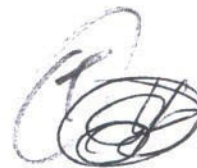


MISSION SUMMARY  
AC-47 DOWN AT A SHAU



At 1317 hours, 9 March 1966 Panama notified the Rescue Control Center at Danang AB that an AC-47 was down with seven survivors. Survivors were said to be in voice contact with an A-1 and C-1 aircraft in the crash area. The primary and secondary alert HH-43F helicopters were airborne at 1327. The initial location was given as 53 miles on the 169° radial from Danang. Approximately twenty minutes after the departure, JCI personnel changed the crash location to 53 miles on the 279° radial from Danang. We corrected course and headed 310° to return to the correct track. After several minutes on a heading of 310° it was necessary to climb IFR through cloud layers to get to VFR On Top at 9,000 feet MSL.

It was impossible to establish radar contact with the JCI due to lack of IFF, however after a short period radio contact was established with the on the scene control aircraft and an airborne DF was initiated. This airborne DF was later passed to the RESCAP aircraft as we approached the crash area. We were informed at this time that the area around the crash site was hostile and under ground fire, but as there were A-1 aircraft in the area for fire suppression we decided to continue the mission.

The weather in the crash area was overcast with a cloud layer from about 300 feet to 3,000 feet MSL. This layer had a few isolated breaks where it was just possible to see the ground. There was another overcast layer from 4,000 to 5,500 feet MSL. The upper layer also had occasional breaks.

The RESCAP A-1 aircraft climbed to the top of the upper layer through two of these breaks that were offset by a few miles. We made a rendezvous with the A-1 and started a descent with the secondary helicopter following. The primary alert helicopter was able to follow the A-1 through both layers with some intermittent IFR, however the secondary alert helicopter could not



find the break in the lower layer of clouds and became separated.

While the A-1 returned to the crash site to provide fire support against the VC, we orbited below a break in the lower overcast while the secondary helicopter made a DE' steer to our position. We then joined up below the lower layer.

The crash site was about three miles down a valley from the point where we penetrated the lower layer. A-1 and O-1 aircraft were flying in the area and the A-1's were strafing VC positions. Although jet aircraft were in the area and VFR On Top, it was not possible for them to descend as the valley was only about one mile wide where the base of the clouds intercepted the side of the mountains. This provided extremely limited maneuvering space even for the A-1 aircraft.

When we initiated our dash for the 7 survivors, the RESCAP informed us that there was heavy VC automatic weapons and small arms fire in the area. He also told us that we would have to fly over the VC positions to reach the crash site. The valley floor was a dense jungle with trees about 100 feet tall. We went toward the crash "on the deck" at 95 knots and below the level of the tallest trees, dodging them enroute. The O-1's then reported small arms fire all along our path, however, I feel the combination of low altitude, speed, surprise, and tree cover, kept us from being hit. The O-1's further reported the VC to be about 30 to 40 meters west of the crash and moving in for another attack. I knew we would have to land as we couldn't take time for hoist operations and the helicopter would be an easy target while hovering above the crash. I wanted to put the AO-47 between the helicopter and the main VC force during the pickup. We flew directly toward the location where the AO-47 was expected to be and as soon as it came in sight we executed a quick stop maneuver, which



carried us slightly beyond the crash to a small hill about 75 feet away. The secondary aircraft was just to our left and behind us. After hovering over the hill momentarily, we moved closer to the AC-47 and placed the nose wheels of the helicopter against the side of the hill and hovered with our rear wheels off the ground. This maneuver kept the AC-47 between the helicopter and the attacking VC forces for possible protection from the automatic weapons fire. At this time, 3 survivors ran from the crash and entered the rear of the helicopter. As the Helicopter Mechanic (HM) and the Rescue and Survival Technician (RS) helped the survivors into the helicopter, they made visual contact with the VC about 40 meters away. The crew did not attempt to fire on the VC as they were helping the survivors into the helicopter.

The original plan was to effect recovery of 4 survivors in the first helicopter and the remaining survivors in the second helicopter. After the first group jumped into the helicopter the HM said, "let's go," and the second helicopter moved in as we moved out. When the remaining survivors did not appear, the HM and RS of the second bird deployed to the crash to investigate while the A-1's made a fire suppression run on the advancing VC. The HM and RS reached the downed aircraft while under heavy small arms fire. They entered the AC-47 and searched it from the cockpit to the tail. During this search they were subjected to intense fire from an unknown position. The search resulted in the location of two deceased crew members. While attempting to return to the helicopter, they were again fired on and pinned down by a machine gun and small arms outside the AC-47. An A-1 made a close straffing pass which dispersed the enemy, and during the confusion the HM and RS made another run for the helicopter. One more machine gun burst tore up the ground between



them as they ran, however another A-1 pass suppressed the fire. The HM and RS returned safely to the helicopter after expending 40 M-16 rounds to cover their escape.

