

# Rescue in Death Valley

Surrounded and desperate, the Evil Eyes of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 163 was the last hope for the men at **A Shau Special Forces Camp**

By Richard Camp



**WAR FOG** Marines disembark from an H-34 in a chaotic scene similar to HMM-163's rescue efforts in the A Shau in early March 1966.

GAMMA-KEystone/GETTY IMAGES

“Need reinforcements—without them, kiss us good-bye,” came the call from the Special Forces camp in the A Shau Valley on March 10, 1966. Plaintive pleas for ammo, water, medevacs and evacuation filled the airwaves. The camp, about 30 miles southwest of Hue and just two miles from the Laotian border, was in imminent danger of being overrun by North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars.

The atmosphere at the Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 163 (HMM-163) base in Phu Bai that day was heavy with urgency as pilots and aircrews poured into the mess tent. They had been summoned there to get the latest word on the status of the Special Forces camp from the squadron commander, Lt. Col. Charles A. “Chuck” House. The tent buzzed with everyone chiming in on whether the squadron would be tasked with the mission. With lousy weather and little daylight left for an evacuation attempt into the heavily defended valley, most of the men thought it would be a no-go.

The flight crews came to attention as Colonel House strode into the tent. All eyes were on him as he quickly gave them a run-down on the situation at the camp. Its defenders were physically exhausted—most were wounded—and they were nearly out of ammunition and about to be overrun. He told his men the decision had been made to launch a rescue effort: HMM-163, the Evil Eyes, was to get under the weather into the valley for one last attempt. Finishing his brief, House then casually remarked, “I’m going to the A Shau to take a look, and if anyone wants to follow me, that’s OK by me.” Within 15 minutes after breaking up the briefing, there were no operable H-34 Choctaw helicopters left on the ramp at Phu Bai.

What Colonel House hadn’t told the squadron was that when



**SMILING EYES** The distinctive markings of HMM-163 was a welcome sight to wounded GIs in the A Shau Valley and elsewhere during the war.

the wing operations officer, Colonel Roy C. Gray Jr., told him to send the squadron in, he had responded that—because of the hazardous weather and waning daylight—he would only go if ordered by the wing commander himself, Maj. Gen. Keith B. McCutcheon. Shortly, House got another call: “It’s an order.”

The unfolding battle to save the 17 Americans and more than 400 South Vietnamese and Montagnard Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) soldiers facing annihilation in the A Shau was an opening salvo to what would be years of some of the war’s fiercest fighting to wrest control of the valley from the North Vietnamese: Operation Delaware in 1968, Operation Dewey Canyon in early 1969 and Operation Apache Snow, including the battle for Hill 937, a.k.a. Hamburger Hill, in May 1969.

The Evil Eyes rescue mission itself was rife with the confusion, contradictions and controversy that would characterize much of the war for the Americans. Ultimately, the fight in the A Shau was a clear, if very costly, victory for the enemy, as it secured a vital infiltration route that would prove unbreakable. The 1966 A Shau battle was a portent of the long struggle to come, where terrain, tenacity and time was on the side of the North Vietnamese, regardless of the technological superiority and courage of the troops of the United States and its allies.

**The A Shau Special Forces Camp** was tucked deep in the southwest corner of Thua Thien Province, in one of the wildest, most inaccessible valleys in the country. A typical Special Forces triangular fort with 200-yard-long walls, it was surrounded by barbed wire entanglements and an old minefield overgrown with tall, dense elephant grass. Although it only had a few small structures and a short dirt airstrip, the camp was important because it sat astride three major NVA infiltration routes. One route ran west to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the main terminus for troops and supplies entering the country from North Vietnam. The other two routes led eastward through the mountains into the heavily populated areas around Hue and Phu Bai. Defending the isolated camp were 17 Special Forces (SF) advisers from Operational Detachment Alpha 102 and 503, and some 400 South Vietnamese and Montagnard (CIDG) troops and Nung mercenaries. In the first week of March, the steep jungle-covered mountains were shrouded by rain-swollen clouds, severely limiting aerial resupply and reinforcement efforts into the valley.

In late February and early March, intelligence indicated that the NVA 95th Regiment, 325th Division, was moving into the area. A CIDG patrol had captured an enemy soldier’s diary in which was recorded that he “had crawled through the first row of barbed wire surrounding the camp.” On March 5, two NVA defectors claimed that a four-battalion attack was planned for March 11 or 12. Reconnaissance aircraft detected numerous weapons positions, freshly dug personnel bunkers and, even more ominous, an aircraft trap the enemy had set up by positioning 37mm anti-aircraft weapons on top of the surrounding hills and mountains.

