This book is for all those
who soldiered in Vietnam
especially those
who in the demoralized last days
still looked out for
the man to their right
and the man to their left

...and for April

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When the 1st Armor crossed the border, Colonel Battreall was at his post in Saigon. It didn't take long to recognize that the reports filtering back had lost their coherency, so he, his sergeant major, and his ARVN counterpart caught a plane to Hue, then a helo to FSB Kilo. There they found that Colonel Luat had left two M577 command vehicles, an ARVN sergeant major, and a half-dozen enlisted men in a rear CP. The APCs were parked back to back beside the I Corps command bunker and Battreall's group spent their days monitoring the radios in them, and occasionally ducking in them for cover when the NVA harassed the command bases with rockets and artillery. As an advisor, Battreall could give no orders to the ARVN and, because of politics, he wasn't allowed to see first hand what was going on in Laos. The frustrations could be tremendous at times.

All in all, Colonel Battreall was guarded about the status of the 1st Armor Brigade at Aloui. His concerns, however, had nothing to do with the caliber of the South Vietnamese soldiers. He considered the troops to be first rate and their commanders superb. Colonel Luat impressed him as a brave commander who led from the front. His counterpart at Armor Command, Col. Phan Hoa Hiep, was also an able officer.

No, Battreall thought, the problem lay not with the combatants but with the plan—with the no-advisors-in-Laos policy. He had begged General Berry for permission to at least overfly the armor's area of operations to get a handle on the terrain and physical disposition of the troops; Berry had no choice but to deny the request and Battreall was one step further removed from the reality of the radio messages from Laos. The armor brigade was attached to the airborne division who were, according to MACV and XXIV Corps, to provide them with logistical support. That is how the Americans defined "attached." Not so with the Vietnamese, Battreall knew, who did not consider an attached unit as a logistical dependent. The airborne made no attempts to support their armor brigade.

Another major problem arose in the airborne's assignment to "secure Route 9" for the armor. To an American officer, such an order meant physically patrolling the road to prevent ambushes and having engineer elements upgrade the surface for traffic. That is what the planners at XXIV Corps had intended; but to the Vietnamese securing a road simply meant being able to bring it under fire. Battreall noted that, on the map, the airborne's LZ Alpha and LZ Bravo sat astride the highway giving the 105mm howitzers there overlapping fire along the entire route. In their minds, the airborne sincerely believed they had accomplished their mission—but the NVA were virtually free to attack the road at will because the paratroopers were not aggressively patrolling it. In addition, the dirt road from Bravo to Aloui was so treacherous that only tracked vehicles could make it; no engineer work was started and no supply trucks got through. Aloui was totally dependent on U.S. Army aviation.

Such problems were bound to occur when U.S. and ARVN forces worked together, but the peculiarities imposed on the Laotian campaign fueled the difficulties, as Battreall noted, "Although titular Senior Advisor, I Corps, the XXIV Corps CG in normal times concerned himself exclusively with his own U.S. units, leaving the advisory function to a brigadier general, Jackson at this particular time. When XXIV Corps Headquarters began planning Lam Son 719, therefore, they did not know their counterparts in I Corps. They wrote a perfectly good plan using standard U.S. military terminology, not realizing the Vietnamese would often nod politely even when they disagreed and that, even when they did agree, they sometimes understood terms differently than the American authors intended. The disconnect between XXIV Corps and reality at the point of contact could not have gone undetected and uncorrected had advisors been at the point of contact."

Some of the difficulties, though, rested squarely on the shoulders of the ARVN. The 1st Armor's initial assignment had been to secure Aloui; this they did with little trouble, and there they sat. General Dong, inexperienced in the ways of war, did not know what else to do with the brigade and Colonel Luat did not pursue any other mission (as Battreall noted, "Initiative by a subordinate, unhappily, never became part of the ARVN character and many, many opportunities were lost.") The 1st Armor Brigade had been able to execute a virtually bloodless attack to Aloui but now they sat on a patch of barren high ground. The terrain around them seriously hampered tank movement, the highway was impassable even to a jeep, and the helicopter resupply was coming under more AA fire every day. Before leaving Saigon, Battreall had seen a MACV intelligence estimate which said no NVA tanks were in southern Laos and none could get there without being detected by the electronic sensors and destroyed by the USAF; he doubted this and was worried, because the brigade had fewer than fifty light M41 tanks at Aloui. He trusted Colonel Luat and his troopers to fight bravely if the NVA brought pressure to bear but, as things stood, he thought a major battle would result in needless chaos and casualties.

Chaotic was the word Okamura chose to describe the developments

rounds came in. The thought that kept grinding in the back of Smith's mind was that it was all for nothing, that it was just a big show of Vietnamization being played out at the expense of American pilots.

Lieutenant Smith had another job which served further to demoralize him. He was company scheduling officer and, at night, some of the pilots came to him, crying over wives and children, begging not to be slotted for Laos again. Smith hated making them go, and he began to hate Kirklighter and Klose for taking them there. He pictured them flying high and dry in their C&C.

The enlisted men were taking it the worst, he thought. They seemed confused about Vietnam to begin with, horrified by their experiences, demoralized with the thought that they were dying for nothing. One night Smith's crew chief came crying to him, saying he had to get off heroin, and he sweated out two nights cold turkey in Smith's tent. Smith was a straight arrow, had never seen anyone light up around him, and was shocked that his chief was a head—the man had always been dependable during the missions into Laos. He told Smith that most of the door-gunners got stoned at night to relieve the pressure. But no one, he said, smoked during combat. What kept them going, Smith figured, was simple comradeship. If Laos and Kirklighter were bad, then the aircrews pulled together that much more. If a man went down, every action was taken to rescue the crew. It didn't matter if you hated the guy's guts, he reckoned, if he crashed, you went through whatever the NVA threw at you to save him. That was the mutual respect they had for each other and if it had been any less, Smith would have refused to fly. He thought of the men in the 48th Blue Stars as heroes, simply that, and he respected hell out of his company commander. Major Bunting always flew the lead ship, "so we automatically wanted to follow."

Sp5 Dennis Lundstrom was also in the 223rd CAB, a twenty-one-year-old South Dakotan flying-crew chief on UHIC of the 173rd Crossbow Guns. He was glad his pilot knew his job expertly, because Lieutenant Colonel Kirklighter made him nervous. Sometimes he could hear on the radio, as Kirklighter ordered them to do something which seemed needlessly dangerous:

"No fucking way," someone would mumble.

"Knock that off," Kirklighter would say hotly.

"Heyyy," someone would cut in, "fuck you," and they'd burst out laughing.

Lundstrom wondered if the colonel baited them along like that to allow them to let off some steam. He couldn't figure Kirklighter out. Sometimes he seemed very brave, but then again it was more as if he were oblivious. Few of the men took the time to analyze it; they just muttered how they wanted to frag his ass. He seemed, to Lundstrom, an absolutely intolerant man who refused to listen to anyone, and who seemed more concerned about the mission than their lives.

Laos changed the war Lundstrom had known. It made him feel like a new guy again. He'd enlisted right out of high school when he'd gotten his draft notice, so he wouldn't have to slog it out as a grunt. He'd gone through high school drinking, driving, and chasing girls, and it had bothered him not a bit when they'd sent him to Nam. He wasn't even very nervous when, after being a supply clerk for two months, an antagonistic first sergeant assigned him as a door-gunner. Then he was shot down, his two pilots badly wounded; he killed four NVA; he saw a dead grunt's brain slide out during a medevac mission, and he was sick for days and wanted to quit. His buddies said you would get used to it. For some sick reason, he thought, you did. In fact, he began to like the action. He made crew chief and, when his tour ended in December 1970, he extended for more combat duty.

But Laos reduced all of the bravado to simply trying to survive day by day. He was shot down once in Laotian territory. Sometimes in the morning, as they cranked up on the Dong Ha pad, a buddy would mutter to Lundstrom, "Hey, I don't think I'm coming back."

"Bullshit, don't even talk that way."

Laos weighed heavily on all of their minds.

During the third week, when they were making a CA to LZ Delta One, a friend who was standby talked Lundstrom into giving him his place on one of the Charlie-model gunships because the friend's good buddy was crew chief on it. When the company came back, two ships were missing, and Lundstrom got the story; the slick his buddy's gunnie had been escorting had hit its skids down into their rotors, and both birds had shattered in mid-air. Eight Americans had died, along with six ARVN passengers. Lundstrom's pilot never volunteered them for resupply missions, but a buddy from Colorado had a pilot who did. When they came back from one his friend had been shot through the face by a 12.7mm—KIA.

Even some of the young pilots turned to drugs and Lundstrom trusted

none of them—except for a captain who occasionally smoked smack and was loose and cool in the air. Once a kid WO was assigned to fly his UH1C on perimeter security around Dong Ha and his first comment was, "You got a bucket in here? I'm really getting sick on this smack."

