
FORTY EIGHT**The A Shau Valley**

This time it was rumored that our battalion would be going up to the A Shau Valley.

Now we had *real* cause for concern. There were three locations in this country that had gained almost legendary status as major battle areas during the course of the war. Everyone over here had heard of these places and dreaded word that they might be going to any one of them.

The first was a Marine base called Khesanh. It was close to the DMZ, or Demilitarized Zone and only some ten miles from the border of Laos. Early in the war there'd been a horrendous situation when the North Vietnamese surrounded the base. In the ensuing battles, ten thousand NVA and five hundred Americans had lost their lives.

The second infamous location was the Mekong Delta. In fact, if anyone said simply "The Delta", it was understood that they meant the Mekong. Because of the fact that there was so much swamp there to hide in, the enemy had always maintained a strong foothold. Needless to say, any unit going into that area had their work cut out for them.

The third notorious spot was the A Shau Valley. This was a huge valley in the mountains about thirty miles south of Hue. It was said that the enemy had a regular truck route in this valley through which they moved a great deal of men and equipment. Though American forces had pounded it continuously for years, with everything they had, the enemy still remained largely in control there.

I had as much foreboding about going to the valley as anyone else, yet I felt a strange kind of fascination with the idea of seeing such a well-known place.

It turned out that we were luckier than we anticipated. After flying north to Phu Bai, the entire company sitting on the floor of a C-130, we boarded Hueys for the final flight to our destination. Rather than going directly into the valley, however, we were dropped off on one of the many peaks that rose up just outside the two main ridges forming the valley's walls. The Army had set up artillery firebases on several peaks around the valley and continuously fired rounds into it at random. This harassment went on day and night, each base firing a round out approximately every fifteen minutes or so.

Our company's job was to act as security on the perimeter of one of these firebases.

The peak we were flown to had five 155mm guns stationed at the top, in an overall area of about fifty square yards. Every growing thing had been cleared from that small area so that there was nothing but dry, white, powdery dust covering the ground. The firebase was just big enough for one Huey to come in at a time and drop off its compliment of passengers in the center.

When I jumped out of the Huey, I was dazzled by the spectacular view that presented itself in all directions. Standing on this peak was like standing on top of the world. Looking to the northwest, across a jungle-covered valley, I could see the massive ridge that formed the eastern wall of the A Shau Valley. Though I couldn't see into the valley proper, on the other side of that ridge, I got a feeling for its size because the ridge ran north for as far as the eye could see.

In every other direction there were steep peaks rising from deep gorges, just as the one we were on did. This whole area was as rugged and massive as any mountain range on Earth and was all

covered in lush, dark-green jungle which meant that, if not for the Hueys, we would be totally isolated, untold miles from civilization!

As soon as I and the others jumped out of the bird, it took off and another one of those that were circling came in to drop off it's contingent. Not far below the level area at the top of the peak, where the clearing ended and the jungle began, there was a string of reinforced sandbag bunkers spaced all the way around the circumference. These were for the security force that protected the guns and their crews from attack up the sides of the mountain.

The security force was simply companies like ours that took turns occupying the mountain on a rotational basis, the same way we had at LZ Hardcore. Anytime we got a bunker roof over our heads at night, we considered it pretty good duty and they were large enough so that half a squad of men could occupy each one.

When we moved from the peak down to the bunkers, the company we were relieving moved up to be taken off.

While we were here, we would go on patrols down the sides of the mountain during the day and guard the perimeter at night. The actual perimeter was about ten feet below the line of bunkers. That way, if we should be attacked, and couldn't hold them off from there, we could pull back to the protection the bunkers offered.

During the day, when it would be nearly impossible for anyone to come up the side of the mountain, we'd spend a lot of time sitting on top of the bunkers, either reading paperbacks that the Red Cross had sent out, or cleaning our weapons and equipment.

Even here, however, there were unusual incidents that occurred during the nearly two-week period we spent on the peak. The first was just another indication of how well the human condition could adjust to almost any situation.

First of all, the particular bunker that the lieutenant, myself, the other platoon radioman, and the medic shared was located about twenty feet in front of, and about twelve feet below the muzzle of one of the 155mm Howitzers. As usual, this large artillery piece fired a round out into the valley on an average of once every fifteen minutes all through the night. Each time the gun went off, sending a round directly over our heads, dirt and debris dropped from the bunker walls with the ear-shattering vibrations.