Just before 0400 on March 9, the NVA 325th Division began a



**HO’S HIGHWAY** The A Shau Valley in Thua Thien Province was a key infiltration route for the NVA, and driving the Special Forces from their camp in March 1966 was critical to maintaining it.

mortar bombardment, while its sappers blew gaps in the camp’s defensive wire along the south wall and the east wall parallel to the airstrip, and machine gun teams completed the investment against the north wall. Casualties from the mortar attack were heavy—two American advisers and eight CIDG soldiers were killed and 47 soldiers were wounded. In addition, the team house, supply room and water storage were heavily damaged. As a flag with a red star went up to signal the start of the infantry attack, Special Forces soldiers peppered the wire with claymores and machine gun fire as company after company of NVA charged the south wall.

The camp’s Special Forces commander, Captain John D. Blair IV, requested air support, but poor weather prevented any assistance until midmorning, when an Air Force AC-47 gunship, Spooky 70 from the 4th Air Commando Squadron, arrived. The aircraft made two passes trying to get below the 400-foot ceiling. On its third attempt at treetop level, it succeeded and made a firing pass on enemy troops. Circling back, it started a second pass when the right engine was blasted from its mount by heavy-caliber automatic weapons fire. The other engine was knocked out seconds later, and the aircraft crash-landed on a mountain slope, sliding to rest at the base. The six crew members survived

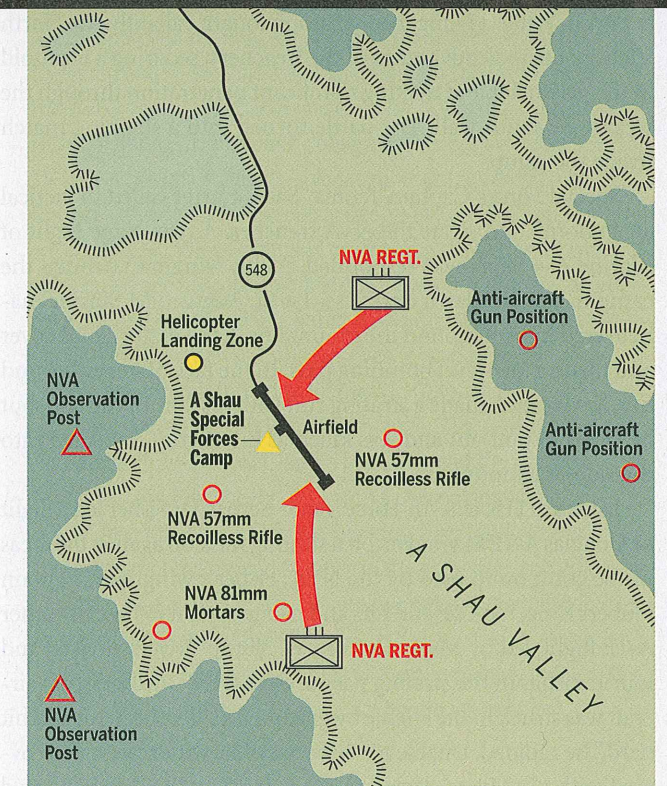


PHOTO COURTESY OF THOMAS PILSCH; MAP: KEVIN JOHNSON

the crash, but in the ensuing firefight three were killed before an Air Force helicopter rescued the others.

Two Cessna L-19 Bird Dog light observation planes made an attempt to evacuate the most seriously wounded from the compound, but intense enemy fire forced them to take off with only one casualty. At 1700, clearing weather allowed two H-34s from HMM-363 to skim under the overcast and attempt another evacuation. One chopper, piloted by 1st Lt. Richard A. Vasdias, was hit and crashed inside the compound. The crew was quickly picked up by its accompanying helicopter and safely evacuated. Just prior to darkness, an Air Force CH-3 managed to land in the camp. Despite taking fire and overcoming a mob of panicked Vietnamese irregulars trying to board the aircraft, 26 casualties were taken out.

Barely holding on and with casualties mounting, the camp's

runway. Fisher followed alongside, guiding Myers, who decided on a "wheels-up" landing. As soon as the plane touched down, it burst into flames, but Myers was able to get out of the aircraft just seconds before it exploded, diving into in a weed-covered ditch.

