

# Hitting the Ho Chi Minh Trail

Forty years ago, in early 1971, GIs mounted a major operation in support of Saigon's incursion into Laos—a last offensive gasp to forestall the inevitable invasion of South Vietnam. This is the story of the GIs' role in operations *Dewey Canyon II/Lam Son 719*. **By Richard K. Kolb**

**W**hat kept them going, in spite of a pervasive sense that the war served no real purpose and the country didn't care," wrote battalion commander Lt. Col. William Hauser, "was a combination of pride, mutual interest and loyalty to good leadership."

These values did indeed motivate GIs serving in Vietnam in the 1970s, just as they had past generations of warriors. Morale then, as it has always been, was the key ingredient to unit cohesion. And members of combat units in the field fiercely held on to their morale.

On the surface, however, it may not have seemed so. Spec. 4 Mark Jury, an Army photographer who served in the war from 1969-70, about said it all when he made this observation:

"Often their opposition to the military had nothing to do with the moral aspects of Vietnam. It's just that they'd pick up a battered copy of *Life* magazine and see everybody else skinny-dipping at Woodstock, and that's a hell of a lot better than 'greasing gooks,' fighting malaria, and maybe going home in a plastic bag."

Yet the Laos operation was replete

with sacrifice and genuine heroism. For those who served, place names like "the Rockpile," Lang Vei, Vandegrift, Khe Sanh, Lao Bao, Landing Zone (LZ) Lolo, LZ Hope and Ranger North would forever be imprinted on their minds.

## Cutting Hanoi's Laotian Lifeline

When asked in 1995 how the U.S. could have won the war, Bui Tin, a former North Vietnamese Army (NVA) general staff member, quickly replied: "Cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail inside Laos."

That's precisely what the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was sent to do in February and March 1971. Laos had served as a sanctuary and lifeline for the NVA for seven years, and it was time to sever Hanoi's umbilical cord.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail was actually 3,500 miles of roadways contained in a 30-mile corridor stretching the length of South Vietnam. All of its branches passed through the Tchepone area, 22 miles inside Laos. The most direct way to this dusty town was to head due west on old colonial Route 9, originating in Dong Ha.

ARVN's *Operation Lam Son 719's* intent was to drive a 15-mile-wide corridor to Tchepone with the objective of destroying NVA's base areas 604 and

611. This would, it was hoped, pre-empt any NVA offensives into South Vietnam.

No U.S. ground troops or advisors were allowed to accompany ARVN units across the Laotian border. Helicopter crews were the only exception. GIs on the ground had one essential mission: maintain Route 9 as a vital supply line to invading ARVN forces. That mission was dubbed *Operation Dewey Canyon II*.

Nearly 10,000 Americans participated directly in *Dewey Canyon II* and the helicopter aspects of *Lam Son 719*. These combined thrusts had many of the earmarks of a conventional WWII campaign. And it was one that required mobilizing the full range of Army assets then available in Vietnam.

## 'Magnificent to Behold'

Mobilized on South Vietnam's side of the border were the 101st Airborne Division; 1st Brigade, 5th Mechanized Infantry Division; 11th Infantry Brigade, Americal Division; elements of the 1st Aviation Brigade; 223rd Combat Aviation Battalion; 108th Artillery Group; 45th Engineer Group; and two units (HMH-463 and HML-367) of the 1st Marine Air Wing.

In support, were the 5th Transportation, 801st Maintenance, 326th Medical



CORBIS PHOTO

Two members of a helicopter recovery team at Firebase A Luoi turn their backs to dust whipped up as a Huey “slick” hoists a light observation helicopter, which had been shot down by NVA anti-aircraft fire. Although U.S. ground troops were forbidden from entering Laos, American pilots flew in support of *Lam Son 719*.

and 426th Supply & Service battalions. A task force of the 834th Air Division, 7th Air Force, operated out of Quang Tri, and the Navy flew missions from carriers stationed in the Gulf of Tonkin.

