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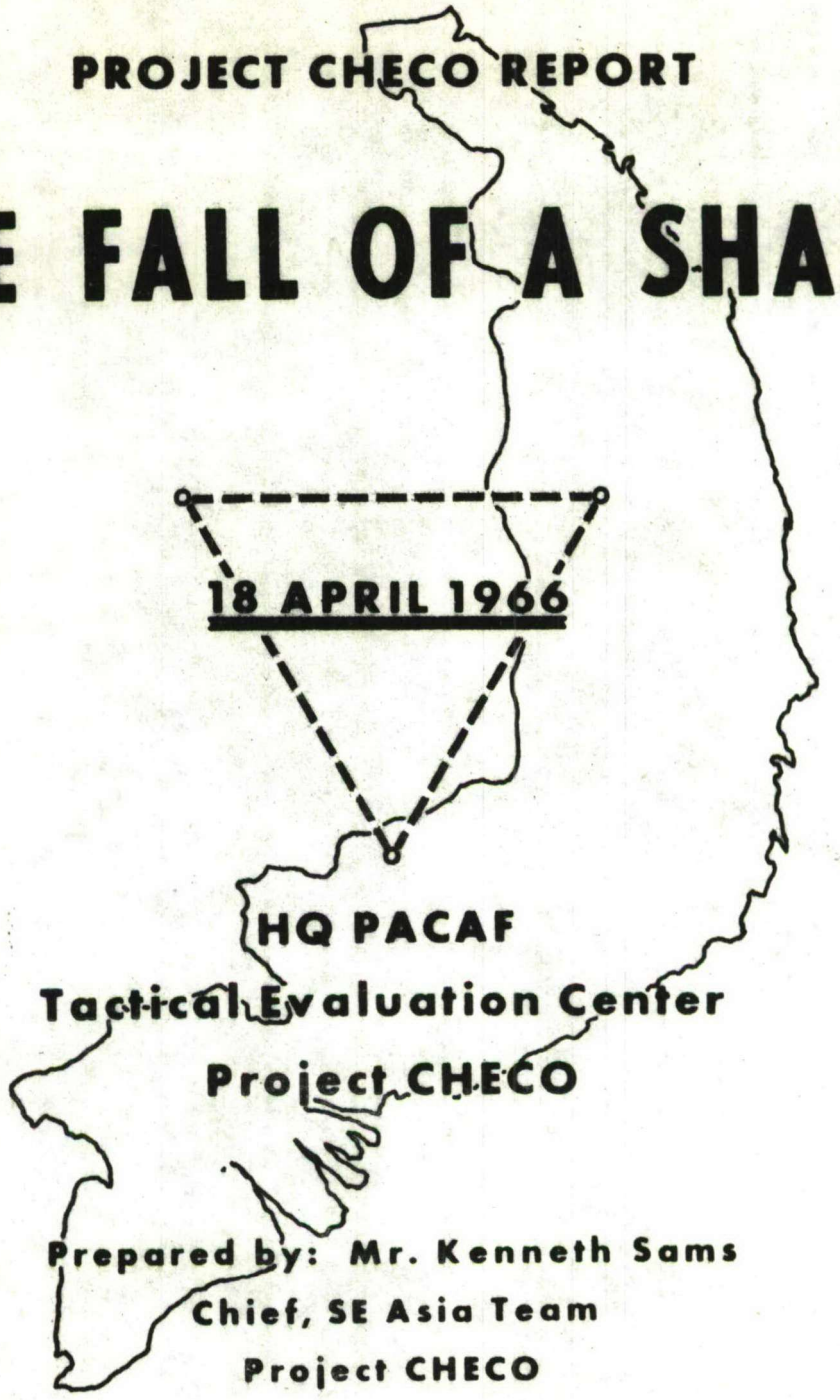
PROJECT CHECO REPORT

THE FALL OF A SHAU



18 APRIL 1966

HQ PACAF

Tactical Evaluation Center

Project CHECO

Prepared by: Mr. Kenneth Sams

Chief, SE Asia Team

Project CHECO

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Project CHECO was established in 1962 to document and analyze air operations in Southeast Asia. Over the years the meaning of the acronym changed several times to reflect the escalation of operations: Current Historical Evaluation of Counterinsurgency Operations, Contemporary Historical Evaluation of Combat Operations and Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations. Project CHECO and other U. S. Air Force Historical study programs provided the Air Force with timely and lasting corporate insights into operational, conceptual and doctrinal lessons from the war in SEA.

