



## ASHAU

Colonel Phan of the headquarters section Third People's Army (PAVN) sat soaking in a hot tub in the Embassy Hotel in downtown Danang. It was his last night of R&R and he intended to make the most of it.

Enjoying the tranquility of the bath with him were a Japanese press photographer from Asahi Shimbun and two beefy Air America pilots. Their meeting was fortuitous for Phan, not only because it solved the problem of how he was going to rejoin his command at Hoi An Ca after a protracted strategy meeting in Danang, but having the photographer along was just that kind of blind luck that made belief in a divine establishment momentarily inviting.

"Hey, Tojo," drawled one of the pilots with good old down home amiability plastered all over his florid face, "any of them gooners up there where we're going?"

"Are nothing but peasants and loyal ARVN in Hoi An Ca. All very copacetic. No VC; no VD; no trouble for honorable Yankee sky pilots." It might appear to some that Phan's words were less genuine than his smile, for it so happened that Hoi An Ca was North Vietnamese Army territory down to the last inch. But since the PAVN trained and staged supplies in the area for raids elsewhere, the last thing they wanted was to bring trouble on their heads, so it was all the same.

"I'm Bobby," the pilot said, offering his hand. "Me and Houdini here ain't looking for any more trouble for a while," he continued. "We've had enough of that over by the Laotian border for the last three weeks."



"My name's Carl," the other said without offering to shake. "Bobby's just not used to landing on postage stamps with automatic weapons going off all over the place. He thinks that it's a little more fascinating than his four grand a month is worth."

Bobby gave him a curious look but said nothing.

Phan couldn't blame the Air America pilots for their apprehension. There had been a critical mistake less than two months before when a bunch of hotshot Cong down near the town of Vitanh in the Delta had shot down an Air America DC-3 and then murdered and mutilated the crew. The was a hell of a row, with CIA staunchly maintaining that there would be no more R&R flights for the NVA. The situation was desperate as it would have severely hampered North Vietnamese command and control activities in the south. Finally, an agreement was worked out in which the scalps of the murderers were turned over to CIA along with a guarantee of safety for Air America flights in Vietnam. In return, Air America agreed to reestablish R&R flights throughout South Vietnam with the proviso that it would be on a space available basis so as not to look too hokey.

Additionally, a new set of Rules of Engagement were adopted, forbidding U.S. aircraft from attacking North Vietnamese aircraft that were not showing hostile intent. Hostile intent, as it evolved, required that the aircraft in question actually be engaged in a firing pass on a US aircraft, not merely peripherally present no matter how threatening that presence might seem to American pilots. It was the aerial equivalent of "in and out the border" games played along the Laotian and Cambodian borders by the ground troops.

Phan's smile widened as he thought, you've got to love these imbeciles for the absurdities they live with.



It might seem strange to some, but Phan didn't mind the American presence in his country in the least. Their stay wouldn't last much longer, indeed the trick was to make certain they stayed long enough that when it ended Vietnam would be strong enough and wealthy enough to stand on its own as the principal power in Southeast Asia.

When the French first arrived, they had understood where the action was, solidifying their position in no time at all. But as time went by, their guilt began to get the better of them and they chose to wring blood from the trees rather than from the feudal overlords, who came more and more to despise them for their weaknesses.

The Japanese were smart enough to leave the administrative apparatus alone during their occupation during World War Two, harvesting the fruits of French Colonialism without having to tie up unnecessary men and materiel. Japan's Greater Southeast Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere cut so deeply into French influence in Indochina that when America put them out on a limb in 1954 (indeed helped saw it off) their stewardship came to an ignominious end with the fall of Dien Bien Phu.

In came the Americans with their money and their hordes of infantile do-gooders bent on bringing liberty to the oppressed masses. The results were diametric.

What made the Americans perfect for the role of liberator was the almost incomprehensible arrogance of their bureaucratic leaders aided by the greediness of their lesser functionaries whose sublime talents lay in their universal callousness to the plight of peoples everywhere. Humanity to them was most any act of self-interest that left its recipient in a fawning position. Despite the exaltation of their perch, even the emperors of long forgotten dynasties viewed the kowtow with a detached amusement



and would have been hard-pressed, no doubt, to keep a straight face watching these pompous nitwits in action.

Best of all was the fact that none of these ignoramuses seemed to have the slightest notion of who was important and who wasn't. Nor did they seem to care. In the same way their troops would as quickly belly up to Montanyard matrons or Chinese paddy stompers, the USAID ignoramuses persisted in creating pimps and lackeys from the lines of incompetent no-accounts who showed up in droves ready to shine shoes or murder their countrymen, while the overlords of Vietnam's vulnerable (but still viable) feudal structure were left to their own devices.