"I ain't got no bucket," Lundstrom shot back, "You better not get sick in my helicopter."

The pilot flew crazily, the skids smacking the surface of the river, and Lundstrom gripped his M-60, terrified, muttering, "Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit." When they landed, he reported the WO to his platoon leader and had the satisfaction of seeing the idiot grounded for the duration of Laos.

Capt. Rich Johnson, operations officer of the 173rd, could understand why morale was so poor during the op. His company commander was shot down at LZ Blue and, in Johnson's mind, it ruined him; he flew only select missions after that. The men began calling him Prettyboy, and Johnson became de facto commander of the 173rd. If the intensity of the air war could affect a professional soldier like that, Johnson recognized what it could do to a draftee door-gunner. It seemed to them worst in the afternoon, when they were preparing to go back into Laos after refueling from the morning trip. Over the radios, they could hear what was happening to those still flying, punctuated by the occasional sight of a Chinook coming over with a slingloaded wreck. Some guys would put on a facade of toughness as they got ready to go back. Others would vomit their lunch of cold C rations before climbing in. Captain Johnson made it a point not to eat lunch because he would be gripped with dry heaves right before he took off; it wasn't until he cranked the engine that he could replace his anxiety with flying skill.

He knew that many of the men took it out on Kirklighter and Klose (claymores blew apart Kirklighter's private latrine and HQ hootch—while unoccupied). They were hated men in the battalion, but were not the monsters the troops thought them to be. As Johnson saw it, they had been assigned a mission and, to carry it out, they had to put some people in precarious situations. And men died. Johnson himself had some shouting matches with Klose at Dong Ha on tactics—but unlike most of the men, he remembered that Kirklighter and Klose were sharing the danger every day over Laos. Big, red haired, and hard drinking, Kirklighter impressed Johnson as one of the toughest and bravest commanders he knew.

And for those qualities, his men—who thought the war over and it was time to go home—hated him.

Despite difficulties, army aviation got the job done in Laos. General Berry was the commander of air operations (with the call sign Big Ben) and his can-do attitude and personal courage influenced the course of the campaign. As Colonel Battreall remembered, "Sid Berry was absolutely superb. He could easily have run the U.S. Army Aviation support of Lam Son 719 from a secure bunker at the Khe Sanh airfield, but he never missed a day commanding it 'eyeball' from his own chopper over the scene of action in Laos. He always made Lieutenant General Lam's afternoon briefings and offered clear and incisive comments on the status of the fighting. I recall vividly one afternoon after he'd been shot at in his helicopter and nearly hit by the 76mm main gun of a PT76 tank. 'Damn it,' he said, 'That's not in my contract!' The point was, of course, that with the exception of Humphrey Bogart in *Sahara* nobody ever tried to use a tank cannon for antiaircraft. We all believed that the Soviets had succeeded in doing what our own ordnance said was impossible: designing a proximity fuse that would withstand the severe setback of a high-velocity tank gun."

There were 90,000 U.S. helicopter sorties into Laos. For four days the South Vietnamese invasion force had a relatively easy time. They cut branches of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, uncovered abandoned bunkers and supply caches, but found only a few North Vietnamese. On 12 February, the first intense firefights broke out around Aloui. On that day the battle for the Ho Chi Minh Trail was joined. President Thieu was unsettled by the casualties (he personally visited ARVN infantrymen on the Co Roc that day) and instructed his commanders to proceed with extreme caution. (Unknown to both Nixon and Abrams, he planned all along to call off the operation if three thousand ARVN were killed.) If Lam Son 719 ever had the momentum to be a daring strike, bad weather was not the only thing which slowed it down.

Each day the tempo and number of firefights between the ARVN and NVA increased. The press gave the impression that the NVA had suckered the ARVN into Laos and were now slamming the door behind them and moving in to annihilate effortlessly. Such a scenario was an exaggeration; the Communists, presumably, had been lying low for the first four days, not to lure the ARVN deeper into Laos but to wait for reinforcements to be shifted from North and South Vietnam. The NVA did not want their foe in Laos for any reason; it put their backs to the wall.

And for that reason, the Communists fought ferociously.

to Ranger North when he dropped to a hover over a group of troops on the perimeter. His crew chief prepared to kick out the gear, then suddenly screamed, "Pull up! They're gooks!" The NVA were hugging the perimeter, actually crawling through the wire and firing at helicopters while lying on their backs, in an attempt to avoid artillery and airstrikes. That kind of danger accompanied the aircrews all the time. Updyke, for one, had a wife and three children at home, a Distinguished Flying Cross from Ripcord, and only three months left in a war he thought was useless because the politicians were abandoning it. He could feel the acid burn his gut the entire time he was over Laos and he wished to God a caution-light would come on so he could turn around. It was a shared wish. Once a helo from the 1st Aviation Brigade flew with them into Laos and the pilot radioed, "I'm heading back, I've got a caution-light."

"Roger," the flight leader answered, "What's the problem?"

"The APU warning light is on." The Alternate Power Unit was a small compartment in the fuselage which could be used to jumpstart other helos.

"You dumb shit, that just means your little APU door is open."

The timid pilot stayed with the flight, and Updyke took some pride in the fact that that was the only time he saw any shirking. For all the fear and danger, the men clung to their personal and unit loyalties and did the job. Colonel Davis monitored one telling radio conversation: a USAF Phantom pilot bombed the NVA AA positions in preparation for the slicks, then watched them sail through the blizzards of flak and bullets, and commented admiringly, "Those helicopter guys must have steel balls." Because of the numerous shoot-downs, many of the pilots augmented their standard .38 Smith & Wesson revolvers by carrying M-16 rifles and bandoliers of ammunition in the cockpits.

February 18 marked the beginning of the last act for Ranger North.

That morning, the crew of DMZ Dust Off—a Huey medevac from the 237th Medical Detachment, 61st Medical Battalion, 44th Medical Brigade—was waiting on the Khe Sanh pad. An emergency medevac call came in and the crew dropped their C ration breakfast and climbed aboard, two pilots up front; the crew chief; Sp5s Costello, Fujii, and Simpco, in the back. En route to Laos, the aircraft commander came over the intercom, explaining the mission: the 39th Rangers had heavy casualties, the LZ was extremely hot, and two Cobras would escort them in. The Cobras joined the Huey over Laos. Three klicks from Ranger North,

they began taking heavy ground fire. The medevac AC decided it was too hot and turned the ship around for Khe Sanh. The Cobras, low on ammo and fuel, turned back, too.

Then the AC changed his mind, banked back towards Ranger North. Sp5 Fujii saw the Cobras disappearing to the east.

The Huey came in low, green tracers from AK-47s and 12.7mms burning lines all around them. Fujii tensed; looking down he could see NVA in the brush at the base of Ranger North and mortar rounds exploding on the denuded, bunkered hill. They landed on the LZ, screaming at the ARVN litter teams to hurry with the wounded and the AC instantly pulled pitch to get out. A mortar round exploded on the LZ as they lifted off and they came crashing back down into the dust. The AC was slumped in his seat, mortally wounded; the pilot, gravely injured from shrapnel, was temporarily paralyzed below the waist. The wounded ARVN were trying to climb off. Fujii and Simpco had shrapnel in their backs; Costello was the only one unscathed. Yanking their radio helmets off, they jumped out amid the continuing mortar barrage.

Fujii and Simpco crawled off looking for cover and a hundred yards down from the LZ found the opening to a bunker. They tumbled inside. Two ARVN were already in it and Costello rushed in moments later. They bandaged each other's wounds, crouching in the bunker while mortar shells kept walking across the hill.

A rescue Huey landed near their disabled medevac.

Somehow, in all the fire, the wounded pilots were carried aboard. Then Costello dashed from the bunker, followed by Simpco, then Fujii. Costello and Simpco flung themselves aboard, but Fujii had just cleared the bunker entrance when an explosion bowled him over. In a daze, he stumbled to his feet and waved at the pilot to get out, the LZ was too hot. He paused long enough to see the Huey miraculously glide off the LZ amid a torrent of fire, then hustled back into the bunker.

There was a PRC25 there and he radioed for all aviators to stay clear of Ranger North. The AA fire was simply impenetrable.

That night, the mortaring stopped for a while and, under cover of darkness, Fujii left the bunker with an ARVN sergeant and walked to the LZ. Fujii opened the fuel release valve on his crippled Huey, draining the JP4 fuel, then they salvaged whatever usable gear they could find. It was the end of the first day of what for Sp5 Dennis Fujii, a soft-spoken, twenty-one-year-old half-Irish, half-Japanese Hawaiian, would be a five-day ordeal.

attackers and a Cobra from A/2/17 caught fire and crashed; the two pilots were wounded but immediately rescued by another helo.

