

The Battle of A-Shau

Vietnam March 1966

In the NW corner of South Vietnam, in the Thua-Thien Province lies a narrow valley known as the A-Shau. Running North-South for 25 miles, it's a mile wide bottom land covered in elephant grass and flanked by deeply forested mountains rising to as much as 5,500 ft. Bisected with a hard crusted dirt road with A-Luoi to the North and the A-Shau Special Forces camp to the South, this valley was the scene of some of the hardest combat between US and NVA throughout the Vietnam war and was one of the strategic focal points of the war.



Because of its importance to the North Vietnamese the A Shau became a major battle ground from the earliest days of the American involvement in South Vietnam. The US Special Forces had established their camp in 1964 at the lower end of the A Shau Valley in Vietnam. It was some two miles from Laos and was a constant problem for the North Vietnamese. From this camp, the Green Berets could observe and impede traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail on the other side of the border. They were also astride the infiltration route toward Hue and Da Nang. Being in a very remote corner of the Central Highlands, the SF camp was extraordinarily reliant on airpower. Material to build the camp had been flown in by Air Force C-123s. Everything, including food and ammunition, came by air. The camp consisted of some barracks buildings, a triangular fort, and an airstrip made of pierced steel planking. The fort had a mortar bunker at each corner. The walls consisted of steel plate and sandbags.

The airstrip was east of the camp, just outside the barbed wire perimeter. The valley lay beyond the range of US artillery, so its only real defense was air support. At this point in the valley, the area around the camp was six miles long and a little more than a mile wide. Hills rose up on both sides, ascending 1,500 feet above the valley floor. The mountain valleys were often hidden by clouds and low-lying fog. The valley was called the tube by the pilots who had to fly there. In February 1966, the North Vietnamese Army decided to put the camp out of business and moved a fresh regiment down the trail to join the 325th NVA Division, which was already operating in the vicinity of Hue. On March 5, two NVA defectors walked into the camp at A Shau and warned that an attack was coming on March 11 or 12. They said the 325th Division was about seven kilometers east of the valley. US aircraft promptly struck that location. On March 7, Air Force C-123s brought in reinforcements, increasing the strength of the camp to 17 Green Berets and 368 South Vietnamese irregulars and Chinese Nung mercenaries.

The attack came sooner than expected. About 2 a.m. on March 9, enemy bombardment began, emanating from the surrounding hills. Mortars, artillery, and rocket-propelled grenades pounded the camp, killing two Americans and wounding 30. The barrage set the buildings and the supply dump afire. The artillery barrage stopped at dawn. Some 2,000 NVA regulars were situated to take the fort unless air support drove them away. Until the clouds lifted they were hanging as low as 200 feet in places air strikes were not feasible. The NVA force prepared to rush the fort, but visibility was improving. At 11:20 a.m., with the cloud ceiling at 400 feet, an Air Force AC-47 gunship got through the clouds and flew up the valley at treetop level, strafing the attackers. On the gunship second pass, it was hit hard by ground fire. The right engine was torn from its mounts. Seconds later, the other engine was knocked out, too. The bullet-riddled AC-47 crash-landed on a mountain slope, five miles farther up the valley.



With the gunship gone, the airborne command post diverted two A-1Es from the 1st ACSq at Pleiku, callsign Hobos, and sent them to the aid of the SF camp at A Shau. Leading the A-1E flight was Air Force Maj. Bernard F. Fisher, a 39-year-old fighter pilot from Kuna, Idaho. Fisher had flown jet aircraft in Air Defense Command before coming to Vietnam, and, when he buckled into the propeller-driven A-1E, he still wore his helmet with the silhouette of an F-104 painted on the side. Known as the SPAD, the single-engine A-1E Skyraider was undeniably an old airplane, but it was well-suited to a number of missions. It was adapted from the Douglas AD-5 dive fighter-bomber that the Navy had flown in Korea. It mounted four 20 mm machine guns and carried a wide assortment of ordnance. Cruising speed was 240 mph, but it had exceptional endurance and could stay airborne for six to eight hours. It could fly for long periods of time at low altitude, making it ideal for close air support. And the A-1Es had two seats, side by side.



