that struck the viewer was their youth. They looked for the most part barely two and three years out of their teens. Young faces for the most part, smooth, unwrinkled and without real worries.

They had their working tools all laid out on green blankets: ropes, medical kits, survival rations, scuba and ski outfits and, oh yes: guns, guns, guns.

There was a brief ritual with a Cub Scout—he got a beret and three stripes as a representative of the United Foundation. A young sergeant with a battery operated bull horn did some explaining about the outfit, or rather he tried—in truth he was quite inexperienced. Bothered by the wind at his back that kept whistling into the horn and shrieking, he said again and again that the GBs were elite.

Four or five young civilians came through the crowd, passing out a mimeographed sheet. The broadside carried quotes from a M/Sgt. of the GBs who told of the horrors and wrongness of the war in South Vietnam. Several of the VFW types in the crowd gave some negative growls and sneers. One said, “Why don’t you enlist?”, apparently recommending his fountain of wisdom to all comers. The protest really didn’t cause much of a stir.

Then the show began. Twelve of the GBs laid their weapons down—in a row and very precisely. At a command they turned and double—timed off the Veteran’s Memorial Building just west of the grassy spot. They disappeared, later to reappear at the top of the building.

More talk from the sergeant on the horn—they were almost all sergeants, just a few corporals. With great show he lit a flare when they appeared at the top of the building where two ropes were hung waiting for them. There really didn’t seem much reason to light the flare—he must have thought so too, because he shouted at them with the horn—to no avail though, they certainly couldn’t hear.

When they began to reappear down the side of the building, the guy on the horn tried to give a running commentary on each of them. “Here’s Captain so-and-so, he’s our leader. He’s also our father confessor. He lends us money too.” A few in the crowd smiled at his try for a joke. He must have been disappointed because he tried the joke again—it didn’t work any better the second time.

For three of the men, while they were coming down, he amended “He’s really terrific on this,” and each time, as though by divine intervention, the man would slip on the rope or turn, obviously fumbling the rappel. One looked like he might break something when he swung back to the wall and failed to catch himself with his feet.

Not really much drama there. They double—timed back to the line to scattered applause.

Then the teams switched, the “B” team replacing the “A” team. Their relative functions weren’t explained.

Next an exhibition of Karate. The traditional breaking of the cinderblocks came off well -the crowd liked it. Another sergeant on the horn tried to explain the martial arts and failed also.

Then the best karateka tried to make the old show with six men standing around him holding foot square boards for him to break. He -broke the first three OK, using his fists and elbow then muffed one. (No sneer here

-it is difficult.) He moved to the next and with a lovely kick missed the board. A second kick looked to hit the fellow holding the board on the arm, but he held in there forthrightly.

Finally, all the boards broken, they gave a short demonstration of unarmed mayhem. Their striking form was for the most part quite good, their throwing techniques were weak.

Words of apology: They were to have had two GBs jump from a plane in scuba outfits, submerge and set off demolition charges. They didn't come—their pilot couldn't make it, alas.

Then with thanks to the scattered crowd, they gathered about the weapons laden blankets to "explain."

These GBs, if they are representative, just weren't the seven foot men in the comic strips—to be honest, their average height looked about five feet six inches—a disappointment to Americans who always want supermen. They just didn't look like blood thirsty killers. A couple could have passed for college sophomores if they tried hard, a few had that adolescent curse, pimples!

A Saturday afternoon in the Detroit sun.



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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/15-october-1-15-1966/the-green-berets-play-war-in-detroit>
Fifth Estate #15, October 1-15, 1966

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