

# Chapter 1

## Into the Valley of Death

Dong Re Lao Mountain rose to a height of 4,879 feet over the A Shau Valley in South Vietnam. It sat less than six miles from the Laotian border. The communist NVA took control of the valley in March of 1966 when they successfully overran the last remaining Special Forces camp in that area. Running north to south, the valley is approximately a mile wide and twenty-five miles long with elephant grass covering most of the valley floor. The A Shau is neatly split lengthwise by Route 548, a hard-packed dirt road. The valley is bordered on both sides by densely forested mountains ranging from three to six thousand feet in elevation.

The A Shau provided the NVA with a strategic and easily defensible stronghold. Lieutenant General Ngo Thanh, the NVA Commander, wasted no time turning the entire valley into a heavily fortified supply depot. General Thanh commanded a garrison of between 5000 and 6000 NVA soldiers supplemented by the local VC forces. Under General Thanh's direction much of the complex was concealed in underground bunkers and tunnels. It was also ringed with one hell of an anti-aircraft battery with sophisticated inter-locking fields of fire. The valley soon became a major infiltration point into Thua Thien Province of South Vietnam and was used to funnel men, weapons, and materials down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in support of the communist North's

effort to unify the country. Subsequently, it was an extremely painful thorn in the side of the U.S. forces fighting in Vietnam. It would be a very hard nut to crack!

The last time Cordell was in the A Shau Valley, his team had gotten eyeball deep in the shit. His six-man team, on the second week of a six-week long-range reconnaissance patrol (LRRP), nearly walked into a cleverly-concealed “V” shaped ambush. Lt. Cordell was wounded in the desperate firefight that followed. He’d also lost a good friend. Officers and enlisted were not supposed to mix, but Hicks was different. He would have made a damn good officer. He was also the best point man Cordell had ever had on his team.

A Vietcong favorite, the “V” type ambush is virtually undetectable by the man on point or by flank security; at least until some of the team are already in the kill zone. Positioned with its open mouth toward the enemy’s advance, the ambushers lay in good concealment along the legs of the “V,” and wait until the enemy point had passed. Then they creep up closer to the trail. Enfilading fire is directed down the enemy’s line of travel and combined with interlocking fire along both legs of the “V.” This positioning created deadly three-way crossfire throughout the ambush kill zone. It also provided a perfect area for the use of controlled mines and booby-traps.

Lt. Curtis Cordell awoke with a start, sweat dripping from his body. It was that same stupid dream. Smoke, heat, jungle, explosions and a young Vietnamese woman who was just calmly standing there in front of him, smiling, and beckoning for something. Cordell was just never sure what.

He sat up on his cot naked except for his dog tags and skivvies, and spent a few moments studying his feet on the pallet flooring of his tent. It was

only six a.m. and already steaming hot. There was simply no escape from the heat. In the Peoples Republic of Vietnam, it was hot and wet or hot and dry ... heat being the only real constant.

*Maybe these dreams are somehow prompted by the rumors that they were going back into the A Shau,* he thought. He was not looking forward to that. A lot of good men had died in that valley. He had lost several good men himself.

Cordell pulled on some shorts, grabbed a towel and his wash kit. Slipping on his Ho Chi Minh sandals, he made his way to the latrine. After emptying his bladder, he checked in at the shower tent, one of the few true pleasures of life in base camp. Feeling a little better and in clean jungle fatigues, Curtis stopped in at the mess hall for a quick breakfast before the briefing scheduled for 0800 hours. Rumors were flying about a possible upcoming major offensive. He guessed that the upcoming briefing probably had something to do with these rumors.

Cordell met Sergeant Walker, just finishing breakfast, at the mess hall door. While just an E-5, Jim Walker was the most experienced enlisted man on Cordell's LRRP team.

"Morning Lieutenant." Walker saluted.

Cordell returned his salute. "Morning Jim. What's for breakfast?"

"The usual .... green eggs and shit on a shingle," Walker replied grinning.

"You gonna find out the truth behind these god-damned rumors this morning?"

"Hope so," Cordell muttered. "Fill you in afterward."

"Yes sir. See you later sir."

Cordell hoped the rumors were just that. Rumors.