To the south of this action, teams from the Dutchmasters made more finds. A Loach, piloted by a cocky and bold lieutenant named Bruce Cannon, followed vehicle tracks to a solid wall of jungle. He put a burst of minigun fire through the vegetation—and a fuel truck exploded in a ball of fire. Cannon had discovered an NVA truck-park under the triple-canopy jungle. Cannon quickly radioed for tac air but USAF rules-of-engagement prevented them from bombing so close to the main road so he maintained his low-level maneuvering as his door-gunner sprayed with his M-60 and hurled fragmentation grenades. The trucks did not explode so the gunner began putting bursts into the fuel tanks, getting gas on the ground, then tossing white phosphorus grenades. WO Borders came in to provide fire support and could see only the Loach darting below with Cannon shouting excitedly on the radio, then another explosion and a column of black smoke rolling up from the roof of jungle. The Cobras rolled in to finish the job and took some fire, but finally tallied up the destruction of ten fuel trucks, two large fuel blivets, two supply caches, a hootch, and several telephone poles and communication lines which Cannon had spotted down amid the trees.

The day's low overcast deteriorated by late evening, preventing some of the cav teams from returning to Khe Sanh or Quang Tri. Those aircrews were forced to shut down at Lang Vei where elements of the Blues, Delta 2/17, 101st DISCOM, and ARVN Hoc Bao maintained a forward staging area/refuel/rearm point. At dusk, the NVA struck back with mortars, RPGs, and AK-47 fire against the perimeter. Mortar fragments tore a ten-thousand-gallon fuel bladder and JP4 aviation fuel soaked the ground around the airstrip. An RPG sent one parked Huey up in a ball of fire so, while the men on the perimeter returned fire, the pilots ran from their bunkers and revved up their birds before the NVA could destroy any more. Cobras circled Lang Vei, but could not fire on the NVA attack because the U.S. perimeter was not visible in the dark. A quick-thinking young sergeant in the Dutchmaster Blues shouted for his lieutenant and together they dashed almost a hundred yards outside the perimeter; there they ignited a five-gallon can of JP4 which burned fiercely, marking the perimeter. The Cobras dove in on the NVA. Artillery from U.S. firebases pounded in. The NVA attack broke up.

In the morning, Lieutenant Colonel Rosenblum (CO, 101st DISCOM) helicoptered to Lang Vei to supervise the replacing of some equipment burnt up in the night probe. He was informed that a young Sp4 in the 426th S&S Battalion, manning the refuel/rearm point, had performed bravely; when the fuel bladder was punctured by mortar shrapnel, the Sp4 had jumped into the berm under fire and had waded through ankle-deep fuel, successfully patching the holes.

"Did you know," Rosenblum asked the man, "that if there'd been a spark, you'd have gone up?"

"Yes, sir," the short, curly-haired kid answered, "but, hell, those pilots needed that fuel."

Rosenblum wrote him up for a Bronze Star for Valor.

Meanwhile the air cav helicopters were sputtering to life at Lang Vei and heading back into Laos. That afternoon they set another pipeline ablaze, gunned down four NVA, and directed airstrikes on NVA tanks and trucks moving down a jungle trail. Coming back at twenty-seven hundred feet a Cobra from the Dutchmasters was hit by AA fire in the main rotor blade. The ship vibrated fiercely, the strained, wobbly pitch echoing for miles, but the pilot made a successful landing at Khe Sanh. The hole in the blade was big enough to put your head through—and the pilot did just that, grinning for the civilian photographers there.

While the U.S. air cavalry wreaked havoc on the NVA, the NVA in turn, tightened the noose on the ARVN.

The initial NVA attack against Ranger North petered out and, on the morning of 19 February they reverted to mortaring the base. Lieutenant Colonel Peachy took the Ghostriders and Phoenix Birds in to resupply the base, and maintained his C&C orbit at about six thousand feet—so high, Lieutenant Updyke laughed, "that his bird looked like a gnat's ass." Peachy ordered two slicks from the Ghostriders to go on in, and WO Smith watched anxiously as two of his buddies headed down. They hadn't even gotten their supplies out before an NVA mortar team raised havoc on the LZ and they had to back off. The pilots were on the radio, clamoring for ARVN artillery or gunships to knock out the mortar, but Peachy ordered two more slicks to give it a try. The pilots reluctantly obliged him, but barely got out alive as mortar shells burst all around them.

Peachy told two more ships to go in.

A kid WO nicknamed Sandy said it for all of them, "Why don't you go!"

"Who was that!"

Sandy identified himself by his Ghostrider call sign.

Lloyd and Nelson managed to nurse the Huey four kilometers to Ranger South. They crashed on the LZ, but everyone managed to scramble clear before the ship exploded. Lieutenant Updyke could see thick smoke rising from Ranger South; there was no radio contact from the crash, and he debated with himself if he should risk going in. Before he could decide, he felt guilty and relieved to see his friend, WO Doan, peel off from the circling pack of gunships and head in towards the flaming wreck. Doan took several hits but came out of the LZ with Major Lloyd and the door gunners. Nelson and Fujii were still on the ground, and another slick barrelled in. Nelson jumped aboard, but Fujii hollered that he'd stay to help the ARVN on the firebase. Fujii was already a hero to the aviators, but Nelson's rescue also provided a piece of pilot folklore: he was a quiet man who loved spit and polish and as they sped out of the hot LZ, taking hits, Nelson reportedly merely grimaced and pointed to a scratch across the toe of his boot.

Major Lloyd, Captain Nelson, WO Doan, and the three other Huey pilots involved in the aborted rescue won Silver Stars, while the six crew chiefs and door gunners won Distinguished Flying Crosses. They were the first medals awarded to U.S. troops for the Laotian operation. Captain Nelson reportedly only had three weeks to enjoy his Silver Star; pilots of his company remember hearing that Nelson's bird took fire at three thousand feet and turned into a mid-air fireball.

The evening of February 20 and the morning of February 21 were a nightmare. Hundreds of dead NVA could be seen from the air around Ranger North, but many more had broken through the perimeter and were capturing the base. The 39th Rangers, outnumbered, out of ammunition, and exhausted, retreated down one side of the hill. They left about one hundred thirty dead and sixty wounded, and came out with about two hundred men, half of whom were walking wounded. Dozens of private firefights broke out as the survivors ran through the night, intermingling with NVA in the jungle, trying to reach Ranger South. The NVA began mortaring the base and Sp5 Fujii once again set up a radio vigil, calling in suppressive fire. Hueys from the 158th Aviation Battalion began coming in for the wounded at daybreak. Fujii jumped aboard the first bird. The survivors of the 39th Rangers mobbed the helicopters in a panicked frenzy to get medevacked. The AC of the lead ship began shouting frantically, "Get off, get off, get off!" and Fujii did. He started yanking ARVN out of the cabin, the door gunners kicked at them, and the ship finally got airborne with several men clinging to the skids. Fujii watched them fall to their deaths. Colonel Davis instructed Lieutenant Colonel Peachy to cancel the medevacs and make supply drops from a hover until the ARVN commanders could get their troops under control.

The battalion commander at Ranger South sent NCOs to reorganize the LZ and weed out the real wounded from the fakers. It was dark by then; it was another night of mortar and artillery fire before the helicopters returned in the morning. Tac air, air cav gunships, aerial field artillery, ground artillery, and smoke screens were hammered around Ranger South, supressing most of the NVA fire long enough for medevacs to land. This time the ARVN did not lose control, and the wounded Fujii, after five days on the ground in Laos, was finally able to board a Huey. Flying out of Ranger South, Fujii couldn't relax; he was convinced he'd be shot down again, he couldn't believe he was actually getting out alive. The reporters photographed Fujii being awarded the Purple Heart and twenty-six days after being rescued, he was pinned with the Distinguished Service Cross. He was the only televised hero of the Laotian operation.

At Aloui, Okamura thought the position of the 1st Armor was fast deteriorating. An ARVN officer told him there was nothing to prevent the NVA from moving behind them to sow Route 9 with mines, and commented, "We came in in only two days, but it will take us a week at least to get out." Every day 122mm rockets pounded the firebase. Tank patrols that advanced more than two hundred meters ran into blistering NVA fire. Antiaircraft fire hampered the medevac and resupply choppers. The ARVN soldiers seemed to be holding up under the pressure, but they were homesick and tired of sitting and being pummelled. It was time to get out, Okamura thought; a reporter always had that option. He gathered his gear and waited at the Aloui helo pad, just in time for another rocket raid. The shells walked through the area and a fuel blivet burst into flames. As American helicopters appeared, the ARVN atop their tanks and APCs on the perimeter laid down suppressive fire. The second helo landed, and Okamura joined the rush for it. Two paratroopers with slight wounds fell on him as they jumped aboard, and three ARVN officers also climbed in. One tried to draw his pistol to keep other ARVN off, as the helicopter lifted away.

