

# The Ashau Mission

By [Norm Urban](#), Captain, USMC ret

They say memory is the second thing to go with age. I remember the mission well (and the aftermath), but at my age, I don't know how accurate the memory is.

We had been listening to radio calls from the Ashau Special Forces camp, asking for help, for a few days prior to the March 11, 1966 "Ashau" mission. The Ashau Special Forces camp, on the Laotian border, manned by a SF detachment, an Arvin unit, and a detachment of "Nungs", had been surrounded by the NVA and VC forces. The North Vietnamese 235B Div HQ was reported to be set up in the valley. The enemy had set an aircraft trap by humping 37MM anti-aircraft weapons to the top of the surrounding hills and mountains. So far, the bad guys had downed at least one Army UH-1E, an Air Force AC-47 and a Marine A-4. It seemed to us at Phu Bai, that the Army couldn't or wouldn't do anything further to bring troops in, or get these guys out. LtCol C.A. "Chuck" House finally gathered the squadron together in our mess tent, and explained the situation. House then stated that he was going to Ashau to take a look, and if any of us chose to follow him, that was OK by him. As far as I know, we Marines (HMM-163, call sign, "Superchief") had no frag orders to do anything to support the camp. Fifteen minutes later, there were no operable H-34s left on the ramp at Phu Bai.

Ashau was socked in, with an overcast sitting on top of the mountains surrounding the valley. LtCol House had plotted all the known AA gun sites on his chart. (The day before, on March 10, A-1 Skyraider pilot, Air Force Major Bernie Fisher, landed on the shot up runway at Ashau to rescue his wingman who had bellied in his Spad, riddled with bullet holes created by these same AA guns. He took off in a hail of enemy fire. Fisher won the CMH in doing so.) We approached the valley north of the camp by scud running up a mountain stream, crossing the tops with our rotors in the soup, then scud running down into the valley and under the overcast, which was about 200 feet above the terrain. We then turned left towards the camp about 15 miles south. Fortunately, the enemy AA guns were in the clouds above us.

Suddenly circling around us was a flight of Air Force A-1 Skyraiders loaded with napalm, (forever changing this Marine pilot's opinion of Air Force pilot's skill and courage). These guys had to punch through the solid overcast using just a Tacan fix, (radial & distance), hoping they'd break out below...awesome!

As we approached the camp, the good guys were coming out through the north barricade gate, while the bad guys came in, through and over the southwest wall. That's where the Skyraiders dropped their ordinance. We followed LtCol House's lead and landed just outside the camp in 15-foot high elephant grass. Some H-34s, mine included, were immediately overloaded with panicked Nungs and Arvin, while other ships had no one loading because they couldn't be seen down in the elephant grass. I remember seeing a Special Forces soldier putting Orientals aboard, but not jumping on himself.

About then, the lead H-34, (LtCol House's), kind of exploded and smoke poured out. My bird, BU143977, had way too much weight aboard to lift off, and it looked like mortars were

“walking” into the landing zone. We had perhaps 20 soldiers in the cabin and three or four hanging on the struts. I started yelling to the crew below to get them off, shoot if necessary. We weren't going anywhere the way we were.

Finally, we managed to lift off, trailing barbed wire from the tail wheel, and rose into the soup above. Most other H-34s made it out individually, some full of bullet and shrapnel holes. VFR on top, as a flight of one, we headed back to Phu Bai. Mission time 2.4 hours, .9 IFR.

LtCol. House and his crew joined the Ashau refugees led by a Special Forces Captain. House took command and led the E&E column, choosing a route the SF Captain didn't agree with. Later that night, the Captain's route was heavily mortared, while the path House took brought them out safely. The next day, or maybe the following, House and his crew were picked up by one of our birds.

Aftermath:

The next day, the squadron (HMM-163) was given a stand down, to repair and recuperate. The only birds flying were the 2 med-evac standby ships. I was Section leader of the med-evac flight in BU 149318. I was to fly some photographers over the valley so they could take pictures, now that the weather had cleared. We flew over at 10,000', or as high as I could get, and watched the AF bomb the anti-aircraft positions while the photographers took their photos.