From the Special Forces camp, Sgt. 1st Class Victor Underwood watched the crash-landing and saw Myers take cover in the ditch. He organized a rescue attempt, but as soon as Underwood and four Nungs got through the main gate, they were pinned down. All four Nungs were quickly killed, and Underwood was trapped, unable to move, in a shallow hole.

Still circling overhead, Fisher heard that it would be 15 to 20 minutes before a rescue helicopter would arrive. Fisher decided to try and pick up the downed airman, while two other A-1Es covered his landing. "I'm going in," Fisher radioed.

## 'The word went around Saigon early Thursday...a major battle was underway. A Special Forces 'A' camp was in trouble in I Corps'

defenders worked feverishly to repair defensive positions as darkness fell, anticipating another North Vietnamese assault. An Air Force C-123 flare ship provided continuous illumination throughout the long night.

At 0400 on March 10, under heavy supporting mortar fire, the North Vietnamese launched a massive ground assault against the camp's south and east walls. The CIDG company holding the apex area of the south and east walls crumbled—and rallied to the NVA. While a Nung recon platoon fought valiantly, the North Vietnamese took advantage of the treachery, securing a foothold in the perimeter and making significant penetration through the weakened south wall. The battle turned into a slugging match inside the camp.

Special Forces Captain Tennis "Sam" Carter called in tactical air to bomb and strafe the NVA trenches. A two-plane flight of Marine A-4 Skyhawks responded. As his wingman orbited the camp in the pre-dawn darkness, 1st Lt. Augusto M. Xavier maneuvered his A-4 around the mountains in the dense cloud cover and made a low-level bombing pass. In the face of heavy ground fire, Xavier then made a strafing run with his 20mm cannon, but he failed to pull out and was killed as his aircraft slammed into the side of a mountain.

Later, at 1115, U.S. Air Force Major Bernard F. Fisher led a flight of Douglas A-1E Skyraiders on a strafing mission against the areas of the compound held by the NVA. Fisher's wingman, Captain Hubert King, took several hits and had to return to base. Another A-1E flight, led by Major Dafford W. "Jump" Myers, arrived and joined Fisher in the strafing passes. On Myers' third pass, his aircraft was struck in the engine by ground fire. "I've been hit and hit hard," he radioed. Unable to see because his windscreen was covered with oil, Myers elected to crash-land on the debris-littered

"It was like flying inside Yankee Stadium with the people in the bleachers firing at you with machine guns," another pilot said.

Underwood, seeing Fisher with his wheels down thought: "Oh shit! Not another one."

Fisher suddenly aborted the attempt, swung around to the south and then touched down, dodging empty oil drums and parts of Myers' plane before stopping just off the edge of the runway. He then turned around and taxied full speed down the runway, searching for Myers as enemy tracers zeroed in on him, and bullets plowed into his fuselage. Finally, Fisher saw Myers waving at him from the ditch and brought the plane to a halt. Thinking Myers was wounded, he started to get unharnessed to go after him. Myers, however, was not wounded and may have set a record for the 50-yard dash under enemy fire. As Fisher pulled him into the cockpit, Myers yelled, "You dumb son of a bitch, now neither of us will get out of here!" Fisher calmly turned the plane around, and took off, flying at treetop level up the valley until he gained enough airspeed to break through the overcast. While the NVA were concentrating their fire on the airplane, Underwood got up and ran back into camp unscathed.

**Throughout the morning and early afternoon** of March 10, word of the A Shau battle was spreading. CBS News correspondent John Laurence wrote in *The Cat from Hue, A Vietnam War Story*: "Something was happening and everyone knew. The word went around Saigon early Thursday...a major battle was underway. A Special Forces 'A' camp was in trouble in I Corps." By late that afternoon, the Joint United States Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO) was crowded with reporters. "A MACV sergeant hurried into the room carrying a stack of mimeographed sheets," Laurence wrote. "The one-page summary outlined the

day's action at the remote camp," with stunning radio situation reports from the camp starting early in the morning:

