



The Ashau

The Ashau Valley runs generally north and south and is approximately 22 mile long, sitting between two mountain ranges and only about 6 miles from the Laotian border. It provided safe harbor for around 5000 to 6000 communist troops and was ringed with inter-locking anti-aircraft batteries. Probably the largest concentration of enemy troops in South Vietnam, the valley served as a strategic launching point during the Tet Offensive for their deadly excursions into the northern provinces of South Vietnam. It was a natural target for American forces, specifically the 1st Cavalry Division in concert with the 101st Airborne Division as well as several units of South Vietnamese forces. My unit, Bravo Company, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, would be involved in the initial assault; and as a newly arrived and fully qualified UH-1H co-pilot, I was also going to be involved in a way that can best be described as my very own 'baptism by fire' and transformational initiation as an active participant in the Vietnam war.

Unofficial details of the operation started filtering down through the usual informal channels of communication late on the 17th and all day on the 18th of April. We learned that the assault was to take place on the morning of the 19th of April, 1968. A company briefing was scheduled for the evening of the 18th and we all gathered to learn what our roles would be in what was to be perhaps the largest and most ambitious combat assault of the Vietnam War since the Battle of Ia Drang. It would be still another practical application of the airmobile concept of warfare that had evolved since the Korean conflict of the early fifties.

Company old-timers knew about the Ashau and even though assurances were given that the valley had been prepped over the past few days with saturation bombing by B-52's along with intense tactical air strikes by our Air Force brethren, several outspoken pilots expressed doubt that the enemy positions in the Ashau had been effectively neutralized and that helicopter crews should expect to be greeted by a well equipped, solidly entrenched, and well motivated enemy force. The skeptics among us, however, were not in a position to influence decisions made at the highest levels of command in South Vietnam. After the briefing, we wandered away to our tents and contemplated the day ahead as we all drifted off to a restless and for some sleepless night. Early next morning, the duty clerk from Operations passed through our tents making sure those assigned to fly were up and preparing for the days mission. I seem to recall that it was a 0430 hours wake-up, otherwise referred to as o-dark-thirty. I dressed along with my tent mates and

mostly listened, hoping to glean some bit of useful information from the nervous bitching and commentary by the experienced pilots. We would soon embark on a reluctant journey into the bowels of mortal combat against an enemy whose strengths were mostly unknown and unchallenged. But no one among us had ever experienced anything of this scale and magnitude. Even the old-timers were left to speculate on how it would all unfold over the next several hours and days to come. What follows is the way it unfolded for me and my crew.

I was assigned to fly with Bill Dimmer in aircraft 66-16709. The names of the crew chief and gunner have faded from my memory. It seemed to me that Bill was a little aggravated that he would have to deal with a new co-pilot while flying probably the most demanding mission of his tour in Vietnam. He told me to just pay attention and do as I was told. I was okay with that. The flight of ten helicopters from B 229th departed Camp Sharon along with ten more from our sister unit, C 229th, for a total of twenty birds. We flew in separate gaggles of five ships to a staging area southwest of Camp Evans where we landed and shut down. It was still quite early and the morning air was cool and humid with a thin overcast sky overhead. The weather over the Ashau was even worse and we learned that there was a 'weather hold' for the assault until further notice which allowed the crews to engage in more speculation and griping about what lay ahead. Everyone was nervous and anxious to get on with it. The soldiers we were to carry passed time in their own way, smoking cigarettes and napping, mostly segregated from the helicopter crews. I feared for them and was happy that at the end of the day I would be sleeping in relative comfort on a cot in a secured tent while they remained hunkered down inside a foxhole in the Ashau Valley.

Word came to load up and prepare for a launch. A plan had been formulated that would get us out and over the area using directions from air traffic control. After that, we would be on our own as we descended into the valley to offload our troopers. We departed the staging area with aircraft loads (ACL's) of six per aircraft and climbed in a westward direction towards our destination. In order to get above the overcast it was necessary to climb to as high as 6000 feet and the air was cold with the doors of the helicopter open or in some cases removed. The troopers in the back and the crew chief and gunner shivered and pulled back from the rushing air outside and I felt sorry for their plight. Up front, Dimmer and I were somewhat protected and at least able to turn on some heat that warmed our legs and lower body a bit. I pulled out my camera and took some pictures of the flight, now in loose trail formation and nearing our descent point. The clouds were thicker now and formed a near overcast condition over the valley. There was no way we were going to descend in formation through the clouds below and it became apparent that we would have to descend one ship at a time into the overcast below.

Flight lead instructed our formation to take up one minute separation in preparation for the descent. Each ship, in turn, began to slow down and the flight was now spread out for a mile or more. Minutes later, lead slipped into a hole in the overcast and disappeared below. I still had my camera in hand, taking more pictures of the flight from my position in the right seat of the helicopter. There didn't seem to be much else to do since Dimmer appeared to be in perfect control of the situation for the moment.

