

could hear the enemy looting Hickory. Gooley, burned skin hung from his fingers.

When a rummaging NVA almost stepped on him, Cavaiani pulled his final weapon, the Gerber knife, and slammed it so hard into the man's chest that he couldn't extract it, only pulled burned skin from his hand. Just before dawn he crawled through the wire, slid down a cliff face and evaded toward Firebase Fuller.*

For ten days Cavaiani stumbled, crawled and dragged himself eastward before reaching Firebase Fuller one morning at 3 A.M. He decided to sleep and wait until dawn to approach the wire. At sunrise he stood and an old man stuck a bolt-action rifle in his back; momentarily five more Communists appeared, and Cavaiani was on his way to Laos, a POW.

The NVA beat Cavaiani severely, trying to learn what he knew of the NSA van; he maintained he was only an NCO and not privy to whatever secrets the mysterious van possessed.

Eventually the NVA trucked him, two surviving Yards and his Vietnamese interpreter to Vinh, where they boarded a train for Hanoi. When they arrived, Cavaiani's interpreter dropped all pretense of being a fellow prisoner and proudly donned the uniform of an NVA intelligence officer—he was an enemy mole!

The North Vietnamese did not admit capturing Cavaiani for a year. Then, in March 1973, he was released with other U.S. POWs. For his determined, selfless defense of Hickory, Cavaiani was awarded the Medal of Honor in 1974.

After the Hickory helicopter fiasco, SOG reassigned its own 20th SOS Green Hornet Hueys to CCN. Never again would a SOG man be abandoned due to institutional or personal vanities.

In early August, CCN RT Kansas was assigned the job of penetrating the NVA curtain near Khe Sanh, no small task since there were as many NVA there in 1971 as during the 1968 siege.

For several months, U.S. intelligence had monitored a major concentration of NVA gradually moving across the DMZ then down South

*After Hickory fell, a U.S. spokesman told the Associated Press there was "no report of any such base."

Vietnam's Cam Lo River valley, about a dozen miles east of Khe Sanh. What they were up to seemed a mystery best solved by interrogating a fresh NVA prisoner.

Studying his mission, the RT Kansas One-Zero, First Lieutenant Loren "Festus" Hagen, brainstormed with his One-One, Sergeant Tony "Fast Eddie" Andersen, and One-Two, Sergeant Bruce Berg.

In recent months there'd been a flurry of heavily armed teams landing on old firebases, shooting hell out of the enemy and extracting; why not try that—except, only extract about half the team, leaving the other half hidden on the hill. When the NVA sent a squad up there to see if the Americans had left anything behind—as the NVA always did—the stay-behind element would ambush them, seize a prisoner and come out.

It was perfect, and it would take only twenty-four hours.

Lieutenant Hagen decided to take fourteen men, reinforcing his team with three straphangers—Staff Sergeant Oran Bingham and Sergeants Bill Queen and William Rimondi—for eight Yards and six U.S.

Everyone was confident and upbeat under Hagen's leadership. Easy-going and smart, the Fargo, North Dakota, native was one of those rare junior officers who thrived on Special Forces' informality yet didn't become "one of the boys." He was both liked and respected.

RT Kansas inserted at last light on 6 August 1971, landing on the old hilltop firebase, just 50 yards wide. Hagen's men went to work immediately, restoring its two dilapidated bunkers and shallow trenches and digging in their heaviest weapon, a 60mm mortar. Surveying the scrub brush and bomb craters below them, Hagen split his defense into three sectors to fit three slopes, grouping together Berg and Rimondi on the south, One-One Andersen and several Yards to the northwest, with himself, Bingham, Queen and the rest of the Yards covering the west.

Hagen could see that several approaches afforded decent cover and concealment, especially to the south. Still, with a C-130 Spectre above them, they could throw back any force the NVA could muster at short notice, and besides, they only had to hold the hilltop one night. Just to be safe, he positioned Tony Andersen, his most experienced NCO—who had both an M-60 machine gun and a CAR-15—to cover the most vulnerable slope. Certainly the NVA had seen them land, and Hagen reckoned to be ready for them.