U.S. helicopter crews and ARVN troops who actually entered Laos faced a formidable foe. Preparing for the invasion since October 1970, the NVA

eventually fielded a modern, conventional force of 36,000 men. That figure included 10,000 members of *binh trams* (logistical units), as well as 5,000 allied Communist *Pathet Lao*. Two NVA armored regiments were equipped with Soviet T-34 tanks.

Arrayed against incoming choppers were 20 anti-aircraft battalions bristling

with a deadly arsenal of 23mm, 37mm and 57mm guns. Standard 12.7mm machine guns were placed in multiple, mutual supporting positions. Crews endured the heaviest concentration of fire—WWII-style flak barrages—of the entire Vietnam War.

Every GI in the operation played a crucial role, whether he was a helicopter crewman, air cavalryman, artillery gunner, grunt, Air Force or Navy pilot, Marine advisor, trucker or engineer. Operations had to be conducted in sync.

Securing Route 9 and constructing a secondary pioneer road—“Red Devil Highway” that paralleled the main road into Laos—was the first step. A Company, 7th Engineers, spearheaded the column along Route 9.

Combat engineers earned well-deserved praise from Lt. Gen. James Sutherland, Jr., commanding general of XXIV Corps. “One of the many parts of *Dewey Canyon II* and *Lam Son 719* which I continue to recall with professional pride and admiration was the performance of the 45th Engineer Group with its two battalions, the 14th and 27th,” he said.

“It was the most outstanding performance that I had observed in my 34 years of service... the sight on D-Day was magnificent to behold—a steady stream of helicopters moving engineer equipment, culvert and bridge sections from the rear areas to the front.”

Moving materiel along the route was a Herculean, risky venture. All told, 1,163 U.S. convoys made the journey. “The support of the operation was one of the major logistical feats of the war,” wrote Lt. Gen. William J. McCaffrey, deputy commander of U.S. Army, Vietnam. “The equivalent of more than four divisions received supplies that travelled, for the most part, over a single road and into a single airhead.”

Keith W. Nolan, in his superb account—*Into Laos*—aptly described the perilous conditions: “Through it all, the truckers kept hauling the supplies, enduring bad driving conditions every inch of the way, and occasional bouts with rockets, snipers and ambushes. They drove in all conditions around the clock, fighting sun glare and veils of dust in the day, and fog banks at night.”

Thomas M. Roche was then an MP



GIs manned bases from Dong Ha to Lao Bao on the Laotian border in supporting ARVN's thrust into the crossroads of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in February/March 1971.

## Laos Operation Casualties, Feb. 4 - April 3\*

| UNIT                     | KIA        | WIA          |
|--------------------------|------------|--------------|
| 101st Abn. Div.          | 85         | 261          |
| 5th Inf. Div., 1st Bde.  | 58         | 431          |
| Americal Div., 11th Bde. | 54         | 256          |
| Other Support Forces     | 47         | 125          |
| XXIV Corps Artillery     | 9          | 76           |
| <b>Total</b>             | <b>253</b> | <b>1,149</b> |

\*Actual beginning and ending dates that U.S. KIAs were sustained. An additional 19 GIs were killed in air accidents and 14 in road accidents. Helicopter pilot and crew losses accounted for 89 KIA and 178 WIA of the total.

with the 23rd Military Police Company of the Americal Division. As a V-100 crew chief and driver, he escorted division units to Khe Sanh. "All along Route 9 we saw remnants of previous convoys," he recalled. "A truck-tractor cab was beside the road with a hole through the windshield about the size of a softball, and the area around it singed with extreme heat—courtesy of an RPG hit."

Thomas A. Love, a member of the 529th Quartermaster Company, drove a 2½-ton M-49C tank truck loaded with aviation fuel. Ambushed between Vandegrift and Khe Sanh on March 6, he was grazed in the head by an AK-47 round. "It felt like getting a knuckle sandwich from King Kong, and it bounced me two feet off the seat," he told a reporter.