He still had a bad taste in his mouth from that last mission. They were maneuvering along a ridge about 20 meters above a trail that had seen a lot of recent travel, probably by the NVA or Vietcong. Cpl. Steven Hicks was on point and was just about to begin to move forward again, when something told him to stop. He paused, remaining very still. Hicks signaled the rest of the team to get down and take cover. He often took point because he was known for his uncanny ability to smell an ambush. The other team members half-jokingly referred to it as his “spidey sense.” But, they took it with dead seriousness when they were out in the bush. Whatever was out there, Hick’s “spidey sense” was tingling like hell right freaking now.

He stood stock-still, becoming part of the jungle. His eyes scanned back and forth, starting close to his position and then moving away into the jungle. His nostrils flared trying to pick up any scent that seemed out of place in the jungle. His ears strained to hear and identify any sound that did not belong here either. It was too damned quiet! Then faintly, there it was again. Not really a sound, just the impression of a sound. Something that did not belong in the jungle!

*Ambush, Hicks thought. I can feel it. We’re going to be in the shit!*

From his position, the Vietcong platoon leader could see that his carefully laid ambush was a split second from being discovered. He immediately yelled at his men, ordering them to open fire. Twenty-five well-hidden Vietcong ambushers began firing on the six-man LRRP team.

Hicks screamed “Ambush!” and dropped to the ground returning fire.

The team hit the dirt just short of entering the kill zone and began returning effective fire. Even with their ambush blown, the VC still had the

advantage of higher ground. Cordell's team was now locked in a desperate firefight. It was fortunate they weren't caught in the kill zone, but they'd still been surprised and were outnumbered five to one. The skirmish lasted for several long minutes. Lt. Cordell caught two AK-47 rounds; one in the calf and one in the hip but luckily both bullets traveled clean through. Though seriously hurt and bleeding, the wounds were not bad enough to take Curtis Cordell out of the fight.

*Stay in the damn fight*, he thought, grimacing from the pain. *You can't fucking quit now!*

He dropped two VC with quick, accurate bursts from his M16 rifle. Cordell heard more firing on his left flank. He glanced to his left and saw Big Dave Johnson, the soft-spoken son of a Texas rancher, firing away with his M16. Johnson, at great risk to himself was giving covering fire to Jim Walker and Bobby Stillwater, who were being overrun by charging Vietcong fighters.

Jim Walker, a genuine White Mountain Apache warrior from Arizona, emptied one thirty round mag into the jungle, spraying suppressive fire into the VC position along the left leg of the ambush. He was releasing the empty mag and reaching for another when he looked up to see two VC charging at him. Cordell could hear Walker howling like one of his Apache warrior ancestors as he smashed one charging VC in the head with his rifle butt, splitting his skull wide open. Quickly pivoting on the balls of his feet Walker turned to face the second black-clad attacker. The VC soldier was bearing down on him from behind. Cordell saw them collide and tumble to the ground, each fighting desperately for an advantage.

Just then, Johnson was cut down by a burst of 7.62 from a Vietcong's AK-47 rifle. Cordell spotted the enemy shooter firing from the dense foliage

higher on the ridge to his right and placed a three-round burst through the black-clad chest.

Cpl. Hicks was down as well. He and Mike Hightower managed to take out the Type 24 machine gun the Vietcong platoon placed in the depression at the deadly end of their “V” ambush. Hightower scored a direct hit on the machine gun with a LAW anti-tank rocket at the same time Hicks tossed a fragmentation grenade into the depression. The machine gun was effectively silenced. The two had just shifted positions to enable them to resume firing on the right leg of the ambush when a Vietcong stick grenade traced an arc out of the foliage twenty yards away and landed at their feet. Cordell saw it and shouted.

“Grenade!”

Cordell could only watch as Hicks moved to grab the grenade and throw it back. He was too late. Grenade fuses are never that predictable. The grenade exploded just before Hicks could get to it and the explosion took both down.

“Damn it! Shit!” Cordell raked the dense foliage with automatic fire hoping to get the VC who’d thrown it.

In the next instant, as fast as all the shooting started, it stopped. The Vietcong had faded back into the jungle.

Cordell was still for long seconds, scanning the surrounding area to make sure that the VC were really gone and the firefight over. Keeping his eyes on the ridges he limped over to check on Dave Johnson. Pvt. Johnson was dead. Several rounds had gone through his chest killing him instantly. Lt. Cordell collected one of Johnson’s dog tags, carefully put it in his fatigue jacket pocket. He reached down to gently close Johnson’s eyes.

