

~~Ashau~~  
Ashau, a starkly austere operational base shaped in equilateral triangle 300 foot on a side, lies at the southern end of the Ashau valley (20 miles long and 4 miles wide) on the ~~Laos~~ Laotian border--but even engineers are unsure which side of the ill-defined and unmarked border it is on.

Within the post's perimeter surrounded by beds of thousands of "Bouncing Betty" landmines, lies an old Frontier-styled log cabin used for storing ammunition and five thatch-roofed grass shacks of "walls so thin they wouldn't stop a flea." Interiors of the shacks are papered with American Sunday comics and Budweiser beer cartons to hold in light which would become a Communist Viet Cong target. The grass huts house the headquarters battalion of the Third Regiment, First Inf. Div. in that rugged five-province northern third of the country known as I Corps. ~~Ashau~~ Ashau is situated ~~at~~ 360 miles north of Saigon, only 45 air miles from the corner of Laos, North Viet Nam and South Viet Nam and only 60 air miles from the large Communist depots of Tchepone.

The Army of Viet Nam (ARVN) soldiers live within the walls of earth-banked logs forming the sides of the triangle and the four to six American advisors and Vietnamese officers live in the grass shacks where "rats are safe as in a church" and are so daring at night as "to play a baseball game in the middle of the floor."

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The American advisors were jubilant last week when they received a short-wave radio--only an airstrip and two-way radio communications had previously connected them to the outside world.

To the north nine miles up the Ashau Valley lies an even more isolated outpost of Tabat, where live pigs are airdropped in wicker baskets and U. S. mail is delivered in circular mortar shell cartons via parachute. Five miles further north lies Aluoi. Though a red clay road connecting the three posts was completed several months ago, it is never used except by large, well-armed convoys.

Around this bubble of Vietnamese government control lies the 3000 to 5000-foot mountainous peaks so thickly covered with dense jungle that only a green-on-green landscape of peppermints, pistachos and olives exists. The jungle is ~~thickly forested~~ three dimensional--a tall layer of trees reaching 500 feet; a second layer of lower trees--both of which form a natural canopy preventing effective air reconnaissance--and the lowest layer of ferns, bushes, vines, shrubs, and bushy-tailed but razor-sharp "saw grass" so lush that "Hollywood would love to import it for a set."

Wild animals and mountaineer tribesmen have burrowed trails and tunnels under the treetops, some of them being so large a human being can walk upright.

"You could hide a full division of 10,000 men in a 36 square mile area," one American advisor explained. "And you could never see or smell them."

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During Christmas season of 1960, the Vietnamese government lost in the mountainous jungle region a helicopter carrying welfare workers distributing candies. It still has not been found.

This 250-miles of impenetrable jungle forming common border between Laos and South Viet Nam has posed a big question in the Pentagon, State Department and <sup>Among</sup> Saigon military brass in view of the October 6th troop withdrawal deadline from Laos.

Are the 6,000 to 10,000 North Vietnamese presumed to be left in Laos infiltrating across the border to add dynamite to the war in battle-weary South Viet Nam?

Best American and ~~Saigon~~ Vietnamese military sources here admitted they didn't know the answer.

~~Major Benjamin Rush III~~

As regimental advisor at Ashau, Major Benjamin Rush III could understand why.

"Where do they expect us to get intelligence?" he barked, smashing his cigarette butt into C-ration can. "It's not like talking to a man in a bar. Who should we talk to? The Viet Cong."

Everyone outside the front contessa-wire gates of Ashau is ~~considered~~ considered the "enemy." And the enemy is so effective U. S. helicopter pilots have nicknamed Ashau Valley "Shotgun Alley." Several months ago on a flight of five helicopters, four were hit. Other light aircraft on scheduled Monday-Wednesday-Friday "milk run" <sup>2</sup> brining in food, booze and mail are regularly shot at.

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"Anyone here must be considered unfriendly," the six-foot-one, <sup>157</sup>~~150~~-pound Philadelphian continued. "Why should our soldiers go up to anyone and run into an ambush? The people run when the soldiers approach. If they're interrogated, they're growing crops for the V. C. (Viet Cong). There are no established villages--just a house here and there and when we go there, they are empty."

Major Rush heard an ~~airplane~~ airplane engine and ran outside, looking into cloudy, rainy sky.

"It's a jet--we hear jets all the time," he explained. "But they're too high to tell whose. We assume its U. S. effort in support of Laos."

"But you could fly an F-101 (air reconnaissance jet with modern cameras) at 500 feet over this jungle and they wouldn't see a thing."

After a Vietnamese dinner of rice, fish sauce, meat and vegetable ~~mixture~~ mixture on the eve of troop withdrawal, Major Rush took his pet nameless squirrel from the cage and stuck him in his shirt pocket.

SFC John W. Gundrum, 42, of Jonestown, Pa., who calls himself a "Pennsylvania Dutch Boy," took a cold beer from kerosene refrigerator in which the flame goes out each time a mortar round is fired. He brought in from outdoors his 15-piastres (U. S. two cents) parrot, named Tweetie, with green feathers clipped so that it flopped off the roof when started to fly.

