

# No Peace in the Valley

**A long-range reconnaissance platoon's daring raid was key to neutralizing a major NVA stronghold** By Robert C. Ankony

**A**s evening approached on April 9, 1968, Sergeant Doug Parkinson's six-man long-range reconnaissance patrol (LRRP, or "Lurp") team scrambled aboard a UH-1 Huey. They had just climbed Dong Tri Mountain outside the Marine combat base at Khe Sanh in search of the enemy. Although they never saw the enemy, a stray artillery shell nearly killed them all, and a Bengal tiger stalked them for several nights. Then, with B-52s set to bomb their position in preparation for a Marine sweep

Hueys ferry infantry into the heavily fortified A Shau Valley in April 1968. Operation Delaware, among the most ambitious air assaults of the war, came on the heels of Khe Sanh and Tet and was intended to destroy the NVA in its key sanctuary.

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of the mountain, they almost fell 1,000 feet to their deaths as helicopters hurriedly extracted them on long emergency ropes known as McGuire rigs. As Parkinson glanced through the dust at dozens of helicopters lifting off, he said, "So much for Khe Sanh, lads....I'd say we got off easy!"

But Parkinson's long-range reconnaissance patrol team from Company E, 52nd Infantry, commanded by Captain Michael Gooding, would soon find itself in the thick of one of the most daring airmobile operations of the war: an air assault into the A Shau Valley, the most formidable enemy sanctuary in South Vietnam. Company E would play a key role in establishing a stronghold in the valley—and it would pay a high price.

By early April 1968, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had just suffered two of the most catastrophic defeats of the war: the Tet Offensive and Khe Sanh, which cost them nearly 20,000 men. But the NVA still had an ace in the hole to regain the initiative in the northernmost part of South Vietnam, designated I Corps Tactical Zone (ICTZ). That ace was the sparsely populated A Shau Valley, running north-south along the Laotian border 30 miles south of Khe Sanh, where troops and supplies were pouring into South Vietnam as the NVA geared up for another battle—at a time and place

of its choosing. The A Shau, a lovely mile-wide bottomland flanked by densely forested 5,000-foot mountains, was bisected lengthwise by Route 548, a hard-cruised dirt road. A branch of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the valley was a key NVA sanctuary.

The NVA seized A Shau in March 1966 after overrunning the isolated Special Forces camp there. They considered the valley their turf and had fortified it with powerful crew-served 37mm anti-aircraft cannons, some of them radar controlled. They also had rapid-firing twin-barreled 23mm cannons, scores of 12.7mm heavy machine guns, a warren of underground bunkers and tunnels, and even tanks. Because of this strength on the ground, the NVA were left pretty well alone except for jet attacks, but given the steep, mountainous terrain—often cloaked under clouds and prone to sudden, violent changes in weather—airstrikes were few. And because of the very limited air mobility of the Marines in ICTZ, no ground operations of any significance had been launched in the A Shau.

In January 1968, the situation changed. General William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in South Vietnam, ordered the 1st Cavalry Division to move north from the Central Highlands to support the Marines. The 1st Cav, an airmobile division with 20,000 men and nearly 450 helicopters, had the most firepower and mobility of any division-size unit in Vietnam. When it arrived in ICTZ, the 1st Cav fought toe-to-toe with the enemy during Tet. It was fully engaged with the NVA at Khe Sanh when its commander, Maj. Gen. John Tolson, unveiled plans for the massive air assault into the A Shau Valley: Operation Delaware.

Two brigades—about 11,000 men and 300 helicopters—would attack the north end of the 25-mile-long valley and leapfrog their way south, while another brigade would stay at Khe Sanh, continuing the fight from there to the Laotian border. Since satellite communications were a thing of the future, a mountaintop had to be secured to serve as a radio relay site for the troops, who would be slugging it out hidden deep behind the towering wall of mountains, to communicate with Camp Evans near the coast or with approaching aircraft. On the eastern side, midway up the valley, was a perfect spot: the 4,878-foot Dong Re Lao Mountain. Headquarters dubbed it "Signal Hill."

Since the mission required specially trained men who could rappel from helicopters, clear a landing zone with explosives and hold the ground far from artillery support, the Lurps were the logical choice. As a result, the task of securing Signal Hill fell to Parkinson's unit, Lieutenant Joe Dilger's 2nd Platoon, Company E, 52nd Infantry.