Love was among many casualties sustained along Route 9. By operation's end, the Da Nang Support Command and the 504th MP Battalion had suffered 11 KIA, 55 WIA, 14 traffic fatalities and 68 serious injuries.

This entire clearing operation ultimately cost 55 GIs KIA and 431 WIA over a period of about a week.

### 'Tyranny of Terrain'

To carry out *Dewey Canyon II*, a network of bases had to be established. Dong Ha served as the logistical hub. Within easy reach of NVA artillery, GIs there could see the big red Communist flag that flew just across the DMZ. Covering the eastern DMZ were firebases Charlie 2 and Alpha Four.

Vandegrift served as Forward Sup-

port Area-I and Khe Sanh as FSA-II. Both bases were subjected to 122mm rocket barrages, as well as sapper attacks. Nearby terrain features were occupied by grunts. The "Rockpile" was a piece of jungle-covered granite north of Vandegrift. Hill 400 was situated near

— "A truck-tractor cab was beside the road with a hole through the windshield about the size of a softball, and the area around it singed with extreme heat—courtesy of an RPG hit."

—Thomas M. Roche, 23rd MP Co.

Lang Vei. The valley between "Emerald City" and the Rockpile was nicknamed the "Punchbowl."

On the Laotian border itself, batteries of the 1st Bn., 44th Artillery, and 2nd Bn., 94th Artillery, for example, alternated duty at Lao Bao. During the operation, the two reinforced battalions of the 108th Artillery Group fired 208,962 rounds into Laos from such border positions and from Khe Sanh.

In the field, NVA infantrymen did not necessarily bring the greatest grief to the grunts. More often than not, it was the unforgiving hills, heat, stifling humidity, parasitic pests, jungle rot and immer-

sion foot from constant sweating.

Nolan described the ordeal of the 3rd Bn., 187th Inf., 101st Airborne, northwest of Khe Sanh in March: "It was like being in an oven-hot green tunnel. Minute by minute, the landscape and sun were more of an enemy than any Vietnamese who might be lurking.

"'Wait-a-minute' vines coiled around legs and canteen tops, thorns tore at arms and faces, jungle rot spread, clothes rotted in the humidity, mouths burned from thirst and bile, and leeches appeared seemingly from nowhere to attach themselves."

Exhaustion suffered in the boonies underscored Napoleon's dictum: "The first quality of a soldier is constancy in enduring fatigue and hardship. Courage is only the second. Poverty, privation and want are the school of the good soldier."

Also there was a very real *armed* enemy. At a night defensive position on March 22, C Company sustained five KIA in close combat. The 3rd Battalion took out 48 NVA in firefights during the operation. But when it ended, the unit counted 19 helmets on rifles planted bayonet first in the earth at a solemn ceremony.

### 'Ernie Pyle Would've Loved 'Em'

Despite such losses and the constant battering by the elements, a comradeship of the bush was the glue that held



PHOTO COURTESY ROGER RILEY



PHOTO BY COL. JIM NEWMAN, COURTESY OF WWW.VFWMUSEUM.ORG

Roger Riley, a Huey slick pilot with the 158th Aviation Battalion's "Ghost Riders," braved the worst of NVA fire. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

An unidentified helicopter pilot of C Trp., 2nd Sqdn., 17th Cav Regt., 101st Abn. Div., takes a break during *Lam Son 719*. The "Condors" played a pivotal role in providing life-saving air support for South Vietnamese forces.

prideful units together through thick and thin. The 101st fell into this category, according to many of its veterans.

Pfc. Bill Warren was a draftee who unhesitatingly expressed pride in being a "Screaming Eagle": "I would say morale was high and everyone had pride in the 101st. We never stayed in a safe position or faked coordinates. We never avoided contact and always fought our hardest when we encountered the enemy.

"As a matter of fact, we had a lot of men who were gung-ho and loved a good fight. I am still proud to this day that I served in this unit and with its gallant men."

