

Ashau Valley -- 1966

The Bugsmasher stumbled from one air column to the next as it skirted the eastern slope of the Assam Range en route to the grass strip at Dong Mai at the north end of the Ashau Valley. Off to the right at the edge of the broad coastal plain, sits the provincial capitol of Hue and its citadel. Farther east, the South China Sea sparkled as shafts of morning sunlight accented its deep blue hues emerging from a stunning swath of emerald close to shore. It was barely nine in the morning, yet already, ominous banks of cumulonimbus were hatching from the mountains like time-lapse mushrooms.

Gho Minh hardly noticed the spectacle, his mind on the Special Forces camp at the southern end of the Ashau Valley, a scant fifteen miles from his own base camp. Already, gun emplacements were under construction in the surrounding hills in preparation for next month's planned attack. The base, sitting astride Route 9A from Laos, constituted a nettlesome bottleneck to the flow of supplies into the coastal areas of northern South Vietnam, so Giap had decided as far back as September that it needed to be eliminated. Now, in February, the time for action was near at hand, with training in full swing at the base camp at Ho An Ca.

Looking down the Ashau Special Forces camp, Gho Minh saw that more construction has taken place along the north wall with the addition of inner and outer trenchlines and a general clearing of fire lanes toward the northwest. From an altitude of 6,500 feet he watched as a pair of helicopters lifted off, wheeling away to the southeast, and he made a mental note to spend more time flying with Air America. What he had seen in the brief overflight would save many casualties when the siege began and the perspective from the air added a new dimension to his ground reconnaissance efforts.

The base, he knew, was manned by a platoon of U.S. Special Forces advisors, two companies of Nung, and several hundred CIDG (Civilian Irregular Defense Group) mercenaries originally recruited by the Americans for their technical skills, but more recently converted by the Special Forces into a military organization.

Of the bunch, militarily the Nung were the most significant. They were Vietnamese of Chinese origin, proud and aloof with equal disdain for everyone around them. They disliked the Vietnamese with almost as much venom as they did the Chinese, tolerating the Americans only to the extent that payday occurred routinely every fortnight. The CIDG troops were a joke. In the beginning, the idea was for them to apply their skills to increasing the self-sufficiency of the rural villages that dotted the countryside. It seemed like a good idea at the time, carrying with it long-range benefits for the villagers themselves who became more productive in the wake of the program. Interestingly however, it was Hanoi that reaped the benefits, not Saigon, relieving a major logistics problem for the NVA. This increased productivity gave the North Vietnamese a reliable food supply in South Vietnam, allowing them to turn more of their supply capacity over to weapons and munitions. The villagers complained, but it didn't matter. Armed soldiers in each village saw to it that the peasants toed the

mark, tendering to Saigon what was Saigon's and passing along the rest to the NVA. The villagers were no better off than they were before the CIDG program arrived.

Now that their original program had been all but terminated, the CIDG became a thorn in the side of the Special Forces who tried vainly to turn them into soldiers. Many had already defected, and Gho Minh had little doubt that when the shooting started, many more would run, perhaps even to the point of precipitating a stampede which would leave the base all but defenseless. This was not guesswork on his part. The CIDG was full of fifth-columnists and Gho Minh had gone to great length to infiltrate several hand-picked regulars into the Ashau contingent both to provide a reliable flow of first hand information on activities at the base and to be ready to spark insurrection when the attack began.

As the base fell from view behind him, Gho Minh leaned back in the seat, satisfied that the preparations for the assault were adequate. Relaxed, eyes closed visualizing the conduct of the attack, he was totally unprepared for the violent crash and yaw that sent him flying headfirst into the seat frame in front of him and then in a whipping motion out into the aisle where he dashed his head on the spar box separating the cabin from the cockpit area.