Ranger North was the first domino to fall in the NVA counterattack; the Communists had sustained severe casualties for the victory, but they

coordinates, as two Cobras and two UHIC gunships swooped in to provide cover. They came in, Smith flying the last slick. AK-47 fire popped furiously below them. Rounds slammed through his ship. He abruptly noticed there were North Vietnamese infantrymen, crawling through the wire, ten yards from the ARVN perimeter bunkers.

A firefight was raging below.

The Hueys set down in the landing zone, mortar shells impacting all around them, and they quickly pulled out, a piece of shrapnel smacking into the tailboom of Smith's slick.

They went in again. The mortars drove them away again.

Milling above Hotel Two, Smith spotted the flash of a mortar round leaving its tube on a hillside five hundred yards away. He alerted the gunships, then watched one of the Cobras dodge a wall of bursting flak to pump rockets into the trees. The mortar crew disintegrated in the explosions. Another mortar promptly resumed the shelling. The two UH1Cs had to depart station to refuel and rearm so, while the two Cobras fired up the jungle, the three Hueys went in for another try. The first two made it through the curtain of mortar shrapnel. Smith came in last. The last few ARVN, running like hell, piled aboard, and he pulled up through the mortar bursts. It was a haunting sight for him to look back and see only abandoned, smoking bunkers and the Cobras banking away.

The North Vietnamese overran the rubble. Airstrikes were called in on them and the helicopter and artillery pieces left behind.

Lieutenant Colonel Molinelli's 2/17 Air Cav had several encounters with NVA in Soviet-made tanks. A scout ship spotted their first tank when he noticed what looked like a hootch moving. On closer inspection, the pilot saw a barrel protruding from the thatch and realized that the hut was built on an A-frame over the tank hull as camouflage. In another engagement, the 2/17 overflew fourteen tanks and rolled in on them firing. The tanks responded with their main guns and 12.7mm flexibles, but the Cobras punched holes in three of them with HEAT rockets, blowing up the crews, and immobilized the other eleven. The USAF came in at night, perfunctorily strafed the column, and reported fourteen kills. But in the morning, the cav found only the three burnt wrecks. The NVA had recovered the rest.

On another occasion, Lt. Col. Joseph Ganahl, commander of U.S. artillery on the border, was in his C&C bird when NVA tanks attacked an ARVN position. His S3 got on the radio to say an airborne forward air

controller would direct the battalion's fire on the enemy armor, and that the corps commander was monitoring the frequency. Extremely nervous about all of the brass listening in, the FAC reported it was a good shot, but to drop two hundred meters on the gun target line and go right a hundred. The battery commander answered that his next round was on the way; there was a pause, then the FAC cried, "Holy Christ!" Ganahl thought his men must have dropped a short round into the ARVN, but the FAC caught his breath and said just the opposite was true. The artillery round had exploded between two NVA tanks, bowling them both over. They claimed two tank kills with one shell.

Things were falling apart for the 3rd Airborne Battalion on Hill 31. Their patrols around the base met fierce resistance; NVA artillery, rockets, and mortars pummelled the hill every day, and sappers had been killed in the perimeter wire. General Lam sent the 6th Airborne Battalion into a valley southeast of Hill 31 to destroy the NVA gun positions there. An Arc Light was put on the LZ, but intense NVA fire still forced the helicopters away. They dropped the battalion at alternate LZs, but they were under artillery fire and the battalion retreated in the direction of Hill 31, losing twenty-eight KIA, fifty WIA, and twenty-three MIA in a single afternoon. The 6th Airborne Battalion was helicoptered out, having accomplished nothing.

The death knell for Hill 31 came on 25 February.

At eleven in the morning, 130mm artillery began hitting the base. Hours later a company from the 3rd Airborne Battalion on patrol about a kilometer east of the basecamp spotted an NVA tank and infantry column moving in the direction of Hill 31. They estimated over twenty tanks and two thousand infantrymen. There were only four hundred ARVN atop Hill 31. The company commander quickly moved his men back to the base and the battalion operations officer, a Major Hong, radioed the artillery batteries at Aloui and Hill 30. They began firing on the advancing column, felling numerous NVA foot soldiers, but the tanks rolled through unscathed. Major Hong requested airstrikes, but the ARVN aerial observer, in his circling OV10 plane, was convinced that they must be ARVN tanks, and it took much haggling and an hour before tac air arrived.

The ARVN paratroopers fired madly at the oncoming mass of North Vietnamese, moving in the perimeter wire to the south, as a flight of U.S. Marine A4 Skyhawk jets roared in, led by Col. A. C. Pommerenk and Lt. Col. Jerry T. Hagen. They could see five PT76 tanks—one atop a

and the crew waved frantically as the Cobra flew past. Other helos arrived and the third Cobra of the team landed beside the Huey. A door-gunner and a captain were wounded in the C&C, so the Cobra copilot, a new warrant officer named David Nelson, volunteered to stay on the ground while the captain took his place in the two-seater gunship.

Other slicks arrived to evacuate the rest so, because they were low on fuel and their radios did not work, Ferrell and Lancaster departed for Khe Sanh. Once on the ground, they counted thirteen bullet holes in their fuselage and noted their radio cables had been severed. They also found out that two of the Cobra pilots had been wounded, and the injured door-gunner had died while being medevacked.

The search for the two Phantom pilots continued.

The F4 had gone down at around four in the afternoon, and the U.S. FAC and OV10 observer who'd been directing in the firepower had instantly left station to coordinate the search-and-rescue. Such was the policy of the USAF. Accustomed to bombing stationary targets deep in enemy territory, it was an excellent morale booster that, if a plane went down, the airstrike was cancelled and full attention was given to extracting the crew. In cases of close air support, this was done without regard to the troops who had requested the tac air. The policy had previously caused few problems because AA fire in South Vietnam rarely bagged a jet. But the fact that hundreds of NVA with tank support were now free to charge up Hill 31 did not prevent USAF doctrine from taking over. The ARVN 3rd Airborne Battalion was abandoned for two downed American pilots.

Back at the ARVN command bunkers in South Vietnam, Lieutenant General Dong and his U.S. advisors monitored the radio conversations. Col. Nguyen Van Tho (CO, 3d Airborne Brigade) and Lieutenant Colonel Phat (CO, 3d Airborne Battalion) kept a running dialogue from their bunkers in the middle of the shooting on Hill 31. To support the besieged garrison, General Dong instructed Colonel Luat to dispatch elements of his armor brigade. Tanks and APCs from the 11th and 17th Cavalry Regiments departed Aloui and began pushing north, driving cross-country through forested hills. At around five in the afternoon, they were ambushed, a dozen ARVN wounded, two of their M41 tanks and one APC blown up.

What happened next is a mystery.

The official version is that a conflict in orders from two headquarters, far removed from the battlefield and each other, forced the armor to halt in place. Lam ordered them on to Hill 31, while Dong, thinking the base was being overrun, ordered them to stop south of it and wait for instructions. The upshot was that the average nonaggressive ARVN officers reacted to this confusion by remaining where they were. Colonel Battreall, monitoring the armor radios, could envision the stress and frustration in General Dong's CP when in the midst of the chaos over Hill 31, a question was posed of what to do about the ambushed armor. A weak commander with no understanding of armor capabilities, he probably just shrugged.

Colonel Harrison, forced, as were all of the advisors, to get his information secondhand, thought that General Dong's incompetence caused the stalling of the armor relief column, whereas it had been merely a contributing factor to the cavalry commander's own timid spirits. He heard that, after the three vehicles had been knocked out in the ambush, the cav commander had radioed Dong for infantry support to clear the hills, then had sat idling in place, waiting. Dong sent neither reinforcement nor confirmation of his order that Hill 31—with NVA tanks in the wire—must be immediately rescued. The tanks, supposedly, just sat waiting, idling, until they ran out of fuel and more had to be helicoptered to them. "The armor's supposed to be able to charge through," Harrison thought disgustedly, "but they just sat there."

Whether because of the weakness of Dong, the cowardice of the cav commander, or both, the 11th and 17th Cav halted its rescue rush to Hill 31. The 3d Airborne Battalion was truly alone in their fight against a well-coordinated tank and infantry assault, the USAF having forsaken them for their own comrades, the ARVN armor having halted in place to wait and see. The only aircraft above Hill 31 was a helicopter with several airborne advisors aboard. It dipped down to fire an M-60 ineffectually at the surging attack.

At the time that the Phantom went down and air support ceased to exist for the defenders of Hill 31, Lieutenant General Sutherland arrived by helicopter to Lieutenant General Dong's command post. With him was General Weyand (DEPCOMUSMACV); he had arrived at XXIV Corps HQ at Quang Tri that afternoon for one of his frequent visits to the Laotian operation. After lunch Weyand and Sutherland first visited

in Laos. I simply cannot understand the inertia and lack of "can do" attitude on the part of some middle management Air Force officers when I am certain the Commander, Seventh Air Force, sincerely desires that ARVN troops in Laos receive the most responsive and best possible US Air Force Support.