- 0136:** Friendly forces report they can hear VC digging in 100 meters from the perimeter and that they expect a heavy assault. They are under a heavy mortar attack at this time.
- 0335:** A Shau reports it is under full-scale attack but that the perimeter is holding.
- 0400:** The camp reports it is badly cut up.
- 0425:** Radio operator at A Shau reports he believes he is the only one left alive. Reports that the camp wall is destroyed.
- 0435:** Flare ship overhead reports it appears camp has been overrun however some people may be alive in the communication bunker.
- 0505:** Communication still exists with a man on the ground at A Shau. The man says that everything he sees is destroyed or burning. Immediate airstrikes on the camp are requested.
- 0530:** Radio operator at A Shau says he hears a friendly mortar fire from somewhere.
- 0615:** Radio operator at A Shau is still adjusting rocket fire from aircraft overhead.
- 0730:** Bombing of the camp area continues through cloud cover although the camp can't be seen. Ceiling is 200 feet scattered clouds. 2,000 to 7,000 feet solid cloud layers.
- 0807:** FAC over the area reports he still has radio contact with A Shau.
- 0840:** FAC says north section of camp is still intact.
- 0930:** Communication continues with A Shau.

Laurence noted that the briefing officer tried to downplay the incident but the reporters badgered him for more information until a senior officer took over and reminded the assembly that "lives are at stake here and you are bound not to reveal specific details of friendly casualties or operations in progress." On "background," the officer continued, "I can tell you that an intensive search and rescue mission is underway at this time and it could be compromised by press reports."

**Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt**, III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) commander, chaired an emergency meeting at his Da Nang headquarters on the A Shau situation that afternoon. There were six generals involved in the conference, including General William Westmoreland's deputy, Lt. Gen. John A. Heintges. The Special Forces reps were in contact with their advisers at A Shau, who reported that the situation was deteriorating rapidly and that they might have to leave the communication bunker at any time because of the heavy mortar and recoilless rifle fire. Marine Brig. Gen. Marion Carl, who had earlier that day flown over the valley, urged a rescue attempt: "Yes, you can get in there, and you should go in there. I estimate you're going to lose one out of every four choppers that you put in there...but nevertheless, I don't think we can abandon those people. We'd never live it down."

It was at this point that the decision was made to have Colonel House's HMM-163 go into the valley for one last attempt.

At 1700, headquarters gave Captain Blair the word to abandon the camp. "Almost all friendly crew-served weapons were destroyed. Very little ammunition remained. No food or water had been available for 36 hours," he reported. Sergeant Underwood and another Special Forces soldier were told to set up a helicopter landing zone about 300 meters north of the camp so the wounded could be evacuated. As Underwood later recalled, "When the Vietnamese saw us and the Nungs head for the land-

## Dreaming of Evil Eyes

HMM-163 may be the only Marine helicopter squadron using a nonstandard, nonregulation paint scheme, which originated in Vietnam some 40 years ago, according to Norm Urban, who was a first lieutenant in the squadron during the A Shau battle.

In April 1965, HMM-163, then nicknamed "Ridgerunners," was featured in a stunning, and now legendary, *Life* magazine cover story by photographer Larry Burrows. In October 1965, HMM-163 relocated to Okinawa and Lt. Col. Charles House replaced Lt. Col. Norman Ewers as the commanding officer. According to Urban, with new squadron personnel, House and others felt HMM-163 needed to shake off the *Life* image before returning to Vietnam. Discussing the need for a unit cohesion symbol, HMM-163's intelligence officer, Al Barbe, suggested that two things unsettling to Asians were evil spirits and being watched. Out of this sprang his idea of painting eyes on the clamshell nose doors of HMM-163's Sikorsky H-34 helicopters. House approved the concept and stencils were created and tested on one H-34 while still in Okinawa. On January 1, 1966, HMM-163 flew to Phu Bai to relieve HMM-161, taking over its H-34s. Painting of what were dubbed "Genie Eyes"—after the TV show *I Dream of Jeannie*—began immediately. By March, the Genie Eyes were being widely referred to as "Evil Eyes."

In late 1966, Wing Command ordered the elimination of white paint on Marine helicopters. HMM-163, however, was then aboard a carrier and used the excuse that it was therefore not directly under Wing Command, so the Evil Eyes remained white.

The squadron returned to Vietnam in October 1966. When 1st Marine Aircraft Wing Commander Maj. Gen. Louis B. Robertshaw saw the Evil Eyes, he began to read the riot act to Lt. Col. Otto Bianchi, the squadron's new commanding officer. Also in the room, however, was Lt. Gen. Lewis W. Walt, commander of the ground Marines in the area, who, according to Urban, interrupted to say, "It sure is great to have the Evil Eyes back here at Phu Bai!"