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THE FALL OF A SHAU

A Shau is one of several U. S. Special Forces camps located near the Laotian border in I Corps to keep watch on infiltration of enemy units into South Vietnam from the North. It has a triangular shaped fort with walls about 200 yards long with barbed wire perimeter defenses. A 2300 foot airstrip with a pierced steel planking base is just outside the perimeter. The camp is located at the base of a narrow valley some 20 miles southwest of the coastal city of Hue, and only about two and a half miles from the Laotian border.

On 5 March, 1966, two North Vietnamese Army defectors walked into Camp A Shau in Thua Thien Province and, under interrogation, reported that the camp would be attacked on 11 or 12 March. The defectors gave interrogators the location of the 325th Division Headquarters (seven kilometers east of A Shau), the 6th and 8th Battalions of the 325th Division and the coordinates of a rice cache. All of the locations given by the defectors were hit by air strikes. In anticipation of a probable attack, the camp was reenforcedon 7 March with seven U. S. Special Forces personnel, 149 Chinese Nung troops, and nine interpreters. They joined the 10 Americans and 210 Vietnamese Civilian Irregular Defense Group personnel already at A Shau.

At 0200 hours on the morning of 9 March, the camp was attacked with mortars, 75 mm recoilless rifles, automatic weapons, and small arms fire. In the initial attack, two Americans were killed and 30 wounded; Vietnamese casualties were eight killed and 30 wounded. The barrage destroyed the supply area for the 380-man camp. Medevac was requested along with air

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strikes. The enemy attack was broken off at daylight and the defenders began to repair and improve their defenses. 1/

During the night, the ceiling over the camp was 300 to 500 feet with visibility of five miles. No air strikes were flown due to the poor weather. In preparation for further enemy attacks, the I Corps commander requested that a U. S. Marine Corps standby force be alerted for airlift into the A Shau area if weather permitted and if the need arose. Also, two Chinese Nung companies, one at Hue and one at Da Nang, were standing by for helilift to the camp when the weather permitted. 2/ The first air request was received at 0908 hours, but weather initially kept planes out of the area. 3/

At 1120 hours, 9 March, an AC-47 was sent to the outpost. The crew was scrambled from bed, having flown the previous night. When the aircraft arrived over the camp, the pilot, Captain Willard M. Collins, was told by the ground forces that the camp was in imminent danger of being overrun. The ceiling was still around 400 feet but Captain Collins and his co-pilot, 1st Lt Delbert R. Peterson, made two attempts to penetrate the ceiling under visual flight conditions. A third attempt was made at treetop level and the plane was successful in reaching the fort. Under intense enemy ground fire from automatic weapons, including .50 calibers, the plane completed one pass at enemy troops surrounding the fort and on its second pass, had the right engine torn from the mounts by ground fire. The other engine was silenced seconds later. The plane crash-landed on a mountain slope, sliding to rest at the base. One crew member, SSgt Foster, broke both legs in the crash. The crew prepared a perimeter defense around the wreckage of the plane and wounded crew member, and in fifteen minutes the enemy attacked. This was

repulsed but a second enemy attack killed the pilot, Capt Collins and SSgt Foster, the wounded airman.

