



From March 19-25, 1969, two companies from the 101st Airborne Division's 1st Bn., 502nd Inf., fought the NVA in this infamous valley paralleling the Laotian border. B Company sustained the brunt of the casualties in 12 hours of combat over three days.



COURTESY DAVE NESBITT

Dong A Tay:

A Costly Victory in the A Shau Valley

by Tim Dyhouse

U.S. intelligence reports warned in early 1969 that North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops were busy stockpiling weapons and ammunition in key areas of South Vietnam's northern provinces. The NVA viewed one such area, the A Shau Valley, as a relatively safe haven from which they could launch an attack on Hue, some 26 miles to the northeast.

The 28-mile-long A Shau Valley, located in rugged country in southwestern Thua Thien province along the Laotian border, branched off from the Ho Chi Minh Trail and provided a natural thoroughfare toward Hue and Da Nang. The A Shau ran south down the Laotian and Cambodian border areas to some 37 miles from Saigon.

As of March 1969, it was apparent to U.S. commanders that NVA troops were on the move into the area. Maj. Gen.

Raymond Davis, then-commander of the 3rd Marine Division, said the Communists had hacked a road to within 17 miles of Hue. Davis said the road, if extended another four miles, would have allowed the NVA to bring their 122mm guns within range of the former imperial capital.

The goal for U.S. forces, therefore, was clear: prevent the NVA from using the valley as a staging area for an attack on Hue and the coastal provinces, as the Communists had done the previous year during the Tet Offensive.

On March 1, 1969, the 101st Airborne Division's 1st Bn., 502nd Infantry launched the first of three operations (*Massachusetts Striker*, *Apache Snow* and *Montgomery Rendezvous*)

Above: Dave Nesbitt, holding an M-60 machine gun, pauses while on patrol on Jan. 1, 1969, the day before his 21st birthday. Nesbitt was later wounded at Dong A Tay on March 20.

designed to drive out or destroy NVA forces in the valley. Working from the southern end, the unit's A, B and C companies moved north.

On March 12, C Company assaulted an area near Fire Support Base (FSB) Veghel, a U.S. position in the central valley that had been abandoned the previous year, to establish a landing zone for the battalion. Awaiting the troopers was the 816th NVA Battalion.

Fighting from about 4:30 p.m. through the night, C Company soldiers secured the base, losing 2 KIA while killing 12 NVA.

The rest of the NVA troops fled some four miles southwest to the 2,640-ft. Dong A Tay Mountain, described as a "round, squat hill with a large razorback ridge flowing out of it to the north."

Initially, U.S. commanders thought the enemy force guarding the area around FSB Veghel was only squad-sized, and after it was cleared thought it might be a company. But soldiers in the field knew differently.

"The first couple of nights near Dong A Tay, we could hear the ticking of generators in the background of our radio communications," said 1st Lt. John Eastham, commander of 2nd Plt., B Co. "We knew then we had something big."

'The Noise Was Ungodly'

On the morning of March 19, American commanders called in Air Force firepower to blast NVA troops out of their labyrinth of bunkers on Dong A Tay. 1st Lt. Ed Donaldson, who commanded 2nd Plt., A Co., recalls an Air Force jet dropping a 10,000-pound "daisy cutter" bomb (used to clear landing zones) on the hilltop. Immediately thereafter, 2nd and 3rd Platoons led the attack.

"We were running into delaying contacts as we moved toward the hill," the VFW Department of North Carolina member said. "Every so often we would get contact from two or three NVA. But we kept getting pressured by division to get to the top, so we didn't chase them."

Lt. John Sorge, who commanded 3rd Platoon, recalled that his unit suffered the first casualties.

"My platoon sergeant Sandy Muhlen-

graft was the first one wounded and my RTO (radio telephone operator) Lawrence Olive was the first KIA," Sorge said.

Donaldson says his platoon saw "bunkers everywhere" as they moved forward. Upon reaching the top of Dong A Tay, "we noticed commo wire and there were clothes and other debris up in the trees," that he surmised was caused by the huge daisy cutter explosion.

"Just then a couple of NVA went running down a ridge, and my guys, who



COURTESY JOHN SORGE

were real aggressive, went after them," Donaldson said. "I yelled at them to return but it was too late."

An NVA ambush lay in wait.

"The whole jungle erupted," he recalled. "We got pinned down on a little saddle on a very narrow ridge."

Donaldson called in artillery fire, estimating that 1,700 rounds—some landing only 25 yards from 2nd Platoon's position—blasted the hilltop for the next three hours.

"They laid down a wall of steel," he said. "We would've been in a lot worse shape if not for the artillerymen."

Freddy Baker, a rifleman with A Company who was awaiting a helicopter for a planned R&R leave, says he was ordered back to his platoon when the shooting started.