Robertshaw relented, and the Evil Eyes remained. Today, Evil Eyes is still the squadron's logo and it continues to adorn the noses of HMM-163's Boeing H-46s.

# Battle for A Chau Special Forces Camp

March 9–11, 1966

## MARCH 9

At 0400, four NVA battalions attack under mortar bombardment (A and B)

As mortars rain on camp, NVA sappers blow gaps in defensive wire (1 and 2)

NVA machine gun teams set up for assault to overrun the camp (3)

## MARCH 10

At 0400, under massive ground assault, CIDG defenders crumble (4)

NVA make significant penetration, close combat ensues inside camp (5)

Major Dafford Myers crash-lands his A-1E on landing strip (inset) (6)

At 1700, a landing zone is set up for evacuation. Undisciplined CIDG soldiers swarm from camp to LZ (7)

Masses of NVA pour over south wall as camp defenders stream through north gate to LZ (8 and 9)

Amid intense enemy fire and panic on the ground, some HMM-163 aircraft alight with evacuees. Colonel House's overloaded ship is downed (10)

House leads 200 survivors into the jungle to evade the enemy (11)

## MARCH 11

At 1330, HMM-163 ships spot House's contingent 3 km northwest of the camp. Chaos erupts on the ground among panicked CIDG forces, and several are killed before 34 men, including all Americans, are rescued in the face of withering enemy fire (12)

Approximately 200 yards

12

7 10 11

1  
8  
4  
5  
2

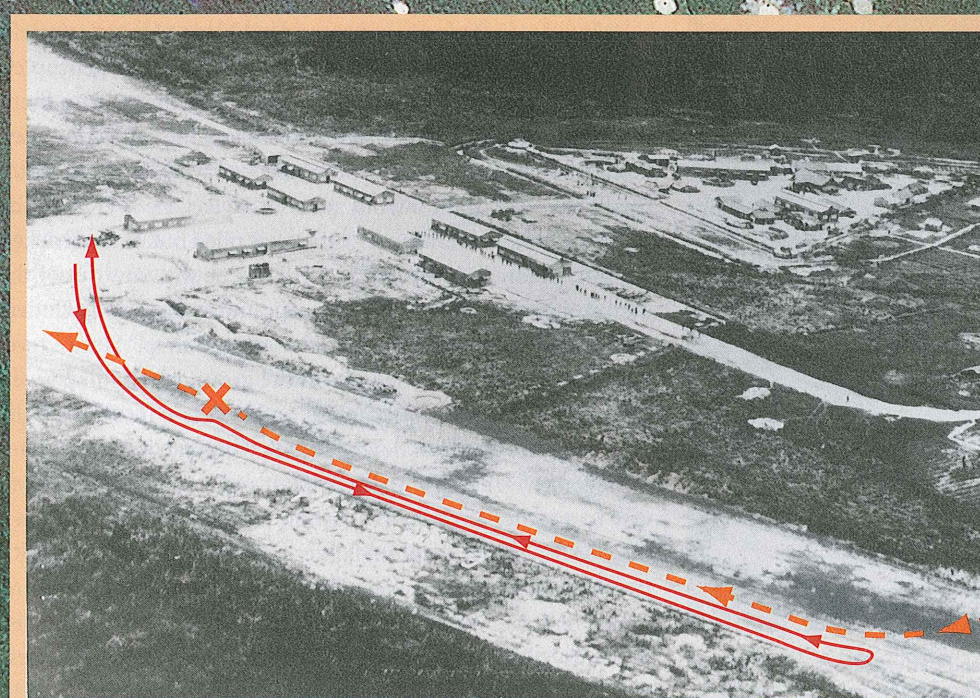
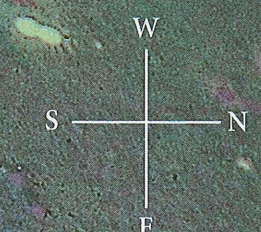
6

9

3

A

B



### Fisher's Fabled Flight

After guiding Major Dafford Myers and his burning A-1E to a crash-landing and figuring Myers had little time before being killed or captured on the ground, Major Bernard F. Fisher executed one of the most daring aerial rescues ever. Even though all enemy fire was trained on his A-1E, Fisher circled and landed from the south, then taxied toward Myers' downed aircraft. Myers, who had hidden in a ditch, dashed to Fisher's plane and jumped into the cockpit.