Still alert for snipers, Cordell painfully worked his way over to where Hicks and Hightower were lying side by side, surrounded by a pile of dead

black-clad Vietcong soldiers. Two more dog tags went into his pocket. Hicks was a damn good soldier as well as a friend. They were all good soldiers.

*Until we meet again Steve,* Cordell thought to himself.

Cordell spotted Jim Walker working his way toward him carrying Bobby Stillwater over his shoulder. Bobby was alive but shot through both thighs and his left hip. Walker was gentle as he placed Stillwater on the ground. Digging into the first aid kit he found the morphine and gave Stillwater a shot and then prepared to give one to his Lieutenant. "Save it," Cordell ordered. "Better to keep my head clear, and besides I think we'd better get the hell out of here. Just hand me a couple of field dressings."

Cordell had already packed the holes in his hip and thigh with tree moss to slow the loss of blood. Fortunately, they were both flesh wounds. But, they still hurt like hell.

"Hopefully I won't catch some fucking kind of indigenous blood poisoning from that damn moss!"

"Damn radio is shot to shit," Walker reported. "We're going to have to hoof it out of here to reach the backup landing zone ... wait for the alternate extraction tomorrow evening. It's about eleven or twelve clicks from here to there I figure."

Lt. Cordell nodded, and thought for a moment about their options. Jim busied himself applying dressings to Bobby's gunshot wounds trying to stop the bleeding.

"Listen," Cordell said. "I won't be able to move as fast as you with these bullet holes in me. Jim, you'd better carry Bobby and go on ahead. I will cover our six ... bring up the rear. Just hold that fucking chopper for me," he grinned.

"You bet!"

Walker adjusted his gear and checked his ammo. He hoisted Bobby to his shoulders and reached down to retrieve his M16. Walker nodded to Cordell and started off through the jungle toward the alternate extraction point.

Cordell hunkered down near a rock in the brush. Keeping an eye on the jungle for any returning Vietcong or NVA and his rifle close at hand, he took a long swallow from his canteen. He sat quietly, listening to the sounds of the jungle. When he was sure there was no activity in the immediate area, he headed down the trail after Walker, stopping and listening every twenty to thirty yards to make sure he wasn't being followed.

The two bullet holes made for slow going but Cordell managed to keep moving for several hours. The sun had begun to drop from the sky when Cordell got out his compass and checked his topographical map. He figured he was maybe half way to the backup LZ. Right now, he was lying on his stomach in the low scrub brush at the edge of what seemed to be a wide flat clearing, maybe a dried riverbed. It looked to be about twenty-five or thirty yards across and ran as far as he could see in both directions. The clearing was covered with low brush, dotted here and there with islands of flat rocks. There were also signs of recent travel along the clearing. Maybe an NVA patrol route?

Curtis Cordell was feeling very tired. The loss of blood wasn't helping his situation any either. He had to concentrate to stay focused.

*If I can just make it across this clearing I'll be able to locate a secure position up on that opposite ridge,* he thought. Up on the ridge he should be relatively out of danger and it would provide a good view of his back trail.

*I need to rest a bit though, before I move on,* Cordell thought. He took one last long look in both directions of the wash.

*Looks O.K. Here goes nothing!*

Cordell worked his way slowly across the clearing still painfully aware of his wounds. As it turned out, he was way too slow.

He was midway across the clearing when the hair stood up on the back of his neck. He could hear in the distance the growling and clanking of machinery. Lt Cordell dropped to the ground and froze. It was louder now.

*Oh shit! An NVA tank. Damn!* It must have been in a low spot or on the other side of a rise. And of course, that meant NVA patrol.

*What fucking luck!!* The North Vietnamese Army had a few Chinese-made T62 tanks operating in A Shau Valley area. Cordell fought the urge to get up and run because, while he couldn't see the NVA tank because of his low position, they would sure as hell see him if he ran. Cordell reached up to pull some scrub brush over him for cover. He flattened out onto the clearing floor and willed himself to be invisible. The clanks and roar of the Chinese tank grew louder.

Time stood still as the sounds of the approaching tank grew louder and louder. It sounded like it was right on top of him.

*By God, it was!* Cordell lay very still. He could see a tank track visible to either side of him. Turning his head, he looked straight up through the brush at the steel hull of the tank itself as its engine cut off. He slowed his breathing and remained perfectly still.