Friday, April 19, dawned calm and sunny, and the assault operation began. The 30-man Lurp platoon gathered with several engineers and signalmen at Camp Evans, awaiting flights to Signal Hill, 19 miles away. The troops heard the rumble of five slicks from the 227th Assault Helicopter Battalion approaching. With every unit requesting lift ships, many of which were undergoing repair or still at Khe Sanh, not enough birds were available to bring in the entire platoon, so Parkinson's team was told to stand aside until later. The helicopters landed, and everyone else clambered aboard, heavily laden with gear. The slicks rose into a clear blue sky and vanished in the west, reaching the mile-high peak of Signal Hill some 20 minutes later.

The small force of helicopters was met by two gunships. The slicks came to hover 100 feet above the dense jungle, and the men, led by Lieutenant Dilger, began rappelling down to clear a landing zone. But in the thin atmosphere, the helicopter engines had less oxygen for power, and the rotors less air to bite into. Seconds after Sergeant Larry Curtis and his assistant team leader, Corporal Bill Hand, jumped off the skids, their chopper lost control while they were still 50 feet in the air.

Curtis and Hand slammed into the ground but managed to get free of their rappel devices and roll out of the chopper's path as it came careening through the canopy and crashed to the jungle floor. The impact knocked the crew and the remaining men on board unconscious. Curtis suffered a concussion and was pinned under a skid when the helicopter rolled onto its side. As he lay struggling to get free, the chopper's engine revved at full throttle and started leaking fuel. Despite the initial chaos, Lieutenant Dilger ordered those still rappelling in to retrieve the crates of explosives and gear being slung down and then make a defensive perimeter around the peak.

Once unloaded, the four slicks and two gunships still in the air quickly flew away to avoid further engine strain, and Corporal Hand and the others could now finally mount a belated rescue. After digging Curtis out from beneath the skid and removing the injured on board to safety, they began the grueling task of clearing an LZ, using chain saws, machetes and long tubular explosives called Bangalore torpedoes. There in the middle of enemy territory, the insertion and clearing work had not gone unnoticed, and soon the troops were battling more than just nature.

By the next morning there still wasn't an adequate clearing for a helicopter to land, so the injured Sergeant Curtis had to be lifted out on a McGuire rig. As the assault force toiled away clearing an LZ, NVA soldiers made the long, arduous climb up from the valley floor, reaching the mountaintop at noon. Hidden by dense foliage and blown debris, and with the sounds of their approach masked by the din of explosives and chain saws, they roamed the perimeter at will, shooting at Dilger's platoon, which was still struggling to make a clearing.

Unable to see the snipers, the assault force threw grenades down the slope and fired their weapons at suspected targets, keeping the enemy at bay. As this battle with the unseen enemy dragged on, men charged forward through mud, debris and deadly sniper fire to rescue the wounded and dying and carry them to the top of the peak and the protective shelter of a bomb crater. Radiomen made desperate calls to Camp Evans for helicopters to evacuate the wounded, but with several waves of choppers still making assaults far north into the valley, and nearly a dozen shot down on the first day of the operation, none were available for Signal Hill.