While the crew of the second helicopter was on the ground, the first group of survivors informed us that the remainder of the AC-47 crew were dead. We immediately alerted the secondary aircraft to depart. With two crewmen out of the second aircraft the secondary RSC picked his helicopter up to a high hover over the crash to try and alert his crew. After noting the helicopter landing again, the HM and RS returned to their aircraft as described above. Lack of communications with the crew on the ground could have been disastrous as the higher hover compromised the helicopter protection from the trees, hill, and the crashed AC-47. Bodies were not recovered because of the heavy ground fire nor was an attempt made to locate the missing crewman.

Both helicopters made an immediate departure into the clouds and climbed IFR to VFR On Top; the climb was made at a low airspeed and high rate of climb in the general direction of the valley to avoid contact with the mountains. When reaching VFR On Top, I relayed to the OGI agency the fact that there were only six crewmembers on the AC-47, three were saved, two were dead, and one missing. We also asked for a vector to Danang AB as our fuel was short and we couldn't afford to search.

The severity of the ground fire is evidenced by the fact that although all six crewmembers survived the crash, two of the crewmembers were killed by ground fire and the other three were wounded. The missing man was presumed to be dead. Two of the wounded were serious and one was critical due to a severed artery in his arm and loss of blood. Enroute, the survivors were given medical aid for shock.



One of the survivors, Sgt Turner, stated that the VC had made four attacks on the crash and had been driven off by their fire and the A-1 fire. Two of the men had been killed on the fourth attack and a third had been caught outside the crash. When they could not locate the third man orally or visually, the remaining survivors figured that he was also killed on the fourth attack wave, and told us that all three were dead when we recovered them. The survivors were told by an O-1 that the helicopters were on the way in but that the VC were also advancing with their fifth attack wave, and were then only 40 to 50 meters out. The survivors were prepared to dash to the helicopter but carried their weapons for defense enroute, as it was debatable as to the helicopter or the VC arriving first. The survivors believe we picked them up before the VC got into position as there was only sporadic small arms fire from the advancing VC during the first pickup. This can be generally confirmed by the fact that there was no automatic weapon fire until after the second aircraft was on the ground.

The excellent cover provided by the A-1's was very important to the success of this mission. It would not have been possible to conduct the mission without their fire support while we made our approach and pickup. The A-1 fire delayed the fifth VC attack long enough for our helicopters to dash in and out making the save. The higher speed jet aircraft which were on top could not operate in the confined airspace nor provide the very close support we had and badly needed. Another factor that contributed to the success was the speed of the approach and pickup and the close coordination between the primary and secondary aircraft that allowed the secondary aircraft to depart no longer

5



than four minutes after we first spotted the crash. If we had been in the area another five minutes or arrived five minutes later the VC would have prevented a successful conclusion.

**CREWS:**

<b>PRIMARY:</b>	Capt Donald J. Couture,	RCC, Oak Harbor, Ohio
	Capt Harold A. Solberg,	CP, Spokane, Washington
	SSgt David L. Lancaster,	EM, Lava Hot Springs, Idaho
	A2C Albert W. Foster III,	RS, Virginia Beach, Virginia
<b>SECONDARY:</b>	1st Lt Arthur F. Machado,	RCC, New Bedford, Mass.
	Capt John B. Kneen,	CP, Burlington, Vermont
	SSgt Curtis F. Yancy,	EM, Odessa, Texas
	SSgt David J. Wheeler,	RS, Salina, Kansas

DONALD J. COUTURE, Capt, USAF  
RCC



3. We've all read and heard vivid accounts of the battle at As Han Special Forces Camp on 9 Mar 66. For the men of Det 7, 38th ARRSq, that battle will live in their memories. Two HH-43F's and their crews wrote their names in the books of heros that day. Braving heavy gunfire they saved the lives of 3 crewmembers of the AC-47 that was shot down there. For their efforts the following men have been awarded the Silver Star.

Capt Donald J. Couture of Oak Harbor, Ohio, RCC of first helicopter

Capt Harold A. Solberg of Monroe Wash., RCCP

A2C Albert W. Foster III of Virginia Beach, Va, Pararescue

SSgt David L. Lancaster of Springfield, Ill., Crew Chief

Secondary Helicopter 1/LT AF MACHADO RCC

Capt John B. Kneen of Burlington Vt., RCCP

SSgt David J. Wheeler of Salina, Kan., Pararescue

SSgt Curtis F. Yancy of Odessa, Texas, Crew Chief

Our sincere congratulations on a job well done.