Diverted to A Shau after the gunship crashed on March 9, Fisher and his wingman, Bruce Wallace, found the mountains blanketed by clouds. Upon arrival, Fisher began probing to find the canyon in which the camp lay. On his third attempt, he emerged from the overcast and barely missed colliding with a helicopter that had just come from A Shau with wounded aboard. The helicopter pilot directed Fisher toward a saddle in the mountains, where he found an opening in the clouds about five miles northwest of the camp. He and Wallace went through the hole and flew down the valley at very low level. The enemy AAA was intense. A C-130 airborne command post told Fisher to destroy the AC-47 before the NVA captured it's weapons. Fisher assigned that task to Wallace who dropped six bombs on the

wreckage and obliterated it while Fisher went to the direct assistance of the fort. For the next several hours, Fisher and Wallace collected arriving aircraft above the clouds and led them down into the valley. Fisher guided a CH-3C helicopter that came to evacuate the badly wounded. He also led A-1Es in a strike to break up a force that was massing to attack the fort.



Fisher went up again to bring down two Air Force C-123s. The mountains were tight on all sides, and forward visibility was less than half a mile. They began taking fire seven miles north of the camp. Fisher suppressed the ground fire as the transports air-dropped supplies for the fort from an altitude of 50 feet. Low on fuel, Fisher went through the clouds one more time to help a forward air controller lead two B-57 bombers down the valley. In all, Fisher spent about two hours under the clouds. He made an emergency landing at Da Nang, 20 minutes away, with almost no fuel left in his tank. Allied aircraft flew 29 sorties in support of the fort on March 9. Of these, the Air Force flew 17, the Marine Corps 10, and the South Vietnamese Air Force two. Maj Fisher would be awarded the Silver Star for his role as on-scene commander on March 9, and Wallace would receive the Distinguished Flying Cross. However, Fisher had not yet seen the last of the A Shau Valley.

On March 10, the attack resumed at 2 a.m. The NVA shelled the camp relentlessly, and, shortly before 4 a.m., it launched an assault on the southern side. Before daylight, the attack broke through the barbed wire perimeter and breached the south wall. The defenders were pushed into the northern part of the fort, and the NVA dug in between the airstrip and the camp. Two C-123s and an AC-47 dropped flares throughout the night. Radar bombing of enemy positions by Marine Corps A-4s began just after 5 a.m. Fire support was continuous from Air Force and Marine aircraft. About 11 a.m., the defenders reported that they could hold out for no more than another hour and that airdrops to resupply them with ammunition should stop, since they could not retrieve the bundles.

Bernie Fisher and his wingman that day, Capt. Francisco Paco Vazquez, were en route to provide air support to Army forces near Kontum when they got an emergency radio call to divert to A Shau. Fishers call sign was Hobo 51, and Vazquez was Hobo 52. By 11:15, Hobo flight had joined numerous other aircraft that were stacked and circling at 8,000 feet and higher above the valley. They had not yet gone to the aid of the camp because of the danger of running into mountain peaks hidden by the cloud cover. One of the other A-1 flights in the stack was led by Maj. Dafford W. Jump Myers from the 602nd Fighter Squadron at Qui Nhon. Myers was Surf 41, and his wingman, Capt. Hubert King, was Surf 42. Myers was an old friend. Fisher had known him back in Air Defense Command. He had been nicknamed Jump when he was a soda jerk in high school. Myers was a hard-bitten chain-smoker who once made his living running a billiard parlor.

Myers suggested that there might be an opening to the west. Fisher went to see, found a hole, and called on Myers and King to follow him and Vazquez into the valley. Fisher told the other A-1 flight to stay in orbit above the clouds. There was not enough room in the valley for six airplanes to operate, so Capt. Jon T. Luke Lucas (Hobo 27) and Capt. Dennis B. Hague (Hobo 28) continued to circle. Fisher, Vazquez, Myers, and King flew down the valley in trail formation. It was too tight to go in side by side. The cloud ceiling in the valley was at 800 feet better than the previous

day, but the visibility also helped the enemy gunners, who were shooting down on the aircraft from the 1,500-foot hillsides.

