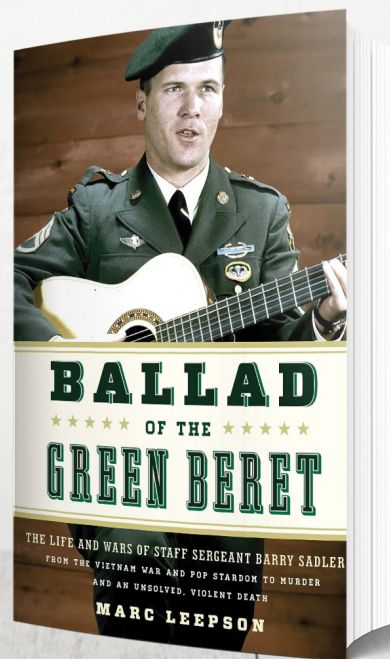


Ballad of the Green Beret

The Life and Wars of Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler from the Vietnam War and Pop Stardom to Murder and an Unsolved, Violent Death



Marc Leepson, Stackpole Books, Lanham, Maryland, 2023 (paperback edition), 296 pages

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*Fighting soldiers from the sky
Fearless men who jump and die
Men who mean just what they say
The brave men of the Green Beret*

—"Ballad of the Green Berets"

I would submit the preponderance of *Military Review* readers are quite familiar with this verse from a song recorded in 1966, "The Ballad of the Green Berets," principally written and recorded by Army Staff Sgt. Barry Sadler. The song was a fixture on radio stations, holding the number one position on the Billboard Hot 100 Chart for five straight weeks (5 March–2 April 1966) and selected as the top song of 1966.¹

For Sadler, it brought him huge fame and an accompanying amount of fortune. The song completely changed his life. Unfortunately, he could not adapt to most of these changes. His life, which had focused on being a soldier, ended as he knew it and a new life as a celebrity and a public relations conduit began. It was a

life that years later would ultimately result in a tragic end for Sadler. It is the classic rise-and-fall tale, which author Marc Leepson superbly details in his biography of Sadler titled *Ballad of the Green Beret: The Life and Wars of Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler from the Vietnam War and Pop Stardom to Murder and an Unsolved, Violent Death*.

Leepson is well-equipped to craft this volume and capture the life and wars of Sadler. First, he is a U.S. Army veteran who served in Vietnam from 1967 to 1968. Second, Leepson is a noted military historian who has not only written nine books but has also published works in many magazines and newspapers and has appeared as a contributor on numerous national television networks. Finally, his book resume includes highly acclaimed biographies of Francis Scott Key and Marquis de Lafayette. In total, he possesses the knowledge and interest in the subject, the research skills, and the ability to package his research into a highly readable volume to meet this challenge.

Within the *Ballad of the Green Beret*, Leepson strives to provide readers with a comprehensive look at

Sadler's life. It is a life that can be categorized into three distinct phases: life before the song, life during the popularity of the song, and the years following the wane of its popularity. I would like to address the key periods in this life in this review. I believe this will undoubtedly spark interest in the volume.

Sadler's childhood did not afford him a particularly bright future; his parents divorced when he was five and his dad died shortly after that. Sadler's early years were far from stable. At seventeen, Sadler dropped out of high school and joined the Air Force. He served for four years, and his service gained him some valuable maturity and the opportunity to earn his high school diploma. Sadler's time out of the military did not last long. Soon after separating from the Air Force, he volunteered to serve in the Army.

When Sadler met the Army recruiter, he was told he could opt out of basic training since he previously completed Air Force Basic Training. However, Sadler decided to go through Army Basic, graduating in late 1962 and then completing Airborne School in January 1963. It was during airborne training that he and a few of his friends decided they wanted to be Special Forces (SF) medics. As Leepson highlights, Sadler did not volunteer for SF because of the mystique or wanting to be part of an elite unit. Instead, he was told he would get an afternoon off from jump school if he took the SF exam.²

Sadler passed the exam and in February 1963 began SF medic training. It was during training that Sadler began crafting what would become "The Ballad of the Green Berets." Sadler passed SF training and was assigned to Fort Bragg until December 1964 when he deployed to Vietnam. All the while, he continued to work on the song.

