



AIR NEWS

by John W. R. Taylor

The SpADs of A Shau

YOU WON'T find A Shau on the map. It was never much more than a triangular fort in a valley, surrounded by 1,500 ft. hills, 60 miles west of the big American air base at Da Nang in Vietnam. Even the fort probably disappeared in March 1966, when the garrison, made up of South Vietnamese troops and members of a U.S. Special Forces team, was overrun by several thousand North Vietnamese soldiers.

This was a typical battle of that grim war; but one incident ensured that the name of A Shau will never be forgotten, even though the jungle may swallow up its ruins.

The hero of the story is a 40-year-old pilot of the U.S.A.F., named Major Bernard Fisher. As a boy, on a farm, he built *model aeroplanes* and dreamed of the day when he would fly real ones. It seemed that his chance had come in March 1945, when he joined the U.S. Navy as an air gunner; but the war ended a few months later and his naval career lasted only one year.

He went back into uniform during the Korean War, this time as a pilot in the U.S.A.F., and graduated eventually on to F-104 Starfighters. Twice while flying these trickily little stub-winged machines he suffered an engine failure and managed to land the aircraft intact. It might have seemed like a rest-cure when he found himself flying piston-engined A-1 Skyraiders in 1965—if his squadron had been based anywhere but in Vietnam!

As a volunteer with the 1st Air Commando Squadron, his main duty was to train new pilots of the

Vietnamese A.F. to fly Skyraiders; but time after time his aircraft took off with a heavy load of bombs and auxiliary fuel tanks under its wings and fuselage to attack the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese.

The Skyraider had proved itself ideal for this kind of counter-insurgency (COIN) work. Designed back in 1944 as a single-seat carrier-based attack-bomber, it was built in seven different basic versions. Its main duties were day attack, all-weather attack, airborne early warning and countermeasures; but, with special equipment installed, it could serve also as a flight refuelling tanker, target tug, anti-submarine search, ambulance or transport aircraft.

Too late for World War 2, it made a great name for itself over Korea. In their book *The Sea War in Korea*, Commanders Cagle and Manson of the U.S. Navy went so far as to claim that "Only the Skyraider could carry and successfully deliver the 2,000 lb. bomb with dive-bombing precision against . . . the bridge abutment or span, the tunnel mouth, and the cave entrance. . . . Its versatility and weight-lifting capacity (as much as 5,000 lb. on a carrier mission) made it the war's outstanding performer."

Long after the Skyraider should have been replaced by jets, its ability to place its bomb precisely on target kept it in service. And when war broke out once again in Vietnam, it was clearly the most suitable aircraft for the Vietnamese Air Force.

Its original U.S. Navy designation had been AD-1 to AD-7. So, American jet pilots who were given Skyraiders to fly usually called them SpADs, as they seemed almost as antique as the French Spad fighters of the 1914-18 War.

The particular type of Skyraider flown by Major Bernard Fisher was an AD-5 redesignated A-1E under the current system). Unlike most other versions, this had two seats side-by-side in front and room for further crew members, passengers, freight or equipment to the rear. It is ideal for operation in Vietnam, as it can be used as a two-seat trainer or single-seat combat aircraft without any modifications.

When Fisher took off from Pleiku airfield in Skyraider 649 on March 10, 1966, it had 14 100 lb. bombs under its wings and the usual fuel tank under the fuselage. It was Fisher's 173rd combat mission and there was no reason to expect that it would be any different from the others.

Over A Shau, the sky was full of jet aircraft, but none of them could get down into the valley to help the beleaguered garrison because the mountains were shrouded in thick cloud. One Skyhawk pilot made the attempt and flew slap into a hillside.