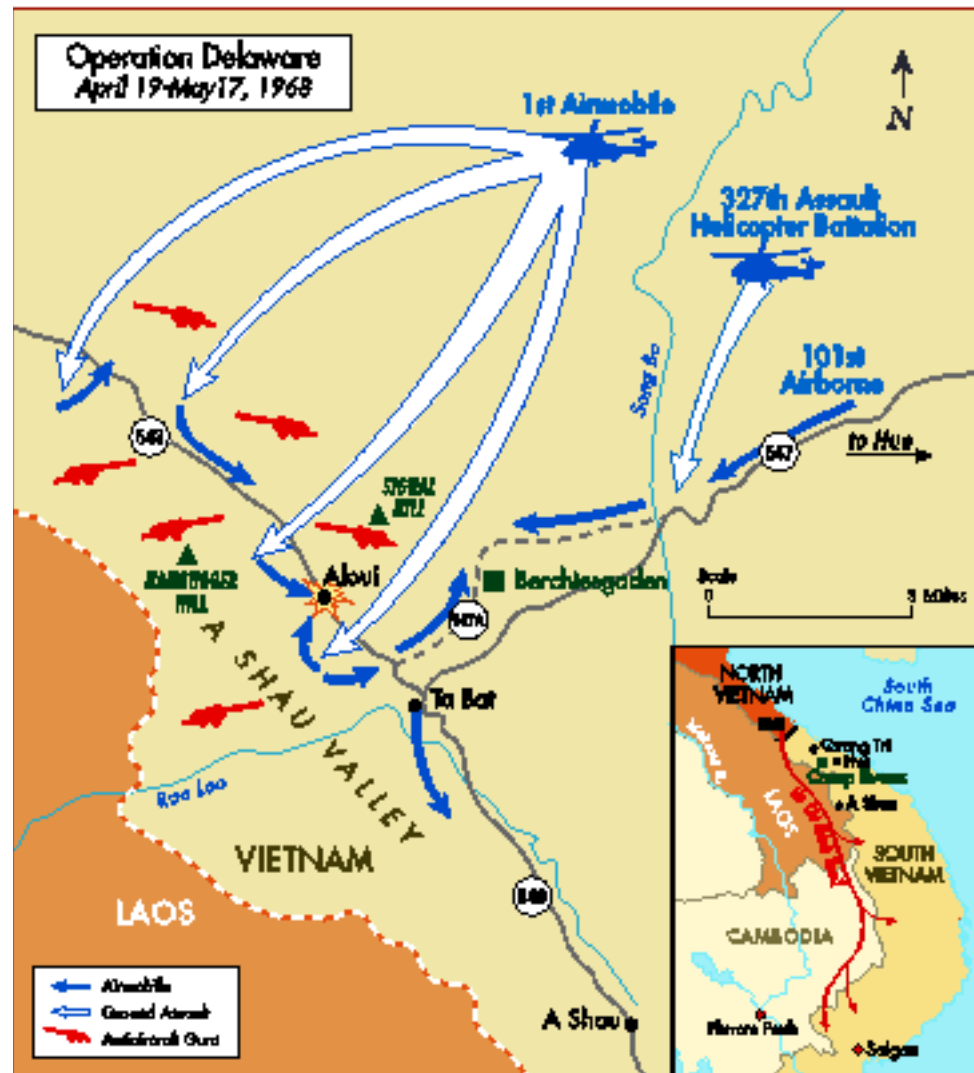
By late afternoon a functional LZ was finally cleared, but at a steep cost. Snipers had killed Corporal Dick Turbitt and Pfc Bob Noto, mortally wounded Sergeant William Lambert and combat engineer Pfc James MacManus, and wounded Corporal Roy Beer. Lieutenant Dilger was shot through the chest and close to death.

As the fighting raged far to the north in the valley, Sergeant Lambert—just one day short of completing his two-year tour—clung to life for six hours before dying in the arms of his comrades. Soon after Lambert died, a lone Huey approached from the north to remove the wounded and the stranded aircrew left on Signal Hill. The dead would have to wait.

Early the next morning, a medevac, already crammed with wounded infantrymen and the badly burned pilot of a downed helicopter, landed on Signal Hill to pick up Corporal Hand, whose condition had worsened. He was put inside on a stretcher, beneath the screaming, burned pilot. As the medevac lifted off, the men on the ground could hear the burned man pleading in his agony, "Shoot me! *Somebody*, for God's sake, *please* shoot me!"

At about that time, Captain Gooding and Sergeant Parkinson's six-man team arrived. No patrols had yet been made to clear the peak of snipers, so Captain Gooding ordered Parkinson to make an immediate patrol around the peak. Once Parkinson had notified everyone on the LZ of their planned route of departure, his team mounted their gear and slogged through the mud to the western side of the mountain, where they came to the crashed helicopter lying on its side on a steep embankment. Then, stepping over an enemy fighting position where cartridges and two grenades had

## The burned pilot screamed: 'Shoot me! Somebody, for God's sake, please shoot me!'



The 25-mile-long valley along the Laotian border and Ho Chi Minh Trail was a vital NVA sanctuary, protected by a sophisticated anti-aircraft network. The 1968 air assault employed some 300 helicopters and 11,000 men.



The first chopper to reach Signal Hill crashed as Sergeant Larry Curtis (left) and Corporal Bill Hand (right) were repelling to the ground. Curtis suffered a concussion and was pinned under the helicopter's skid.



W.T. (BILL) HAND

been left, they pushed through a dense wall of mud-covered branches and trees, twisted from the blasting to clear the LZ.

Once through the mat of debris, they entered dense virgin forest swathed in a blanket of fog—the clouds surrounding the peak. Bracing their feet on tree roots and the stems of huge ferns, they groped from stalk to frond to keep their balance, limited in their visibility to the men immediately in front of and behind them. Suddenly, after an hour of this slow, painstaking and uneventful climb, a lone NVA soldier stood and called to Parkinson's front scout—an indigenous Montagnard named Dish—thinking he was a fellow soldier. Instantly realizing his mistake, the soldier stood shocked, arms at his sides, mouth and eyes wide open, as Dish and Parkinson raised their rifles and shot him.