Everywhere the Americans went, they arrived with a fanfare and innocence that defied understanding. They blew wads of money buying up all the moral cretins they could find to make certain (so it seemed to Phan) that everything they tried was doomed to failure.

And why should it be different. Americans were drilled from birth to concern themselves with a thing called principle, the mandate of which could be changed from time to time by their masters to suit the occasion. Actually, principle was a slight veneer for principal, but it was impolitic to suggest such a thing. The rank-and-file nitwits from the land of plenty couldn't see that life and death in Asia revolved around family and fate. Principle had nothing to do with it.

Lenin would have puffed with pride had he but lived to see the continuation of his handiwork. America's aristocracy showed an amazing flair for organizing and presiding over the dismantling of history's most successful experiment in inclusive diversity. They began by reposing power in the hands of incompetent bureaucrats and two-bit



functionaries whose road to achievement lay in their ability to have procured a white collar work permit from those simpering ivory-tower Quislings whose intellectual honesty stemmed from the certain knowledge that playing ball in school was far more than a recreational pursuit.

Impressive was their understanding that through the idiotic offices of these degenerates, the excesses of capitalism, wrought over two centuries by the villainy of hard work and individual initiative (that Americans were told threatened global peace by challenging the pretense of the world's oligarchs that their vision of the New World Order is based on some secret wisdom imparted to them for our benefit and their safekeeping) were brought under control.

Better still was their ability to mobilize the Wobblies when it came time to prepare the turf for their depredations. But their absolute genius for mass manipulation came to the fore in their mustering of a fierce moral indignation for the reticence of many of the citizenry to swell the ever-increasing rolls of shattered bodies hobbling about on stumps, tapping potholes with white canes, and hoisting beer cans with metal claws.

It was precisely because of their gift for self-deception propelling perfectly good people to work toward their mutual destruction that Americans offered Vietnam the bright hope for an independent and prosperous future free from Chinese, Russian, French, Japanese, Formosan, Filipino, and most especially American control. Not for a thousand years had the future held so much promise.

As for the photographer, Watanabe was a gift from heaven - a chance to show the world the wonders of Pax Americana. Hoi An Ca would be the showplace of the pacification



program, providing the world's press with a cornucopia of evidence provided that the American presence in Vietnam was at once a blessing and a necessity. When at last the citizens from across the sea had been bled dry of money and blood, Vietnam would be strong enough to demand concessions.

"Keep your dollars coming," he mused, abandoning himself to the pleasure of the water.

"Yankee stay here."

Carl and Bobby would have been shocked by Phan's outlook, but it wasn't as if they were particularly naive. Both were retired military pilots, lured away from a life of genteel and boring poverty by the promise of action and profit. Both had families with kids in college and both liked their pleasures. Beyond these, the two were worlds apart.

Bobbie was a Southerner, steeped in the attitudes and principles prevalent prior to the Civil War. He was kind and generous and genuinely interested in your health. He was paternalistic towards all non-Caucasians and felt it America's duty to help its little brown and black brothers have a decent shot at the good life. Bobbie never farted at the dinner table, always held the door for ladies, and wondered at least twenty times a day, what is this world coming to.

Youngsters, and by that he meant anyone under the age of twenty-five, mystified him because they were into so many things of which he knew little or nothing and had no burning desire to learn. Having been stationed in various parts of the country during his military career, he found California youngsters the most mystifying of the lot, operating with assumptions and motivations seemingly devoid of reason. Among themselves (and to a lesser degree their elders) they had managed to elevate rudeness to an art form,



disdaining civility as if it were a disease. Moreover, they upended what to Bobbie were logical priorities, so that surf's up counted for more than school's in. As for the girls, they regularly exhibited parts of anatomy Bobbie hadn't known about until his wedding night and nobody seemed to think anything of it.

This lack of understanding didn't make him mad or uncharitable towards youngsters, indeed it allowed him to accommodate to a life that racked back and forth between the poles of panic and boredom.

Starting as a Navy carrier pilot in World War II, Bobby had met his challenges secure in the faith that a caring God watched over his every move. If he were to buy the farm, it would be God's will no matter if some buck-tooth myopic runt was the instrument.

He retired in 1962 after twenty years of close calls and took a job with a small engineering firm just north of San Diego. At first, it was nice being home for dinner every evening, but after a while he began to feel the strain. His wife called attention to it first, suggesting that he take up golf or tennis as an outlet, but it wasn't enough.

One evening, the phone rang, and the next morning he drove to a downtown Los Angeles parking lot where he was joined by two well-dressed men, one of whom was an old flying buddy. They talked for three hours, at the end of which they had come to an agreement. Two weeks later he landed in Taiwan, and the day after, he was in Vietnam. Secretly, his wife was as relieved by the situation as he.

