

A Shau Valley- PFC. Caballero
KIA 24 April 1968
YD. 274080

Southeast of Co A Nong Mountain-LZ.-Tiger

In my feeble attempt to give credence to the loss of PFC. David Joe Caballero of Corpus Christi, Tx., I feel it necessary to tell of the A Shau Valley and the events that led this battle to come about-Operation Delaware-By the 1st CAV. There are many names of pilots and crewmen that I should give credit to, but three were most notable. During this operation was Ralph Jackson, Co of B/228, Dave Clemmer, wounded pilot and Andy Dulay, my co-pilot on April 24, 1968.

The A Shau is a beautiful valley that runs North and South, adjacent to the Laotian border, just south of the DMZ, sparsely populated by Montagnards, a nomadic people. A logging road 548 runs thru here. The floor of the valley is 2000 ft. above sea level and surrounded by 5000 ft. mountains. In 1963, Gen. Colin Powell arrived, serving as an advisor, declared it had a French Foreign Legion quality, Beau Geste, without the sand, for six months he patrolled the A Shau. Upon his departure, Special Forces operated a small base camp at the south end. As part of the Ho Chi Minh trail, the North Vietnamese found this to be an ideal sanctuary. In 1965, the Marines took over operation of this area establishing a western base at Khe Sanh plateau, just north of the A Shau. The North Vietnamese continued to build supply caches and a hospital complex. This all came to be the staging area for the NVA campaign, Tet'68, initiated in January.

The battle for control of I Corp by the Marines and 1st CAV. began. A/228th, a Ch-47 Chinook Company, had recently moved to Hue Phu Bai on the western edge under protection of the U.S. Marines. PFC. Caballero, Maj. Don Yenglin and myself were new arrivals, days prior to Tet. After many vicious battles, control of most of I Corp was under US control with the exception of the Marines at Khe Sanh. We were all battle weary, but the 1st CAV. fought it's way past the "rockpile" leapfrogging firebases up the valley to Khe Sanh plateau, rescuing a very happy bunch of Marines. The following month of March and April were spent moving the entire 1st CAV. into I Corp and lead elements of the 101st ABN. Division.

The decision had finally come to mount a large force incursion into the NVA supply base, the A Shau Valley. On April 19, 1968 the 1st Cav would air assault into the northern end of the A Shau and the 101st ABN. Division would provide a blocking force at the southern end of the valley. The first day of the assault by 1st Cav. resulted in the loss of 25 aircraft of which 5 were CH-47's and one CH-54. One CH-47 was mine. This battle would be extremely intense. My crew was able to be evacuated while I remained on the ground with the Pathfinder to await another flight. Several aircraft were able to land, but none were available to take me out. My Chinook began to burn and cook off rounds, as we watched the display of fireworks a CH-54 crane arrived with a sling load D7 bulldozer. The C&C aircraft was nearby and told the crane to drop his load further down the mountain at the valley's edge. Unable to satisfactory place the bulldozer down, he moved forward and into the valley. The Pathfinder was frantic to stop him, but was cut out by the C&C aircraft. The crane flew directly into a 51 caliber machine gun. The Pathfinder turned to me saying, "We lost that crane!" I lost two friends, Art Lord and Charlie Millard. Another crane flown by Ted Jenkins came in and dropped a sling load. After several hours on the ground a supply ship was able to take me out. A/228th would lose another CH-47 with the loss of all the crew except the pilots, Don Winskey and Frank Wendt, who were able to E&E out the next day. We would lose another pilot, Dave Clemmer, with a leg wound.

On April 24, 1968, Andy Dulay and myself would receive a tactical emergency mission to resupply a 105 firebase SE of LZ Tiger. The unit was in danger of being overrun. An external load of 105 ammo was rigged and internally we loaded some classified ammo with additional artillery troops. Camp Evans was carrying WX 100 ½ with tops at about 8,000 Ft. Our flight plan would be to climb out IFR to VFR on top. We were then to proceed out to the A Shau and rendezvous with two UH-1 gunships that would escort us down through a VFR hole in the clouds to the valley below.

Since we were close to the Loas border, our descent would be to rapid spiral down 6,000 ft. to the valley. The descent was so rapid and tight we would drift in and out of settling power. The final approach was from Tiger Mountain, SE. parallel to the valley floor to the hilltop firebase. On short final we were able to see 4 or 5 UH-1 destroyed aircraft around the boundry of the firebase. Within 50 ft. of the firebase boundry we began to receive small arms fire directly underneath the left side. This gun fire seriously damaged the radio compartment and the #1 hydraulic system began to lose pressure. The left waist gunner took a round just below his armoured chest protector, proceeding upward and killing him instantly. The crew said he simply crumpled to the floor. They were not sure what happened to him.

There was no room on the helipad to land, so after dropping the sling load we moved forward to the edge of the pad touching down our aft wheels, then lowering the rear ramp to unload the ammo and troops. We began our ascent with the #1 hydraulic pressure now at zero. Our altitude would be limited to 6500 ft., just enough to clear the 5,000 Ft. mountains, but we would remain in IFR conditions for the flight back to Camp Evans. Knowing that an IFR approach would be required, I began announcing MAYDAY on both the emergency frequencies. Carl Hess, of B/228th heard the mayday and relayed our intentions to Evans Tower and that we had wounded on board. After completing an ADF approach , we landed in the Bravo Co. area and were met by medics. PFC. Caballero was taken to the hospital where he was pronounced dead and transferred to the morgue. The aircraft was reviewed by B Co. Cmdr. Ralph Jackson and his maintenance officer to determine the flyable status, again we were met by medics requesting that I come to the morgue for identification and to receive his personal effects. As I observed PFC. David Joe Caballero, it struck me that he appeared so small laying on that cot, pale and in a peaceful sleep. So young~ Just a boy! Of all the emotionally difficult things I've done this would stay with me always!! Tomorrow I would fly again, the battle would go on. I do not look at the name or personal effects~Just keep moving.

It would be many years before I would pursue this man's name. My search taking me through the VHPA Directory and the national archives, waiting months for the final answer on the report DA form #1. Thanks to Julie Klink and Gary Thewlis for their assistance.

This was a tough war for tough young men. Doing their duty in a war they didn't understand, nor was appreciated by the American people. Recently, I participated in a radio talk show in Shreveport, La. The movie "We Were Soliders Once" has generated a lot of interest in those of us that were involved. The public timing may be a little late, but there is a new generation and if we can find ways to remember those we lost, such as the final roll call in the movie, recognizing that these were real young men who's lives were not fulfilled.

In retrospect, most of us have returned to homes, businesses, marrying and raising children in the freedom they purchased for us. God Bless them all!!

Thank you for reading this story.

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