As we landed back at Phu Bai, Major Wyman Blakeman, the Ops Officer, gave me the turn up sign. After refueling, I restarted and he told me on the radio, to go back to Ashau to try to rescue a Skyraider pilot who had been shot down by the 37MM AA gun he was working over. We flew back out at altitude, and contacted an Army O-1 Bird Dog, who directed us to the downed pilot. I instructed my wingman to stay as high as he could, and to try to keep us in sight. My co-pilot, 1/Lt Joe Weiss, and I then flew east, descended and approached the pick up point in defilade keeping hills between the AA gun and us. I did a hover check and found we could not hover at that weight and altitude. I instructed the AF pilot on his survival radio, to try to move downhill, while we flew off and burned up fuel. About 45 minutes of flying in full rich mixture at a high power setting, and throwing out the life raft, survival gear, tool box and anything else not fastened down, did the job. We returned for the pick up, spotted his smoke flare, and came to a hover for an “out-of-ground-effect” hoist pick up. With Weiss on the throttle/collective, looking inside, and me on the cyclic and rudders looking outside, and our wheels in the treetops, we made the pick up in the red paint on the 100' hoist cable. We got the guy (Major “Buzz” Blaylock, USAF) and scooted out of there with Blaylock hugging my feet from the cabin below. My wingman joined up, followed by the A-1 Skyraider wingman. I led the flight into a right echelon (2 H-34s and an A-1) left break over our camp at Phu Bai at 300'. The squadron, on stand down and alerted by Blakeman via the loudspeaker, welcomed us home. Nice to return the AF Ashau escort favor.

Later, all of us who flew the Ashau mission had to testify before a court of inquiry in Danang regarding shooting friendly off our aircraft. I don't know if LtCol. House ever gave that order, but I certainly did...and so stated.

LtCol. House was awarded the Navy Cross and got a letter of reprimand at the same time for telling it all to the press. House was also made an honorary member of the Special Forces at a ceremony at our camp. Subsequently, Barry Sadler's song, "The Ballad of the Green Berets" was often sung over a beer in our squadron O Club (tent) during Happy Hour.

Attachments:

1. LtCol House Navy Cross citation
2. Statement from Special Forces SFC Vic Underwood, USA

Further info:

The Cat From Hue by John Laurence, CBS News. ISBN I-891620-31-2

### **Navy Cross Citation**

**House, Charles A.**

**Lieutenant Colonel, US Marine Corps**

**Med/ Helicopter Sqd. 163, Marine AG 16, 1st Air Wing**

***Date Of Action: March 9 - 10, 1966***

***Citation:***

**For extraordinary heroism as Commanding Officer, Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron ONE HUNDRED SIXTY-THREE, in action in the Republic of Vietnam on 9 and 10 March 1966. Colonel House's helicopter was disabled by intense enemy fire in the landing zone at As Hau, where the garrison had been under siege for several days. After ensuring that all personnel had abandoned the aircraft, Colonel House immediately rallied his crew members and joined a group of seventy exhausted survivors of the garrison. With inspiring leadership and dogged determination, he skillfully led the group into the jungle to escape capture. Chopping a trail through the dense underbrush, he moved into the hills which surrounded the outpost, cleverly maneuvering between hostile positions and successfully evading enemy search patrols. Although the group was subjected to harassing fire throughout the march, Colonel House managed to overcome the language barrier and instill in the Vietnamese a sense of confidence and encouragement which sustained them through the ordeal. With constant concern for the welfare of the survivors, many of whom were wounded, he halted the march several times to allow them to rest, stalwartly standing watch while others slept. When helicopters were sighted and signaled on the following afternoon, Colonel House's brilliant leadership motivated all who were able to help clear a position from which the rescue was subsequently effected. His valiant effort and determination throughout contributed in large measure to saving the members of his crew and many Special Forces and Vietnamese defenders from capture or death at the hands of the Viet Cong. By his intrepid fighting spirit, extraordinary ability as a leader, and unswerving dedication to duty, Colonel House upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.**

**Vic Underwood's account of action during**  
**A-503's battle for Camp Ashau,**  
**7-11 March 1966.**

Left:A-503 personnel Right: SF personnel A-102, Camp A Shau

1. CPT Tennis (Sam) Carter
2. SFC Victor Underwood
3. SFC Raymond Allen
4. SSG Billy Hall
5. SGT John Bradford
6. SGT Minter Hoover
7. SGT Jimmy Taylor
1. CPT Blair
2. LT Mari
3. MSG Gibson
4. SFC Adkins
5. SFC Carnahan
6. SGT McCann
7. SP Stahl
8. SP Pointon
9. SP Murray
10. SP Robins
11. The 1st Mike Force Co.-  
140 Nungs

The Mike Force (A-503) left Nha Trang on the morning of 7 March by C-130 arriving in Da Nang at noon. Carter and I were briefed by the C Team intel and were told there was a possible NVA battalion in the area of Camp Ashau.

We left from Da Nang in six C-123's arriving at Camp Ashau at 1600 hours on 7 March. We moved in and started building defensive positions and mortar pits for the Nungs.

On the morning of 8 March, Carter sent a short patrol out to the west of camp. The patrols were platoon-size with two Americans with each platoon. They returned without making contact. While they were out, Adkins gave Carter and me a complete intel briefing on the camp and surrounding area. According to intel reports the 325B North Vietnamese Division headquarters was located about 15 kilometers to the north. That day the Nungs finished their positions. After dinner a poker game was started in the American team house so Hall, Allen and I went to bed early in the dispensary.