Colonel Harrison received no static for his complaints about USAF support, merely a formal typed reply from Brigadier General Jackson that, "The contents of your February letter concerning FAC/ALO support is appreciated and has been made known to the appropriate individuals. Every effort is being made to correct and improve the responsiveness of Tac Air support. . . ." Colonel Pence, whose comments were more urgent and made in public, received a different fate. The incident destroyed Sutherland's confidence in Pence's ability to advise effectively; when they helicoptered back to Quang Tri, Sutherland commented to Weyand how lackluster Dong was in comparison to Lam and Phu. He thought the inexperienced and politically-prompted Dong was simply losing his nerve over Laos and was being "supported, abetted, and indeed egged on" by Pence.

At Quang Tri, Weyand caught his plane to report back to General Abrams in Saigon, and Sutherland had to figure out what to do with Colonel Pence who, in reality, had not failed in his professional duties but in his tact. Sutherland ordered his XXIV Corps staff immediately to investigate Pence's charges about U.S. air support, detailing three of them:

1. that there was only one FAC over the ARVN 1st Airborne Division AO when he had been promised two such aircraft
2. that the one FAC Pence said he had was inexperienced with the airborne AO and could not even locate Hill 31
3. that there was only one air cav pink team available to the airborne

Sutherland did not include the story of the Phantom shoot-down. His staff answered that all of Colonel Pence's allegations were false and that, in addition, there had been a rainstorm over Hill 31 which had grounded all air support, making the complaints moot and a probable cover-up of the airborne's failings. Sutherland was furious that neither Dong nor Pence had mentioned this fact (the answer being, of course, that weather conditions had not been a problem when the battle started or the Phantom that had been shot down would not have been over Hill 31 to begin with).

After meeting with his staff, Sutherland radioed his XXIV Corps advisor to I Corps, General Jackson, and detailed his difficulties with Pence. He also noted that the advisor had been a burr under his saddle from the beginning: "Each time that I visited the Airborne Division, Colonel Pence tried to convince me that the Airborne Division should have two FAC's dedicated to the Airborne Division and that they and their aircraft should be based at the Khe Sanh airfield. The Khe Sanh airfield was normally closed by fog until about 1100 hours. It was not prudent for us to station FAC aircraft at Khe Sanh since they had to be able to get airborne at any hour of the day or night. They could only do this from the Quang Tri airfield. Lieutenant General Dong, abetted by Colonel Pence, refused to accept the realities of the situation."

Sutherland asked Jackson to confer with Lam on whether he should relieve Colonel Pence of his duties. Jackson's answer was no surprise.

The slopes of Hill 31 were a killing ground as the third NVA attack took advantage of the disappearance of the jets to charge from three sides—tanks from the northeast, infantry from the northwest and south.

Overhead Lieutenant Colonel Molinelli and Charlie Troop 2/17 Air Cav homed in, diverted by General Lam from an extended recon to the north. The scene below was confusion on the grand scale. The USAF and numerous helos were darting above the trees, looking for the two pilots, while some eighteen hundred meters away, the ARVN armor sat impotent, seemingly frozen in place because they perceived themselves to be outgunned. Molinelli sent his Cobras in on the NVA running up Hill 31, but their antipersonnel rockets ricocheted harmlessly off the tank armor.

On the ground, the ARVN paratroopers fired furiously from their bunkers, killing many of the charging North Vietnamese in their tracks. The tanks tore through the wire and the ARVN fired LAW rockets from twenty yards; they scored numerous hits but did no damage with the small rockets because they had not been properly trained in the vulnerable spots of a tank. The firebase artillery had been mostly disabled by previous shellings, but two 105mm howitzers were wheeled around in their parapets. They fired point-blank, destroying two tanks. The rest of the armor made it to the top of Hill 31, foot soldiers pouring in with them.

The NVA swarmed into bunkers and trenches. Combat was hand to hand.

From above, the American aircrews could only look on helplessly. WO Smith of the Ghostriders, who had been heading with his company to

Skimming low over the trees, their Loach was nailed by NVA fire. Babcock radioed that they were going down. The C&C Huey, piloted by Capt. "Mother" Waters, commander of the troop's lift platoon, chased after the descending ship. (Waters claimed his nickname came from some virile exploit, but his troops loved him and called him that because he watched after them like a mother hen.) As Waters zipped down in his Huey, the Loach crashed on a dirt road, and Babcock and the platoon sergeant, jumping out, ran like hell across a grassy clearing. North Vietnamese in the treeline cut them down with their AK-47s. Waters brought his bird to a ten foot hover over them and called on the radio that, from their appearance, he had no doubt they were dead. The C&C crew chief, Sergeant Seaman, dueled the NVA in the treeline with his M60—until a burst from a 12.7mm tore through the Huey. Seaman's ankle was shattered, a ten-inch hole was blown through the floor, the fuel tanks ruptured, and aviation fuel sloshed in the helicopter. Captain Waters managed to pull out and get them back to Khe Sanh.

Another helo went into the crash site but was also driven away by intense fire. Lieutenant Babcock and the platoon sergeant were declared missing in action, and the aircrews simply kept flying.

Relations between the U.S. and ARVN were not superb, as General Berry noted in his journal: "0630, 22 Feb 71. General Lam, the ARVN Corps Commander, is the decision-maker for the operation in Laos. General Sutherland commands the US supporting operations and has little real influence on what General Lam does in the Laotian operations, at least on Lam's tactical decisions. . . .

"0515, 26 Feb 71, Quang Tri. General Sutherland has great pressures on him. This Laotian operation must succeed. Sutherland is the senior US field commander working with the senior Vietnamese field commander, LTG Lam. Sutherland had a large role in planning the operation. Now it's Lam who commands the ground forces in Laos while Sutherland commands the supporting US forces. Command of ground forces in Laos is the decisive element. Therefore, Sutherland lacks control of the decisive element in the campaign. Yet, from the US point of view, Sutherland is the responsible field commander. There is no unity of command in this very difficult operation. That's a major weakness and vulnerability. . . .

"0600, 27 Feb 71, Quang Tri. There is a vast potential for bitterness, recrimination, and misunderstanding between the South Vietnamese and the Americans involved in this operation. If the operation were a great success, everyone would be happy and swapping congratulations. But as the operation bogs down and losses mount, Americans tend to blame the Vietnamese for having been too cautious and conservative in their ground maneuver plan and too unaggressive in their tactics. Vietnamese will tend to blame Americans for having failed to provide the air support, helicopter support, logistical support promised at the beginning of the operations."

Ranger North was overrun on 20 February. LZ Hotel Two was evacuated and abandoned on 24 February. Ranger South was evacuated and abandoned, and Hill 31 was overrun on 25 February. The evacuation of the 2d Airborne Battalion from Hill 30 began in earnest on March 2 when the 158th Aviation Battalion flew through murderous fire in a resupply-medevac mission. In the midst of a shelling, ARVN mobbed the Hueys. One of those who deserted on a helicopter was the ARVN battalion commander of Hill 30. The evacuation was called off while airstrikes came in, and the helicopters were diverted to the armor. Chinooks came in to Hill 30 with resupply and artillery-extraction missions, but were driven away by the intense AA fire. The evacuation was finally completed three days later despite fire from the NVA tanks.

The only base among the six hit in the NVA counterattack which did not fall was Aloui, held by Colonel Luat's 1st Armor Brigade. With the airborne and ranger units pulling out on the northern flank, the pressure on the brigade was intense. Those in the most danger were the men of the 17th Cavalry (reinforced with two companies from the 8th Airborne Battalion and survivors of the 3d Airborne Battalion); when Hill 31 fell, they found themselves cut off. They were alone in the hills and, without orders to attack or withdraw, they simply sat and were pummelled.

The situation only served to aggravate General Sutherland's impatience with the 1st Armor. He considered the armor typical of the "elite" ARVN units, more concerned about polished boots, comfortable barracks, and a sparkling motor pool, than about taking to the field to fight the war. He was tired of complaints that Laos was not tank country (aerial photos of what appeared to be ditches were often thirty-foot ravines), and would respond acidly that the NVA tankers seemed able to get around. The answer may have been that they knew where the good trails were. The ARVN complained that their M41 tanks only had 76mm guns, while the NVA T54s had 100mms.

In all quarters, the friction grew.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Victory

By 28 February, it was obvious that the airborne and ranger drive on the northern flank had been ground to a halt. On that date, General Lam flew to Saigon to confer with President Thieu on an alternate plan. The president had previously sent I Corps a directive to have the Vietnamese Marine Division replace the 1st Airborne Division and press on. Such a switch would have been extremely difficult under the combat conditions in Laos, and it was obvious that Thieu's orders were politically motivated; he wanted to spare his "elite" paratroopers further bloodshed.