SFC John S. Bryant, 31-year-old radio repairman from Zephyrhills, Florida, carefully closed the door to keep in the light from gasoline lamp.

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Major Rush moved his .45 pistol to his bedside bedside.

"I predict no attack tonight," Sergeant Sgt. Gundrum volunteered.  
"We have patrols out and it's moonlight."

"I'll bet a dollar they do when the moon goes down," Sgt. Bryant  
wagered.

Major Rush continued his discussion on infiltration.

"We know the Viet Cong are infiltrating from Laos now--we've captured  
prisoners and documents," he explained. "But is there an increased?"  
He shrugged.

"If they (Communists) <sup>7</sup> come across in small ~~small~~ big groups, we fight.  
If they come in small groups, we try to find them," he said petting  
nameless squirrel. "If they come in those sugarloaves south  
of us--What can we do? Wave at them! We wouldn't even know they're  
there. What can we do? We can't do a damn thing," he explained with a  
desperate wave of the hand.

He patted nameless squirrel good night and put him it into cage.  
~~When Pennsylvania Dutch Boy~~ The night was quiet and the  
"Pennsylvania Dutch Boy" lost the bet.

High-ranking military authorities realize Major Rush's problem in the  
jungle.

"It's impossible to say how many people can cross the border from Laos  
to South Viet Nam," explained three-star Maj. Gen. Tran Van Don, former chief of  
staff of Vietnamese armed forces. "They can cross everywhere because it is not  
a border like a wall. If we know how many and where they cross, we  
won't stop to count each one. We'll try to destroy the route of infiltration."

Before October 6, Laotian crossings were of two types: regular black-uniformed units of 425-man battalions which included North Vietnamese cadres, political agents and propagandists and former South Vietnamese soldiers who went north after 1954 armistice and infiltrated to native district for recruiting local population. The second group was individuals or small groups of political agents infiltrating back to hometown areas to work as lone wolves--not in a unit.

In I Corps at the end of 1961, Viet Cong strength gradually increased from company to battalion-sized units--and the Vietnamese government improved its methods of gathering intelligence, but did not change their methods. Yet, high-ranking military authorities say there is no known increase in Viet Cong battalion-strength in I Corps during past several months--and no noticeable increase in Viet Cong activity. Current Vietnamese government tactic is to have "fire brigade" force ready to pounce on large groups of Viet Cong at any time, to conduct air strikes and ~~to~~ mobile raids destroying the Viet Cong bases making resupply more difficult for them in the approaching rainy season.

The flow of information, like most things in Viet Nam, moves slowly. Information from paid informers--one half of them in I Corps are "doubles" working for both the Vietnamese army and the Viet Cong--takes weeks to reach the corps headquarters. Information from local population of primitive mountaineers is often unreliable, though U. S. Special Forces are giving selected groups of them special intelligence training.

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"Information from the population is never correct," one military official explained. "The mountain people can't distinguish time, space and numbers. They don't know how many years old they are--but how many harvests they are. Many of them can't count above ten. If ~~they say~~ they saw 200 people, they'd say 1000."

In some cases, good intelligence information must also ~~distinguish~~ include the number of weapons carried--without regard to the number of people.

"I've seen one or two hundred mountaineers forced to attack with a Viet Cong platoon," one military official explained. "But only the platoon had weapons."

U. S. MAAG intelligence ~~channel~~ channels pyramid from Saigon to the three corps headquarters in the country to the seven division headquarters and finally to a Leica-equipped team of one sergeant and one captain, who received only six weeks intelligence course in U. S., assigned to each of the 41 provinces. The provincial MAAG teams were stymied their first weeks here until President Diem issued order authorizing them. Yet, this MAAG network relies heavily on Vietnamese intelligence reports--and some Vietnamese reports are withheld from American eyes. Only one MAAG person in I Corps speaks or reads enough Vietnamese for complex subjects.

Communist bases ~~known~~ are known to exist on the Laotian side of the border. "But their bases look just like a village with mountaineer ~~women~~ women and children running around," a Vietnamese officer explained. "The Communists can live ~~their~~ there many years and say they're peasants--and not soldiers."

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Most military officials in I Corps believed that the question of infiltration could be answered only after prisoners and documents were captured or a Viet Cong ~~the~~ defected.

In the October-May rainy season now sweeping through mountainous jungleland, one American advisor laughed, "Until we get a prisoner, buy a bargain-sized crystal ball--and waterproof it."

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FYI--After their return from Honolulu conference, ~~with~~ Gen. Harkins and Ambassador Nolting are expected to hold a background, off-the-record press conference. Will add to this story by cable if they say anything pertinent.

TO: PHOTOS  
FROM: DEEPE, SAIGON

DATE: OCTOBER 10, 1962  
RE: PHOTOS WITH BORDER COPY

Enclosed negatives illustrate the heavy three-layered expanse of jungle covering the 250 miles of common border between Laos and South Vietnam. From the air, jungle is so dense it looks like an ~~everpresent~~ gigantic everpresent head of cauliflower. The other negatives ~~iii~~ show the life and structure of the ~~ginly~~ grimly austere operational base of Ashau situated on the Laotian border 360 miles north of Saigon