

Uncommon Gallantry

He couldn't just leave the downed airman in the middle of the fierce battle for A Shau.

BY CAPT. MICHAEL B. PERINI
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

THE US Special Forces operated an outpost near A Shau, on the Vietnamese border. The camp, near a primary enemy infiltration route, was surrounded by 1,500-foot mountains. The triangular outpost depended heavily on air support for food, fuel, ammunition—everything to keep the camp going.

During a fierce, bloody two-day battle in March 1966, some 2,000 North Vietnamese (NVN) troops fought twenty Green Berets and 375 South Vietnamese defenders for control of the border camp. During the attack, low clouds hampered air support missions, even though 213 close air support sorties were flown by US and South Vietnamese Air Force pilots. The camp finally had to be evacuated on March 10.

Acts of bravery came in many ways during the final struggle for A Shau. One man's uncommon gallantry, however, stands out among the others.

On the morning of the second day of battle, A Shau defenders had been driven into a single bunker in the northern corner of the fort. They needed air strikes badly to slow the enemy advance. Maj. Bernard F. Fisher, an A-1E Skyraider pilot stationed at Pleiku, was among the airmen who were diverted from other missions and ordered to make strafing runs along one wall of the fort in a final attempt to stop the NVN troops.

The enemy had lined the mountain valley with twenty anti-aircraft artillery pieces and hundreds of automatic weapons, making it a deadly flak trap for the slow-moving A-1Es. Fisher knew of the dangers, as he had directed air strikes on en-

emy positions the day before. During the battle, Major Fisher heard a fellow airman, Maj. Dafford W. "Jump" Myers, radio a call for help: "I've been hit and hit hard."

Myers's Skyraider had caught fire as a result of hits by .50-caliber machine-gun bullets. He was too low to bail out, so he decided to try landing on the A Shau runway even though his vision was blocked by smoke and flame. Fisher followed alongside Myers, giving directions. Deep ruts had been cut in the 2,500-foot debris-covered field, so Myers, still following flight directions from Fisher, retracted his gear and made a wheels-up landing. "He had tried to release his belly tank, but couldn't, so it blew as soon as he touched," Fisher remembered. "The plane slid off the side of the runway nearest the enemy."

Fisher called for a rescue helicopter, then circled Myers's burning A-1E. He saw Myers run from the aircraft, his clothes smoking, and then jump into a small ditch. Believing that Myers had been seriously injured, Fisher decided that the rescue helicopter might not arrive in time to save the Major from capture.

"I'm going in," he radioed. The other A-1E pilots followed Fisher to cover his landing. One pilot said later, "It was like flying inside Yankee Stadium with the people in the

bleachers firing at you with machine guns."

Fisher tried a northern approach, but came in too fast. He couldn't stop in time, so he took off again. The enemy fired at him as he made a 180-degree turn and landed again. He turned the aircraft around and taxied back down the obstacle course of fifty-five-gallon oil drums, gaping holes from mortar blasts, and debris from Myers's A-1E.

Streams of tracers from enemy machine guns whipped around him as he looked out his window in search of Myers. Spotting Myers running and waving, he stopped and started to unstrap to get the Major. Just as he was getting out, Myers reached the aircraft. Fisher pulled him head first into the Skyraider. "It was hard on his head, but he didn't complain," Fisher recalled.

Jamming the throttle forward to the wall, Fisher took off and flew at treetop level until he had gained enough speed to climb out of the valley and safely above the clouds. Minutes later, they landed at Pleiku. Except for singed hair and eyebrows, Myers was unhurt. Maintenance crews later found nineteen bullet holes in Fisher's A-1E.

On January 19, 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson presented Major Fisher the first Medal of Honor to be awarded to an Air Force officer during the Vietnam War. In an interview with *AIR FORCE Magazine*, Fisher said he does not regret his decision to risk his life to rescue Myers. "I just felt so strong about it, and still do. You just can't leave a guy there," he explained.

Fisher, a retired Air Force colonel, resides with his family in Kuna, Idaho. He serves as a member of the state's Commission for Pardons and Parole, farms sweet corn and lima beans and raises cattle, and is a part-time pilot for a regional freight airline.

Fisher still keeps in touch with Myers, who is also retired and lives in Newport, Wash. ■



Fisher (left) and Myers after the dramatic rescue on the strip at A Shau.