General Lam presented an alternate plan. Instead of replacing the Airborne, let them remain in place to screen the northern frontier, while the ARVN 1st Infantry Division took on the weight of the drive to Tchepone. General Phu and his troops were making a good showing of themselves and, at that time, they had eight firebases along the escarpment on the southern flank. The last, LZ Brown, was over halfway to Tchepone. Lam called for three more landing zones to be established along the escarpment (LZ Lolo, LZ Liz, and LZ Sophia Two), followed by a fourth (LZ Hope) to be placed near Tchepone and the area searched from there. Thieu agreed.

One of the problems that had been made apparent in the first phase of the campaign was the lack of coordination between the U.S. and ARVN. General Lam was at FSB Kilo, while General Sutherland was at Quang

"I don't know. It's just down, ah, straight below us. Just a minute, we'll get you coordinates."

" . . . there at the two o'clock position, down on the river."

"Okay, divert south of the river."

"Okay, where we took fire is approximately four-six-three-eight."

Into the LZ, they flew fire streaking up at them, door-gunners going in hot crew chiefs screaming to move, ARVN jumping out. Up, they circled back to Lang Vei or Khe Sanh to refuel, then to get more troops, then to go back through the fire, radio headsets buzzing with a constant stream of commentary. The NVA gun crews fired furiously. Another flight of Hueys came in with ARVN, Cobras rolling in to suppress fire. Door-gunners on the trail ship popped smoke out on the LZ for the next flight. Kirklighter was on the horn, "Do you have it now? Black Cat, do you have that smoke?"

"Yes, I sure do. . . . Hold off, I'm coming down to the mark."

Slicks came in, taking fire before they were even close to Lolo.

"Aw shit, I was going to tell you, you're not supposed to fire unless you can see the fire."

"Hell no, I didn't even get a round off."

"What was that pop-pop?"

"Hell!" came the door-gunner's high-pitched exasperated reply, "that was somebody shooting at us!"

So much fire tracked the flights that ships went down before they could even disembark the ARVN passengers. One crashed in the Laotian wilderness, and another chopper broke pattern to cover him while rescue ships came in. A commander shouted to keep the insertion going.

" . . . that's affirmative, sir."

"Roger, get him back in business. If he's over that downed bird, get him back with his flight and proceed with your SOP for the recovery. Over."

"Roger, sir. Boats-six, Red Dragon Zero-nine. . . ."

"Hi, this is Boats-six. Roger, you got a recovery aircraft on my bird now. I'm coming on out of the LZ."

"Roger, your flight with you?"

"Negative, I let them go ahead. I got chalk two in charge of the flight now."

"Roger, roger, we have recovery in process."

". . . You've got recovery, now stay with the mission! Over."

"Roger, sir."

The last helicopter of the Black Cats came out of Lolo and popped more smoke; the next flight descended, taking fire, losing two Hueys, two-nine and two-six, still short of the hilltop.

"Two-nine's on fire, two-nine's on fire, going down."

"Did you see the fire?"

"Fire from three o'clock, from that ridgeline that they just passed over."

Pandemonium on the radio, a calm voice came on, "Okay, hold it, hold it down,"—then a ball of fire below them brought more shouts.

"Six, we got a fire."

"It just exploded."

"We got two ships down. One just crashed and burned."

More fire: the flight left two-nine and two-six, making the final descent approach to Lolo, Kirklighter watching from his C&C, trying to counsel them in, "They got twenty-three millimeter all the way down this flight path. You've got to remain south of the river, grab some altitude coming in here, start your descending approach into the LZ."

They descended to the unsettling sight of Hueys still in the LZ, unloading troops, which meant that they might have to overfly the LZ—and possibly have a helo, lifting off at that moment, crash into their underside.

"Tell these guys to unass this thing!"

"Get out of the LZ, you got aircraft on short final."

Coming back from the LZ, choppers passed the two crashed ships.

"Jesus Christ, that thing went up."

"Can we go back and see if them guys are okay?"

Long bursts of M-60 reached down to protect the crews.

A Huey went down through the fire to the crash site, the crew of two-six jumping aboard, except for the missing copilot. An excited voice called from the LZ, "Roger, one-seven has gone in and picked up two-six and a full crew off that ship! We're coming out of the LZ at this time. . . . My ship's running a little rough. We took a lot of fire. Don't know if I had any hits or not. I believe I've got it under control now."

The next flight on the long approach to Lolo took fire, took hits.

"Okay, what's your status? Do you have the LZ in sight?"

"Negative. I broke off the LZ on long final and I'm heading back inbound to Kilo Sierra at this time. I got a gunner hit in the head, some of the troops hit, and the aircraft's hit pretty hard, and I was losing fuel, but it stopped losing the fuel now, so I'm just heading back to Kilo Sierra."

"Okay, who have you designated as your. . . ."

"Roger, his aircraft was definitely on fire. Very hot. The ammo was popping off."

"Okay."

"And six one-seven, we took a lot of fire and we'll be shutting down at the laager pad to check it out. I think we've sustained some hits."

Two Cobras and two Hueys came on station over the burning ship.

"Okay, did you get two-six himself out?"

"Roger, I have two-six himself."

"And the enlisted crew members?"

"Roger, I have the charlie-echo and the gunner."

"Okay, did they ever see the guy get out of the aircraft, the copilot?"

"That's a negative."

"He probably didn't because that thing went over on its right side and then it exploded."

"Boats six, Boats one-seven. The gunner just said that he got the co-pilot out and the copilot was walking around the LZ."

Another Huey went through the fire and found the copilot, still alive, down the slope from the hilltop LZ. Crew extracted, the air-mission commander said. "Let's all regroup at POL."

To avoid the intense fire, Berry and Kirklighter tried bringing the slicks in one at a time to the escarpment face. They approached through the river valley, then came in to land, one skid against the crest, the other hanging free, the ARVN jumping out the one side and scrambling up the hill. It usually worked, but the NVA fire continued unabated. Twenty helicopters radioed that they were inbound from the east, taking fire; ARVN wounded were on board, two slicks down. A voice on the radio said, "That's a helpless feeling to have to pull off an LZ like that and know that those guys are down there."

There was more firing.

"We got a slick autorotating to the dirt road. We are dropping down to take a look."

Lieutenant Colonel Kirklighter and Major Klose were in their C&C orbit above the battlefield, when 23mm fire began bursting around them at all angles, looking like bright puffs of white cotton. Four exploded in line behind the tailboom, then the fifth burst outside Klose's left-side door. The ship jerked in space, shrapnel tearing through in screams, and blood suddenly splattered the Plexiglas windshield in front of them. The crew chief, a young spec five, was down with a wounded hand. There were holes in the floor and ceiling of the Huey. Kirklighter radioed for the battalion exec, Major Davis, to continue the assault as Klose turned the ship around. They settled down beside the medical bunker at Khe Sanh and the crew chief was taken inside. Klose then flew to the nearby refuel/rearm pits and set down, leaving the engine running and the blades pumping. A nozzle was screwed in and the JP-4 turned on; then they stared in amazement as the fuel began spraying out as if from a garden sprinkler. Dozens of shrapnel holes had punctured the belly of the ship. The fuel was quickly shut off and Klose, jumping back to the controls, lifted away from the fuel blivets. He sat down, shut off, and another helo was readied for them.

Lieutenant Colonel Kirklighter was sweating in his flight suit. Christ, he thought, this a bitch.

In minutes they were airborne again and headed for LZ Lolo.

Over the landing zone, Major Davis was the temporary air mission commander. His normal duties had nothing to do with combat flying, but he was a man of courage and got into Laos any chance he could. By the end of the day, over five hundred ARVN soldiers had been inserted atop Lolo and, despite the murderous fire, had secured the hill. However, the second phase of the insertion, the airlifting of the artillery, had to be cancelled because it would have been impossible for the big Chinooks to hover long enough for the slingloaded pieces to unload without being blown out of the sky. The day had taken a heavy toll in helicopters, the official tally being seven shot down and thirty-five damaged.

On 4 March, the 223d CAB with the 101st and 158th Aviation Battalions cranked up to complete the move to Lolo. The ARVN 4/1 Infantry and the regimental command post were airmobiled to the firebase, enemy fire having lessened considerably from the day before, then the choppers continued west to LZ Liz. ARVN artillery on Lolo pounded the site designated as Liz, five kilometers further along the escarpment: sixty airstrikes and numerous gunship sorties further pummelled the area. The helos came in with the ARVN 2/1 and artillery, through heavy fire, and secured Liz. Heavy smoke blocked vision around the LZ and General Berry, on station in his Huey C&C, later wrote, "What transpired was an alternating stream of assault helicopters and large cargo helicopters in a stream of combat air traffic which would rival that of a large international airport on a foggy day."

Official toll for the day was one Cobra and one Huey downed, twelve helos hit.