The first couple of times this happened, we pretty nearly jumped right out of our skins, but once we got used to the regular routine of it, we slept right through each thundering boom.

Near the end of our first week I was lying on the roof of the bunker, at about the middle of the afternoon, reading a paperback. The roofs were the men's favorite spots to relax. They were covered with a corrugated steel sheet, like the ones used to build the airport runways, with a layer of sandbags on top of that. The bunkers juttied out from the side of the mountain so that sitting or lying on the roof of one was like being on a terrace with a tremendous view of the valley.

I was lying stretched out on my back, my legs crossed, enjoying the warmth of the sun and absorbed in a biography of the tragic life of the artist Modigliani. While I was reading, I felt an annoying itch or tickle on the front of my upper right thigh, just below the hip. Being so used to the nasty bite of the horseflies here I subconsciously took it for granted that this was just another one trying to get at my skin through my fatigue pants. Without taking my eyes from the book I slapped at my thigh.

Suddenly, I jumped up with a searing flash of pain, as if the tip of a red hot poker had touched my leg!

If it weren't for the pain, it would have been funny the way I scrambled to unbuttoned my pants and yanking them down around my ankles. A quick glance at my leg revealed a circular hole about a quarter inch in diameter, and just as deep, with blood oozing out. Something had taken a chunk out of me,...but what?

It was hard to imagine what could cause such a severe bite until I looked down at the pants bundled around my ankles. Crawling out over the top was a centipede. I'd seen the little brown inch-long type that flourish under just about every stone back home in the States, but never anything like this. This was truly a monster of the jungle! It seemed to keep coming and coming, as if there was no end to it. It had a flat, bright orange body about a half-inch wide with jet black legs and a horrendous set of black pincers on the head end. Not only that, but it was a good foot in length!

Not knowing what the consequences of such a bite might be, I immediately reported it to the medic who gave me a shot for poisonous snake and insect bites. While this was being done, two other men went down into the bunker where I'd seen the creature go after it left my pants. They were a bit skeptical when I told them what it was that had caused such damage to my leg, but a search revealed it hiding under one of the sandbags on the damp floor. Just as stunned by its incredible size as I had been, they killed it with a shovel.

Even with the shot the medic had given me, because of that bite, I was quite sick for a day afterwards.

The most unusual incident that took place during our stay on the mountain, however, happened on an evening at just about the end of our second week. Since I didn't have radio duty this particular night, I was on watch with the men on the lower perimeter where everything was peaceful and quite. Even at night there really wasn't too much to worry about, since no one usually ever made an attempt to come up the sides of the mountain. For one thing, it was extremely steep, dropping down into the valley with something more than a forty five degree angle, which meant that anyone trying to come up had to fight the mountain and the jungle, as well as the men defending it.

Secondly, there were four lines of defense to be gone through before an attack force would be able to claim the top. On the peak itself, of course, there were the artillery gun crews who could put up a pretty good defense from their lofty position. Then there was the circle of large bunkers which were heavily fortified. Just below these was the company perimeter where the men spent each night on watch, and finally there was a line of bangalore torpedoes below that which completely surrounded the top of the mountain.

Bangalore torpedoes were actually mines, but, because of their shape, were dubbed torpedoes. They were pieces of pipe five to six feet long and approximately three inches in diameter that were normally slid under barbed wire to blast a hole so that men could get through during an offensive attack. Here, however, they had been connected together, end to end, around the entire top of the mountain as an additional security measure against an enemy attack. This meant that the ring had to be at least five-hundred feet in diameter! Should the enemy try to come up in force, the people at the top could set the entire ring off with a single plunger.

We men on the lower perimeter had set our trip flares about thirty feet below our positions in the usual manner. Myself, Swede, and a new kid, Jimmy, were sitting on the ground behind a fallen log that had been incorporated into the perimeter for cover. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary until about ten o'clock when one of the trip flares down to our left front went off. For several moments everyone on the line, within sight of it, just stared down at the point where the flare was burning. In its light we could clearly see a single North Vietnamese soldier who had obviously been caught off guard by the flare. He was wearing the typical pith helmet, tan colored shirt, and shorts of the NVA Army, but didn't appear to be carrying any sort of weapon.