To Gho Minh in his dazed state, what followed was a nightmare of careening and slewing and air rush and yelling as the aircraft staggered under its wounds. It was a rod cap in the right engine that failed, allowing its piston to crash into the crankcase where it jammed solid, breaking the engine's articulating rod. The engine went off like a grenade, all but wrenching itself off its mounts as it spewed molten chunks of metal in all directions. Bobbie (who as pilot-in-command sat in the left seat) reacted to the emergency automatically, disconnecting the supplies of fuel, oil, and hydraulics entering the engine through the emergency firewall cutoff control valve. But the propeller, now free from restraint of engine oil pressure, spun up to some impossible rpm and separated explosively from the crankshaft. Like some avenging demon, the two-bladed scythe entered the cabin just behind the co-pilot's head, cleaving its way through like a buzz-saw until it exited next to the window adjacent to where Gho Minh but seconds before had been sitting.

As his senses returned, Gho Minh could see that the plane was in a steep left bank with thick black smoke pouring off the up-tilted wing. Below, the hills and jungle whirled by in a kaleidoscope of colors. Bobby and Houdini worked frantically to bring the aircraft under control. In the midst of the chaos Gho Minh watched in horrified amazement as Watanabe braced himself between two seats and began mechanically clicking off shots as if this were some sort of sporting event. As he came to the end of the roll, he rewound the film into its canister, opened the camera, threaded new film onto the crank, checked all of the settings, and went back to work. Paralyzed by fear, Gho Minh was furious.

"If y'all would kindly take your seats, now," Bobby shouted, leaning far back into the cabin to make himself heard above the slipstream, "we're going to land this little old critter."

Bucking and wallowing, yawed far to the right to keep the smoke and flames away from the cabin, the Bugsmasher made a swift steep descent into the valley. Up front, Houdini cycled the landing gear switch to the down position. When nothing happened, he shrugged and began the laborious task of lowering the wheels with the emergency hand crank. After a dozen turns, it jammed solid and he threw up his hands in despair. The ground rushed up and at the last moment, Bobby closed the left throttle while Houdini secured all the switches.

The plane touched down gently on its tail and after a short ride, it rocked forward onto its belly. It was all very smooth with only the grinding noise to attest to the plane's perilous condition. Inexorably, the plane began to slew to the left, drifting to that side of the runway and its adjacent drainage ditch. Its momentum spent, the aircraft left the runway at a walk and nosed easily into the ditch, coming finally to rest with its tail sticking sixty degrees into the air. Already there were people running toward the smoking wreckage. While Houdini popped the overhead hatch in the cockpit, Bobby turned his attention to the passengers.

"Ashau, gentlemen. Now if you'll kindly unstrap one at a time and move forward to the cockpit we'll begin deplaning." He paused for a moment as Watanabe levered his way downward, then a grin lit his face from ear to ear. "There'll be a slight delay before continuing the flight."

Gho Minh sat on the grass at the edge of the runway, fifty feet from where a bucket brigade had formed to draw water from the drainage ditch to toss on the still smoldering hulk. A hospital corpsman trotted up and began ministering to the cut high up on his forehead. He was still a little dazed and enervated in the excitement, but apart from that he was fine.

"Better move back, Tojo," warned Bobby, taking Gho Minh by his collar helping him to his feet and propelling him at a purposeful pace another hundred yards from the airplane.

"The fuel tank's leaking into that benjo ditch," he confided with great relish. "Just about now, there ought to be a bucket of AvGas landing on th . . ."

He didn't finish the sentence because all at once, tentacles of flame snaked out of the blackened nacelle and raced up the wing. Before anyone had a chance to move, a livid fireball belched 50 feet into the air, its appearance accompanied by a leaden *whump!*

The fire spread quickly down the ditch where men were busy bailing buckets of fuel-contaminated water. The boiling flames paused slightly before racing back up the bank into the brigade line itself. Soon there were burning bodies whirling and leaping in a macabre frenzy. Some writhed on the ground in a vain attempt to

smother the flames while others ran heedlessly back toward the camp, human torches touching off brush in the open field. It was over in less than five minutes and while the hulk would continue to smolder for more than a day, the dead and wounded were policed up and borne to their appropriate resting places within the hour.