DETACHMENT 7, 38TH AEROSPACE RESCUE & RECOVERY SQUADRON  
AEROSPACE RESCUE & RECOVERY SERVICE (MAC)  
APO SAN FRANCISCO 96337

EDITOR, AIR FORCE & SPACE DIGEST  
AIR FORCE ASSOCIATION  
1750 PENNA. AVE. N. W.  
WASHINGTON, D.C., 20006

19 October 1966

DEAR SIR:

We enjoyed your June issue very much, especially articles on the air rescue portion of the Vietnam Symposium by Captain Bruce C. Hepp on page 63, and "The Fall of A Shau" by Kenneth Sams, 7th Air Force Historian.

May we make a small correction on the latter please. Page 72 mentions a CH-30 picking up the AC-47 survivors. It was actually an HH-43F from this detachment. The CH-30 from the 20th Tactical Helicopter Squadron picked up some of the last personnel to leave the camp itself. We didn't receive our first HH-3E (Rescue version of the CH-30) until July 1966. The two HH-43F crews received the silver star for their efforts. See page 24, 31 Aug 66 issue of the Air Force Times.

WILLIAM V. D. HICKERSON, MAJOR, USAF  
Information Officer

cc. Kenneth Sams  
Historian, 7th /

President Lyndon B. Johnson congratulates members of 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Sq

A SHAU MEN  
9 MAR 66

Citation.



August 1966 AIR FORCE and SPACE DIGEST

Left to Right: Col Edward Krafka, former CO; Maj Ronald L. Ingraham; President  
GMC Ronald J. Blier; and TSGT Charles T. Walther.

DETACHMENT 7, 38TH AEROSPACE RESCUE & RECOVERY SQUADRON  
AEROSPACE RESCUE & RECOVERY SERVICE (AAR)  
APO 96337

REPLY TO

ATTN OF: Major Hickerson/6104

19 October 1966

Subject: Correction to 3d AARRGp Newsletter

TO: Hqs 3rd AARRGp, APO 96307

1. We enjoyed the publicity in the July issue (Vol 1, No. 2) on former members of our detachment who wrote history at the special forces camp at A Shau, on 9 March 1966. We would like to point out the error in the name of the camp which you erroneously list as "As Han."

2. More than this, though, we would like to point out the omission of the Rescue Crew Commander of the secondary helicopter, 1st Lt Arthur F. Machado. Fifty lashes with a wet noodle.

WILLIAM V. D. HICKERSON, Major, USAF  
Information Officer

1. Hickerson

TSGT Resos





# Silver Stars Go to Crewmen at DaNang for Rescue in Red Sector

DA NANG AB, Vietnam—Eight crewmen from the rescue helicopters of Det. 7, 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Sq. have been awarded the Silver Star for rescuing three survivors of a downed AC-47 gunship in VC-held territory.

The primary copter, with Capt. Donald V. Couture and Harold A. Soldberg at the controls and SSgt David L. Lancaster and A2C in the crew, rescued the three surviving members of the downed aircraft.

The secondary copter landed and tried to find the other members of the crew until it became apparent that they had been killed by the VC. Crewmembers are Lt. Arthur F. Machado, Capt. John B. Kneen and SSgts Crutis F. Yaney and David S. Wheeler.

Successful rescue of three aircrewmembers of AC-47 under fire at A Shau, Republic of Vietnam 9 March 1966. HH-43F

## Low Bird

P. Capt. D. V. Couture

C.P. Capt. H. A. Solberg

RS ~~H.M.~~ A2C A. W. Foster III

HM ~~R.S.~~ SSGT D. L. Lancaster

## High Bird

P. 1st Lt A. F. Machado

C.P. Capt. J. B. Kneen

H.M. SSGT. C. F. Yancy

R.S. SSGT. D. S. Wheeler

# AEROSPACE RESCUE and RECOVERY SERVICE

## NEWSLETTER

15 August 1966

Office of Information

**SILVER STARS FOR HEROISM.** Eight members of Det 7, 38th ARRSq, have been awarded the Silver Star for "extraordinary heroism" in rescuing three survivors of an AC-47 gunship downed by enemy fire. The rescue took place on 9 March, near the A Shau Special Forces Camp. The Da Nang RCC was notified that the armed version of the C-47 transport had been shot down, and within minutes, two rescue crews were on their way. Arriving at the valley leading to the crash site, they found the weather extremely bad and Viet Cong troops heavily concentrated in the area. Both helicopters dropped to below tree top level to take advantage of tree cover and the element of surprise. The primary crew with Captains Donald V. Couture and Harold A. Soldberg at the controls raced to the embankment above the aircraft and hovered, their front wheels touching the side of a slope and their rear wheels in the air. Three crewmen raced from the wreck under a hail of fire and dived into the rear section of the Huskie. The chopper lifted off, and immediately the second, piloted by Lt Arthur F. Machado and Captain John B. Kneen, moved in to pick up the rest of the crew. When no one emerged from the wreck, flight mechanic SSgt F. Yaney and pararescue-man SSgt David S. Wheeler leaped from the waiting helio and darted into the AC-47. There they found two crewmen who had been killed by enemy fire. While the rescuemen searched for the last missing crewman, the survivors in the lead chopper told the secondary pilot that the AC-47 co-pilot, in trying to blast open an escape route, had charged the enemy's fire; he was missing and presumed dead. Hearing this, the secondary Huskie pilot lifted his bird into the air to draw the attention of the rescuemen inside the wreck. They saw the warning and attempted to return to the Huskie, but were caught in a hail of machine gun fire and pinned down. An A-1E pilot, seeing their plight, dived on the source of enemy fire. His strafing pass, less than 30 yards away, allowed the two rescuemen to complete their dash to the waiting chopper,

