



To the Rescue:

Rangers in Peril on Hill 809

One of the most daring rescues of the Vietnam War occurred in the A Shau Valley in April 1971.

By Gary Linderer

On April 23, 1971, Capt. James Montano led a 24-man patrol from L Co., 75th Inf. (Ranger), 101st Airborne Div., onto the floor of the eastern rim of the A Shau Valley. His mission: destroy a culvert in the dirt road that ran the valley's length. The culvert ran under the road channeling a stream, so it had to be blown in place. Two engineers were along for that task.

A six-man Ranger team, led by Sgt. Marvin Duren, was inserted that same day to act as a radio relay team for the Rangers operating in the valley below. The team consisted of Sgt. Fred Karnes, the senior radio operator; Sgt. Steve McAlpine, assistant team leader/medic; Spec. 4 Johnnie Sly; Pfc. James Champion and Spec. 4 Isaako Malo.

Overriding L Company's Capt. David Ohle, the 2nd Sqdn., 17th Cav, CO ordered the helicopter pilot to insert Duren's team in a saddle farther up the ridgeline from the patrol. Depositing the men on Hill 809 overlooking Highway 548 was a fatal decision.

Pinned Down by Intense Fire

Before the Ranger patrol and radio relay team could link up and reach cover, small-arms fire erupted from NVA in well-camouflaged bunkers. The initial burst cut down Duren: hit twice in the right hip, once in the chest, and once in the stomach. He was hit several more times, taking rounds in the spleen, appendix, left lung, left arm and back.

Meanwhile, a Huey slick from B Trp., 2nd Sqdn., 17th Cav, piloted by Capt. Louis Spiedel, departed for the valley. On board was Sgt. William Vodden, a Ranger team leader who volunteered to replace Duren.

Approaching the saddle, the chopper was hit, crashing into the hillside and rolling over twice before coming to rest upside down in the thick vegetation. Vodden had already cleared the aircraft. It was 4:25 p.m.

After retrieving door gunner Spec. 4 Brian Plahn, Vodden was hit by a burst of AK-47 fire that shattered the femur in his leg. He looked up to see a dust-off chopper drop into the LZ.

As Vodden watched helplessly, McAlpine and Sly rose from cover and began dragging Duren toward the waiting aircraft. Seeing the two Rangers struggling with the now-unconscious team leader, crew chief Spec. 5 Michael Brummer jumped from the dust-off and raced out into the LZ to help get Duren aboard.

WO Fred Behrens, 326th Medical Battalion, evacuated Duren and Plahn and then realized that another wounded man was left behind, so headed back to the valley.

Behrens brought the aircraft straight into the LZ and slammed it down in the clearing. Amid the swirling smoke and battle debris, McAlpine, Karnes, Malo, Sly and Champion quickly boarded the Huey. Vodden and Brummer were still on the ground.

Later, Behrens felt the dull pain of a round slam into his foot and another hit him in the upper body. A third round hit Brummer in the head, killing him instantly.

Behrens struggled to auto-rotate the craft back into the saddle because the chopper was hit in the turbine and lost power. The survivors spilled out both sides of the smoking helicopter, some heading for Vodden's position, the remainder for a bomb crater about 50 feet away from the crash site. Unable to keep up, Behrens limped away from the ship, collapsing into the first cover. It was 7:45 p.m.

GI Bait for the NVA

To everyone's surprise, the NVA remained in their bunkers during the night. That's because the enemy had decided to use the Rangers for bait. As long as there was anyone left alive in the saddle, the Americans would send more aircraft

Karnes, Sly and Capt. Roger Madison, the dust-off co-



▲ Above and right: WO Fred Behrens alongside a minigun-equipped OH-6 helicopter at an earlier date. Behrens heroically returned twice to rescue the trapped Rangers, only to be wounded several times and forced to abandon his Huey.



▲ Above: Army Ranger Sgt. Marvin Duren was severely wounded at the outset of the ambush, but was airlifted to safety. Above right: Pfc. James A. Champion is shown here during his time with the 11th Armored Cav. Champion was presumed killed during the battle. His body was never recovered despite a search and is still listed as MIA.



pilot, spent a sleepless night huddled in the bomb crater. At dawn, they tried to locate a radio by crawling on their hands and knees. An NVA sniper spotted Sly, killing him with a well-placed shot. But the radio was found.

An NVA battalion had been spotted moving up to reinforce the enemy on the hill. Madison spent the rest of the day directing airstrikes and gunship runs on the NVA positions surrounding them.

At 10:30 a.m. on April 24, Hueys from C Trp., 2nd Sqdn., 17th Cav inserted 77 "Blues" from D Troop into an LZ 1,000 feet northwest of the saddle. They walked head-on into an NVA ambush, suffering five KIA and 10 WIA.

Gathering up their casualties, they fell back and set up a defensive perimeter.

B Co., 2nd Bn., 502nd Inf., and A Co., 1st Bn., 327th Inf., then air-assaulted into LZs down in the valley. They set up defensive perimeters to support the Cav troopers.

Meanwhile, Karnes, Madison and McAlpine circled around enemy positions to the north, managing to link up with Delta Troop. Madison was evacuated with other wounded. Karnes and McAlpine spent their second night on the ground, this time inside the Cav perimeter.

Behrens, shot a third time, had taken his personal Thompson sub-machine

gun with him when he abandoned his aircraft and managed to kill the NVA who had shot him.

Spec. 5 Robert Speer, Behrens's medic, was killed by small-arms fire when he came back to the saddle after trying to help the Cav pilots. Spec. 5 David Medina was killed by a strafing run from one of the supporting Cobra gunships. Both were with the 326th.

Vodden, Champion and the Cav crew chief Pfc. Clarence Allen were alone on the opposite side of the saddle. Champion attempted to escape, but a single shot followed by a burst of full automatic fire indicated he was cut down. He was never seen again.

During the night, co-pilot Capt. Bill Collum died. Now only Spiedel was left alive in the wrecked 17th Cav aircraft.

At 6:35 p.m., Ohle landed at the Cav perimeter with four other Rangers, Sgts. Herb Owens, Dave Quigley, Dave Rothwell and Don Sellner. They had volunteered to try to reach those trapped.

Mission Complete

The next morning, April 25, the reaction forces were pulled out and an Arc Light (B-52 strike) was called in on the ridgeline. The five Rangers, plus Karnes and McAlpine who volunteered to lead them back to the LZ, moved out.

Quigley stumbled upon Behrens, seemingly dead, and got him on a medevac. Rothwell and Sellner located Allen; Vodden helped evacuate them. Owens and Quigley swept the ridgeline looking for Malo and Champion, but found no trace of them.

Spiedel was evacuated with help from one of the infantry companies. He ultimately had both of his legs amputated and died 63 days later on Okinawa.

Later that afternoon, all U.S. forces were evacuated from the ridgeline. The final casualty count was 12 KIA—five D Troop, three 326th Bn., two B Troop, two L Company—and 20 WIA. In 1973, Isaako Malo was released from captivity.

One of the war's most daring rescues had been pulled off, but at a steep price for the men of the units involved. ❦

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