Each aircraft had three communication radios on board; UHF, used mostly for ATC com; VHF, used primarily for air to air com between aircraft; and FM, which served as our link with the units and patrols on the ground. All were now in use with a cacophony of transmissions relevant to the current situation and the chaos generated by men and machines engaged in battle. We listened to those ahead of us in the descent as they broke through the undercast only to be greeted by volleys of anti-aircraft fire from an enemy now under airborne assault. AK-47's, .51 caliber machine guns and 23 millimeter anti-aircraft weapons were collectively being directed at each

aircraft as they descended through the clouds and into view of the enemy gunners. Air to air frequencies were now filled with the tense and excited voices of pilots giving notice to those following that they were taking fire. When able, they also provided information about gun positions along the inbound route. Many aircraft were hit, while others were going down, some in control and some not.

Keeping track of the aircraft ahead of us became difficult as each maneuvered along the valley walls in an attempt to evade the enemy gunfire. It was difficult to guess where the fire was coming from. And still not fully appreciative of our own situation, I continued to take snapshots with my Kodak as Dimmer strained to follow the Huey ahead of on approach to LZ Tiger, where we would off-load our seven troopers. I scanned the gauges while Dimmer flew, not wanting to see the tracers coming at us from below, still somewhat disconnected from it all but growing more fearful as we got lower. Finally, I began to sense our absolute vulnerability. Still, thus far, our flight of five remained relatively intact. This was about to change.

Ahead of in the flight was aircraft serial number 66-16799, crewed by Harrington and Nessel along with gunner Matis and a crew chief whose name I don't recall. On short final into the LZ, their aircraft was hit in the tail boom by a rocket propelled grenade (RPG). Harrington, the aircraft commander, attempted to get airborne again but the tail boom separated from the helicopter as they gained altitude. A trooper standing on a skid was thrown off, falling to his death as the aircraft yawed violently in its vertical axis. Harrington, Nessel and Matis were also killed as they plunged to the hillside out of control. Someone heard Nessel make a final call with the words, "...well, this is it". Just prior to impact, the crew chief apparently jumped clear and lived. He was the only survivor.

Dimmer continued towards LZ Tiger where we managed to safely drop our load of troopers before climbing at maximum rate up and away from the chaos and danger below us. Scared and numb from the shock of combat, I remember very little about dropping our load of soldiers and the subsequent flight back to the staging area near Camp Evans. On arrival there, crews and commanders quickly assessed our losses, including several damaged ships that managed to make it back. Word rapidly spread about the shoot down and crash of Harrington and Nessel in 66-16799 as well as other's from the various units involved in the assault. For the moment, though, no one knew for sure what how serious our losses were. We could only speculate and hope for the best. The fate of those onboard 799 had not yet been officially verified as crews prepared for the next lift. Because of the rough, high terrain around Tiger, loads were reduced to just five troopers for a total of nine souls aboard each Huey.

Angry and perplexed from our losses and fearful of the obvious strength and resolve of the enemy we were facing, we grudgingly prepared ourselves for the second wave of the assault. I took a few more pictures with my Kodak as our flight lifted off and turned towards the west. The weather had not improved and once again the flight climbed into the cold air at around 6000 feet. Dimmer let me take the controls while he smoked a cigarette in silence. I don't think he was happy to be flying with the new guy at a time like this and I couldn't blame him. Too soon it was time for our gaggle to take up the separation necessary for the single ship descent back into the A Shau. I don't recall our position in the formation but it must have been near the back of the pack as our line of Hueys lengthened to several miles long. Dimmer took back the controls when it was our turn for the descent through the clouds. I picked up my camera for a few more shots. Once again radios came alive with still more terse transmissions by crews taking fire from enemy gun positions hidden along the slopes and valley floor as they broke through the clouds and made their way towards LZ Tiger. Dimmer guided our ship through the maze of fire around us at near maximum airspeed (not nearly fast enough for me) while zigging and zagging in a way

to provide a more difficult target for the enemy gunners who sought to ruin our day. The crew chief and gunner cranked off intermittent bursts of machine gun fire into the jungle below in an effort to discourage them from firing in our direction. The shock wave from their firing M-60's pounded at my entire body and the cordite smell of expended gunpowder permeated the air swirling through our Huey helicopter.

Nearing the summit of the isolated hilltop where LZ Tiger was located, Dimmer searched for a suitable spot to bring the helicopter to a hover and offload our group of troopers. The terrain around Tiger was ragged with bomb craters and shattered trees with jagged stumps that posed a threat to tail rotors and fragile underbellies housing fuel tanks. The sky was filled with tracer rounds and the radios remained alive with excited voices warning of enemy gun positions and hostile fire being taken from several locations along the valley floor and nearby slopes. I found myself not wanting to look anywhere but straight ahead, fearful of seeing any tracer fire that might be coming our way. The Kodak was now under my seat and I hunkered down into in an effort to take advantage of the seat's armor plated construction. The ship ahead of us had landed, offloaded and departed; now it was our turn in the sequence. Dimmer picked his spot which was sloped and filled with stumps but suitable for a hovering drop of our anxious passengers. He came to a high hover and began to descend the final few feet to an altitude that would allow them jump safely to the ground from our hovering bird. My mind raced trying to process all that was going on around us as Dimmer struggled at the controls. Over the din of the radios, rotor blades and shrieking of the engine, I felt more than heard a thump from somewhere behind us. Then the engine quit.