Indeed the North Vietnamese had seen RT Kansas' two Hueys

hover above the old firebase, instigating a phone call to the nearby 304th NVA Division Headquarters, which found the recon team's presence intolerable.

From their little hilltop, RT Kansas' first inkling of an NVA presence came at 9 P.M., well after dark, when they saw campfires on the ridgelines north and west of them, unusual because the enemy normally masked himself. At midnight the NVA fired shots below the hill from north, south, east and west—the SOG men had never seen such wide-scale probing and, of course, didn't return fire.

At 1 A.M., Spectre arrived and the team invisibly marked their perimeter with infrared strobe lights. The big C-130 gunship fired for them all night, walking 40mm and 20mm rounds within 10 yards of them. Not once did RT Kansas fire, staying blanketed protectively in darkness. Then at 3 A.M. they heard trucks arrive and tailgates dropping—it was odd, very odd.

Beneath the hill, dismounting NVA soldiers formed up into platoons and companies, which their leaders marched in careful order to their assigned attack positions, to wait for dawn.

Just before sunrise the enemy ceased probing fire and it became forebodingly quiet. Then the SOG men heard more trucks.

At Phu Bai, Covey and a flight of helicopters was lifting away for the planned false extract; they would be above RT Kansas in thirty minutes. Already, Lieutenant Hagen had radioed Covey, telling him something was developing, that the NVA were moving through the heavy ground fog.

As darkness gave way to light, Hagen detected glimpses of enemy on one slope, which his men could certainly handle; then on another slope NVA pith helmets were seen bobbing in the fog, and he grew concerned, especially since he didn't know anything about the third slope. When his men reported NVA there, too, Hagen realized the entire hill was ringed by NVA, a force spread so wide that it would have to be more than a thousand men, a whole regiment!

The NVA regimental commander understood he had to dispatch the Americans, and do it quickly. RT Kansas had inadvertently landed almost within sight of the Hanoi High Command's most critical new venture, the first 6-inch fuel pipeline laid across the DMZ and down the Cam Lo River valley, absolutely essential in a few months when entire

tank battalions would roll through here for the war's largest offensive. Already the NVA 304th Division, plus a regiment of the 308th Division, were massing nearby, preparing for the offensive.

A fourth NVA battalion commander radioed that his men were in place and prepared to assault. Ground fog concealed them from American air strikes, so the regimental commander waited for yet a fifth battalion to get into position, by which time he'd have committed nearly two thousand infantrymen to crush RT Kansas.

Later, Chief SOG Sadler would learn an entire regiment had stormed the hill, supported by a second regiment, the most one-sided fight of the war. A regiment was all it took to overrun Kham Duc Special Forces Camp in 1968; one third that many NVA swallowed up Lang Vei Special Forces Camp in one night. Here on this remote, scrub-covered hill, RT Kansas' fourteen men with CAR-15s, grenade launchers and a single M-60 machine gun, were outnumbered 107 to 1, a mismatch seven times greater than that at the Alamo.

As the truth became evident, Lieutenant Hagen saw there was no time for gestures or inspiring words, just serious soldier work; he spent those final moments repositioning men and weapons, readying grenades and stacking magazines. One-One Andersen crawled out and checked their claymores to ensure they hadn't been turned around or disabled. The Catholic Montagnards made the sign of the cross.

Then the NVA came.

A single, well-aimed RPG round smashed into Bruce Berg's bunker, collapsing it and signaling the attack. As if a dam had burst, NVA fire went from nothing to all out in two seconds. Ten thousand rounds per second were striking a space the size of a tennis court!

Hagen looked to Berg's bunker and shouted to Andersen, "We're getting hit on that side, we're being assaulted!" At the same time, Andersen could see dozens of NVA rushing in lines up his slope and was meeting them with his M-60 machine gun. Hagen hollered that he was going to check Berg; Andersen nodded to one Yard, "Tsao, go with him."

Tremendous AK fire was cutting the air from all directions—terrible fire, equal to fifty miniguns sweeping back and forth—but Berg could be bleeding to death, so Hagen ran directly into that maelstrom, toward the collapsed bunker, bullets ricocheting and slamming the earth in front of, behind, and beneath his dashing feet. Momentarily, Tsao trotted

back to Andersen and shouted, "The *trung ui* (lieutenant) is dead." Hagen had hardly gone a dozen yards when fire from NVA rushing up another slope cut him down.