In May 1965, Sadler stepped on a fecal-covered punji stick while on patrol. He suffered a severe leg wound resulting in a bad infection. The infection effectively ended his tour, and he deployed back to Fort Bragg to recover. The recovery period meant far more time for Sadler to dedicate to the "Ballad."

During his recovery, two events occurred that were key in turning Sadler's "work in progress" into a record. First, leadership in the SF community became enamored in what they had heard of Sadler's song. They felt it would be a boon in their recruiting efforts and thus, were instrumental in Sadler getting a record deal.

Second, Sadler was introduced to Robin Moore (author of *The Green Berets*), who would be influential in adding to the song's lyrics and promoting the ballad.

In early 1966, the song was released, and the timing was impeccable. As Leepson states, "That song all but perfectly fit in the early 1966 American zeitgeist. It captured the national imagination when the Vietnam War was widely seen as a necessary step in the American-led fight against a world-wide communist insurgency."³ Soon, the song found heavy rotation on radio stations of all formats. "Ballad" was played alongside songs from the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Simon and Garfunkel. It would become the number one song in the country.

The success of the song publicly and its huge support in the SF community ensured that Sadler would not see the "field" again. Instead, Sadler's deployments consisted of taking part in extended nationwide tours to market his song and Special Forces. It was not the Army life Sadler envisioned, and in May 1967, he decided to leave the Army and received his honorable discharge. This was also the time when the public popularity of the song began to significantly wane. The disenchantment with the U.S. involvement in Vietnam was certainly a factor in its decline. Sadler had now clearly moved onto a new phase of his life.

For the next ten years, Sadler pursued numerous ventures and sought careers in various fields, none of which proved to be successful. It began with his desire to begin a full-time music career, but there were no more hits in Sadler's kitbag. The following years brought opening a bar, pursuing a movie and television career, attempting to open a chain of battery stores, and trying once more to resurrect a singing career. By this time, Sadler's song royalties were long gone, and life was not going in a positive direction. It was at this time when he began an unexpected career as a pulp fiction writer.⁴

In late 1977, Sadler's first book hit the market to little interest and low sales. Leepson details the start of Sadler's literary career and its progression when he states, "It's fair to say that Barry's first foray into fiction was an artistic

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and financial flop, but that did not deter him. Within eighteen months he would start churning out a chain of more than two dozen action- and violence-filled mass market paperback thrillers that would sell hundreds of thousands of copies.⁵

The chain focused on the adventures of Casca Rufio Longinus; a Roman soldier condemned to live as an “eternal mercenary” because of his role in the crucifixion of Jesus.⁶ Sadler believed his interest and knowledge of military history would afford him numerous possibilities regarding subject material (he was right). When asked about the potential of the series, he stated, “Run these books on and on and never have them end until I get sick of them. It’s a good trick I think.”⁷

As Sadler began his foray as a paperback writer, events in his personal life took center stage. In fall 1978, Sadler began having an affair with Darlene Sharpe, an aspiring country singer in Nashville. The woman had recently ended a volatile relationship with a man named Lee Bellamy. While Sadler was seeing Sharpe, Bellamy continued to harass Sharpe and Sadler as well. On 1 December 1978, it came to a head, and Sadler shot and killed Bellamy.

After many varying stories of what had occurred on that date were provided to detectives (principally on Sadler’s part), he was charged with second-degree murder on 1 June 1979. After nearly a year of discussion and negotiations, Sadler plea bargained and pleaded guilty to voluntary manslaughter. The judge sentenced Sadler to four-to-five years in prison. However, Sadler did not immediately go to jail. Instead, after more negotiations, Sadler’s sentence was suspended, and he wound up serving around a month in a county minimum security workhouse for the death of Bellamy. It is a safe assumption that Sadler’s service to the Nation and “Ballad” were integral in the plea bargaining and the sentencing.⁸

The next few years saw Sadler’s bitterness toward “Ballad” and dissatisfaction with his life in the states continue to grow. In an interview in July 1983, he stated, “I wasn’t a hero. I was a manufactured hero by the media. I’m the best-known soldier of the Vietnam War and that’s wrong. The people who were writing all those things back then couldn’t even name one Medal of Honor winner.”⁹ Finally, in the beginning of 1984, he left the United States and flew to Guatemala, which was amid a continuing civil war.