My first thought as the Low RPM audio and warning lights came on was that if a crash was imminent it was good to be close to the ground so that we didn't have far to fall, thereby increasing our chances of survival. Then, as Dimmer continued fighting for control, the ship spun clockwise. For a moment during the Huey's final turn, I was looking down at the valley floor probably a thousand feet below us. "This is not good", I thought to myself, surmising we were all done for.

But there was just enough energy left in the rotor blades to give us one more half turn back towards the mountain side. Our helicopter crunched into the sloping hillside that had been our intended landing spot, slamming my body forward against the seat belt which worked as advertised but not well enough to keep my knees from making contact with the instrument panel. The dying Huey then rocked rearward onto the tail boom and tail rotor. At some point in the sequence the main rotor blades made contact with the ground, wrenching the transmission from its mounts. In seconds, the half-million dollar machine thrashed to a grinding, gut wrenching stop. There was momentary silence, then someone yelled, "Get out! Get out now!"

We were all acutely aware of the Huey's propensity to burn once fuel tanks ruptured and I quickly unbuckled the seat belt and reached for the handle of my door but found it to be jammed. Turning back to my left, I then scrambled over the center console and into the now vacated cabin area on my hands and knees, looking up to make certain the rotor blades had stopped. Clearing the wreckage, I followed the others as they ran towards a nearby bomb crater, hunkering down there as we gathered ourselves. We looked back at the crashed Huey expecting it to burn or blow up but it did neither. We looked around at one another, dazed and apprehensive about our new predicament.

The Huey hadn't caught fire so after several moments I decided to go back to the wreckage and retrieve both my Kodak and, more importantly, the .38 pistol that I had foolishly left hanging on the back of the armored seat. It seemed safe enough since there didn't appear to be anyone shooting at us for the moment. Also there were plenty of friendly troops just up the ridge above

us. Besides, the distance to the crashed helicopter wasn't more than fifty feet or so. Crouching low, I left the bomb crater, walking cautiously towards the Huey. I was almost there when the ground around me suddenly erupted, apparently from rounds fired by the same .51 caliber gun that had knocked out our engine. I scrambled back to the bomb crater and lay low, now very worried about being unarmed with bad guys in the nearby forest who wanted us all dead. Word that we had crashed was soon relayed to others in our flight and one intrepid crew approached our position with a rescue attempt in mind. Much as we appreciated the effort and wanted to be rescued, we frantically waved them off knowing that the nearby .51 cal crew would relish the opportunity for another kill. For now, we were safe with our own troops nearby who were more than willing to see to our safety since helicopter pilots and crews were regarded with respect and affection by the troopers we served. One of the troopers handed me an M-16, telling me that its previous owner would no longer need it. It was then that we learned of two KIA's (killed in action) from the crash of our Huey. They had jumped to the ground as we spun out of control and been struck by the main rotor blade during the crash sequence. They should have stayed with the helo but had it been me I might have done the same thing. It had worked for the lone survivor from Harrington's and Nessel's crashing UH-1.

Over the next several hours we simply 'hunkered down' in a secure area near friendly troops, ate C rations and watched the invasion unfold around us. From our vantage point atop LZ Tiger, we experienced the war from the perspective of the 1st Cavalry troopers we carried into battle, watching the assault of the A Shau in relative safety as our airborne brethren came and went. Towards the end of the day, the crew and I were picked up by a company aircraft and flown back to Camp Sharon. As I sat on the floor of the Huey, doors open, the cold air swirled through the open cabin. During the ride back to Camp Sharon, I reflected on the day's events and it occurred to me that I had been in-country a mere two weeks and had already been shot down while participating in my first combat assault. The thought was sobering.

Back at Camp Sharon, we learned of the fates of our fellow pilots and crew members, Harrington, Nessel, Branaugh, Matis and Wilburn; all were KIA. The mood of the entire unit was somber and subdued. I was not to fly again for several days but others would be required to do it all over again the next day. I felt sympathy for them and was glad to be staying behind.

Operation Delaware continued through May 10 when the 1st Cav began to withdraw and was fully complete by May 17. I have seen several accounts of our losses that first day in the A Shau but my recollection is that the Division lost a total of 12 helicopters including nine UH-1 Hueys, two CH-47 Chinooks and one CH-54 Skycrane. Many others were damaged and rendered non-flyable. My unit, Co. B, 229th Aviation Battalion, left three destroyed Hueys there with the loss of three pilots and two enlisted crew-members. I was now three weeks in-country and had already been shot down. The sobering realization came over me that bad things might lay ahead. Until the A Shau, I felt confident of my ability to manage the risks associated with combat but now my confidence was shaken. It was a sobering moment.

A few weeks later the division commander, Major General Tolson and a small entourage arrived at Camp Sharon carrying impacted medals for everyone taking part in the initial assault on April 19. For two sorties into the A Shau during which I mostly sat like a bump on a log in my armored seat, Kodak in hand, I and others from Bravo Company were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.