- Flight path of Myers' A-1E
- X Approximate location of Fisher's rescue of Myers
- Flight path of Fisher's A-1E

AERIAL PHOTOS: THOMAS PILSCH; INSET: U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO/U.S. MARINE CORP HISTORY DIVISION

ing zone, they lost complete control and swarmed out of the camp in a mob, led by the Vietnamese camp commander...I tried to shoot [the camp commander] but someone always kept getting in the way." Blair's plan was to use all able-bodied Special Forces and irregulars to fight a rearguard action while the wounded were placed first on the aircraft. But the rout left him with only a few Americans and Nungs to hold off the NVA.

In what he would later describe as "a suicide mission," House continued to lead his flight toward the camp, approaching the valley north of the camp by following a mountain stream, crossing the tops of the mountains in the soup, then diving down into the valley under the overcast, which was about 200 feet above the terrain. They then turned toward the camp, about 15 miles to the south. Through a blizzard of enemy fire, 1st Lt. Norm Urban

**'There were 50 of 'em hanging on one of the birds...we had to shoot 'em off...We hated to do that but no one would have gotten out if we didn't'**

Shortly after 1730 on March 10, Colonel House was in the air leading 16 UH-34s from his squadron into the valley, supported by six UH-1Es from VMO-2 and fixed-wing aircraft. The squadron was organized into two flights of eight, with House leading one and Captain Wyman Blakeman, the operations officer, leading the other. The rapidly deteriorating weather caused Blakeman to detach from his flight of four and leave them east of the valley. He put his first four into trail position and snuck through a crotch in the mountains just below the clouds, only to find the weather in the valley to the south to be "zero-zero," forcing his return to base.

followed House's lead, and as they neared the camp, they could see the good guys streaming out through the north barricade gate, while the bad guys came in and over the south wall.

The helicopters swept in, flared and settled in the 15-foot-high elephant grass. Some of the H-34s, including House's, were immediately overloaded. "So many people wanted to get out," House said in an interview later, "they hung on the cables and almost pulled the helicopters into the zone. There were 50 of 'em hanging on one of the birds, holding onto the sides, grabbing on the wheels. We tried to drag 'em off, beat 'em off, kick 'em off—but they just came back. It was mass panic. Finally, we had to shoot 'em off...We hated to do that but no one would have gotten out if we didn't."

Urban's helicopter was likewise mobbed. With some 25 soldiers in the cabin and three or four standing on the struts, Urban yelled to the crew to get them off, shoot them if necessary. Finally, the chopper managed to lift off, with barbed wire trailing from the tail wheel.

Wounded in the legs, Underwood hobbled to House's aircraft, encountering 20 to 30 Vietnamese trying to get in his helicopter. As he later reported, "I was on the ground trying to calm them down but they wouldn't listen and shoved me out of the way. Some of them were shot; the others backed away." The helicopter finally was able to lift off, but at about 10 feet the NVA shot the tail rotor off and it crashed. As the crew piled out of the stricken aircraft, Colonel House realized that rescue was now out of the picture and started planning to escape and evade, asking Underwood: "Have you got a compass? I've got a map." House took charge of all the friendlies left on the ground, including seven Green Berets and 190 Vietnamese, and led them into the jungle.

Enemy fire also shot down House's wingman, 1st Lt. William J. Gregory, who along with his co-pilot and crew chief made their way to another aircraft. In addition to the two downed H-34s, three Marine F-4B Phantom fighter-bombers, two A-4 Skyhawks, two UH-1E Iroquois helicopters and three other UH-34s sustained damage. With the approaching darkness, the rescue mission was halted. Four Special Forces advisers and 65 Vietnamese and Nungs had been pulled out of A Shau.



**HAPPY ENDING** Majors Bernard Fisher and Dafford Myers are all smiles shortly after Fisher's incredible A-1E rescue of Myers at the A Shau camp.

As soon as the weather permitted on the following morning, March 11, Major Blakeman led a search and rescue mission consisting of seven aircraft from HMM-163 and two from VMO-2. At about 1330, they spotted House and his men about three kilometers north-northwest of Camp A Shau. Colonel House ignited a red smoke grenade to mark the small landing zone, even though red smoke normally marked an enemy position. House knew that Blakeman would understand that no enemy would have the guts to pop a red smoke on himself.