At about 0350 the morning of the 9<sup>th</sup> we heard the V.C. mortars fire from south of camp. Bradford and Allen were first out of the dispensary. Taylor Hoover, Hall and I started out after them but had to take cover from a heavy barrage of rocket and 82mm-mortar fire. Most of the rounds were landing on and around the American team house and commo bunker. When this barrage slackened off, I started to run toward the Nung positions.

When I got just past the commo bunker I found Gibson lying in the middle of the road which runs the length of camp. He had a bad wound in the back of his head; I thought sure he was dead but when I moved him, he groaned. I picked him up and started dragging him to a Nung trench when another round came in wounding Gibson again and knocking me down. After I got my wind back I picked Gibson up and got him into the trench.

When I got there I found Bradford and Allen in the trench, both wounded. Allen was hit in the head and chest, Bradford in the leg, butt and hand. After making Allen as comfortable as possible, I helped Bradford to the relative safety of the commo bunker where I left him with Hoover. I went to look for our medic, Billy Hall, to go to the trench to help Allen and Gibson, then I went to the commo bunker to check on Bradford. While I was there another heavy barrage came in. I went back to the trench and found Allen dead; Hall had one leg gone and the other mangled; and Hall's interpreter was dead. I put tourniquets on Hall's legs then went to look for Adkins and found him in the 81mm mortar pit. We went back to the trench together to take care of Hall and Gibson. While Adkins gave Hall a shot of morphine, I tried to find bleeders inside his legs and clamp them. Adkins put a blood expander IV into Hall's arm but we couldn't completely the bleeding. While Adkins worked on Hall I went back to the dispensary to find a stretcher and a Nung to help me. We moved Gibson and Hall to the dispensary.

After turning them over to Carnahan and Stahl, Adkins and I went to check the camp defenses. I told the Nung mortar crews to keep firing illumination until daylight. We then found the Nung C.O. and Taylor. After telling them what had happened to Allen and Bradford, I informed Taylor he was in charge of the Nung Company.

After leaving them, Adkins and I separated; he went to check the rest of the camp and I went to look for Carter. I found him by the U.S. 81mm mortar pit. He told me he had

been sleeping in the supply room adjacent to the U.S. team house when the attack started and that one of the first rounds had collapsed the supply room on top of him. He had just now dug himself out. I informed him of what had happened and he went to check on Hall while I went to find Taylor and tell him to have the Nungs improve their positions.

Hall died at about 0900. Hoover and McCann were in the commo bunker trying to get med-evacs but the weather was bad—a low ceiling. Two finally tried to make it in; one was shot and crash-landed inside the camp the other left. After several radio messages we finally got an L-19 on the airstrip to pick up Gibson who was the most critically wounded. We moved his and Allen's bodies down next to the airstrip. Carter and Adkins stuffed Gibson in the back behind the pilot. Later a CH -47 came in and pickup all the wounded.

When Carter and Adkins were loading Gibson, an unusually heavy volume of fire started coming from the southeast corner of the camp. Taylor, Stahl and I ran to that area and found that the Vietnamese company in that position was firing on the airplane. While we were trying to stop the firing, a couple of the Vietnamese were killed. When this happened, the firing stopped. After that, Taylor and I placed the Nung recon platoon in positions to watch the Vietnamese in that corner of the camp.

From then until later in the evening, things were fairly quiet. That evening an AC-47 came in to strafe around the camp and was shot down about four kilometers north of camp. That night we all stayed in our fighting positions.

Sometime after 0300 on the 10<sup>th</sup> the V.C. opened up with everything they had. They attacked the south wall in wave after wave. When one wave was shot down, another would come. They finally breached the southeast portion of the wall. Because the Vietnamese company responsible for that section was mostly V.C. and turned and tried to attack back into the camp. The Nung recon platoon killed most all of them.

During the early morning Stahl, and McCann were killed and Taylor was seriously wounded. At about 0700 the V.C. occupied the south wall. At one time Carnahan, Carter and I, using an M-79 and M-16s, killed a tremendous number of V.C. as they didn't seem to know what to do when they got inside the camp. They would stand up to look around, making good targets.

Later that day we were talking about a counter attack, which the Nungs C.O. did, retaking the eastern portion of the camp. In order not to leave the Nung's flank open, we tried to get the Vietnamese to counter attack and retake part of the south wall. They didn't think much of the idea; in fact, it scared the hell out of them. Carnahan and I decided we would try to lead them. We armed ourselves with handgrenades and our M-16s. We started across the camp towards the south wall throwing handgrenades at any V.C. we could see. We were about halfway across the camp, even with the commo bunker. We took cover behind a Conex container; Carnahan covering one side and I the other. V.C. threw a handgrenade, wounding us both. I jumped around Carnahan and saw the V.C. who threw the grenade running back toward the south wall. I hit him in the back with our last grenade and blew him all to pieces. We then pulled back to the north

wall and Carnahan took care of our wounds which were all in our legs—he had a broken leg.