Warren's feelings were shared by other GIs, too. Not surprisingly, members of P Co., 75th Inf. (Rangers), 5th Inf. Div., which fielded six-man teams for seven days at a time around Khe Sanh, Vandegrift and the Rockpile, were ingrained with a positive attitude.

Spec. 4 Henry E. Walters, Jr., was unequivocal in his views: "We never abandoned anyone in the field—dead or alive. If six went out, six came back—always. The leadership of P Company was superb; the morale, camaraderie, courage and dedication of our people were unqualified."

Some of the heaviest action for U.S. troops occurred during ARVN's withdrawal from Laos when the NVA was counter-attacking. Fighting intensified on both sides of the border. Capt. Gerald Downey, commander of C Co., 2nd Bn., 1st Inf., 196th LIB, Americal



SPEC. 4 LARRY MITZER / U.S. ARMY MILITARY HISTORY INSTITUTE

Grunts of the 1st Brigade, 5th Mech. Inf. Div., take time out for some "C-rats" in February 1971. Route 9 and "Red Devil Road" were the areas of operation for the 5th's men, 58 of whom died making them secure for the invasion of Laos.

Division, remembered:

"The guys from the 5th Mech and the other armored cav outfits were a brave and tough bunch of men. They fought their way up that road every day, sometimes several times a day, and each time they went they knew what to expect. They behaved in a way that would have made the original General Patton proud. If it had been World War II, someone would have written stories about them. Ernie Pyle would have loved 'em."

However, quite the contrary occurred. Lt. Col. Richard Meyer, commander of the 1st Bn., 77th Armor, 5th Mech, attempted to get correspondents, who could never measure up to Pyle, to take notice. "I had reporters seek out other units than mine because my troops were just doing their duty without any of the race and dope problems that made stateside headlines. They went looking for problems elsewhere."

## Fighting Along the 'Yellow Brick Road'

Five days into *Dewey Canyon II*, on Feb. 5, the first U.S. casualties were sustained. A Cobra of D Trp., 3rd Sqdn., 5th Cav, accidentally crashed northwest of Khe Sanh, killing both pilots. The following evening, A Btry., 1st Bn., 82nd Arty, Americal, near the Rockpile, was hit by 122mm rockets, killing one GI and wounding four. The first American blood of the operation had been spilled.

That morning, gunships from the 2nd Sqdn., 17th Air Cav, confirmed six NVA KIA along the border. Casualties climbed on both sides as contacts intensified. The 4th Bn., 3rd Inf., Americal, occupied the Rockpile on Feb. 10. The hilltop hosting the command post was dubbed "Purple Heart Hill." The 4th's A Company went in with 122 men and left with 88 effectives. Battalion kills, though, totalled 122 NVA.

On Feb. 19, five men of 3rd Plt., D Co., 1st Bn., 11th Inf. Regt., were KIA in a firefight west of Hill 926 after they were cut off from their company.

During a minesweeping operation on Red Devil Road near the Rockpile on Feb. 23, Spec. 4 Terry J. Johnson, a forward observer with 2nd Plt., C Trp., 3rd Sqdn., 5th Cav, had a close call. He told an Associated Press reporter, "That dink would have blown me away if he hadn't had a misfire. Instead, I cut him in half with my machine gun." For preventing his unit from being ambushed, Johnson earned a Silver Star.

As the operation drew down, the ground pounders achieved perhaps their greatest single victory on April 2. Off the Yellow Brick Road, a 20-man NVA unit was sighted. A Sheridan tank and 81mm-mortar crew quickly swung into action: the tank's 152mm main gun ripped the Communist patrol apart.

## Khe Sanh: Ring of Fire

Meanwhile, NVA rockets and sappers had been taking a toll along Route 9. Around QL-9 on March 14, an NVA barrage claimed the lives of five engineers of the 59th Eng. Co., 39th Eng. Bn.

Khe Sanh, famous for the 1968 siege, was hit hardest. The prospect of sappers penetrating the perimeter wire was not a pleasant one, but it became a reality.