A third attack began as a USAF H-43 rescue helicopter dropped down to pick up the crew. During this attack, Lt Peterson charged the enemy's .50 Caliber machine gun with his M-16 rifle and a .38 caliber pistol, to permit the rescue to take place. He was successful. The chopper picked up the other three survivors and took off under heavy enemy fire, leaving Peterson and the two dead men behind. 4/

When the word was received that the AC-47 had been shot down, a flight of two A-1Es, led by Major Bernard F. Fisher, of the 1st Air Commando Squadron at Pleiku, was diverted to the scene. Locating a small hole in the overcast above five miles northwest of the camp, Major Fisher led his flight through the hole and down a mile-wide valley to the camp. The ceiling was about 500 feet and enemy automatic weapons fire, including .50 calibers, was trained on the planes. Receiving instructions to destroy the AC-47, Fisher assigned the task to his wingman and went to the assistance of the beseiged fort. Learning that enemy forces were preparing for a mass assault, he brought another flight of A-1Es into the box canyon area and directed their strikes on enemy positions less than a half mile from the fort. When this flight had expended, he directed a CH-3C helicopter into the fort to evacuate badly wounded personnel. He then returned above the overcast and brought in two C-123s to make a perilous paradrop of needed medical supplies and ammunition to the defenders. As the C-123s made their drop of some 6000 pounds on target, Fisher and his wingman suppressed hostile ground fire by strafing. Earlier, two

U. S. Army Caribous had made drops of supplies to the fort which landed outside the compound, but were later retrieved. 5/

Two B-57s joined the battle later, being led through the hole in the overcast by Fisher, who by that time, was dangerously low on fuel. The B-57s strafed and bombed enemy positions in the camp and around the AC-47 where numerous enemy troops were observed. 6/ The AC-47 was destroyed along with its valuable mini-guns around 1650 hours after napalm and bomb drops were observed making direct hits on it. In addition to the A-1E and B-57 strikes, two VNAF A-1H aircraft successfully penetrated the ceiling around 1330 hours, expending ammunition on enemy positions.

Throughout the daylight hours of the 9th, only 29 sorties could be flown in support of A Shau; 17 by the USAF, ten by the USMC, and two by the VNAF. The ground defenders, concerned about deteriorating weather and another enemy attack, repaired their defenses as well as they could and dug in for the night.

Starting around 0200 on 10 March, the enemy forces again launched a mortar attack against A Shau. The mortars, which had found their range the night before, rained shells into the compound with deadly accuracy, according to one survivor. This was accompanied by a torrent of machine gun and rifle fire. At around 0335, the camp radioed to a USAF C-123 flareship overhead that it was under full scale assault. The attack continued without let-up under the low cloud ceiling as the attackers made human wave assaults against the layers of barbed wire defenses outside the south wall of the camp. The enemy troops broke through the wire and breeched the south wall before daylight as U. S. Special Forces and Chinese