**P**arkinson's team made another patrol around the peak while, with the LZ now operational, hundreds of scout helicopters, slicks, gunships and powerful CH-47 Chinooks laden with troops flocked in from the east. Reaching the Lurps' mountaintop stronghold, they then plunged deep inside the valley to search out and destroy the enemy with airpower and overwhelming infantry assaults. As large and small battles raged farther south, streams of tracers could be seen flying skyward. The effectiveness of the enemy anti-aircraft operation was obvious as massive CH-54 Skycranes could be seen from Signal Hill, returning to Camp Evans with one or two destroyed helicopters slung beneath them.

During the operation, jet airstrikes came frequently. In clear weather, they struck the valley and mountainside positions, at times screaming in just above the Lurps' heads. Their bombs, along with the shells from the vast rings of artillery, soon transformed the lush, green valley and mountainsides into a wasteland of craters. Watching it all from their mountaintop, the Lurps could see for miles in the cool air, from the warships 30 miles east in the South China Sea to towering green mountains in neutral Laos seven miles away.

B-52 Arc Light strikes were launched several times each night. Cells of three bombers would approach north along the valley at 30,000 feet, with each aircraft carrying 84 500-pound bombs inside the fuselage, and 24 750-pounders beneath the wings. The bombers could easily be identified by their running lights, V formation and the drone of their engines, but by the time the enemy could identify them, it was too late to run. When the bombers reached the valley, the clouds below the Lurps' position suddenly started flashing bright orange as three lines of bombs merged to lay down a continuous swath of destruction that raced down the valley at 500 miles an hour. In seconds the earth trembled beneath the Lurps' feet, followed after a long lag by a deep rumbling that sounded as if the valley itself were moaning in agony.

In the following days, Signal Hill was secured, a battery of artillery was airlifted on top to support the infantry in the valley, and another helicopter crashed on the peak, its rotors narrowly missing two Lurps but severing the legs of one soldier and crushing another.

The Lurps held that small green islet high above a vast ocean of clouds for close to three weeks, providing a vital fire support base and radio relay site for the troops in the valley. Their action saved many lives and helped ensure the success of Operation Delaware by allowing coordinated air and ground attacks, timely artillery



BETT MANN/CORBIS; ABOVE: DOUG PARKINSON

**Smoke beckons an inbound helicopter to a fire support base built around a downed Huey. Inset: Dish, a Montagnard scout, holds an NVA sniper's rifle, believed to be the gun used to wound Lieutenant Joe Dilger on Signal Hill.**

strikes, and air rescues of wounded infantrymen and aircrews.

Despite hundreds of B-52 and jet airstrikes to destroy the most sophisticated enemy anti-aircraft network yet seen in South Vietnam, the NVA managed to shoot down a C-130, a CH-54 Skycrane, two CH-47 Chinooks and nearly two dozen UH-1 Hueys. Many more were lost in accidents or damaged by groundfire.

The 1st Cavalry Division suffered more than 100 dead in the operation. Bad weather aggravated the loss by causing delays in troop movements, allowing a substantial number of NVA to escape to safety in Laos. Still, the NVA lost more than 800 dead, a tank, 70

trucks, two bulldozers, 30 flamethrowers, thousands of rifles and machine guns, and dozens of anti-aircraft cannons. They also lost tons of ammunition, explosives, medical supplies and foodstuffs.

A week after leaving A Shau, Sergeant Parkinson's assistant team leader, Bob Whitten, was killed in action. Three other Lurps from the Signal Hill assault force were also killed, and Sergeant Curtis lost an eye in a grenade blast. Lieutenant Dilger recovered and became a member of the Special Forces, and Captain Gooding was promoted to major and assigned to Special Warfare Command.

Major General Tolson, summing up why so many of the NVA were able to flee to safety in Laos despite his division's huge air-mobile force, remarked: "According to old French records, April was supposed to be the best month for weather in the A Shau Valley. As it turned out, May would have been a far better month—but you don't

win them all." That lesson would not be lost on the 101st Airborne Division. In May 1969, they stormed Dong Ap Bia Mountain, known as Hamburger Hill, across the valley from Signal Hill. The NVA lost that battle, too, yet they again returned to claim A Shau, prompting criticism of American tactics. There simply were not enough allied soldiers to secure South Vietnam's remote borders—more than twice as long as the trenches in France during World War I, which were manned by millions of troops. Even with that limitation, the 1st Cav and 101st Airborne showed that a unit need not be based in the hinterlands to operate and destroy the enemy there.

*Robert C. Ankony wrote Lurps: A Ranger's Diary of Tet, Khe Sanh, A Shau, and Quang Tri. For additional reading, see Inside the LRRPs: Rangers in Vietnam, by Michael Lee Lanning.*