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With heavy cloud cover above and mountains on both sides, and outnumbered and outgunned by a superior enemy force on the valley floor, the gallant defenders of the Special Forces camp at A Shau on the Vietnamese-Laotian border held out last March for two incredible days. The full use of US airpower might well have spelled the difference between victory and defeat. Valiant US airmen did their best. But their best was not good enough, and after two days of savage fighting the fortified outpost fell, though once again the character of those who fight the air war in Vietnam was demonstrated . . .

# THE FALL OF A SHAU

By Kenneth Sams

HISTORIAN, SEVENTH AIR FORCE



Map shows location of A Shau outpost, strategically located on border of Vietnam and Laos. The fortress was overrun in March by a Viet Cong force after a two-day pitched battle.

**W**ITHOUT air support, the US Special Forces camp at A Shau—on the Laotian-Vietnamese border, about 375 miles northeast of Saigon and some thirty miles southwest of the coastal city of Hué—could not have existed in the first place.

The triangular fortress outpost with its 1,800-foot airstrip was built in 1964 from material flown in by C-123s. Ammunition, fuel, food, barbed wire, medical supplies—everything needed to keep an outpost going—had to come by air. When things looked rough, airplanes brought in troop reinforcements.

A group of such reinforcements reached A Shau on Monday afternoon, March 7, 1966. An AF transport touched down and, with its engines churning in reverse, roared to a bone-jarring halt. Aboard were seven members of the US Special Forces, 149 Nung troops (the Nungs are a Vietnamese sect of Chinese descent who, as topnotch fighters, enjoy much the same reputation as the Green Berets), and nine interpreters. These men had arrived to reinforce the outpost's usual complement of ten Americans and 210 Vietnamese Civil Indigenous Defense Group (CIDG) militiamen.

They spent the rest of Monday and all day Tuesday strengthening the camp's fortifications. But no matter how many more trenches were dug, how many more sandbags were added to the double steel-plate outer walls, or how the bunkers were strengthened, the 385 defenders of the camp knew that only if they were backed up by airpower could they hope to survive a major enemy attack.

The Viet Cong knew this too.

That was why a multibattalion force of North Vietnamese, estimated at from 3,000 to 5,000 hard-core troops, picked March 9 to attack A Shau. On that day the clouds were at 200 feet in places, and the 1,800-foot-high mountains that straddled the valley three-quarters of a mile apart were in the clouds. This created a "box" over the camp, which the enemy was sure would not permit airplanes enough room to maneuver. The enemy was right.



This photo, made before the battle of A Shau, shows the airstrip in the foreground with the triangular compound behind it. The barracks buildings were destroyed early in the battle, which centered on the compound. Rugged mountainous terrain, combined with low clouds, made air support hazardous.



The camp at A Shau was overrun on March 10. Most of its survivors were taken out by air. Aircraft did take a heavy toll of enemy soldiers. But there was just not enough opportunity for air support.

There are pilots in Vietnam today who believe that, if the defenders of A Shau had been able to hold out for one more night, the camp could have been saved. The treacherous weather cleared on March 11, but by then it was academic. A Shau had fallen. The defense of this remote outpost sitting on one of the main enemy infiltration routes into South Vietnam put airpower to perhaps its most difficult test of the war. And it provided one of the best examples yet of the caliber of Air Force people fighting the Vietnamese War.

The battle for A Shau started at 2:00 on the morning of March 9. One of the Americans in a trench on the perimeter of the camp heard the thud of mortar shells being dropped into tubes. Seconds later, white phosphorous shells began saturating the living quarters and supply dump, setting buildings ablaze and driving the US Special Forces troops and Chinese Nung irregulars to cover. The barrage continued until daylight, killing two Americans, wounding four others, and causing dozens of casualties among the Vietnamese.

The first requests for air were received at 9:08 on the morning of March 9. Aircraft reached the area but found themselves weathered out.