As the rescue ships prepared to land, the situation on the ground grew even more desperate and chaotic, with the CIDGs panicking and fighting among themselves. One of the South Vietnamese threw a grenade, killing 10 of his fellow soldiers. In another instance, according to Colonel Gray, "one of the U.S. Army advisers ordered a CIDG soldier to get out of the area which they were clearing for the rescue, and when he refused the adviser shot him on the spot. It was a desperate situation complicated by diluted command authority."

Finally, control was established, allowing the rescue to be completed. Thirty-four more survivors, including House, his crew and five Army advisers were evacuated. All the helicopters sustained damage—one H-34, piloted by Captain Wilbur C. McMinn Jr., struggled back with 126 bullet holes.

During the two-day rescue operation, HMM-163 brought out 161 of the 186 survivors, including 10 of the 12 Special Forces advisers. All but three of its 24 helicopters had to be replaced as a result of the evacuation operation. It was estimated that 300 North Vietnamese had been killed by the defenders and another 500 killed by airstrikes.

However, the Special Forces camp was no more, a major blow to efforts to stop North Vietnamese infiltration. Lost with the base were 248 of its 434-man garrison, including five Green Berets. Reverberations from what had transpired during the rescue rippled through the military command and into the public.

Correspondent John Laurence interviewed Colonel House soon after the rescue. He described the mass panic during the evacuation and how the helicopter door gunners first fired their machine guns into the ground in an attempt to force the CIDG to back off. When that didn't work, House told the reporter he ordered his men to fire at the Vietnamese who wouldn't obey. Laurence was taken aback. "Colonel House was giving us the big story," he wrote. "For Americans to shoot their South Vietnamese allies deliberately, for whatever reason, was extraordinary news. But I doubted he would say it on film. Officers' careers had been ruined by public admissions far less controversial than this." He asked House if he would repeat what he had said on camera. "Yeah," House replied after a long pause. "I've been passed over for promotion twice, so I'm on my way out anyway." The broadcast of the interview caused a sensation, leading to an investigation of House by a board led by General Carl.

In a final act to the battle that, in many ways, is emblematic of the Vietnam War's contradictions, as a result of his actions in

## The Mettle and Medals of A Shau

★ When Air Force Major Bernard F. Fisher saw A-1E pilot Major Dafford W. "Jump" Myers crash-land on the A Shau airstrip after being hit by NVA ground fire, he realized that the pilot stood little chance for survival. NVA troops were positioned between the airstrip and the camp, which was under siege and taking continuous automatic weapons fire from the surrounding hills. Quickly sizing up the situation, Fisher decided on his risky rescue. "Although aware of the extreme danger and likely failure of such an attempt, he elected to continue," reads Fisher's Medal of Honor citation. Fisher was also awarded the Silver Star for his actions the previous day at A Shau.

★ "For extraordinary heroism as Commanding Officer, Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron One Hundred Sixty-Three, in action in the Republic of Vietnam on 9 and 10 March 1966," Colonel Charles A. "Chuck" House was awarded the Navy Cross. His citation refers to "inspiring leadership and dogged determination," as House skillfully led the group of some 70 survivors into the jungle to escape capture after his overloaded chopper was shot down. "Chopping a trail through the dense underbrush, he moved into the hills which surrounded the outpost, cleverly maneuvering between hostile positions and successfully evading enemy search patrols," the citation reads. "With constant concern for the welfare of the survivors, many of whom were wounded, he halted the march several times to allow them to rest, stalwartly standing watch while others slept....His valiant effort and determination throughout contributed in large measure to saving the members of his crew and many Special Forces and Vietnamese defenders from capture or death."

★ First Lieutenant Augusto M. "Gus" Xavier, who was piloting an A-4 Skyhawk in the darkness during the first hours of the attack on March 9 and slammed into a nearby mountain during his second strafing run, was awarded a posthumous Silver Star.

★ Seven others were awarded Distinguished Service Crosses for their actions at A Shau, including the Special Forces commander, Captain John D. Blair IV, and Sgt. 1st Class Victor Underwood.

the A Shau, House was awarded a Navy Cross. But for making what his immediate superior, Colonel Thomas J. O'Connor, deemed "some rather emotionally charged statements to authority about the wisdom and futility of the mission," he also received a letter of reprimand—and was relieved of command. ★

*Colonel Richard Camp retired in 1988 after completing 26 years of service, including a tour in Vietnam as commanding officer, Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment. He is currently a vice president of the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation.*