"You watch, Tojo," Bobby winked at Gho Minh, his ever-present smile firmly in place. "They'll write this up as a bunch of suspected Vietcong killed or wounded in a firefight. MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) will love it." Just for a moment a frown crossed Bobby's face. "Who knows, they might be right at that."

"More right than you think," mused Gho Minh. "and a lot who weren't Cong before, are now."

Bobby, Houdini, Watanabe, and Gho Minh were sitting in the mess tent each deep into his own thoughts, when the flap opened admitting a Special Forces Captain who looked around uncertainly, struggling to adapt to the light. Finally he spied the group and made his way to their table.

"I guess you had a little excitement out there today, Mr. Minh," he gushed, preparing to sit. "Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all, Colonel," Gho Minh lied glibly, watching the captain glow with pride as if the promotion were for real. "Yes, it was quite a ride. I'm terribly sorry about your men."

"It was a tragedy all right, but we caught the little bugger who started the fire. Before he died, he told us that most of the victims were Vietcong, so it could have been worse." Gho Minh adopted his most somber "ah, the trials and tribulations of command" expression for the occasion.

"Anyway, the reason I stopped in to see you was I hear you're on your way to Dong Mai." He looked at Gho Minh for confirmation before continuing. "Look, I'll have my driver run you up there this afternoon, but maybe there's a favor you can do for me."

"Certainly, Colonel. I appreciate your kindness. How may I be of service?"

"We have a man up there - at least we used to - keeping an eye on things for us. Lic Son's his name. The trouble is that we haven't heard from him in over a week, and I'd like to find out what's happened to him. It's difficult for one of us to go in there and ask questions because we don't want to compromise him. If you could make discreet inquiries it would help us a lot, if you know what I mean."

"Ah yes, Colonel. I know exactly what you mean," he agreed with mock sincerity, chuckling inwardly at the thought that it was he who had set into motion the plan to have Lic Son serve as informer. "The Vietcong try to

discourage cooperation with the Americans, even at a place so peaceful as Dong Mai. I will be happy to do as you ask and send word back with your driver. Now, may I ask an additional favor of you?"

"Anything."

"Could Watanabe here go along with me. I wish the world to see how well the pacification program is working here."

When it came time to leave, Bobby came over and gave him a big bear hug. "Sorry about the trip, Tojo," he said sincerely. "I sure hope you get over your headache soon."

"I'm fine, Bobby, and I thank you and Houdini for saving our lives." He started toward the jeep, then turned back. "If you're ever in the area and need a good meal and a little nooky, drop into the strip at Dong Mai. It's a nice village and we make a pretty mean rice wine."

The Jeep was nearly new, yet already it was close to becoming a basket case. Wiring dangled below the dash panel. The engine spat and wheezed at the slightest provocation. The body was encrusted in mud from front to back and the left headlight was missing from its bracket. The driver was a nineteen year old, fuzzy-faced towhead from Memphis whose expertise behind the wheel led Gho Minh to suspect that he had never seen a vehicle before he came to Vietnam. He weaved back and forth across the road for no apparent reason, hitting or missing the ruts on a random basis. After a while, he pulled over to the side of the road and took a pouch from his pocket. Creasing a piece of paper, he placed a small string of what appeared to be tobacco inside and dexterously wrapped it into a tube. Finally, he cupped his hands against the wind and lit up, inhaling deeply. Holding his breath for several seconds, he exhaled slowly, repeating the ritual two more times. At last he settled back with a huge grin.

"Go on," he offered amiably, "take a drag."

The photographer smiled toothily but declined. Gho Minh was curious. He had smoked American cigarettes, of course, but never one rolled from scratch. He took the tube and puffed lightly, thinking what a different taste it had from others he had tried.

"Here, Tojo, let me show you." Again the lad inhaled deeply, holding the draft for several seconds. Then, as before, he repeated the ritual three times. Gho Minh wasn't sure, but he thought he saw the boy's eyeballs cross for just a second.