Then Klaus Bingham left a bunker to reposition a claymore and didn't get 6 feet before a bullet struck him in the head, apparently killing him. The Yard with Bingham could not even risk checking him, the fire was so furious.

One Yard in a trench below Andersen fired several bursts, then jumped up to pull back. He attracted intense fire and fell into Andersen's lap, dead. The bullet that struck him would have hit Andersen had the Yard not taken it instead. Four men had died in less than four minutes.

It was up to Andersen now, the senior man.

Small-arms fire rattled closer on all sides, and grenades lobbed up from below the hillcrest, beyond the defenders' vision. The danger wasn't just the NVA they saw, but the more numerous enemy crawling and scurrying nearer behind small rises and from bomb crater to bomb crater.

Andersen dashed across the hill to look for Hagen but couldn't see him anywhere—just one hundred khaki-clad NVA almost at the top! He ran back for his M-60, fired one belt at NVA coming up his own slope, then sped to the other approach and ran belt after belt on the one hundred assaulting enemy. By then grenades started coming from behind him as NVA closed in from his rear.

Now within a dozen yards, just beyond the curvature of the hill, NVA popped up their heads, cracked a few shots at Andersen, then dropped back down.

Covey arrived, took one look at that hillside alive with NVA, scrubbed the snatch mission and called for fighters. But it would be more precious minutes before they were overhead.

Fighting a westerly headwind, the helicopters were still a dozen minutes away. The Cobra gunships went to full throttle, leaving the slower Hueys behind.

Meanwhile RT Kansas was pulling hand grenade pins, counting to three then heaving the grenades to airburst above the NVA—then they were out of grenades. A North Vietnamese grenade exploded beside Andersen's M-60, rendering it useless—he spun his CAR-15 off his back

and kept shooting, then he tossed back one enemy grenade that went off in front of him, leaving bright spots in his vision, but he kept shooting. More shrapnel tore into him, then an AK round slammed through his web gear and lodged in his elbow, knocking him down. He stumbled back to his knees and kept shooting.

The perimeter was pinched almost in half when Andersen grabbed his two remaining Yards, circled below and around the nearest NVA and somehow managed to reach the survivors on the opposite side. He found Bingham, started to lift him, and saw he, too, was dead, from a head wound. All around him he heard *zzzsss, zzzsss, zzzsss* as bullets flashed past his ears.

Andersen dragged Bingham's body back to where Bill Queen lay, wounded. Only Rimondi wasn't yet hit and still fired furiously. Andersen put them in a back-to-back circle just off the hilltop where they would make their last stand. An AK slug already had destroyed their team radio, another had shot Andersen's little survival radio out of his hand, so Rimondi tossed the One-One another survival radio, their last.

Now the NVA were *streaming*, rolling over the hillcrest like a tidal wave, their rattling AKs blending together into one never-ending burst. Andersen's men were shooting not at NVA but at hands wielding AKs over parapets and around bunkers. There was no place left to fall back and they could no longer spare five seconds to talk to Covey—Andersen was shooting NVA not much farther away than the end of his CAR-15's muzzle. The time it took to speed-change a CAR-15 magazine meant life or death.

From the air it looked like an ant mound, with moving figures everywhere. Cobra lead rolled in and sparkled 20mm cannon shells around the surviving RT Kansas men while Covey's OV-10 slipped sideways to strafe with machine guns and rockets. Then at last fighters arrived, adding splashing napalm and groaning Vulcan cannons to the melee.

Precise Cobra gunship fire stacked NVA in front of RT Kansas' final holdouts, then at last the assault ebbed, turned, and the surviving NVA fled for cover, just as the Hueys arrived.

The smoke-shrouded hill was an unforgettable sight: Beneath wisps of napalm flames lay khaki-clad bodies all the way up the slopes, then heaps of dead NVA radiated outward from a handful of dark green figures.

