

If Bernie Fisher went into the airstrip at A Shau, his chances of coming out again would not be good.

Into the Valley of Fire

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HE 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.

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.

The Special Forces camp was in a remote corner of the Central Highlands and 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 valley lay beyond the range of US artillery, so its only real defense was air support.

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 A Shau Valley was six miles long and one mile wide. Hills rose up on both sides, ascending 1,500 feet above the valley floor. The valley was called "the tube" by the pilots who had to fly there.

Mountain peaks in that part of the

By John T. Correll



Maj. Bernard Fisher, top, fresh from flying interceptors Stateside, strapped on an A-1E Spad (bottom) in Vietnam. At right, Fisher is shown with his friend, Maj. Dafford "Jump" Myers. A daring, no-hope rescue of Myers led to Fisher's receiving the Medal of Honor.

highlands reached an elevation of 7,000 feet. The ocean was only 30 miles to the east, and the mountain valleys were often hidden by clouds and low-lying fog. The North Vietnamese were counting on such cloud cover to limit air support.

The NVA Attacks

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's 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.



Adapted from the Navy's World War II-era Douglas AD-5, the unglamorous A-1E was ideal for use in Vietnam. The Spad could carry lots of weapons, could stay aloft for hours, and even had room for passengers.

With the gunship gone, two A-1Es from Pleiku were diverted from other targets and sent to the aid of the fort at A Shau.

Fisher and the Spads

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.

There weren't many jets in Vietnam in the early part of the war, so Fisher had volunteered to fly the A-1E, which was in use both by the South Vietnamese Air Force and by US Air Commandos. Fisher was initially sent to Bien Hoa, where he trained South Vietnamese pilots to fly combat in the A-1E. He then transferred to the 1st Air Commando Squadron at Pleiku.

Fisher, a devout Mormon, did not drink, smoke, or use strong language, but, as a later description of him said, he was held in high esteem in a squadron of men who did all three. He had been in the Air Force for 15 years.

The single-engine A-1E Skyraider—called the “Spad” in Vietnam—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 World War II and Korea. It mounted four 20 mm machine guns and carried an assortment of bombs and rockets. 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 counterinsurgency and close air support.

There was also an A-1H, “Sandy,” a single-seat version of the airplane, which flew escort for search and rescue missions.

The A-1E Spads had two seats, side by side. There was enough space to fit 10 persons in the aft part of the cabin,



Officially called the Skyraider, the A-1 was used for low-level strikes against concealed targets and for close air support of ground units. It was the airplane of choice to keep the enemy at bay during rescues of downed airmen.

which was called the “blue room” because of the color tint on the canopy.

Silver Star Mission

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.



An AC-47 gunship tried to help the beleaguered Green Berets hold out against the North Vietnamese attack on their firebase. Flying at treetop level, the “Spooky” met its end. Rescue of its crew was a story unto itself.

The Crashed Gunship

The first aircraft coming to the rescue of the camp on March 9 was an AC-47 gunship. It made one firing pass down the valley at treetop level, then came around for a second pass. This time, the anti-aircraft gunners were primed and knocked out both of the aircraft’s engines.

The pilot, Capt. Willard M. Collins, was able to crash-land on a mountain slope five miles up the valley. The aircraft was intact, and it slid down to the base of the slope. Among the crew of six, the only one injured seriously was one of the gunners, SSgt. R.E. Foster, whose legs were broken.

Moving to a better defensive position would have meant leaving Foster behind, so Collins and the co-pilot, 1st Lt. Delbert R. Peterson, organized a defense at the crash site. They repulsed the first NVA attack, but Collins and Foster were killed in the second attack. That left four people to defend a 360-degree perimeter.

As the NVA gathered to rush them again, a rescue helicopter approached. A .50-caliber machine gun was firing from the undergrowth. Peterson, now in command, knew that it was likely to shoot down the helicopter.

Armed with an M-16 carbine and a .38-caliber handgun, Peterson charged the machine gun, which fell silent as the helicopter dropped down to pick up the other three crewmen. Under intense ground fire, the helicopter pulled away.

Collins and Peterson were posthumously awarded the Air Force Cross.

A C-130 airborne command post told Fisher to destroy the AC-47 before the NVA captured the three 7.62 mm Gatling guns, which could fire 6,000 rounds per minute and which were still in working order. 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.

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.

The Second Day

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.