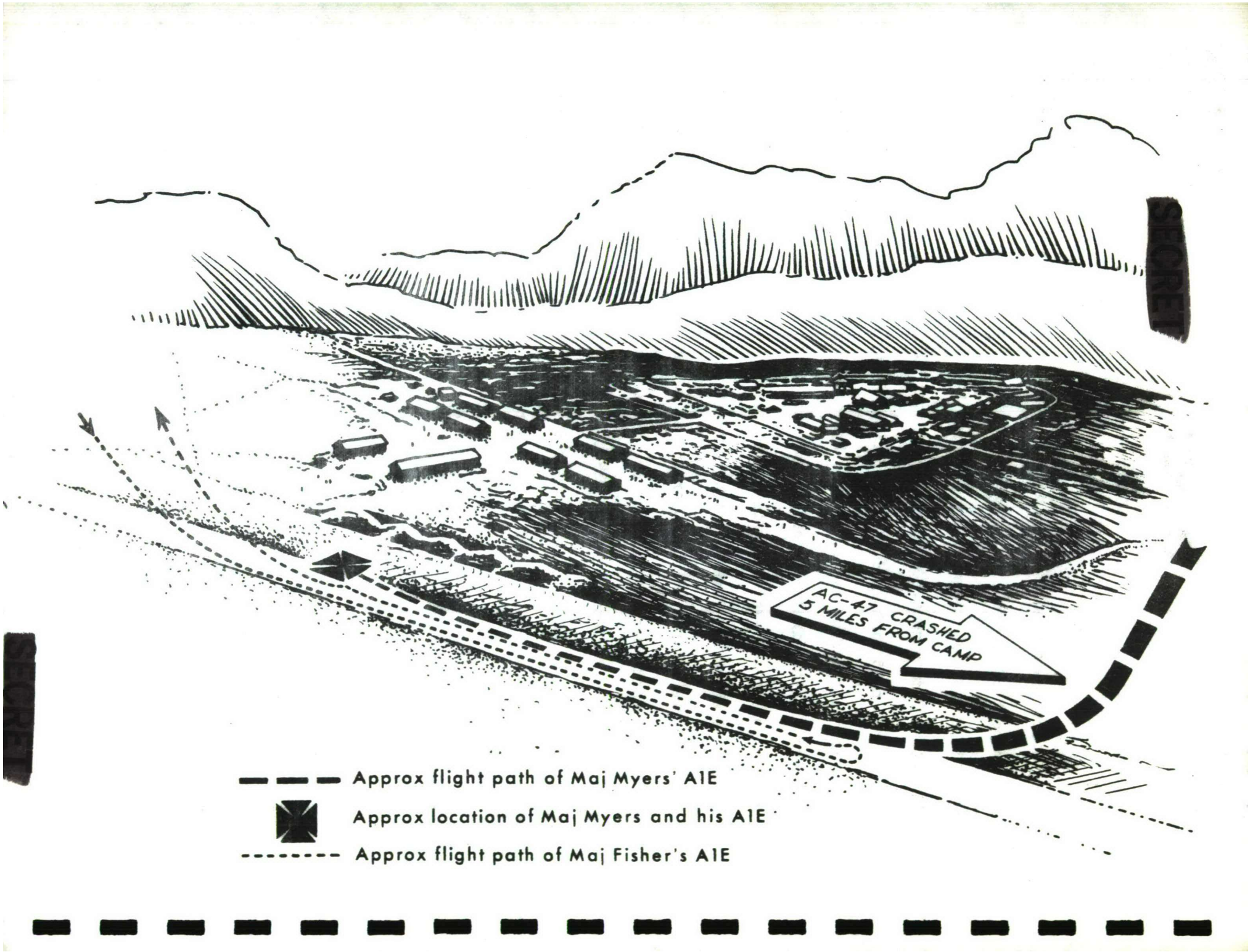
Nung Tribesmen fought them off. At this time there were also Vietnamese CIDG irregulars in the camp. The Americans and other survivors were forced to the north side of the compound and desperately waited for daylight and air support if weather permitted. 7/

Two C-123s and one AC-47 were overhead throughout the night providing flare support. From 0515 until 0630, radar bombing was conducted by U. S. Marine jet aircraft providing 19 sorties. At 0705, one USMC A4 disappeared in the heavy overcast while flying air support and was reported missing. 8/

At 0730, the 1st Division (ARVN) and the on-site Forward Air Controller reported that radio contact with A Shau had been lost. Bombing was continuing through the cloud cover, however. The cloud cover at this time was solid and layered from 200 to 7000 feet. Contact was reestablished at 0807 by the FAC, who received a report that the camp was still holding and that the air strikes were keeping the enemy back. The north wall of the camp was held by the defenders while the Viet Cong occupied the south wall and half of the east wall of the triangular fort. Around 0950, in response to ground requests, the Forward Air Controller directed a napalm attack against the south wall. The defending forces asked for all the air support they could get. Unfortunately, the weather was still down to around 800 feet. At 1100 hours, the defenders reported that they would be able to hold their positions for no more than another hour or so. Shortly after, they radioed that airdrops for resupply of ammo should not be attempted since they could not retrieve the bundles. 9/