At 11:20 a.m., with the ceiling lifting slightly, an AC-47 "Magic Dragon" was ordered to the area. When he reached the camp, the pilot, Capt. W. M. Collins, was told by the fort's defenders that they were in imminent danger of being overrun. He made two attempts to go under the ceiling under visual flight conditions but without luck. Listening on his radio to the ground forces' calls for help, the pilot tried a third time at almost treetop level and broke through. He saw the river valley below at about 300 feet. He maneuvered up the valley a few miles until he saw the camp, with clouds of smoke and dust rising above it,

and, through the smoke, the red tracers of antiaircraft fire.

Collins, with his copilot, 1st Lt. Delbert R. Peterson, at his side, made one sweep over the enemy forces attacking the fort, and poured out thousands of rounds of 7.62-mm. cannon fire. Enemy antiaircraft fire followed the plane as it swung around. On the AC-47's second pass, at about 1,000 feet, several .50-caliber rounds ripped into the aircraft, tearing the right engine from its mounts. Seconds later, the left engine also was knocked out.

Collins and Peterson brought the plane to a crash landing on a mountain slope about seven miles north of the camp. The plane slid down until it came to rest at the base of the slope. One crewman, SSgt. R. E. Foster, suffered two broken legs, but the other men were relatively unhurt. Since Foster could not be moved, the crew decided to throw up a defensive perimeter around the plane. One crewman got on the radio in an effort to direct air strikes while another looked after Sergeant Foster.

Fifteen minutes later, enemy troops attacked the tiny perimeter but were repulsed by automatic-rifle fire from the five crewmen. Then the VC brought up a .50-caliber machine gun and attacked again from undergrowth toward the right rear of the aircraft. In this attack, the pilot, Captain Collins, and Sergeant Foster were killed, and Lt. J. L. Meek, the navigator, was seriously wounded.

There was another lull. Then the enemy opened up again as a rescue helicopter approached the area. The hail of bullets was so heavy that it looked as if the chopper could not land. Realizing there was little chance of rescue until the machine gun was knocked out, Peterson went after it alone, armed only with his AR-15 and a .38-caliber revolver. His attack silenced the machine gun, permitting the chopper to land long enough to remove the three surviving members. But the helicopter could not wait to pick up Lieutenant

*(Continued on following page)*



Peterson; he and the bodies of the two dead crew members had to be left behind.

While the AC-47 crew was fighting for survival, a pair of A-1E Skyraiders from Pleiku, led by Maj. Bernard F. Fisher, was sent to the camp. Arriving at A Shau, Fisher looked down on the practically solid cloud layer underneath. He scouted around until he found a hole in the clouds about five miles to the northwest. Leading his wingman through the hole and down the narrow valley toward the fort, he approached at almost ground level against intense automatic weapons and 12.7-mm. AA fire that filled the sky in the tiny canyon "box."

An orbiting C-130 airborne command post directed Fisher to destroy what was left of the AC-47. Fisher assigned his wingman this task while he went to help the defenders in the compound. Realizing that more planes were needed, he went up through the overcast, found another flight of A-1Es and brought them in through the hole he had used earlier. He then directed their strike on enemy positions less than half a mile from the fort. Then he helped direct in the CH-3C helicopter that landed at the AC-47 crash site and brought out the three survivors.

With only limited air support overhead, the friendly ground forces at A Shau were still holding the camp. At Phu Bai outside Hué, two reinforcement companies were standing by to board Marine helicopters for airlift into A Shau. Two Army Caribous (CV-2B) flew over the camp and dropped supplies that fell outside the drop zone but were recovered by friendlies. Major Fisher, meanwhile, made another trip in his Skyraider up through the overcast to lead two C-123s into the valley to drop more supplies to the defenders.

This turned out to be an extremely dangerous operation. The planes had to stay close to Fisher's A-1E, descending through the various cloud layers at a rate of 4,000 feet a minute. During the descent, the pilots, Capt. William C. Devoe, and Capt. Ronald E. Trickey, had to make rapid and steep turns to avoid mountains, throwing the crew members all about the aircraft. Both planes were forced down to about fifty feet, just above the treetops, with a forward visibility of less than half a mile. Both planes started drawing enemy fire about seven miles north of A Shau and were under constant fire until they left fifteen minutes later.

As they entered the narrow portion of the valley just north of A Shau, both planes were caught in a crossfire from .50-caliber automatic weapons. Reaching the drop zone, each plane made two drops on the first pass. Still under fire, they made 180-degree turns and dropped another eight bundles, each weighing 1,800 pounds. The cargo, mainly ammunition and medical supplies, fell inside the camp and was retrieved by the defenders.

During pull-up, Captain Trickey's plane took multiple hits, one cutting a six-inch hole in the center of the cargo floor. This knocked out several electrical wires, making the engine, flight, and navigation instruments and the compass system inoperative. Devoe's plane took no hits, and both planes made it safely back to Da Nang.

