

# Operation Dewey Canyon

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It was a heck of a way to fight a war, almost like the children's game of *hide and seek*... only deadlier...and it wasn't a game by any means.

Running almost the entire length of both North and South Vietnam was an enemy supply road, infamously known as the Ho Chi Minh trail. Stretching from the Communist capitol in the north, this supply route funneled thousands of enemy soldiers and tons of weapons and supplies to the south, almost entirely within the protected confines of Laos and Cambodia. But for aerial attack, the Ho Chi Minh trail was invincible. United States soldiers and Marines were not allowed to cross the borders.

During the Christmas cease-fire of 1967 the North Vietnamese used the Ho Chi Minh trail to amass tens of thousands of soldiers for a major offensive. A month after Christmas, on January 30, 1968, nearly 100,000 enemy soldiers launched a major offensive, striking simultaneously at every provincial capitol in the south. In the northwest corner of South Vietnam, embattled Marines survived a 77-day siege at Khe Sanh. Throughout the northern portion of South Vietnam, labeled by the military as I CORPS, fierce fighting raged for months. The massive enemy buildup had been staged from within their Laotian sanctuary, and launched in I Corps in large part from fortified positions deep inside a South Vietnamese mountainous jungle called the A Shau Valley.

The A Shau Valley was one of two major enemy strongholds in the south. The other was the U Minh Forest. Twenty-two miles long, the A Shau Valley was only six miles from the Laotian border, a deep valley that ran between two heavily forested mountain ranges. The strongest enemy base in South Vietnam, A Shau was protected by a sophisticated complex of interlocked anti-aircraft batteries and garrisoned more than 5,000 enemy soldiers.

Following the Tet Offensive of 1968, signs of American presence in A Shau was limited primarily to three abandoned airfields spread throughout the valley floor, and a deserted Special Forces camp at the southern tip of the valley. The Special Forces camp had been overrun by the enemy in 1966. For the most part, the A Shau was a staging point where the enemy could build huge stockpiles of weapons and supplies funneled south on the trail through Laos, and then launch strikes against American and South Vietnamese troops throughout Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces.

A year after the Tet Offensive of 1968, military intelligence reports indicted a massive enemy buildup in the already heavily enemy-controlled A Shau. Plans at this stage of the war were for a decreasing role for US ground troops, and transfer of responsibility for combat actions to the soldiers of the Army of South Vietnam (ARVN). But the enemy strength in A Shau posed a threat that demanded an immediate American effort to deny the enemy his sanctuary, capture his supplies, and prove that the A Shau would no longer be a haven. Primary responsibility for this mission fell to the men of the 9th Marines, 3d Marine Division (Reinforced) FMF.

Headquartered 50 miles northeast of the A Shau at Vandergrift Combat Base under the command of Colonel Robert H. Barrow, the 9th Marines boasted three battalions to be marshaled for the formidable task. The mission would be one of the last major offensives conducted by US

Marines in Vietnam. It would be tough, it would be deadly, but it would be in the tradition of the US Marine Corps, an engagement fought valiantly and successfully

The commanding general of the 3d Marine Division, headquartered out of Da Nang, was Major General Raymond G. Davis. For Davis, this was his third war, having served in World War II and receiving the Medal of Honor for his heroism at the Chosin Reservoir in Korea. Davis referred to the 9th Marines as the "Mountain Regiment" and his "Strike Force Regiment". As Operation Dewey Canyon began on January 22, 1969, General Davis had good reason to pay close attention to the efforts of his Marines. Among the men assigned to meet and defeat the enemy in their A Shau sanctuary was a young lieutenant in command of a rifle platoon. By a strange twist of fate that defied military policy prohibiting relatives from serving in the same war zone, Operation Dewey Canyon would send Davis' son, Lieutenant Miles Davis, into harms way.

Phase I of Operation Dewey Canyon primarily involved the movement and positioning of air assets. Phase II, the movement of the 3 battalions of the 9th Marines out of Vandergrift Combat Base began on January 31<sup>st</sup>.

From January 31 until February 10, 1969, 2/9 continued its movement south, flanked by 1/9 and 3/9. Colonel Robert Barrow, commander of the 9th Marine Regiment (who later became the 27th Commandant of the Marine Corps), coordinated the mission with support from American assets throughout I Corps. By February 10th the three battalions were poised and ready to enter Phase III, the incursion into A Shau. Along the way they had built numerous firebases with names like Henderson, Tun Tavern, Shiloh, Razor, and Cunningham, to provide artillery support and maintain supply routes.

The large movements of the three battalions demanded a regular and consistent resupply at Vandergrift Combat. Phase II of *Operation Dewey Canyon* was under way. The following morning the Marines of 1/9 and 2/9 began moving out of their firebases as well, heading southward and towards the North Vietnamese Base Area 611 that ran from the north boundary of A Shau and into Laos.

The move into A Shau was at once both miserable and dangerous. Triple-canopy jungle made movement difficult and two weeks of continuous fog and heavy monsoon rains removed any possibility of personal comfort and made resupply difficult. The enemy moved freely through the A Shau at night on roads they would carefully camouflage during the day with movable trees and shrubs ingeniously planted in containers. As they moved, the Marines were subjected to heavy artillery fire from NVA guns inside Laos. At night, more troops and weapons moved down the Ho Chi Minh trail. General Davis caused a slight stir on the home front when a newspaper reported a remark made in a personal conversation. "It makes me sick," the 3d Marine Division C.G. had said, "to sit on this hill and watch those 1,000 (enemy) trucks go down those roads in Laos, hauling ammunition down south to kill Americans with."