At about 1115, a flight of A-1Es was diverted to the camp. The flight was led by Major Fisher who had flown over A Shau the previous day. He learned from the ground that all friendly forces were concentrated in the northern part of the fort and that the other walls should be strafed. Major Fisher and his wingman, Captain Francisco Vazquez, started raking the walls with 20 mm cannon. Another A-1E flight, led by Major Dafford W. Myers of the 602d Fighter Squadron from Qui Nhon, arrived on the scene and joined in the strafing passes. Major Myers' wingman, Captain Hubert King, took several hits, including one in the canopy, and he had to return to base due to limited visibility from the cockpit. On Myers' third pass over the fort at about 800 feet, he took at least three .50 caliber hits, including one in the engine. His windscreen was covered with oil, smoke filled the cockpit, and soon the whole aircraft appeared to be engulfed in flames. Under the radio directions of Major Fisher, Myers brought the plane into a wheels up crash landing on the wrecked and debris littered pierced steel plank (PSP) runway of A Shau. The plane burst into flames,when the belly tank exploded on landing,and skidded about 200 yards to the right side of the runway, veering off toward an enbankment. Myers, only superficially wounded, evacuated the aircraft immediately, and ran for a weed covered ditch off the runway. 10/

Fisher called for a rescue helicopter and circled the downed aircraft with his wingman, Captain Vazquez. After being informed that it would take 15-20 minutes for the chopper to arrive and after estimating the extent of the ground fire would not permit the chopper to land, Fisher decided to land his A-1E on the 2300 foot mortar-shattered runway to pick up his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AC-47 CRASHED
5 MILES FROM CAMP
Approx flight path of Maj Myers' A1E
Approx location of Maj Myers and his A1E
Approx flight path of Maj Fisher's A1E

fellow pilot. At this time, around 1145, another A-1E flight, composed of Captains Dennie B. Hague and Jon I. Lucas, arrived on the scene, and prepared to cover Fisher's landing. 11/

Fisher made one attempt to land from the smoke engulfed north approach, touched down, quickly realized he could not make it, and took off again. Making a 180 degree turn with enemy automatic weapons trained on his plane, he swung around, landed on the other end of the runway, dodging empty oil drums, cans, and parts of Myers aircraft and brought the plane to a halt just off the edge of the runway. Turning in the dirt, he taxied at full speed, looking out his right window for signs of Myers. He watched enemy tracers coming at him and heard the plunk of bullets in his fuselage. He saw Myers waving from his weed hide-out and brought the plane to a halt. Believing the downed pilot to be wounded, he started to unharness himself to go after him. Although he could not see Myers on the right side of the aircraft, Myers was making a 50 yard dash for the plane, with enemy bullets following him. Hague, Vazquez, and Lucas provided suppressing fire throughout the rescue attempt. However, by the time Myers was making his run to Fisher's aircraft, their guns were empty. 12/

Fisher pulled Myers into the plane head first, turned the plane around, and took off, flying at treetop level up the valley till he got enough airspeed to go up through the overcast. It was an extremely heroic feat and Fisher was subsequently recommended for the Congressional Medal of Honor. The A Shau strip was not considered safe for A-1Es even under normal circumstances. To land on its jagged, mortar-pocked surface among debris, with enemy troops all around and even firing from the hills above the

clouds, took a tremendous amount of courage and skill. Myer's words to Fisher when he was pulled into the aircraft were: "You dumb S.O.B. now neither of us will get out of here". Myers later said that if he had any way of communicating, he would have told the fighters to call off the strikes, since the enemy automatic weapons were located and concentrated for a classical aircraft trap. 13/

Despite the desperate efforts of the defenders to hold A Shau, it was decided to evacuate survivors by helicopter and get out of the camp that evening. The estimated three enemy battalions of the 95B Regiment of the 325th Division were too much for the defending force in view of the poor weather which restricted air strikes. On 10 March, although 210 sorties were flown in support -(103 USMC, 67 USAF, 19 USN, and 12 VNAF), 14/ bad weather impeded their effectiveness and forced strike aircraft to low altitudes where their vulnerability was increased. 15/