The defenders had fallen back into a bunker at the northwest corner of the fort. The NVA was making a ground attack, so the A-1s flew three strafing runs, which killed between 300 and 500 of the attackers. On the first run, Kings aircraft was hit in the cockpit canopy, shattering the plexiglass. He had to break off and go to the nearest base, which was Da Nang. On the second pass, Myers airplane was hit by shells of a heavy caliber. His engine conked out and the cockpit filled with smoke. At 400 feet, he was too low to use a parachute. "I've been hit and hit hard", Myers radioed. You're on fire and burning clear back past your tail, Fisher replied. Rog, Myers said. Ill have to put her down on the strip. Myers cockpit was filled with smoke. He couldn't see, so Fisher talked him down. At the same time, Fisher laid down suppressive fire in front of Myers and gave battle instructions to the other aircraft.



Myers was going too fast to land on the short runway, so he would have to belly slide in. He jettisoned his bombs and retracted his landing gear, but his attempt to release the center line fuel tank failed. The fuel tank exploded on contact with ground. Surf 41 skidded about 800 feet, trailing fire, then veered off the runway on the west side and exploded. Incredibly, Myers survived. Fisher saw him clamber out of the airplane and run to a ditch between the airstrip and the fort, where he was screened by a clump of weeds. Fisher called in Hague and Lucas. Hague: It was like flying inside Yankee Stadium with the people in the bleachers firing at you with machine guns, Hague said. Vazquez, meanwhile, was operating with a dead radio. The A-1s put down saturated fire, driving back the NVA troops who were trying to get to Myers. The Green Berets later said the attack wiped out a company of the North Vietnamese and took pressure off the fort.

As the A-1Es continued their strikes, Fisher called for a rescue helicopter. Ten minutes later, the command post said the helicopter was at least 20 minutes out. Fisher figured that this was probably a guess. Anyway, it wouldn't be much longer before the NVA closed in on Myers and killed him. Fisher thought about going to get Myers. The runway looked short. He called the command post and asked the length. It was 3,500 feet, he was told. That would be long enough. Even in the best of conditions, however, it was almost suicidal to land an aircraft as large and slow as the A-1E while exposed to direct enemy fire, Fisher said in his 2004 book, *Beyond the Call of Duty*. A helicopter crew can fire their weapons from the side doors to hold the enemy at bay while executing a rescue, but it'd be defenseless while sitting on the ground.

It made no logical sense, but I felt a strong impression that I should do this. Jump was one of the family one of the fellows we flew with and I couldn't stand by and watch him get murdered without at least trying to rescue him. The odds of coming out again were not good. He would be landing in a crossfire from 20 anti-aircraft gun positions that lined the valley. The enemy also had hundreds of automatic weapons. The runway was a major hazard. The pierced steel planking was slick, and shards of it torn by the mortars and bombs were sticking up and could rip airplane tires to shreds. The runway was cratered and littered with shell casings, pieces of Myers aircraft, barrels, pieces of tin and metal, and other debris. Fisher counted on the other A-1s to provide him fire support. He approached the airstrip from the north, which would give him the advantage of landing into the wind, helping him to slow down. Unfortunately, the wind was also blowing thick smoke from fires ignited by the bombs and napalm in his direction, obscuring his vision. When he broke out of the smoke, he saw that he was over the runway but too far along it to stop the airplane in the distance remaining. As he passed by at low level, he caught a glimpse of Myers.