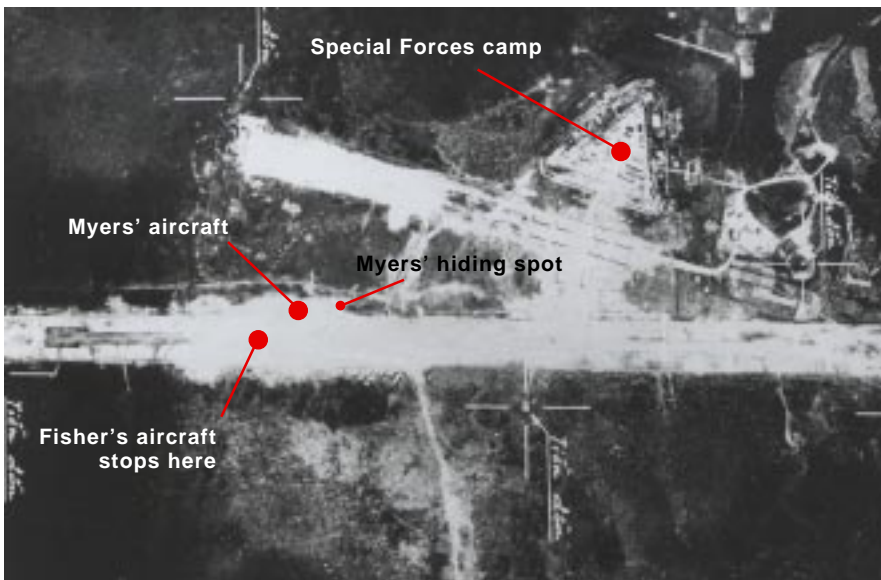
Bernie Fisher and his wingman that day, Capt. Francisco “Paco” Vazquez, were en route to provide air support to Army forces near Kontum when they got an emergency radio call to divert

to A Shau. Fisher's 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 fort 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-bit-



Myers was forced to land his crippled ship on the strip near the Green Berets' triangular firebase. The metal-plate airfield was torn up by mortar fire and pocked with craters. Fisher had to steer around chunks of Myers' A-1 (bottom photo).

ten 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.

Myers Down

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, King's 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. "I'll 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.

Fisher Goes In

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* (co-authored by Jerry Borrowman). "A helicopter crew can fire their weapons from the side doors to hold the enemy at bay while executing a rescue, but I'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."

"I'm going in," Fisher radioed.

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. "Let's keep making passes, though. Maybe they don't 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."

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.

Two Beady Eyes

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



As Fisher's Spad idled, he pulled Myers into the cockpit head first. Myers berated Fisher for a foolhardy rescue attempt that neither of them would likely survive. The rescue A-1 is now at the Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio.

Photo via Martin Winter



From left to right: A-1 pilots Myers, Fisher, Capt. Jon Lucas, Dennis Hague (looking at paper), and Francisco Vazquez, who helped buy the Green Berets time to escape A Shau, relax after the battle. All survived the war.

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 Fisher's 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 air-speed 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 Fisher's 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.

Fisher's airplane had 19 holes in it. There were 23 in Vazquez's.

Fate of the Fort

The Special Forces camp in the A Shau Valley fell to the NVA late that afternoon. Air strikes suppressed the attack long enough for rescue helicopters to pick up survivors.

The Green Berets took 100 percent casualties: five killed, 12 wounded. Only 172 of the South Vietnamese irregulars and Chinese mercenaries were evacuated, although many of the others turned up later.

"I only wish we could have done more to help them," Fisher said.

The NVA paid a heavy price for its victory. It lost 500 troops to air strikes and another 300 to ground fire.

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.

As 7th Air Force Historian Kenneth Sams said in his report, without airpower, there would have been no survivors. One of the Special Forces

defenders, Capt. Tennis Carter, said, "Without the air support you provided, we wouldn't have lasted one day."

It was two years before allied forces retook the valley. The NVA established its own camp at A Shau, ringed the valley with anti-aircraft batteries and used it as a staging area and a supply dump. In January 1968, the Tet attacks on the northern provinces were launched from A Shau.

Medal of Honor

Myers wanted to buy Fisher a year's worth of whiskey, but Fisher didn't even drink coffee. Instead, Myers gave him a Nikon camera engraved, "A Shau, March 10, 1966."

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.

Myers and Lucas were awarded the Silver Star. Hague and Vazquez received the Distinguished Flying Cross.

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.

Bernie Fisher stayed in the Air Force, retiring as a colonel in 1974. Myers died in 1992, but Fisher kept in touch with the others. At a presentation in the Pentagon honoring Fisher in 1999, the attendees included Paco Vazquez, Denny Hague, and Luke Lucas, as well as Gene Deatrick, who was commander of the 1st Air Commando Squadron at Pleiku.

Interest in the mission continues. Fisher is called upon often to tell the story. Over the years, he has made about 500 speeches.

After retirement, he went back to Idaho and became a farmer, raising seed corn, sugar beets, wheat, and alfalfa. He still lives on the farm, but rents most of it out to another farmer. ■

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