Khe Sanh was defended by 650 troops—350 of them ground combat. On perimeter guard were men of the 2nd Squadron, 17th Cav, and 4th Battalion, 77th Aerial Rocket Regiment.

March 15 saw 200 122mm rocket rounds hit the base. A peak of 500 NVA artillery rounds hit it on March 19. Some 20 rounds an hour—all day long—rained in on the GIs.

Yet life had to go on. While repairing the airstrip on March 22, Staff Sgt. Donald Briggs of 1st Plt., A Co., 27th

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# Heroism on Display: Laos Operation, 1971

## Medal of Honor

| Recipient                    | Unit                                    | Date     | Location | MOS         |
|------------------------------|---|----------|----------|-------------|
| Fitzmaurice, Spec. 4 Michael | D Trp., 2nd Sqdn., 17th Cav, 101st Div. | March 23 | Khe Sanh | Infantryman |

## Air Force Cross

|                              |  |           |      |      |
|------------------------------|--|-----------|------|------|
| Carter, Capt. William R.     | 23rd Tac. Air Support Sqdn. (Thailand) | March 6-7 | Laos | FAC* |
| Funderburk, Capt. Leonard J. | 23rd Tac. Air Support Sqdn. (Thailand) | March 22  | Laos | FAC* |

## Distinguished Service Cross

|                               |   |                |                     |                  |
|-------------------------------|---|----------------|---------------------|------------------|
| Barker, Maj. Jack L.          | B Co., 101st Avn. Bn., 101st Div.           | March 20       | FSB Brown, Laos     | Helicopter Pilot |
| Bowers, Capt. Charles J.      | 1st Bn., 42nd Regt., 22nd ARVN Div.         | Feb. 27-Mar. 5 | Kontum Province     | Senior Advisor   |
| Chapman, Staff Sgt. Leslie A. | TF 1 Adv. Element, 5th SFG                  | Feb. 16-18     | FSB Thor, A Shau    | Advisor          |
| Fujii, Spec. 5 Dennis M.      | 237th Med. Det., 61st Med. Bn.              | Feb. 18-22     | Laos, Ranger North  | Crew Chief       |
| Green, Chief WO Gerald D.     | A Trp., 2nd Sqdn., 17th Cav, 101st Div.     | Feb. 18        | Laos                | Helicopter Pilot |
| Newman, Maj. James T.         | C Trp., 2nd Sqdn., 17th Cav, 101st Div.     | Feb. 18        | Laos                | Helicopter Pilot |
| Pederson, Spec. 4 Roger A.    | 3rd Sqdn., 5th Cav, 1st Bde., 5th Inf. Div. | March 29       | Punch Bowl, Route 9 | Medic            |

## Presidential Unit Citation

| Unit                            | Date            | Location | Mission  |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|----------|--|
| 158th Avn. Bn., 101st Avn. Grp. | Feb. 8-March 24 | Laos     | Multitude of missions through barrages of enemy fire |

## Valorous Unit Award

|                                       |                 |      |  |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|------|--|
| 4th Bn., 77th Aerial Arty, 101st Div. | Feb. 8-April 8  | Laos | Deployed consistent aerial rocket artillery fire |
| 101st Avn. Bn., 101st Div.            | March 3-20      | Laos | Battle for Tchepone                              |
| 223rd Avn. Bn., 1st Avn. Bde.         | Feb. 8-March 24 | Laos | 52 combat assaults along Ho Chi Minh Trail       |
| Trp. C, 7th Sqdn., 17th Cav           | Feb. 8-March 24 | Laos | Assaults on Ho Chi Minh Trail                    |
| Trp. B, 7th Sqdn., 1st Cav            | Feb. 8-March 24 | Laos | Assaults on Ho Chi Minh Trail                    |

**Note:** The air cav troops operated with the 223rd. \*FAC=Forward Air Controller

Engineer Bn., helped pull three men from a flaming helicopter. In return for his second- and third-degree burns, Briggs received a Bronze Star for valor.