While these drops were taking place, Major Fisher's wingman, Capt. Francisco Vazquez, noticed .50-caliber fire coming out of the overcast from the mountains to the southeast. This meant that the planes flying in the closed "box" were being fired on from *above*, even though the gunners were apparently having difficulty spotting the planes through the mist.

By now dangerously low on fuel, Fisher made one final trip through the overcast, this time to help a Forward Air Controller lead two B-57s down the valley where they could attack the target. Fisher and his wingman, in their A-1Es, covered and directed the C-123s out of the valley. In all, Fisher had spent some two hours under the clouds in highly dangerous terrain facing some of the war's heaviest antiaircraft fire.

As it turned out, this was only the beginning for Fisher. The enemy attack had left a lot of damage. Friendly casualties were heavy. USAF and USMC helicopters evacuated twenty-seven wounded before 7:15 p.m. A Marine H-34 was shot down inside the compound at 6:30 p.m., but its crew was evacuated. The Communist barrage had leveled buildings and cut up some of the camp's barbed-wire defense. The triangular-shaped fort, with its 480-foot-long walls, was hit hard but still in friendly hands. It was entirely possible that the enemy had withdrawn as he had done after attacks on other bases. But just in case, the defenders set up their communications to call in air strikes at first light.

At 1:30 on the morning of March 10, troops in the perimeter trenches heard the VC digging in about 100 yards away. Another enemy mortar attack was launched, and by 3:35 a.m. the camp was fighting off a full-scale assault. Moving over the shattered barbed wire, the VC broke the perimeter and entered parts of the camp. US and government troops fired at the enemy and, according to Specialist Five Wayne H. Murray, enemy bodies were being stacked up on the wire. "They came in mass formation, fifty or sixty at a time," he said. As the defenders pulled back, their supply of explosive shells used up, they threw grenades at the attackers. The enemy soldiers were wearing blue-green uniforms, civilian clothes, and camouflage fatigues, much like those worn by government troops in the camp, which made the task of identification difficult. In the radio bunker, a USAF communications sergeant reported that they were badly cut up and could not last much longer without air support. He directed air strikes on the camp itself.

At 5:15 a.m. radar bombing began through the overcast. Nineteen of these sorties were flown up to 6:30 a.m. Three C-123s and one AC-47 provided flare support to the camp during the hours of darkness. A Marine A-4 was reported lost shortly after 7:00 a.m. He was last observed by the FAC plunging into the overcast, and he never came back up.

Hand-to-hand fighting was taking place in the shambles of A Shau with the defenders pushed into a single bunker in the northern corner of the triangular fort. At 7:30 a.m., direct radio contact with the fort was lost. The FAC in the O-1F Bird Dog overhead also lost radio contact about this time. Bombing was still taking