He powered up, holding the aircraft a few feet above the ground to avoid ground fire, made an S-turn, and approached the runway from the opposite direction of his first attempt. The other three A-1s continued to strafe to cover Fisher as he went in. Vazquez went Winchester (out of ammo) on the first pass. After three more passes, the others ran out of ammunition, too. "I'm Winchester", Hague declared. So am I, said Lucas. Lets keep making passes, though. Maybe they dont know it. Fisher touched down at the very end of the field, stood on the brakes, and skidded down the runway. His brakes began fading from heat at 2,000 feet. The second landing attempt was successful although violent braking and rudder action was not always successful in avoiding debris on the battle-torn runway, Lt. Gen. Joseph H. Moore, 2nd Air Division commander, said in nominating Fisher for the Medal of Honor. Major Fisher utilized all his flying skill to miss mortar craters, shell casings, and pieces of the A-1E which now littered the runway as a result of the fuel tank explosion.



Surf 41 on the A-Shau airfield

Also, Fisher had been told wrong about the length of the runway. It was 2,500 feet, not 3,500. It was too short for an A-1 under any circumstances. He overran the runway onto some grass and crossed a small embankment, which slowed him down a little. As he swung the aircraft around, he slid into a fuel storage area. His wings passed over the tops of some 55-gallon drums, although he hit several of them with the tail of the airplane. Fisher taxied 1,800 feet back along the runway in full view of the enemy. He saw Myers waving his arms as he passed by. It took Fisher about 100 feet to stop. He couldn't see Myers, who was running behind the airplane, off to the right side, with bullets following him along. Myers later said it was the fastest dash an old man of 46 ever made. Fisher expected Myers to climb into the cockpit momentarily. When he didn't, Fisher figured Myers must have been hit. He unbuckled and set the brake to go looking for him.

As Fisher climbed out on the right side of the airplane, he saw two little red beady eyes trying to crawl up the back of the wing. It was Myers, his clothes burned and muddy and his eyes reddened by smoke. Fisher had left the engine running fairly fast, ready for a quick getaway, and the airflow from the big four-bladed propeller was blowing Myers back as he tried to reach the cockpit. Fisher cut power to idle, risking a stall. As bullets continued to strike the aircraft, he pulled Myers into the cockpit head first. Myers first words were: You dumb son of a bitch, now neither of us will get out of here. He drank some water from Fishers canteen and asked for a cigarette. Fisher did not have any. As Fisher pulled Myers aboard, Lucas who had taken a severe hit in his hydraulic system led Hague and Vazquez in a dry pass over the camp. The three Spads went hurtling by at low level. It was enough to hold the NVA back momentarily. Turning his aircraft around, Major Fisher saw that he had less than two-thirds of an already too short airstrip ahead of him, Moore said in the Medal of Honor write-up. Calling on all his skill, he applied power and worked his way through wreckage and debris, gaining enough speed to lift off at the overrun. Flying just above the ground at insufficient

airspeed to climb, he gradually built up speed, still under intense hostile fire, and began a climb into the 800-foot overcast above the valley.

According to one report, the defenders in the fort cheered as Fishers A-1 roared down the strip and rose into the air. Fisher and Myers flew to Pleiku, where the medics met them at the flight line. Myers was not badly hurt, although he was singed and covered in soot and smelled awful, according to Fisher. Myers wanted to buy Fisher a years worth of whiskey, but Fisher didn't even drink coffee. Instead, Myers gave him a Nikon camera engraved, A Shau, March 10, 1966. Fishers airplane had 19 holes in it. There were 23 in Vazquezs. In all, 201 air strikes were flown in support of the fort on March 10. Of these, 103 were by the Marine Corps, 67 by the Air Force, 19 by the Navy, and 12 by the South Vietnamese Air Force. Including Myers A-1E and the gunship, six Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps aircraft were shot down in the effort.



Bernie Fisher

Fisher was awarded the Medal of Honor, the first airman in the Vietnam War to receive it. It was presented by President Johnson at the White House, Jan. 19, 1967. His wife, Realla, and their five sons were present for the ceremony. The aircraft Fisher flew in the A Shau Valley later crashed and burned at Pleiku as it was returning from a mission. However, it was recovered and restored. In 1967, it was flown by none other than Jump Myers from California to the Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio, where it can be seen today. Col Bernie Fisher passed away on 16 Aug 2014.

[Source: VFW Post 6756 | Leo Miller | March 27, 2016 ++]