America's Great Depression had left its mark on Carl. He was five when he discovered his father, Steffan, dangling inert from a rafter in the milking shed at the end of a hastily



drawn noose. The cow's going dry for lack of proper feed was the final straw for a man who had arrived at Ellis Island from Germany in the hold of a freighter. Taking whatever employment offered itself on the bowery while he studied English in night school, Steffan met a young Swede name Larsson who was planning to make his way to Minnesota where relatives owned a farm. Steffan tossed in with his new-found friend and by Spring of 1922 the two had enough money to make the break.

Larsson's relatives took them in, promising that if the two worked hard they would be given a stake to purchase farms of their own. In the spring of 1925, Steffan received enough money for a down payment and seed money for 160 acres near Duluth. Life was good and when it soon turned out that the Larsson's youngest daughter, Helge, was four months pregnant, the family threw a magnificent wedding, presenting the newlyweds with enough money to purchase an additional 160 acres, "... to see to it that the baby has plenty of food."

After Steffan's funeral, the farm was sold at auction and Carl and Helge moved back in with the Larssons but life was not the same. Those things that had once made Helge the apple of Grandfather Larsson's eye were gone, replaced by a sullenness that cast a pall over the household. For his part, Grandfather Larsson was bitter at the turn of events, hating Steffan and allowing this hatred to spill over onto Carl. Carl ran away to Minneapolis just before Thanksgiving, 1939, the day after his fourteenth birthday.

Even though he was good with machinery, Carl had difficulty finding employment.

Production began to increase, driven by the war in Europe, but it wasn't until the

Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor that the job market really opened up. For Carl, it made





no difference because there really was no decision. His grandfather's bitterness toward Steffan and inferentially himself had taken root. Though he would not have admitted it, he too hated Steffan, and because Steffan was German, he hated Germans with a passion that fell just short of rage. He had tried to join the Canadian Army earlier but been turned down because of his age. Now, at sixteen, looking closer to twenty, and with America finally at war, he found the recruiters eager to accept his version of his age.

The war was the best thing that could have happened for Carl. No sooner had he finished boot camp than he was shipped to Kelly Field in San Antonio for aviation gunnery training. The day he reported in, there were extra openings for pilot training and Carl found himself in ground school learning about engines and controls and weather. He was a natural, graduating at the top of his class. At flight school, it was the same, only more so. While his classmates spent as much time chasing skirts as they could without washing out, Carl concentrated on all the Hun he was going to personally destroy. When he worked out a navigation problem, he did so with the vision that any deviation from perfection allowed some dirty kraut to live to fight another day.

Following graduation from flight school, Carl was commissioned a second lieutenant and sent to Omaha to learn to fly the B-17 Flying Fortress and then to England for assignment to the Eighth Air Force.

Carl flew his fifty missions as co-pilot and then pilot in command without giving true thought to the danger or his own mortality. Others got shot down - some quite literally blown out of the sky - and his airplane took occasional hits, but such thoughts never



penetrated. You signed for the bird, took her off, waited for the enemy to give you his best shot, got in your own licks, and high-tailed it for home. He made neither friends nor enemies.

The first time he realized that flying had its dangers was as a B-17 instrument instructor at March Field. Just as a student added power for a go-around at the completion of a low approach, Carl reached up and retarded the left side inboard engine. The startled student immediately grabbed the propeller handle for the outboard engine on the same side and yanked it back. Before Carl could react, the plane slewed out of control and cartwheeled out of the sky, spearing the ground with the left wing. Carl knew for a certainty he was dead.

There were six people aboard the plane, himself, the flight engineer, and four students. To this day, the only things Carl remembered were the initial contact with the ground, which seemed so soft and detached, the sensation of corkscrewing madly to the left, then watching helplessly as the instrument panel came at him in a rush.

He was sitting in the overrun next to a high intensity runway marker light thinking it a strange place to be. Off to his left, less than a hundred yards away, firefighters were waging a losing battle with the burning hulk of what until recently was a nearly new B-17G. Nobody seemed to be paying any attention to him, so he figured he could stay put for the time being. He watched as an ambulance picked its way through the ruts on the perimeter access road, heading in his direction. "They'll probably want me to leave," he opined, irritated that his fun was about to be spoiled. As it turned out, however, they didn't want him to leave, they wanted him to lie down. It was all very strange.



The four students and the engineer had perished in the wreckage, and no one could figure out how Carl managed to escape. The incident became an integral part of Carl's life throughout his flying career, manifesting itself most immediately in the nickname Houdini, which stuck.

Like Bobby, Carl found it difficult to adjust to ordinary living after retirement. He tried selling insurance and real estate before deciding to take a shot at corporate flying. It was bad enough having to put up with all the petty regulations the Feds continued to dream up to rid the sky of a single vestige of joy, but what made things worse was that invariably he played co-pilot to some twenty-five year old rookie building time to go to work for the airlines. Besides, the pay was awful.