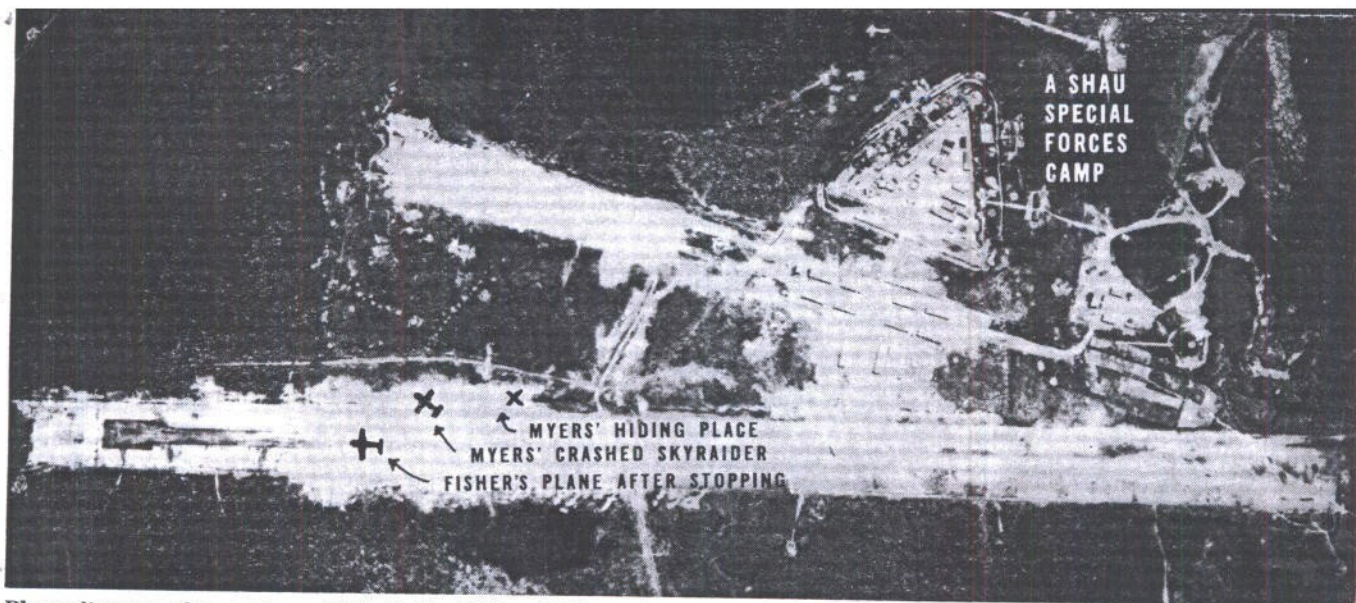


Photo-diagram shows where Maj. Dafford Myers' Skyraider stopped after he crash-landed on the A Shau airstrip. "X" marks his hiding place off west edge of the strip. Maj. Bernard F. Fisher brought his A-1E under enemy fire onto the debris-littered, 1,800-foot runway, taxied to Myers, and succeeded in taking off in a daring and spectacular rescue feat.

place through the overcast, but neither the FAC nor the fighters could see the ground. About an hour later, the FAC again reestablished contact with the ground and was told that the fighter strikes were keeping the enemy back and that the northern section of the camp was still intact. The defenders occupied the wall where the radio was located and wanted incendiary on the southern wall held by the VC. The east wall of the triangle was half occupied by friendlies and half by the enemy. The defenders wanted fighters overhead continuously. Incendiary strikes were placed on the south wall and on enemy troops who were reported massing to the east of the A Shau runway, which was on the east side of the fort.

Although the bombing was continuous, weather slowly deteriorated, and by 10:20 in the morning the ceiling was down to less than 800 feet. By now the situation was getting desperate, and the trapped ground forces radioed that they could hold out only another hour and a half. They said it was useless to airdrop ammunition as they would not be able to retrieve it.

Around 11:30 a.m. Major Fisher, his wingman, and two other flights of A-1Es were over A Shau, diverted from another mission. Fisher led his flight to the target area by radio navigation and, as on the previous day, located a hole in the clouds and brought his flight in. Contacting the personnel in the fort, Fisher was told that all friendly forces were now in the bunker in the north corner and that his flight should strafe the walls of the fort. Enemy AA fire, which had downed two planes on the previous day, was more intense and accurate than ever, but these attacks were essential.

Fisher led off with a strafing attack on the walls, spraying them with 20-mm. cannon fire. After he and Vazquez made two passes, he heard Maj. Dafford W. Myers, leader of another flight of A-1Es from the 602d Air Commando Squadron, ask the FAC for the way into the target. Fisher climbed over the overcast, radioed Myers to follow him, and brought this additional flight down into the narrow canyon. Myers made two passes over the target, firing his 20-mm. cannon. On his third

pass, at about 800 feet, he took at least three .50-caliber hits, one in his engine. The engine caught fire, smoke filled the cockpit, and within a minute, the plane was engulfed in flames. Myers was too low to bail out and could not see. Fisher followed alongside Myers, giving directions for a landing on the enemy-held airstrip. First, Myers jettisoned his 100-pound bombs and then, following flight directions from Fisher, brought the plane into a wheels-up landing on the strip. The belly tank exploded on impact, and the plane skidded along the jagged, wreckage-strewn runway for several hundred feet before it slid off the west side, near the embankment, with enemy troops on the other side.

Fisher called for a rescue helicopter, then circled the burning aircraft. He saw Myers climb out of the plane, his clothes still trailing smoke from the burning cockpit. Myers jumped into a small ditch off the runway among a clump of weeds.

At this time Fisher's flight was joined by another flight of A-1Es from the 1st Air Commando Squadron, flown by Capt. Jon I. Lucas and Capt. Dennis B. Hague. Fisher was told it would take fifteen to twenty minutes for the rescue chopper to arrive. Believing that Myers had been seriously injured, Fisher decided the chopper would be too late, and anyway he doubted that it could make it in against the intense enemy fire. Therefore, he decided to land and rescue Myers himself. "I'm going in," he radioed Hague.

"We're here to cover you," Hague replied.

The A Shau strip was not considered safe for A-1Es even under normal conditions. With fifty-five-gallon oil drums, cans, and debris from Myers' aircraft strewn along the 1,800-foot runway, and gaping holes caused by mortar blasts, the chances of landing a Skyraider and bringing it up were slim.