Though wounded repeatedly, Andersen crawled out to fire his CAR-

15 to cover the landing Hueys as they came in, machine guns blazing, while their escorting Cobra gunships sprayed cannon and minigun fire all around them. With Rimondi's help, Andersen got as many teammates' bodies as he could find aboard the first Huey, then helped the wounded Queen and others aboard the second.

Under intense fighter and Cobra attack, few NVA fired at the Hueys as they lifted away.

Despite his wounds, three hours later Andersen accompanied the Bright Light mission, commanded by Noel Gast, which included RTs Cobra and Indiana. Along with Jimmy Reeves and Sam "Injun" Adams, and even the CCN commander, Lieutenant Colonel Donnie Bellfi, they searched the hilltop, recovered Lieutenant Hagen's body and those of several Montagnards but never found Bruce Berg.

Already the NVA had recovered their own bodies and withdrawn.

The Bright Light team withdrew under light ground fire.

Lieutenant Hagen had died, along with Bingham, Berg was presumed dead, three Yards had died, Rimondi and Queen both suffered multiple frag wounds, Andersen had been struck by both small-arms fire and shrapnel, and their other Yards, too, had all been wounded.

Against this, Tony Andersen learned, the USAF had confirmed that 185 NVA lay dead on that hill. Little RT Kansas had wiped out half a battalion. But compared to the loss of his best friends, that gave Andersen sparse satisfaction.

The RT Kansas debriefing resulted in one of SOG's most dramatic documents, and a quote from Andersen so inspired Colonel Pezzelle that he had it engraved on a plaque: *"I looked up at the bunker in front of me and saw a khaki-uniformed NVA with pith helmet, chest web gear, green Bata boots and an AK, Type 56, and no other identifying insignia. Then I shot him."*

"It's just perfect," Pezzelle said. "It epitomized the SOG soldier who knew what his job was, which was gathering intelligence, then he turns around and fights when he has to."

First Lieutenant Loren Hagen's family was presented the U.S. Army's final Vietnam War Medal of Honor; Tony Andersen, his One-One who held together what remained of RT Kansas through those final mass assaults, received the Distinguished Service Cross, while Queen, Rimondi, Berg and Bingham were awarded Silver Stars.

A few days after coming off the hill, Tony Andersen took the bodies of his three Montagnard teammates to their little village, a place where they'd feasted and drunk rice wine together. As his truck rolled in, fearful women looked up from their work, knowing unannounced visitors meant bad news, and sobbing started as soon as the truck halted.

The entire village gathered at the headman's longhouse, where in their tribe's tradition, Andersen told of the fallen men's bravery and the many NVA they'd killed. It gave comfort to mothers and sisters to know their men had fought honorably, and to the brothers and fathers, great pride that they'd killed so many of the detested North Vietnamese. The Montagnard boys' dark eyes watched, as they hung on Andersen's every detail as the interpreter related the battle.

Despite the tragedy there was pride in the village.

When Andersen returned to his truck he found a cluster of nervous Montagnard boys, one of whom explained they wanted to return with him, learn how to fight and go kill the NVA. Most of the eager faces belonged to thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds, standing erect and swelling their chests to look older. Andersen nodded to the two oldest, who grinned and scrambled happily aboard the truck.

SOG's secret war continued into the fall of 1971, as teams documented the continuing NVA buildup. By October, seven of every nine missions had teams fighting for survival, yet they were always ready to go back, as if it were still 1965 and America was fighting to win.

In early October, USAF Captain Jim Cryer and I spotted an NVA regiment walking a Laotian road in broad daylight, which led to three days' incessant bombing—directed as well by Covey Riders Lowell Stevens and Larry White—which practically wiped out the entire unit, quite likely one of the most effective air attacks of the war.

That same month, NVA tanks were spotted in southern Laos, their first significant appearance there in over two years. When CCC commander Lieutenant Colonel Mike Radke reported this, the civilian II Corps adviser, John Paul Vann, shouted, "That's a lot of horseshit!" Vann's humility returned as evidence mounted.

In Saigon there was a hesitance to accept SOG's warnings by minimizing and nitpicking intelligence reports, which came to a head during a briefing for General Abrams. Chief SOG had just presented recon