Houdini's recruitment scenario differed from Bobby's in only minor details: Two men sidled up to the bar at the Holiday Inn adjacent to Chicago's Midway Airport where he had just landed, and after passing along a few pleasantries, proceeded to explain Air America. They talked far into the night, sometimes focusing on the point at hand, others reliving countless war stories worn smooth in the countless retellings.

The next morning, he signed the papers, phoned his resignation to his employer, and wrote a note to his wife asking her to pack a suitcase and send it on. That evening, he boarded an airliner to the West Coast where he transferred to a Pan Am charter bound for the Philippines. His clothes caught up with him ten days later.



## **Into the Valley of Death**

The Bugsmasher stumbled from one air column to the next as it skirted the eastern slope of the Assam Range enroute to the grass strip at Dong Mai at the north end of the Bhat Shan Valley. Off to the right, at the edge of the broad coastal plain, sat 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 that emerged 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.

Colonel Phan, hardly noticed the spectacle. His mind was on the Special Forces compound at the southern end of the Bhat Shan 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 as far back as September plans were in place for its elimination. 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, Phan could see that more construction had taken place along the north wall with the addition of inner and outer trench lines and a general clearing of fire lanes toward the northwest. From an altitude of 6,500 feet he



could see activity on the ground and even as he watched, a pair of helicopters lifted off, wheeling away to the southeast. Phan 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 US Special Forces advisors, two companies of Nung, and several hundred CIDG Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) 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, the Nung were militarily the most significant. They were Vietnamese of Chinese origin, proud and aloof with equal disdain for everyone in the neighborhood. 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.

As warriors the CIDG troops were a joke. In the beginning the idea was for them to apply their agricultural 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, it was Hanoi not Saigon that reaped the benefits, relieving a major logistics problem for the North Vietnamese Army. This increased productivity gave the NVA 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 Phan had little doubt that when the shooting started, many more would run, perhaps even to the point of precipitating a stampede that would leave the base all but defenseless. This was not guesswork on his part. The CIDG was full of fifth-columnists and Phan had gone to great length to infiltrate several hand-picked regulars into the Ashau contingent both to provide a reliable flow of firsthand 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, Phan 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 Phan 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, wrenching itself nearly off its mounts as it spewed molten chunks of metal in all



directions. Bobby, who as pilot-in-command sat in the left seat, reacted to the emergency by 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 by the window adjacent to the seat in which Phan had been sitting.

As his senses returned, Phan 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, Phan watched in horrified amazement as Watanabe, the photographer from the Tokyo's Asahi Shim Bun, 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, Phan 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 screaming 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, Bobby pushed the Bugsmasher into a swift steep descent to the valley floor. Beside him in the right seat, 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, 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 around to the left, drifting to that side of the runway toward its adjacent drainage ditch. 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 at this time." 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."

Phan 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 in the excitement but apart from that he was fine.

"Better move back, Tojo," Bobbywarned, taking Phan 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 Phan, his ever-present smile firmly in place. "They'll write this up as a bunch of suspected Vietcong killed or wounded in a firefight. The MACV folks 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," Phan mused. "And a lot who weren't Cong before are now."

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Bobby, Houdini, Watanabe, and Phan 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. Phan," he said solicitously, preparing to sit. "Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all, Colonel," Phan 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."

Phan adopted his most somber and 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 Hoi An Ca." He looked at Phan 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 as peaceful as Hoi An Ca. 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 Hoi An Ca. It's a nice village and we make a pretty mean rice wine."



## The Fall of the Ashau Special Forces Camp

The battle for the Special Forces camp at Ashau went easier than Phan 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 that prevent 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 crossfire between Phan'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 Phan'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 US Air Force Skyraiders lumbered into the fray below the overcast, scattering the attack and allowing the defenders time to regroup.

The antiaircraft 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, Phan 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.

Then 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 alongside 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 Phan 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, Phan knew that something dire was about to happen. Even before he turned to face the wingman's airplane, feared he would be hit 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 that 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, Phan found himself sprawled face down in abject terror, envisioning himself sliced into canvas-wrapped salami by the four-bladed propeller that mangled the air in a vicious succession of clubbing swipes.

The Skyraider's landing gear slammed down, straddling Phan, 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 Phan 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 Phan had actually passed through the prop's arc.

Long after the Skyraider had clawed into the overcast dragging its fury behind, Phan 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 Phan 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, Phan'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 that had taken nearly fifty percent casualties. The low clouds helped the evacuation that 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, Phan's troops made one last sweep through the demolished base and departed to prepare for the next mission.

That evening, back at Hoi An Ca, Phan 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. Phan 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.