Fisher went in on the north approach end, which was blacked out with smoke and dust. He touched down through the smoke and quickly realized he could not stop in time so lifted off again. Doing a 180-degree turn with enemy guns trained on him all the time, he

*(Continued on following page)*





All smiles after one of the most dramatic rescues of the Vietnam War are Majors Bernard Fisher (left) and Dafford Myers. Fisher landed his Skyraider on the A Shau runway during the Viet Cong attack and succeeded in picking up his fellow pilot, whose A-1E had been shot down earlier.

landed on the south end and, dodging debris as well as he could, barely halted the plane at the runway edge. He turned the plane around in the dirt off the runway and started taxiing at full speed to avoid enemy fire, all the time looking out his right window for Myers.

Streams of tracers came toward him, and he could hear the bullets tearing the fuselage. About three-quarters of the way down the runway, he spotted Myers waving to him. He stopped about 150 feet beyond and started to unharness to go after what he believed to be a wounded pilot. He could not see well out of the right empty seat side of the plane, but Myers, who was relatively unhurt, was making a fifty-yard dash for the plane. Just before he could get out, Fisher saw Myers, pulled him head first into the plane, turned around, and took off.

Flying at treetop level till he gained speed, Fisher finally got out of the murderous barrage and into the clouds. Minutes later he landed safely with his passenger at Pleiku.

It was a miraculous feat. All the maneuvering had to be done in a tight, socked-in area. The A-1Es providing suppressive fire had run out of ammunition at the time Myers was making his dash to the plane. Enemy automatic-weapons fire was coming from the camp area as well as from the hills above the camp. The runway was jagged with tire-puncturing metal ripped by mortar blasts. When Fisher landed at Pleiku, his plane had nineteen bullet holes in it. His wingman, Captain Vazquez, had taken twenty-two hits. Lucas took eight hits, and his plane was severely damaged. Myers' wingman, Capt. Hubert King, had to return to Pleiku before Myers was hit, due to a direct hit on the canopy which blurred his vision. Hague's Skyraider took no hits.

Commenting later on the operation, Captain Hague said: "It was like flying inside Yankee Stadium with the people in the bleachers firing at you with machine guns." Captain Lucas, who also provided cover for Fisher and who took a .50-caliber hit which knocked out his hydraulic system and started a fire in his cock-

pit, said: "I gave him [Fisher] a hundred-to-one chance of pulling it off." Both pilots speculated that the North Vietnamese had thought Fisher's plane had been shot down and were concentrating on the planes still flying, saving Fisher until later. Myers himself told Fisher when he was pulled into the cockpit: "You dumb son of a gun! Now neither of us will get out of here!"

Despite the valiant effort of USAF and USMC pilots, the decision was made to evacuate the camp. At 4:30 that afternoon, sixty-nine of the survivors, most of them wounded, were lifted out by Marine H-34 choppers. Another thirty men, including two US Special Forces personnel, left the camp by foot with radio equipment around 5:00 p.m. The camp was officially closed at 5:45 p.m. In bringing out the wounded men, the Marines lost two helicopters. One crashed and burned in the camp, but its crew was picked up. Another with four men aboard took off and was listed as missing, believed to have crashed nearby.

In the two-day action, 213 close-air-support sorties were flown by USAF, USMC, US Navy, and Vietnamese Air Force planes. Six aircraft were shot down—the AC-47, A-4, A-1E, and three Marine helicopters. On the following day, March 11, another USAF A-1E attacking the enemy-held camp was shot down, but its pilot was recovered. Friendly losses at A Shau were heavy, and an important Special Forces camp astride a primary enemy infiltration route was lost. Five US Special Forces personnel were killed, in addition to the four Marine crew members of the H-43 and the two USAF dead in the AC-47 incident (plus the man who had to be abandoned). Nevertheless, in the fighting against an overwhelming force of crack North Vietnamese troops, airpower, despite incredibly poor weather, was devastating. Although it will never be known for certain, survivors reported that 300 enemy troops were killed by defenders and possibly another 500 killed by air strikes.

Some have suggested that the camp could have been saved if the defenders had been able to hold out for one more night. Weather improved on the morning of March 11, and it would have been possible to bring airpower to bear more effectively on the enemy. Still, despite the loss of this important outpost, the US Air Force wrote a new and glowing chapter in its history. The valiant performance of men like Fisher, Peterson, Myers, and the crews of every aircraft committed to this action matched anything in aviation history, according to Gen. William C. Westmoreland, Commander of the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.

"Without the air support you provided, we couldn't have lasted one day." These were the words of US Army Capt. Tennis Carter. He added: "If you hadn't flown at all, the Special Forces wouldn't have blamed you. It was suicidal, but you carried out your mission anyway."—END

*The author, Kenneth Sams, is an experienced military historian who has served at Hq. 2d Air Division (now redesignated Seventh Air Force) in Vietnam for more than a year. He has contributed a number of articles on the Vietnamese War to AF/SD, most recently in the March issue.*