Phantom jets flew continuous airstrikes around Hope and caused numerous secondary explosions. That firepower, combined with the Arc Lights of the previous night, must have devastated the NVA antiaircraft crews in the area because only a minimal amount of fire was directed at the choppers. Six crewmen were wounded, fourteen helos hit, and only a single Huey was shot down, its crew immediately rescued. In ninety minutes, the ARVN 2d Infantry Regiment was on the ground and securing the area against minimal resistance.

Tchepone had been taken.

The next morning, Berry wrote in his journal, " . . . Yesterday was a good day. We seized our objective. We had very few casualties. . . . What a glorious relief!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: The Great Withdrawal

How long were the ARVN in Tchepone before they started screaming to come out, Lieutenant Smith thought bitterly. A few days, was it? And then began what the aircrews cynically referred to as the great withdrawal, marked, Smith noted, by a graveyard of American helicopters.

The plans for invading Laos had not envisioned an army of occupation; the ARVN were to strike to Tchepone, destroy Base Area 604, then withdraw. MACV and XXIV Corps (not to mention the White House) hoped they could destroy the NVA logistical systems until the onset of the rainy season in May, and then make their withdrawal through BA 611 and the A Shau Valley, wreaking further destruction along the way. The ARVN high command had never wholeheartedly embraced that option; when Tchepone was taken, the South Vietnamese had the choice of reinforcing and continuing the fight, or of pulling out as soon as possible. They opted for the latter. The ferocity of the North Vietnamese counterattacks was the main factor in this decision. Intelligence had failed accurately to gauge the great rate at which the NVA could reinforce southern Laos, and even the successful drive to Tchepone had been met with fierce resistance in an area that was still hot. Lolo, Liz, and Sophia Two were under daily shellings and the patrols in the area made numerous contacts.

This phase of the operation could be summed up by noting, for example, that the 1st Regiment, working off of Lolo, had killed hundreds of NVA, discovered tons of supplies, and cut important communist

Klose circled the boulder outcropping on which Lolo sat, directing in airstrikes and gunships. One of the Cobras was hit and fell from the sky in flames. But the two wounded pilots crawled away from it.

The lead Huey came in towards the face of the escarpment—and Klose suddenly saw a stream of green 12.7 tracers stitch across its tailboom. The Huey shuddered and veered away, Johnson and Pomije valiantly refusing to punch the slingload which slowed them down in the ground fire. Pomije radioed Klose that he had taken hits but that no caution or warning lights had come on. He turned the ship back around, hovered over Lolo, and gently put the slingload of ammunition on the ground. Then Johnson and Pomije banked the Huey and hovered over the bunker line, looking for the Cobra pilots. Rounds ripped through the helicopter.

Klose screamed on the radio, "Get the hell outta there!"

They maintained their orbit over Lolo and radioed the location of enemy guns to chalk two, boring in next. It hurtled in high and fast, not slowing down or dropping low with its slingload. Johnson mumbled to Pomije, "What the hell is he doing?"—just as the slingload of ammunition was released from two hundred feet, hit the middle of the perimeter in a cloud of dust, and splintered in all directions. Klose exploded on the radio, chewing out the pilot. When finished, the pilot cut to the company frequency and said nonchalantly, "They won't have to uncase that shit." The other pilots came in and dropped their slingloads softly. All five Hueys were riddled with fire.

Captains Johnson and Pomije went back for the Cobra pilots. They emerged from a bunker, waving a red NVA flag they had found, then jumped aboard the slick which pulled out with sixty-five bullet holes in it. Quebec Whiskey got back on the radio, directing the Cobras on NVA attacking the perimeter. During the night, tac air pummeled the NVA. Quebec Whiskey was either killed or wounded in the battle, because another Vietnamese took over the radios. In the morning, 16 March, the 1st Regiment pulled out, leaving five damaged howitzers, destroying three more in place, and abandoning their dead and whatever couldn't be carried.

The 4th Battalion was left behind to conduct a rearguard defense.

The ARVN 4/1 Infantry was immediately hit by NVA artillery which wiped out the battalion command group, including the commander. As they moved on foot to the northeast, they were under almost constant fire and, at noon on 17 March, the North Vietnamese launched a heavy assault.

The battle raged for two hours; the ARVN radioed that they had killed five hundred NVA, but had lost fifty men themselves. Helicopters of the 223d CAB went in through heavy fire to medevac their many wounded. Sergeant Keith, Intelligence NCO with the 101st Airborne, was flying as an observer on one of the Hueys that was diverted towards Lolo. Cobras zipped in ahead of them, and heavy fire cracked from the escarpment. Keith's slick banked off, but then went back in to get a fix on the gun positions. The tracers began streaming at them—then, suddenly, the Huey lurched in space, the floor exploded. Keith didn't even realize he'd been hit until he looked down. His left leg was literally disintegrated, all white and red, the kneecap gone, and Keith muttered into his radio mike, "Oh damn, I'm hit, I'm hit." His radio cord was severed. The copilot turned to look back in the cabin and almost fainted when he saw Keith—he just shook his head and laughed back, "I've done it now!"

The crew chief helped him lay back. He was in shock until the chief straightened out was left of his leg; then the pain shot through him. There was no morphine on the helicopter so all they could do for Keith was tie a bandage around the stump. Blood kept seeping onto the floor. Keith's glasses were speckled with it. When he looked up in the vibrating helicopter, he could see bits of his bone and flesh embedded in the ceiling. The pilot struggled to control the bird as all the warning lights flashed, and Keith knew that if they had to ditch in Laos he'd bleed to death before a medevac got in. He was a professional soldier and didn't want to go through life crippled; he forced himself to mumble, "If you want to die you can die right now . . . no, I don't want to die." Keith patted himself, finding other wounds, and kept smiling at the shaken copilot who glanced back at him. The pilot kept the Huey together and headed for Khe Sanh, radioing for medevacs in case they went down. Gunships peeled off to cover them.

When they shut down on the strip, medics from Bravo Med rushed up.

Keith was badly in pain, coming out of the Huey. He was taken to the underground medical bunker. Medics cut off his clothes, stopped the bleeding, kept talking to him, asking questions. A medevac came in soon and he was ferried to the 18th Surg at Quang Tri. He babbled in his morphine stupor, passed out when they started the IV, and woke up five hours later, coming out of it with terrible nightmares and with his left leg amputated. Later he told a reporter, "The pilots I had flown with came in that evening and said a lot of good things to me. That set me on the road to recovery. From then on I had no problem about my mental attitude."

moment of pure joy—the dazed grins, the helpless laughter, the jubilation of friends celebrating joint survival, with arms flailing round necks and shoulders. It takes no oracular powers to understand that in the past six weeks these men have seen fighting they never expected to survive. Yet they have come back, and despite their long unwashed griminess and tatterdemalion fatigues, each man has a steel pot and a rifle, and somehow they have the carriage of the tough, dependable soldier."

"They look good," Saar commented to a pilot.

"Yeah, what there are left of them."

Saar spoke with a crewcut U.S. Marine captain, an ARVN advisor, who watched his returning troops with controlled emotions. The politics of the invasion forbade him from accompanying his charges into Laos and his comments betrayed guilt, "I wish we could have gone with them. We trained them, lived with them. It's kind of like cheating."

The 223d CAB immediately took off again to get the last of the regiment, the 4th Battalion, which was cut off four kilometers east of Lolo. They were in an area where the escarpment tapered off to the river flatlands, still in the higher part where thick scrub grew, seeking shelter in the craters produced by their USAF close air support. Of the 420 men of the 4/1 who went into Laos, only eighty-eight were there. All of the officers were dead and sixty-one of the survivors were wounded. Their final position measured only sixty meters in diameter. A sergeant was in command, and his only link to the vital U.S. air power was a single PRC25 radio. The men were exhausted, outnumbered, almost out of ammunition, and surrounded by the NVA.

Another attack would destroy them.

As soon as the main extraction of the regiment was completed, General Berry got into a C&C orbit above 4/1. Lieutenant Colonel Kirklighter and Major Klose joined him, calling in all available helicopters and directing in more airstrikes. The Phantoms tumbled bombs and napalm around the battalion's crater, sixty-eight airstrikes in all, keeping the North Vietnamese at bay. A flight of Cobra gunships, led by Capt. Keith M. Brandt of D Company, 101st Aviation Battalion, came on station in response to Kirklighter's call for assistance. The ARVN on the radio called Brandt, "We're completely surrounded. You expend on my smoke." He hurled his last smoke grenade from the crater and twelve Cobras rolled in right on top of it.

Captain Brandt stayed over the ARVN all afternoon. Three times he expended his ordnance into the NVA, flew back to Khe Sanh to refuel and rearm, and returned to the crater. He stayed in contact with the ARVN sergeant and dodged the NVA fire on low-level flights to pinpoint 4/1's exact location and calculate the best approach route for the rescue birds.