Early in the phase III of the operation, General Davis flew out to meet with Colonel Barrow. Earlier that morning the General had begun receiving reports of enemy contact..."Kilo Company, fire fight, 1 killed, 2 wounded." An hour later Kilo Company was in contact again, more Marines killed, more wounded. Davis did his best to concentrate on the meeting at hand, all the while knowing that his son was a rifle platoon leader in Kilo Company. Even as he landed for his meeting with Colonel Barrow, some of the wounded were arriving...Lieutenant Miles Davis among them. The younger Davis would survive his wounds and subsequently would receive the Purple Heart Medal from his father.

Meanwhile, in the A Shau, other Marines struggled to stay alive and complete their mission. By February 20th the Marines had moved all the way to the Laotian border. As the enemy played their deadly game of *hide-and-seek*, raining death on young American Marines and then quickly scurrying across the border into the safety of Laos, Colonel Barrow had seen too many of his men die to the unfair advantage. "The political implications of going into Laos were pretty unimportant to me at that point," he later stated.

The policy of US commanders had always been that units could enter Laos or Cambodia, only when American lives were endangered by enemy forces therein. (Usually this applied to SAR (Search and Rescue) missions for down pilots or LRRP (long range reconnaissance patrols). Colonel Barrow saw the danger his own men faced from within and, despite the very real possibility of sacrificing his distinguished military career, ordered Hotel Company, 2/9 to cross the border and set up ambush positions INSIDE Laos. (This plan was approved by General Creighton Abrams, commander of all U.S. Forces in Vietnam...AFTER the border crossing had already occurred.)

With elements of the 9th Marines now operating inside Laos, the other battalions moved out to take up positions along the border. On the morning of February 22nd, the 1st Battalion was in place on a ridge overlooking Laos. The Marines of 1/9 called themselves *The Walking Dead*. On this day, for one company in particular, the name would be all too real.

First Lieutenant Wesley Fox was in command of Alpha Company, 1/9. He was a seasoned veteran, now in his 19th year in the Marine Corps. As a young Corporal he had served in Korea, slowly working his way through the ranks to become a First Sergeant by 1966. The veteran leatherneck, now in his second war, had begun anew...working his way through the commissioned ranks. Fox had already completed a tour in Vietnam, and recently had extended his combat tour. As dawn broke on the forested hillside overlooking Laos, Alpha Company was sent out to look for and destroy a suspected enemy force operating in the region. Lieutenant Fox's 3rd platoon had made contact with them the previous day, and now the Company was looking to finish the fight. In addition, First Battalion was low on water. A detail from Charlie Company was dispatched to get resupply from a stream below, Alpha Company leading the way to provide security as Lieutenant Fox and his men searched for the enemy. As they reached the stream, the enemy appeared.

The NVA seemed to be everywhere, popping up out of hidden spider holes to rain devastating machinegun and small arms fire on Alpha Company and the Charlie Company water detail, while enemy mortars fell on the embattled Marines. The suddenness and the ferocity of the attack caught the Marines by surprise, many falling wounded in the initial onslaught.

Quickly Lieutenant Fox moved out, working his way through the heavy jungle overgrowth to gain a position where he could assess the situation and direct his platoon leaders. Deadly missiles struck the foliage and bamboo palms around him. Fox located a sniper's position, quickly killing the enemy with his M-16 rifle before moving on.

As Fox deployed his platoons, two enemy mortar rounds landed in his position, killing his radiomen and air and artillery observers. Shrapnel stuck the lieutenant in the shoulder but, despite the bleeding wounds, he grabbed both radios and continued to direct the movements of his Marines.

The lieutenant who led Fox's 2nd platoon was seriously wounded, and Fox instructed his executive officer to take command of that platoon. When his platoon leader in the 3d platoon was

killed, Fox quickly moved in to fill the void and take command. He personally destroyed one position while continuing to shout orders and give encouragement. Coolly he spoke into the radio to coordinate aerial and artillery support for his Marines. Among those working to defend these Marines on the Laotian border was artillery officer Harvey "Barney" Barnum, who had earned the Medal of Honor three years earlier and returned, at his own request, for another Vietnam tour. As the enemy fire continued unabated, the executive officer Fox had sent to 2nd Platoon was killed, and another of his lieutenants was wounded. Though wounded himself, Fox was the only officer in Alpha Company still capable of leading the resistance. This he did with calm professionalism, his Marines repulsing a final enemy assault during which the Company Commander was wounded a second time.

Heedless of his battered body, Fox began organizing his survivors in establishing a defensive position. As corpsmen moved about to locate and treat the wounded, Fox refused aid, setting himself to the tasks leadership demanded. By late afternoon his Marines had secured their position, and Delta Company 2/9 arrived to relieve them. Ten of Fox's brave Marines had died and, of the 153 men who had joined him that morning in the patrol down from the ridge, only 66 were able to continue the mission the following day. Despite his wounds, and determined not to leave Alpha Company leaderless, Lieutenant Fox was among them.