On March 23, 40 men of the 2nd Co., 15th NVA Engineer (Sapper) Battalion, breached the perimeter.

To meet them were 33 GIs of 3rd Plt. (an aero-rifle "Blues" outfit), D Trp., 2nd Sqdn., 17th Cav. The platoon's calling cards proclaimed them "The Grim Reapers of Death."

During the assault, either a satchel charge or an errant allied artillery flare hit the refuel/rearm point, igniting a 10,000-gallon fuel container and a store of 2.75-inch rockets.

"We fought them for four hours—Jesus, some of them were on the runway," Platoon Sgt. Terry Stallard said. "We killed 15 of them. The dinks had charcoal on their legs and faces. When they were throwing satchel charges into our bunkers they'd kind of start yelling." The "Blues" lost three KIA and 15 WIA.

That same night, Spec. 4 Michael J. Fitzmaurice of 3rd Plt., D Trp., 2nd Sqdn., 17th Cav, 101st Abn. Div., earned one of the six Medals of Honor awarded in 1971.

When the sappers entered the South Dakotan's trench, they dumped three satchels. He hurled two of the explosive charges from the bunker and then himself on top of the third, absorbing the blast through his flak jacket. Though suffering serious multiple wounds and partial loss of sight, he went on to engage the enemy singlehandedly.

"Fitzmaurice stumbled into the trench line, firing his M-16, gunning down two of the sappers," wrote Nolan in *Into Laos*. "He dropped the empty rifle, grabbed a machete, and stormed down the trench. He ran into three other sappers and hacked them all to death in furious hand-to-hand combat."

Having refused medical evacuation, Fitzmaurice spent 13 months at Fitzsimmons Army Hospital recovering from his wounds. His Medal of Honor was presented at the White House on Oct. 15, 1973.

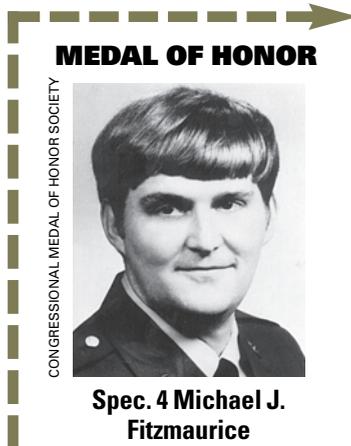
In the last two weeks of March, 1,150 NVA artillery rounds hit the dust-shrouded outpost. Six days later, Khe

Sanh was once again abandoned.

Two days after the big assault, on March 25, near Khe Sanh another selfless act of bravery was witnessed. A 12-man patrol from 1st Plt., B Trp., 1st Sqdn., 1st Cav, Americal Div., was ambushed. A second patrol from B Trp., 3rd Sqdn., 5th Cav, 5th Mech., came to the rescue.

During the melee, Staff Sgt. Manuel Puentes picked up a grenade to throw it away, but it exploded, killing him but saving the lives of several men. He was among six U.S. KIA and five WIA.

In early April, Spec. 4 Leslie Liebowitz of the 3rd Plt., B Co., 1st Bn., 11th Inf,



**Spec. 4 Michael J. Fitzmaurice**

told a *New York Times* reporter: "We've been out here 60 days. We're just straight legs. The guys in the helicopters get all the attention. Most people don't even know we're here."

### Hunted by the Enemy

While grunts were waging a ground war inside Vietnam, just over the border in Laos, U.S. helicopters were literally undergoing an ordeal by fire. "Missions were so bad," remembered pilot David Groen, "that crews taped 'chicken plates' [steel body armor] down to the chin bubble and on the floor to stop the bullets. Door gunners wore chest and back armor plates, and sat on pieces of armor."

Of the Americans directly supporting the invasion, 2,600, or 26%, were helicopter crews flying in hundreds of choppers. They flew nearly 46,000 sorties *inside* Laos, some 28% of the total flown during the operation. Marine birds flew additional missions. The war's largest helicopter assault involving 120 aircraft took place against LZ Hope and Tchepone. At FSB Lolo alone, 11 choppers were shot down.