*Shit! I guess I must have dosed off,* Cordell thought to himself. *Must be the loss of blood.*

Cordell heard the murmurings of Vietnamese voices quietly talking off to his left and could identify the dim light of a small concealed fire. The faint smell of wood smoke and the greasy metallic smell of the tank also filled the air. It was getting dark. He heard the clinking of pots and pans, then the footsteps of someone working his way around to the rear of the tank. Someone

was relieving himself in the brush. A few minutes later he smelled the strong, pungent odor of a Vietnamese cigarette. The smell was coming from his right side.

*Must be finishing supper,* he thought.

Cordell heard the hissing sound of a fire being extinguished and three or four voices talking quietly as they made their way up onto the tank. Then silence ... except for the sound of insects and a NVA soldier snoring quietly above him.

*No sleep tonight,* Cordell thought. *This is insane.*

The roar of the Chinese tank's engines coming to life yanked Cordell back from his sleep and into the land of the living. Startled, he started to sit up. But, remembering where he was he stopped short and narrowly missed cracking his head on the hull of the tank. Cordell lay back down and kept still. The tank started to move. Moments later the NVA tank was gone, the sound of its engine growing dimmer as it slowly moved off down the clearing.

*I'll be a son-of-a-bitch,* he thought, grinning at the absurdity of the entire situation. Cordell felt a bit more rested and thankfully his wounds didn't hurt as much. *Guess I must have gotten some sleep after all,* he mused.

Waiting long enough to make sure that the tank was gone, Cordell got slowly and stiffly to his feet. He made it across the rest of the clearing and part way up the ridge before taking a drink from his canteen. He looked back, checking his back trail. No movement he could see. Deciding he had enough of a rest, Cordell took a compass bearing and started off along the ridge toward the backup extraction point. Five or six clicks left to go. He had plenty of time and had slept some last night. Things were looking up.

The sun was not yet at its zenith and already it was damn hot. Walker finished giving Stillwater a swallow from his canteen. They were hidden in the foliage a few meters back from the secondary LZ. It was still a few hours from the pre-arranged backup extraction time. The choppers wouldn't even be in the air yet.

Suddenly Walker heard the call of a Great Barred Owl off to his left, maybe twenty or thirty yards away. The Great Barred Owl has a distinct call, not easily mistaken by anyone who had heard it before, and as far as Walker knew ... there were no Great Barred Owls indigenous to South Vietnam. Knowing that Great Barred Owls were very territorial, Walker figured he'd better return the challenge. He did. Grinning, he hunkered down to wait. In a matter of minutes, Lt. Cordell worked his way up beside him.

"Howdy Lieutenant." Walker offered him his canteen. "About damn time!"

"No thanks. I'm good. How's Bobby?"

"I'm here." Bobby spoke up in a subdued, hoarse voice. "But I confess I've felt better."

"It's been a pretty quiet night here Lieutenant," Walker whispered. "Nothing much moving out there."

"How was your night Lieutenant," Bobby asked in his hoarse whisper. Cordell grinned.

"Bobby, Jim, you guys wouldn't fucking believe me if I told you."

They settled back in to wait for the choppers, each set of eyes scanning the jungle terrain around them, alert for any sign of the enemy. A few hours later they heard the welcome sound of two approaching UH-1H helicopters. Walker threw a yellow smoke grenade to help guide the choppers in to their

location. While one Huey, acting as the escort gunship, took a defensive station, circling overhead, the second Huey touched down in the small clearing.

Walker carried Bobby to the chopper while Cordell limped along at his side keeping his eyes on the jungle behind them. The Huey's door gunner scanned the clearing's perimeter for any sign of the enemy, his finger ready on the trigger of the chopper's M-60 machine gun. The co-pilot helped Walker lift Bobby up onto the chopper's deck. Walker sprang up into the Huey and leaned down to give Cordell a hand up as well.

“Damn, we are glad to see you guys!”

“Well, we're damn glad to see you three as well. We should be back at Evans in about thirty minutes,” the co-pilot yelled over the roar of the Huey's engines. The chopper lifted off, climbing into the late afternoon sky.

Cordell settled in for the flight and thought about Steve Hicks, Dave Johnson, and Mike Hightower, all damn good soldiers. Steve Hicks had been a good friend.

What a snafu! He'd make sure their bodies were recovered and sent home. Three more letters to write.