At around 1700, U. S. Marine helicopters went in to evacuate the wounded, extracting 69 personnel. The camp was officially closed at 1745 hours on 10 March. The complement at A Shau originally consisted of the 17 Americans, 149 Chinese Nung mercenaries, and 219 Vietnamese irregulars. U. S. Special Forces personnel suffered 100% casualties - 5 killed and 12 wounded. Only 172 Vietnamese were evacuated, the rest being listed as missing in action, although many of these turned up later. It has been estimated that the Viet Cong lost about 300 to ground fire and estimated 500 killed by air strikes. In addition to the ground casualties, the U. S. lost one in the A4 crash, two dead and one missing in the AC-47 crash, and four Marine crewmen missing after the crash of an H-34 during

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the extraction operation on the 10th.

The loss of A Shau was a substantial ground victory for the enemy, yet it was plainly evident that without air power there would have been no survivors. A B-52 strike planned for the 10th of March near the camp was cancelled when it was discovered that the strikes would be in the route of friendly personnel evacuating the camp. A B-52 raid was conducted at A Shau using CBU munitions on the 19th of March 1966. Tactical air strikes against enemy positions at A Shau continued for the following week with aircraft strafing and bombing the enemy-held installations of this former Special Forces camp.

There is some consensus among USAF pilots that the camp could have been saved if the defenders had been able to hold out for one more night. The weather cleared partially on the morning of the 11th, and under the clearer skies U. S. aircraft might well have been able to repeat the performance at Plei Me, where pinpoint napalm and bombing attacks on the camp's perimeter kept the enemy at bay. Unfortunately, this was not possible at A Shau.

General William C. Westmoreland, Commander, U. S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, congratulated U. S. airmen who provided close support to A Shau's defenders. In a message to the 2d Air Division, General Westmoreland said: 16/

> "...The air support provided by Marine and Air Force units at the recent battle of A Shau Special Forces Camp was equal to any in aviation history. The repeated heroic deeds of the transport, fighter, and helicopter crews and forward air controllers, accomplished under extremely adverse conditions, reflects the utmost credit on the crews themselves and their respective services...."

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Perhaps the most glowing tribute to the role of air power in the battle of A Shau came from one of the Special Forces defenders, Captain Tennis Carter, who said, "Without the air support you provided, we wouldn't have lasted one day. If you hadn't flown at all, the Special Forces wouldn't have blamed you. It was suicidal, but you carried out your mission anyway. I wouldn't have done it".

THE FALL OF A SHAU

Footnotes

(References as noted provided in Copies 6 and 40)

1/ (C) Msg I DASC to 2AD, I DASC 00451, 091015Z Mar 66. (Doc 1.)

2/ Ibid.

3/ (S) Msg, 2AD to CSAF, DP 05670, 14 Mar 66.

4/ Citation for Award of Silver Star to Lt Peterson, prepared 12 Mar 66. (Doc 2.)

5/ Msg, IACS, Pleiku to USAF, IACS 00145, 11 Mar 66. (Doc 3.)

6/ (C) Msg, MACV to JCS, MACV 07602, Sitrep 68, 101003Z Mar 66.

7/ Stars and Stripes, Pacific Edition, 23 Mar 66.

8/ (S) Msg, 2AD to CSAF, U-55 Report, DO 05670, 14 Mar 66. (Doc 4.)

9/ (C) Msg, I DASC to 2AD, DASC 00455, 100715Z Mar 66. (Doc 5.)

10/ Interview by Ken Sams with Major Bernard F. Fisher, Major Dafford W. Myers, Captain Jon I. Lucas, and Captain Dennis B. Hague, 12 Mar 66.

11/ Ibid.

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13/ Ibid.

14/ (S) Msg, 2AD to CSAF, DO 05670, 14 Mar 66. (Doc 4.)

15/ (S) Weekly Intelligence Summary, 2AD DI, 18 Mar 66. (Doc 6.)

16/ 2AD DOI New Release, 15 Mar 66. (Doc 7.)

17/ 2AD OI New Release, 20 Mar 66. (Doc 8.)