Remarked one pilot: "In Vietnam, you have to hunt for the enemy. But in Laos, man, they hunt for you!" For the copter crews, at least three ops must have scarred their memories: Hope, Lolo and Ranger North all went down in the annals of helicopter warfare.

At Firebase Ranger North in late February, the ARVN 39th Ranger Battalion was cut to pieces. The U.S. 158th Aviation Battalion flew around the clock supplying the Rangers and evacuating casualties. "Those helicopter pilots must have steel balls," said an airplane pilot.

An F-4 pilot, Air Force Capt. William Cathey of the 40th Tactical Fighter Squadron, described the frightening scene: "[Ranger North] looked like World War II must have. We put a napalm strike within 100 meters of [ARVN] troops. That was tight. We could see them in the trenches."

The 158th Aviation Battalion of the 101st Aviation Group symbolized the crews' courage. Its five companies and four assigned Transportation Corps detachments earned the prestigious Presidential Unit Citation for extraordinary heroism between Feb. 8 and March 24. Its A Company also led the massive flight of helicopters across the border.

Conducting combat assaults and resupply missions deep inside enemy territory along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the battalion's "valorous aircrews flew mission after mission through barrages of enemy fire," according to the citation.

"Flying in Vietnam and Laos was vastly different for two reasons," remembers Roger Riley, a Huey slick pilot with A Co. (the "Ghost Riders"), 158th Avn. Bn.

"In Laos, we were working with the ARVN, who may have been responsible for more American deaths than the NVA. This may sound harsh, but they completely fell apart. During pickups in hot LZs, they would not provide covering fire, they simply kept their heads down."

Riley, who served in Vietnam from May 1970 through May 1971, was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his heroism in Laos and at Firebase Ripcord the previous July.

"Counter fire in Laos was far more intense than anything we normally encountered in Vietnam. We ran up against 23mm, 37mm and 57mm anti-

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aircraft fire, as well as tube artillery and even tanks. Sometimes pilots were caught on the ground and came under withering small-arms and mortar fire.

“There is no question that the NVA were a determined, tenacious, admirable foe. But the American crews flying during *Operation Lam Son 719* were more than a match for them.”

On the ground, the astounding survival story of Spec. 5 Dennis M. Fujii stands out. The Distinguished Service Cross (for the six other DSC awardees see the chart on page 36) attests to his heroism. A crew chief aboard a helicopter ambulance of the 237th Medical Det., 61st Med. Bn., 67th Med. Grp., Fujii’s bird was shot down during a rescue mission over Firebase Ranger North. He voluntarily remained behind rather than risk the lives of other helicopter crews. The only American on the battlefield, and disregarding his own wounds, he administered first aid to ARVN troops.

When his position was attacked, Fujii called in gunships for 17 hours while repelling the NVA with his rifle at close quarters. Finally rescued, he was shot down a second time and stranded for two more days at an ARVN Ranger base. His ordeal from Feb. 18-22 ended when he was ultimately lifted to safety in Phu Bai. He had directed helicopter and fixed-wing strikes over five days.

Six Huey pilots earned the Silver Star and six crewmen the Distinguished Flying Cross for attempting Fujii’s rescue under heavy fire.

Spec. 4 Paul A. Lagenour, a door gunner aboard a UH-1C gunship, had another incredible experience. He was shot down on March 19 during a mission to FSB Alpha. Wounded, he directed air strikes and then evaded capture for 12 days until found by a U.S. armor patrol west of Khe Sanh.

Landing Zone Lolo, on March 3, was a death trap for helicopters. The LZ was pulverized, yet the NVA held on. “They [U.S.] put in five hours of airstrikes, and Cobras hit that hillside,” remembered one pilot. “Then we went in and it sounded like a million people opened up on us.” Nearly a dozen UH-1s were downed and 44 damaged in the hail of fire.