Sadler’s life in Guatemala is sketchy in many parts. What is known is that he continued to write books in his Casca series and provide significant free medical care to impoverished people living in Mayan villages. The sketchy parts regard his involvement in the Guatemalan Civil War. At times, Sadler would tell people he was significantly engaged in various actions for both sides. However, Leepson is unsure where the truth lies. He states, “Was Barry being honest or was he burnishing his image by doing what he often did—telling people what they wanted to hear.”¹⁰

For all accounts, Sadler and Guatemala were a good pair, but he began to seek a new adventure. For Sadler, that opportunity did not come to fruition. On 7 September 1988, Sadler got into a cab in Guatemala City after some significant partying. There are several versions of what happened next (robbery gone bad, assassination attempt, or the police version—Sadler accidentally shot himself). Regardless, a bullet entered his head and caused significant injury but did not kill him. Within days, he was transported back to the United States for care.

Nothing ever seemed simple in Sadler’s life, and his subsequent medical treatment was no different. Almost immediately, sides were formed on where and what care Sadler should receive. Things got ugly between family members and friends. Unfortunately, much of the time, things were settled in court. Sadler passed away in his hospital bed on 5 November 1989. At the age of forty-nine, Sadler had unquestionably lived a life that was anything but ordinary.

During the past paragraphs, I have tried to provide an extremely abbreviated version of the life of Sadler. As I’m sure you gleaned from the above, Sadler lived one of those rare “stranger than fiction” lives. In fact, many would say that in many ways it was highly reminiscent of his character, Casca. Because of this life, there is much for a biographer to work with, and Leepson works with all of it. He superbly provides the details and the rest of the story to readers, which I left out. The author achieves this through exhaustive research, writing in an extremely conversant style, developing a highly organized volume, and striving to offer an objective perspective of Sadler. Let me expand on each of these characteristics.

There are many various versions of “war stories” circulating regarding Sadler. Many of these versions were initiated by Sadler himself. Consequently, it is imperative that

any biographer of Sadler put in the investigative work to find truth amongst the fabrications and embellishments. Leepson has clearly conducted this work highlighted by the over seventy personal interviews he conducted during his research. This eclectic group includes Sadler's wife, lawyers, and police detectives involved in the shooting, book and record agents, fellow soldiers, and friends. He states, "I relied heavily on interviews with people who knew Barry Sadler, as well as those who served in the Special Forces during the Vietnam War and others who had special insights into his life and times."¹¹

In my experience, the best biographies are those written in a highly conversant style. This is clearly the case in this biography. Leepson is an outstanding storyteller and certainly Sadler's life provides countless opportunities. The combination of Leepson's writing style and the content of Sadler's life make this an incredibly quick read. It is one of those select books in which you quickly read and weeks later you read again to ensure you didn't miss anything

The organization of the volume is certainly instrumental in the book's readability. Leepson has broken the biography into twenty-one chapters. Each focus on a particular event or aspect of Sadler's life. These bite-sized chapters are easy for a reader to digest. They additionally serve as excellent breaks during which a reader can reflect on Sadler and a particular part of his life.

It would be easy for a biographer to be either extremely disparaging of Sadler or be too lavish in their praise of him and offer excuses for actions and decisions in his life. I believe Leepson has done neither and has been very objective in his portrayal of Sadler. Leepson certainly does not sugarcoat any of Sadler's unflattering traits or some of the aforementioned actions or decisions. The biography is certainly critical of Sadler in instances, but readers will not come away feeling that the biography is a personal attack on Sadler.

