

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

The Valley of Death

Maj. Bernard Fisher won a rare distinction in the bloody battle to defend an outpost at A Shau.

IN early 1966, the US held an outpost in the A Shau Valley at the extreme northwest of South Vietnam, near the border of Laos. It was lightly defended by 17 US Army Special Forces advisors and fewer than 400 South Vietnamese irregulars and Chinese Hmong mercenaries. For the North Vietnamese, however, this was a piece of high value real estate since it was adjacent to the Ho Chi Minh Trail and could provide a valuable spur to the trail.

On March 9, 1966, the outpost was attacked by a regiment-sized force of North Vietnamese regulars. They had picked a time when the valley habitually was covered by low clouds masking the surrounding 1,500-foot hills and higher peaks. The narrow valley was flanked by many enemy anti-aircraft guns and automatic weapons.

Defending the outpost under these extreme conditions was a job for the air commando units that had been reestablished in Vietnam after a lapse of several years. They were equipped with older aircraft such as the A-1E of late World War II vintage and the venerable C-47 in its gunship version. Their activities ranged from single aircraft night missions behind enemy lines to supporting air rescues and ground forces in areas where the fast movers could not be used.

On the first day of the battle for A Shau an air commando AC-47 gunship had found its way under a 400-foot overcast and attacked the enemy force, only to be shot down by ground fire. [See "Valor," *January 1988*, p. 116.] Responding to the gunship's distress call, Maj. Bernard F. Fisher of the 1st Air Commando Squadron, flying an A-1E Skyraider, was one of the first to reach the scene. He called out targets for the A-1Es that followed him, then flew cover for two C-123s that were delivering supplies to A Shau's increas-

ingly desperate defenders. Low on fuel, Fisher had to return to his base at Pleiku, South Vietnam.

On the morning of March 10, Fisher was diverted from another mission to return to A Shau. From his experience of the previous day he knew that the chance of emerging safely a second time from the Vietnamese shooting gallery was not high, but as another Air Force hero, Col. Robinson Risner, said, "A fighter pilot thinks less about risk than about his objective." Fisher found a hole in the clouds and, followed by other A-1Es, attacked the enemy force.

During the engagement another A-1E pilot, Maj. D. Wayne "Jump" Myers of the 602d Air Commando Squadron, was hit by enemy fire and called for help. His aircraft was burning but he was too low to bail out. He had no choice but to belly in on the badly damaged runway, now controlled by the enemy. Fisher talked Myers, who was blinded by smoke and flames, to a crash landing.

Myers was not able to release his belly tank, which exploded when he hit the runway. Fisher saw Myers jump from his burning aircraft and run to a bordering ditch. The rescue helicopter that he called for would take at least 20 minutes to reach the scene. Fisher decided to attempt to rescue Myers himself. In an outstanding display of airmanship, he landed on the runway that was littered with oil barrels, rocket casings, and fragments of aircraft and was pocked by holes from mortar fire. He skidded to a stop at the end of the runway, then, bracketed by enemy fire, turned his aircraft around and taxied back toward Myers' burning plane.

As he passed the downed aircraft he saw Myers jump up from the ditch and run toward him. Myers could not climb up on the wing because of prop wash, so Fisher throttled back, reached out to grasp Myers, and pulled him into the cockpit headfirst. Without taking time to buckle up, he once more turned his aircraft around, fire-walled the throttle, and took off, again avoiding the impediments on the runway. With 19 bullet



Maj. Bernard Fisher (left) poses with Maj. "Jump" Myers after the rescue.

holes in the aircraft, they cleared the mountains and made it safely to Pleiku.

At the end of the second day, the outpost had to be abandoned to the vastly superior enemy force. Rescue helicopters supported by strike aircraft evacuated the survivors. Five of the 17 US Army Special Forces men had been killed and all others wounded. Half of the South Vietnamese and Hmong defenders were lost. It was two years before the allies retook A Shau Valley.

Army Gen. William C. Westmoreland, head of the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, called the support provided by the air commando units, led by Fisher and his daring rescue of Myers, one of the most courageous displays of airmanship in the history of aviation.

In the course of the war 12 Medals of Honor, the nation's highest decoration for valor, were awarded to Air Force men, five of them to air commandos who comprised less than 10 percent of Air Force strength in the war. Among those five was Maj. Bernard Fisher, the very first airman of that war to be so honored. On Jan. 19, 1967, his medal was presented by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

After completing his Air Force career, Colonel Fisher retired at Kuna, Idaho. He divides his time between farming, public service, and a continued interest in aviation, which had been the core of his distinguished military service. ■