Three days later at LZ Hope near Tchepone, the war’s largest helicopter combat assault occurred. Some 120 Hueys of the 223rd Combat Aviation Battalion, escorted by scores of gunships and tactical aircraft, flew 50 miles from Khe Sanh into Laos. While moving elements of the 1st ARVN Division, U.S. Army aviation survived the war’s heaviest anti-aircraft fire. Yet, miraculously, only one Huey went down; 14 were hit.

In a March 15, 1971, article, *Newsweek* dramatically described the helicopter mission: “To the modern American cavalryman of the air, the plunge into Laos has been something like an old-time charge on horseback: admirably heroic, stunningly effective—and terribly costly.”

Simon Dunstan, author of *Vietnam Choppers*, put the aviation war in proper perspective: “However equivocal the results of the ground campaign may have been, nothing can detract from the fortitude and professionalism displayed by the helicopter crewmen during *Lam Son 719*.” But the price was high to the bitter end: 75% of the choppers used to pick up the stranded ARVN sustained bullet damage.

NVA gunners brought down a total of 107 confirmed U.S. Army helicopters—including 53 Hueys and 26 Cobras. Five more were completely destroyed in accidents and 618 were damaged out of 659 deployed.

According to John Prados, in his book *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (1995), the official tally of hostile U.S. helicopter losses was 118 inside Laos and 22 in South Vietnam. (Seven fixed-wing aircraft with four pilots also were lost to enemy action.)

All told, 89 pilots and crew members were KIA along with 178 WIA. Helicopter crews constituted 35% of all American KIAs during the Laos operation.

“The magnitude of their [helicopter crews] sacrifices was unprecedented during the Vietnam War,” Robert E. Jones wrote in *History of the 101st Airborne Division* (2005).

“Thanks to the courage of the crews aboard the choppers, it [Laos, 1971] may well rank as the finest hour in the history of U.S. Army aviation,” wrote Earl Swift in *Where They Lay* (2003), an account of MIA searches.

## Fatigues Rotted on Their Backs

ARVN’s withdrawal from Laos was not a pretty sight. Marine Lt. Col. Robert Darron, flying in a forward air controller plane, recalled: “Route 9 was cluttered full of junk. Tanks and trucks and all kinds of things stretched about a mile.” A week after ARVN’s departure, the Ho Chi Minh Trail was in full operation. The campaign officially closed down April 6, 1971.

Saigon’s gambit in Laos cost 253 Americans killed in action and 1,149 wounded. An additional 33 non-hostile U.S. deaths were associated with the campaign, too. (For a unit breakdown, see the chart on page 34.)

The grunts accepted their casualties stoically. Pfc. Michael DeAngelis, an assistant machine-gunner with B Co., 1st Bn., 61st Inf., 1st Bde., 5th Div., said it best in recounting his unit’s experience: “They were out for 75 days and never got mail or clean clothes the whole time. Their fatigues were literally rotted on their backs and they were all caked with dirt and very pooped, too.

“They lost 15 men, six from my old platoon... there is now no one left from my old squad... What can I say to tell you how I feel right now.”

Like many other GIs, DeAngelis had gone to Vietnam believing in the cause. Yet others felt the lunge into Laos was the right move.

“In my opinion, the Cambodian operation and this operation are the two most intelligent moves we have made since we have been in South Vietnam,” Pfc. Clyde Baker wrote in a letter to President Nixon.

Believing at the time that it might end the war, he said in his unit that “everyone here is putting out 100%. I’m sorry for the lousy hand-writing, but I’m writing this letter down inside a tank.”

Ambassador to Vietnam Ellsworth Bunker summed up the American role best: “What we’ve done, *our* forces, on the ground and in the air has been magnificent. It’s been a great performance.”

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**Editor’s Note:** For the Laos campaign’s best account, read: Into Laos: The Story of Dewey Canyon II/Lam Son 719 by Keith W. Nolan (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1986). The book is available on Amazon.com.