What kept us men on the line from blowing him away, since he was dead in our sights, was the way he was moving. Having been surprised by the flare, his legs were pumping up and down, like pistons, with his knees almost touching his chin and he was turning from side to side, but going nowhere.

That, and the fact that he was wearing high-top, black and white, American-made, basketball sneakers, made it look like he was doing an Oliver Hardy impression at trying to escape danger.

After several moments he bounded back down the slope, tearing crazily through vines and bush with huge strides that a man twice his size shouldn't have been able to manage. Since all these mountains looked pretty much the same, especially in the dark, it was easy to mistake one for another. The look of utter surprise on the man's face, made it clear that he had no intention of approaching our positions. He'd simply made a gross error in judgment as to where he thought he was.

Seeing such a comical sight, no one thought to shoot at him until he was well out of the light of the flare, and there wasn't any feeling of eminent attack along the perimeter.

For me and Swede, this was only the beginning of the funny side of the incident. Once the enemy soldier was gone from sight, everyone on our side of the mountain began firing down the slope into the darkness. This was really only a precaution in the unlikely event that there may have been more of them out there.

In the all the commotion, although it wasn't needed, the new kid, Jimmy, pulled the pin on a hand grenade and tossed it down to our front. He, I, and Swede ducked down behind the log waiting for the expected detonation.

Suddenly there was a tremendous explosion that literally rocked the whole top of the mountain! Large pieces of tree limbs, dirt, and stones came raining down on everyone along the entire perimeter, even on the other side of the peak!

After a brief period, the larger debris finally stopped falling, but the air was filled, almost to the choking point, with dust and falling leaves. Not only that, but with so much material falling, most of our trip flares had been set off, lighting the top of the mountain with their eerie yellow light. In the glow, Swede and I looked over at Jimmy. He was resting back against the slope, bits of leaves and twigs hanging in his hair, staring wide-eyed at the pin from that hand grenade, which he still held dangling in his hand, out in front of his face. Never taking his gaze away from it, he said one long, low word with distinct awe in his voice.

“W-o-o-o-w!!”

Swede and I just couldn't help ourselves. We rolled over sideways in uncontrollable fits of laughter. The expression on Jimmy's face was just too priceless.

Needless to say, the firing along the perimeter ceased. That blast had stunned everyone, all the way from the lower line to the artillery crews at the top. It was the biggest explosion any of us had ever heard and quite literally moved the top of the mountain!

The next morning a couple of Army engineers were flown out to try and determine how a single hand grenade could have caused such a tremendous blast. They scoured the peak, from the top down to where the ring of bangalores were located, and then made their report. It turned out that the bangalores were no longer there.

Evidently, when Jimmy tossed that grenade out,...in a million to one shot, it managed to roll down through the tangled morass of jungle foliage and rest right up against the ring of bangalores. When it went off it set the entire circle off with one horrendous blast!

The story of the great explosion on the mountaintop spread far and wide across the country and Jimmy carried that grenade pin in his helmet band for the rest of his tour.¹

On the morning of the day when our company was to leave the mountains, my platoon lieutenant decided to make an aerial recon of the valleys around the peak we were on. A Huey came out to pick he and I up, since I was the radioman on duty.

We flew around the peak in an ever widening circle, the lieutenant seated on a canvas seat against the back wall, and I sitting cross-legged on the floor in the center, the radio on my back.

Suddenly, I felt the strangest sensation. It was as if my stomach slid instantaneously up into my throat and I was floating in the air. Instinctively, I stretched out face-down in a prone position, and it

¹An interesting adjunct to this funny incident is that, years after I was out of both Vietnam and the Army, I met another veteran to whom I related the account. He surprised me when he said that he had heard of it when he was there, even though he was nowhere in the vicinity when it happened. That explosion was so huge that it literally took on a legendary quality of its own!

was immediately evident that the lieutenant felt the same sensation, since he involuntarily joined me, in that same position, on the floor.

This was the first time, in all the Huey flights I'd been on, that I felt what it was like to hit an air pocket or wind sheer. The bird literally dropped like a stone, for quite some distance, until it caught the air again. When it did, as if gravity had suddenly been re-introduced, we slammed against the floor with an unpleasant thud. It was a hell of an experience when you weren't expecting it and it didn't take the lieutenant but a couple of moments to decide he'd had enough of aerial recon. The pilots took us back to the firebase.