He was nothing if not a fast learner, duplicating the procedure down to the last detail. Handing the tube back, he found himself unimpressed by the taste, but just to make certain, he repeated the operation one more time when once again the tube was offered.

Two hours and two joints later, they roared into Dong Mai swacked to the gills, giggling and carrying on like a couple of long-lost buddies. The Jeep looped to a stop, barely missing the stilts of the largest hootch in town. The photographer - the very one who had remained stoically at his post in the plane when all appeared lost - was cringing in terror and it was fully ten seconds after they stopped before he dared open his eyes.

Gho Minh jumped down with a big grin plastered on his puss to the utter consternation of his troops who were at a loss what to do. Obviously they weren't to salute, but here was their Colonel acting very out of sorts. Perhaps it was a Yankee trick and the village was about to be overrun.

"Wait here," he told the driver as he headed into the structure which served as his headquarters. As he mounted the steps, the effects of the weed departed in noticeable stages until, by the time he ducked through the door, it was as if none of it had ever happened.

"Where's Lic Son?," he demanded of his executive officer who had yet to recover his composure following Gho Minh's dramatic arrival.

"He's with his platoon on a forced march. They should be back tonight or tomorrow."

"You know he's supposed to be looking out for American interests here. How can he do that if you've got him running all around the countryside playing soldier?"

"He is a soldier, sir, and your orders were very explicit. 'Nobody gets out of the forced march,' you said, and that's why Lic Son is out in the boonies."

"Ok. You're right, but in the future, use your head. What I don't need is for them to get the idea that Lic Son is not to be trusted. Luckily, I can square it this time, but there better not be any more screw-ups."

Getting the driver motivated to take it on down the road was no easy matter. He kept trying to get the horn to bleat to no avail. Then he cranked the engine with the ignition switch in the off position until, by the time he figured out his mistake, the battery was dead. In the end they had to push him to get the Jeep started.

"Tell your Colonel that Lic Son has been on a religious retreat for several days but that he will be back tomorrow," he confided in the driver. "By the way, what do you call that tobacco?"

"Man, that's not tobacco, Tojo," the driver explained patiently, "it's Maui Wowie, the best there is." He pulled out the pouch and separated out a pile which he handed to Gho Minh along with several sheets of paper. "Have fun, babe," he laughed as he hauled the shift lever into low gear with an ominous growl and popped the clutch sending a shower of dirt into the assemblage awaiting his departure.

That night, as Gho Minh lay in bed reviewing the day's lessons, what stood out foremost in his memory were the incredible sensations the little cigarettes produced. Despite the split in his forehead, he had all but forgotten the close call of the plane wreck and the carnage that followed. Something deep within was telling him that marijuana was important and as he drifted to sleep, a plan began to take shape.

The battle for the Special Forces camp at Ashau had gone easier than Gho Minh could have dared dream, which is not to say that it didn't have its moments. The attack began at dawn under cover of a low overcast preventing any effective air support for the defenders during the early stages of the battle. The fight was barely joined before the Special Forces and Nung found themselves caught in a crossfire between Gho Minh's troops attacking the perimeter from the east and the CIDG troops manning the north wall of the redoubt. Within two hours, the outer defenses were breached and Gho Minh's soldiers roamed the inner perimeter looking to mop up the remnants of resistance along the south wall. Just as the climax appeared to be at hand, a pair of U.S. Air Force Skyraiders lumbered into the fray below the overcast, scattering the attack and allowing the defenders time to regroup.

The anti-aircraft positions dug into the surrounding hills opened up and almost immediately dense smoke began to boil out of the cowling of the lead plane. For an instant, Gho Minh felt compassion for the pilot, remembering with terror his own experience over this very same airfield. Then his feelings turned to amazement and finally shock as the stricken airplane, its landing gear suddenly extended, made a beeline for the very spot where he was standing. At once it came to him. He was standing in the middle of the runway and that was where the pilot intended to land. He found himself with most of his soldiers running for the drainage ditch along side of the runway. Forgotten was the near triumph of just moments before. Lost too, in the headlong plunge for the safety of the fecund waters was the initiative that had been theirs from the very first. When Gho Minh resurfaced and cleared his vision, the Skyraider was out of sight at the far end of the field, a trail of grey-blue smoke marking his route.