"The noise was ungodly," Baker said. "Arty, machine guns, rifle fire, RPGs, as well as gunships and jets. I remember the Phantoms releasing their ordnance and you could see it tumbling right toward you."

Dave Nesbitt was a 21-year-old specialist 4 serving with A Company's 1st Platoon. He says he and another soldier were digging foxholes when they heard

small-arms fire erupt down the ridge from them.

"He jumped up, grabbed his M-16 with only one magazine and ran down toward the firing," Nesbitt, a VFW member of Post 3034 in Sumter, S.C., said. "It was a very bad mistake. I helped retrieve his body the next day."

Nesbitt was wounded the following day, March 20, when "a big ball of fire from a mortar or command-detonated artillery round" exploded as he manned an M-60 machine gun behind a tree. He



COURTESY JOHN EASTHAM

Left: RTO Lawrence Olive and Lt. John Sorge. Olive became the first KIA at Dong A Tay.

Above: Lt. John Eastham and radio operator Spec. 4 Dean Smith.

remembers a couple of his fellow troopers pulling him up the hill and out of firing range where A Company's 1st Platoon medic, James "Doc" Feliciano, could apply first aid.

"I had a hole in my knee big enough to put in a grapefruit," said Nesbitt, who later had his knee fused together instead of amputating his leg.

Feliciano recalls Nesbitt as the last casualty he treated that day.

"Wally Morrow gave me cover fire as I worked on Dave," said Feliciano, a VFW life member from New York. "Besides an ambush in Tam Ky in July 1969, this operation was the worst for me. We were making contact daily and it was pretty hectic."

'The Best Thing I Ever Did in My Life'

The next two days, March 21-22, were particularly bad for B Company when it lost seven KIAs. On March 21, 1st Lt. William Dent, who commanded 3rd Platoon, was wounded in an ambush and later died.

"I put him on a chopper alive," said B Company 1st Sgt. Royce Burkett, a life member of VFW Post 6018 in Fayetteville, N.C. "He had three bullet

holes in him. I guess he must have lost too much blood. I remember him asking me to secure his Ranger knife."

Burkett, also a Korean War vet, was wounded March 22 when fragments from an RPG hit him in the head, leg and arm.

"It knocked me back into a bomb crater," he said. "I had blood sloshing around in my boots, but I didn't think my condition was bad enough to be evacuated then. I spent that night on the hill and was medevaced out the next day. I spent 45 days in the hospital with an infection."

Casualties were taking such a heavy toll on B Company platoons that Spec. 4 Dean Smith, an RTO with 1st Platoon, remembers a fellow RTO, Spec. 4 Robert E. McAferty, walking point for a squad because all other pointmen had been wounded.

"He walked past me and down a trail," said Smith, a former five-time commander of VFW Post 2494 in Irving, Texas. "All of a sudden I heard him screaming, 'They're all around us,' and then hell broke loose. It sounded horrible."

Smith says his unit later found

McAferty's lifeless body tied to a tree.

Donaldson says A Company secured the hilltop on March 24. He was then ordered to take command of Recon Platoon.

"It was the most intense time of my year in Vietnam," said Donaldson, who became a lawyer and judge as a civilian. "It also was the best thing I ever did in my life."

The next day, B Company would make the final push to move the NVA off Dong A Tay.

'Jane Fonda Stuff' Found in Bunker

Around 10:35 a.m. on March 25, 2nd Platoon discovered a deserted NVA hospital bunker complex that Eastham said contained Communist propaganda leaflets depicting U.S. POWs and "Jane Fonda stuff" like blankets and towels sent by sympathetic Americans.

According to the book *Hamburger Hill* by Samuel Zaffiri, soldiers found a list "of medicines that had been shipped to the hospital, followed by the words: 'Donated by your friends at the University of California at Berkeley.'"

At 11 a.m., 1st Platoon soldiers dis-

covered a small bunker complex, and three were killed "instantly" upon entering it. It is unclear how they died, but 1st Sgt. Burkett believes the bunker was booby-trapped. The other four soldiers who died that day—from both 1st and 2nd Platoons—were killed by sniper fire.

Firefights continued throughout the afternoon as 2nd Platoon moved to reinforce 1st Platoon. By 6:30 p.m., the enemy had broken contact with B Company.


All seven Americans killed March 25 were from B Company's 1st and 2nd Platoons. Overall, from March 19-25, 1st Battalion's official death toll shows 20 U.S. KIA. According to daily after-action reports, 1st Battalion members had 39 WIA while killing 56 NVA troops.

"It was most certainly the worst day of my Vietnam tour," said Eastham, a member of VFW Post 201 in Waterbury, Conn. "I think about it every day."

B Company was airlifted off Dong A Tay on March 26. But more bloody battles awaited U.S. troops in the A Shau Valley. 1st Battalion had merely fulfilled the first objective in a campaign that would last throughout the summer of 1969. ★

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