I went to look for Carter who had attempted another counter attack and was pinned down by one or more snipers on the south wall. I found a Vietnamese 60mm mortar with the crew all dead so I started lobbing rounds into the south wall where the sniper fire was coming from. The firing stopped and Carter was able to withdraw to the north wall. The next hours were rather slow.

In the afternoon of the 10<sup>th</sup> the overcast lifted a little to let the jets and A1Es come in. They started dropping bombs and napalm and firing rockets south and east of camp. Blair brought the A1Es in to bomb the south wall which was approximately 75-100 yards from the north wall where we were and it shook the hell out of us. During one of the strikes, a piece of shrapnel about 10 inches long landed between Carnahan and me. He hollered "Grenade!" I dove for cover, he grabbed it to throw it back outside the wall and burned the hell out of himself.

One of the A1Es crash-landed on the airstrip. Carter and Carnahan saw the pilot climb out and run to the berm east of the runway. I led four Nungs to try and get him inside the camp but when we got through the main gate, we were pinned down. All four Nungs were killed and I was in a shallow hole and couldn't move. Then another A1E came in with his wheels down. I thought "Oh shit! Not another one." He landed and taxied to the end of the airstrip, turned around, pulled up by the downed pilot who jumped into the cockpit head first and they took off with a lot of V.C. shooting at them. While the V.C. were concentrating on the airplane I got up and ran back into camp. This act not only earned Major Bernie Fisher the first Air Force Medal of Honor but also saved my ass.

At 1700 hours headquarters gave us the word to abandon the camp. We were to be picked up by Marine helicopters at approximately 1000 meters north of camp. Carter and Blair told me and Carnahan to go out first to organize and control a landing zone so we could get the wounded out on the helicopters first. When the Vietnamese saw us and the Nungs head for the landing zone they lost complete control and swarmed out of the camp in a mob, lead by the Vietnamese camp commander. They ran past us, separating Carnahan from me and the Nungs. I was wounded in the legs and couldn't move very fast. I tried to shoot the Vietnamese camp commander but someone always kept getting in the way. When the helicopters (Marine CH-34's) tried to land the Vietnamese swarmed on the first ones down. The others started circling looking for a clear place to land. Some landed away from the Vietnamese but were then were mobbed.

The first helicopter I got to was Lt. Colonel House's, the Squadron Commander. There were from 20 to 30 Vietnamese trying to get in his helicopter. His crew chief and gunner were trying to beat them off so they could lift off. I was on the ground trying to calm them down but they wouldn't listen and shoved me out of the way. Some of them were shot; the others backed away. The helicopter lifted off about 10 feet and the V.C. shot the tail rotor off so it crashed. Colonel House and his crew got off. Colonel House walked up to me and said, "I've got a map, have you got a compass?" He and his crew were separated from me by the confusion.

I had moved about 100 meters to the northwest looking for other Americans when Pointon hollered "Sgt. Underwood, get me out of here!" He was wounded through the chest and both upper arms. There were still gun ships flying around. I had a panel sewn in my hat. I flashed the panel at a gun ship; he dropped his ammunition pods and landed. I helped Pointon on board and he pulled his pistol and pointed it at me; I side-stepped and he shot Vietnamese off my back. The helicopter took off and left me standing there.

All of the remaining Americans (some got out on the Marine extraction), Nungs and Vietnamese got together about a mile north of camp to plan our E&E route. Adkins and Mari had carried Taylor out of camp. We went west toward Laos into the mountains and stopped for about two hours to rest. When we started moving again Carter and Adkins and some Nungs, who had stayed at the rear of the column with Taylor, got separated from the main group. Taylor died while we were stopped. Carter and Adkins cached his body. Carter and Adkins and about four Nungs E&E'd together until they were picked up. Hoover and three or four Nungs got separated the first night but were able to rejoin the main body the next day about noon. We kept moving north and at about 1700 we were spotted by a Marine helicopter. He was able to hoist Colonel House and his crew aboard and an old Vietnamese lady and Blair ordered me to go aboard, too. We were flown to Phu Bai where Sgt. Perkins was waiting with 2<sup>nd</sup> Company. We flew back to Nha Trang that night. Hoover, Blair and Mari and their group were picked up the next morning. Carter and Adkins were picked up in the afternoon.

This is the action that I was involved in and is by no means all of the action that took place in the battle for Camp Ashau.