Dumbly, he was on his feet running after the plane with the rest of his troops, bent on exacting revenge for the humiliation he had just suffered. Dimly at first, and then in a burst of cognition, Gho Minh knew that something dire was about to happen. Even before he turned to face the on-coming airplane, he knew he would be face to face with a hail of bullets from its eight 20 millimeter cannon. But it was more awesome than that.

It took an instant to grasp the significance of the apparition which bore down upon him from now no more than 100 meters. It, like its predecessor, approached ominously with gear extended, nose cocked high for landing. For the second time in thirty seconds, Gho Minh found himself sprawled face down in abject terror, envisioning himself sliced into canvass wrapped salami by the four-bladed propeller which mangled the air in a vicious succession of clubbing swipes. The Skyraider's landing gear slammed down, straddling Gho Minh, propeller and tail wheel skimming not more than six inches above his supine misery. Pressing himself deeply into the sod, he would have remained there for all eternity, had not the excited shouts from his troops brought him back to the present. Gathering himself quickly, he gained his feet in time to see the second airplane wheel back around toward him like an avenging devil, the pilot of the first plane stuffed head first into the cockpit with his legs flailing in the slipstream.

It was too much for Gho Minh who was by now so drained of emotion that it never occurred to him to clear out of the way or even dive to the ground. He just stood there watching as the behemoth loomed larger by the instant in its rush for the sky. It seemed impossible, but the plane - propeller and all - missed him, though there were those who swore that Gho Minh had actually passed through the prop's arc. Long after the Skyraider had clawed into the overcast dragging its fury behind, Gho Minh stood transfixed, oblivious to the stinging and snapping sounds of spent small-arms rounds whizzing about as the fighting resumed.

It was Lic Son who finally succeeded in bringing Gho Minh back to the present, explaining that they needed to regroup before continuing the attack. Reluctantly he agreed, ordering the sounding of retreat while standing at the threshold of victory. It was a wise decision as the clouds lifted, permitting enemy fighter/bombers access to the valley floor. Unable to make a concerted assault under such conditions, Gho Minh's troops kept up a steady barrage on the base, sending small units inside the perimeter to disrupt communications between the CIDG on the north wall and the Special Forces detachment dug in to the south.

On the third day of the siege, the fight was over. Helicopters arrived to retract the beleaguered Special Forces unit which had taken nearly fifty percent casualties. The low clouds helped the evacuation which started out smoothly. Then as their numbers diminished, the remaining Special Forces found themselves under assault by the CIDG attempting to escape annihilation. The Americans suffered more casualties the final half-hour than during the rest of the operation combined. Finally, after the last helicopter had paddled away out of the valley, Gho Minh's troops made one last sweep through the demolished base and departed to prepare for the next mission.

That evening, back at Dong Mai, Gho Minh held an award ceremony where he heaped lavish praise on his weary but victorious soldiers. The rain, which had held off during the siege, began as he spoke, muting the distant thunder of bombs pulverizing the abandoned base at Ashau. The combination lent the ceremony a

dreamlike and timeless quality, adding to the poignancy of the scene. Gho Minh was saddened by the loss of thirty-one men, but he was thankful that of the forty-five wounded, all but five would return to ranks again within the month.

As a fitting close, Gho Minh called Lic Son from ranks and presented him with the Hero of the People Medal, Second Class, the nation's second highest award.

"It's not the real thing," he explained, pointing out the makeshift construction of the medal, "but it's the best we can do for the time being." He struggled unsuccessfully for nearly a minute trying to affix the award to Lic Son's uniform. Handing the clay replica to the young soldier, Gho Minh eyed him intently.

"Thank you for your service to me, Lic Son. Come by my office after formation. I have a new assignment for you."