Within the biography, he also strives to provide readers with another side of Sadler. He summarizes this side later in the book. He states, "There was another Barry Sadler, of course—a smart, knowledge-hungry, charming, funny, and sometimes gentle husband, father, and friend. A man who overcame a rough childhood, served his country in peace and war, and gained national fame and admiration."¹²

Besides the obvious discussion and understanding of Sadler, I believe the biography also achieves three other key things. First, it provides readers some excellent nuggets on American culture and society in the 1960s. It reinforces the understanding some may have on the decade and provides a portrait that others may not have thought of. Second, it is a perfect case study on what happens when an organization places someone in a position that they are not comfortable with. Finally, and related to the above, it is yet another unfortunate example of how people handle fortune and fame in their lives and the negative repercussions it can have.

I believe the most important decision a biographer makes is what he wants to leave readers with regarding their subject. For many biographers, it is hard to surmise what that exactly is. I feel Marc Leepson has thought over this extensively and captured this in the book's final paragraph. It is an ending that blends Sadler's life with the Vietnam War and the song that he will always be tied to. He states, "His second, commercially successful act as a pulp novelist notwithstanding, Barry Sadler was a victim of his meteoric success, of his unhappy childhood, and of the times that he lived. Very likely the most famous Vietnam veteran of his time—and perhaps of all time—Barry Sadler also was one of the countless victims of that tragic conflict, which provided the fertile ground for the song that made him famous and helped contribute to the disastrous downward spiral that ended in his violent death."¹³ ■

Notes

Epigraph. Opening verse from "The Ballad of the Green Berets," written by Barry Sadler and Robin Moore in 1965.

1. History.com Editors, "Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler Hits #1 with 'Ballad of the Green Berets,'" History, last updated 9 March 2023, accessed 3 April 2023, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/staff-sergeant-barry-sadler-hits-1-with-ballad-of-the-green-berets>.

2. Marc Leepson, *Ballad of the Green Beret: The Life and Wars of Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler from the Vietnam War and Pop Stardom to Murder and an Unsolved, Violent Death* (Lanham, MD: Stackpole Books, 2023), 25.

3. *Ibid.*, 231

4. Charlie Kerlinger, "Pulp Fiction: A Definition," Ben Vaughn, 9 October 2022, accessed 3 April 2023, <https://www.benvaughn.com/pulp-fiction-a-definition>. "Pulp fiction" is a term used to



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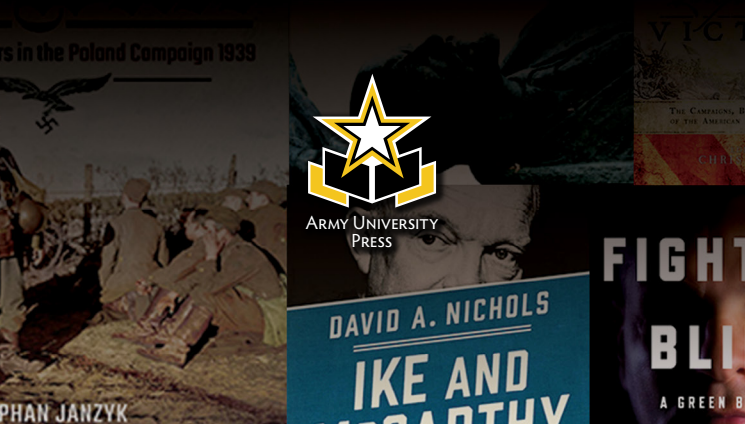
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describe a certain type of popular fiction that is characterized by its graphic and often violent content. The term was first used in the early twentieth century to describe the penny press novels that were popular at the time. These novels were often filled with stories of crime, violence, and sex, and were typically printed on low-quality paper.

5. Leepson, *Ballad of the Green Beret*, 150.
6. *Ibid.*, 154.
7. *Ibid.*, 178.
8. *Ibid.*, 182.
9. *Ibid.*, 195.
10. *Ibid.*, 198.
11. *Ibid.*, 233.
12. *Ibid.*, 231.
13. *Ibid.*, 232.





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