It was almost five in the afternoon before the 173d Robinhoods began trailing from the east, Captain Johnson flying the lead with Lt. John Trapani. Captain Brandt was still circling the area, out of ammunition but aware that the ARVN had no smoke grenades left to mark their position. He volunteered to lead the slicks in and contacted Johnson, "This is Music One-six. Follow me, Robinhood Three, and I'll lead you to the friendlies."

The Cobra and Huey darted in at treetop level but overshot the crater as NVA fire exploded around them. The Cobra shuddered, trailed smoke and fire, but Brandt was still on the radio, "I've lost my hydraulics and my mast is on fire." He brought his gunship into a slow, 360-degree turn towards the ARVN, with the slick still following him.

Brandt lined Johnson up with the crater and shouted in the radio, "There it is! Twelve o'clock, a hundred meters. I'm going to try to make the river."

"No sweat, buddy," Johnson answered, "I'm right behind you."

Smoke and flames dragged in the wind behind the Cobra. The rotor rpm slowed as he fell towards the riverbank treeline.

Captain Brandt was on the horn, "I've lost my engine and my transmission is breaking up. Good-bye. Send my love to my family. I'm dead." Then, the Cobra became a ball of fire and crashed into the trees. Captain Johnson brought his Huey to a hundred-foot hover over the burning wreck, and thought he could see an outline of the pilot and copilot lying in the flames. Johnson and Trapani looked at each other, knots forming in their throats.

Major Klose's voice screaming over the radio brought them back to reality, "The troops are at your six! Get'em, get 'em!"

Klose was not being heartless. He had watched Brandt die from his C&C; he could feel the lead weight sink in him and thought, My God, that man was a true hero. He'd given his life for others. Klose wanted to put Brandt in for the Medal of Honor.

But the battle was still being fought.

Johnson landed his Huey and it was chaos. Twenty-four ARVN scrambled aboard, filling the cabin, hanging from the M-60 mounts and skids—one even opened Johnson's door trying to get in with him. They

serious hits. They made it to the assigned coordinates, a small clearing on a knoll, and Smith could make out ARVN clustered in the brush, firing from their hastily formed perimeter.

He could see mortar rounds exploding around the LZ, as he sailed through a crossfire of 12.7mm and AK-47 tracers. One round punched through the main rotor blade. First one M-60 stopped firing, then the other, and the crew chief screamed, "They're jammed, let's get outta here!"

"Long as we're here," Smith shrugged, "let's see what we can get."

WO Smith brought the Huey to a ten-foot hover. There was a mad scramble and, within seconds, ten ARVN were hanging from the skids. He pulled up through the fire as the crew chief and door-gunner hauled the men into the cabin. They dropped them at the airborne CP, traded their jammed machine guns for a working pair from a wreck, and prepared to go back again. A captain, the new company commander, came over then and told the copilot to get out; he took the seat to Smith's right. They were almost to the paratroopers again when Peachy came on the horn and cancelled the mission. The ARVN advisors wanted more time to organize the troops via radio.

Smith and the captain were headed back when an emergency call came over the radio. A UHIC was down and they were to extract the crew. They were told to fly on the deck while Cobras led them in. Smith was tempted to pop up to several thousand feet to see for himself, but he obeyed the Cobra pilot leading him. "Go left, go right, okay, flare now!" He brought the Huey to a hover over a jungle clearing, as instructed, and looked through the Plexiglas at his feet. The crashed gunship was nowhere in sight, but he could see figures in the brush fifty feet away—and he realized they were shooting at him. His face suddenly recoiled as if a sledgehammer had hit it and the bullet crashed out the windshield in front of the captain.

Reflexively, Smith grabbed the cyclic between his legs with one hand and reached for his face with the other. There was no blood; then he realized where he'd been hit. The round had come through his door, punched through his lower left side and tumbled out just under his right shoulder blade. His spine had been hit and his legs were paralyzed straight over the foot pedals. There was no real pain; it was numb. As he slumped uncontrollably to the right, gripping the cyclic, the Huey veered from its hover, and he shouted at the captain to take the controls. The captain hesitated a stunned moment, then grabbed the controls and pulled them out of

firing range. They banked around for Vietnam. Smith occupied his mind by staring at the control panel. The engine oil pressure suddenly dropped to zero, and the temperature gauge spun up. He shook the captain's shoulder and pointed.

The captain made a controlled crash in the dust of Route 9, still in Laos. They sat vulnerable on the road, the door-gunners sweeping the brush with fire, tracers burning back at them. Smith could hear whistles in the treeline, maybe bugles, and thought, God, I'm going to die. Then he noticed he really wasn't scared. The firing was getting heavy but he was going into shock from his wound, floating into a world of detached bliss. Another Huey, piloted by a buddy nicknamed Muddy Waters, landed right behind them to rake the trees with M-60s, while a medevac bird darted in. The crew chief and door-gunner hauled Smith from his seat and ran to the medevac. They laid him in, then joined the captain running to Muddy's slick. The two Hueys lifted up under fire. The fifth member of the medevac crew, a young medic, worked on Smith as they flew towards Khe Sanh. Harold Smith could feel nothing below his waist.

The airborne advisors stood in a tense cluster at the CP as the Hueys of the Ghostriders came back from Laos. The reporter, Saar, stood nearby as the slicks shut down on the strip cabins empty of ARVN. The pilots joined a huddle.

"I don't know who the hell is running that, but there's NVA right alongside the landing zone and .51 is hitting inside. Six ships hit, one went down, and one aircraft commander hit in the spine so he can't move his legs. What are they trying to prove?"

"We started taking fire from a klick out."

"That's two of my birds got shot up today. They can stick this flying up their ass. What are they trying to prove?"

The height of the debacle, Saar thought, that's what this is. He'd been at the airborne CP for several hours, watching the Hueys coming and going, disgorging over a hundred dead and wounded paratroopers. Almost all of the dead were barefoot and wrapped in ponchos tied with cords, or in U.S. body bags. They were stacked like firewood, weapons and gear piled beside them. " . . . And among the helmets, is one drilled front and rear with odd precision by a Kalashnikov bullet. . . ." he wrote. The underground medical bunker, made of sandbags and carved earth, was a hell of moans and screams under hazy flourescent light. The wounded lay in blood and bandages, just off the choppers, still wearing their muddy

On the afternoon of 21 March, the choppers went back to pick up Sp4 Lagenour and the ARVN paratroopers still on the ground. They walked east, the wounded door-gunner calling in airstrikes along the way, and grouped at a small hill for the extraction. This is reportedly what happened: The first slick filled with ARVN; Lagenour ran towards the second, but mobbing ARVN shoved him aside and he tumbled into a ravine, out of sight, the helicopters departing without him.

Lagenour was not seen again until eleven days later. He walked east the whole time, travelling by night, sleeping by day, eating leaves and rice, evading NVA units in the area. Twice he was almost captured, and once a U.S. gunship almost killed him. Thirty kilometers and eleven days later, Sp4 Lagenour was found by a U.S. armored patrol west of Khe Sanh. Lieutenant Smith was detailed to investigate the incident, but Lagenour was medically evacuated to the United States before anyone could talk with him. The impression among the aircrews, however erroneous, was that the lifers wanted Lagenour out of the way before he could tell anyone what he'd seen with the ARVN.

As the general withdrawal continued, General Berry and Colonel Ghai, deputy commander of the ARVN 1st Infantry Division, planned a raid into BA 611 in Laos to keep the enemy guessing and off balance. The always tough Hoc Bao Company conducted the successful foray. This completed, Berry bid his friend and comrade, Ghai, goodbye and asked him how he thought the war would finally end.

"It will never end," Colonel Ghai said. "It will go on forever."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: Ambush Alley

The ARVN 1st Armor Brigade was also pulling out via Route 9. The North Vietnamese were waiting for them. It was a chaotic and bloody episode, made even more dramatic as American armor and cavalry units rushed to the border to hold the road against repeated ambushes. At the same time, they were trying to evacuate the U.S. artillery in the area before their firebases were overrun. For the American ground troops in the operation, it was perhaps the most sustained action they ever saw.

Captain Downey, observing Route 9 from his hilltop perch, remarked, "It was quite exciting to watch our convoys come charging around that bend with all guns blazing and the NVA rockets coming back at them. Although it became much less a charming scene when you reminded yourself that men were dying down there in some very horrible ways. The color of the tracers, rockets, and explosions was awesomely beautiful. In every case the ambush was overcome or silenced and my arty FO helped by directing howitzer fire against the NVA. The guys from the 5th Mech and the other armored cav outfits were a brave and tough bunch of men. They fought their way up that road every day, sometimes several times a day, and each time they went they knew what to expect. They behaved in a way that would have made the original General Patton proud. If it had been World War Two, someone would have written exciting stories about them. Ernie Pyle'd have loved 'em."

The border firebases were held by the 8/4 and 2/94 Artillery, XXIV