



## LAST PLANE OUT OF A SHAU

How One 'Birdog' Jockey [Earned] The DFC

*The American Weekend* – 29 June 1966<sup>i</sup>



Distinguished  
Flying Cross



Ira W. Meisenheimer



Air Medal  
With "V" Device

### PHU BAI, Vietnam

The siege of A Shau, the doomed Special Forces camp near the Laotian border in South Vietnamese province of Thua Thien, spawned many a tale of courage, sacrifice and valor. None is more remarkable that the story of the last plane out of A Shau.

The craft was a tiny Army O-1 "Birdog." The pilot who flew it from the shooting gallery that was A Shau's landing strip was a 20-year old warrant officer, Ira W. Meisenheimer, III. His exploits earned him a Distinguished Flying Cross. Meisenheimer, a member of the 17<sup>th</sup> Aviation Group's 220<sup>th</sup> Aviation Company, received his DFC as well as an Air Medal with "V" (for Valor) in his unit's Organization Day ceremonies recently. The citations for the medals told the story of his efforts on behalf of the A Shau garrison.

The Viet Cong had the Special Forces camp surrounded on 9 March, when Meisenheimer, in answer to an urgent radioed request, forced his spindly spotter plane through dense clouds to land on the camp's airstrip. His mission was to load a badly wounded sergeant aboard his plane and fly him to safety. Enemy fire about the landing strip was so intense it took 25

agonizing minutes to move the wounded man across a small clearing separating the camp from his airplane.

With the patient finally on board, Meisenheimer took off through a blazing torrent of tracer bullets, then plunged into dense cloud cover and began to spiral upward, flying by his instruments. Suddenly he felt a powerful drag on the “Birddog.” Its airspeed dropped sharply and it began losing altitude. Knowing there were other 220<sup>th</sup> planes in the area, he radioed that he was having engine trouble, as he lowered the nose of the spotter plane and began to feel his way down through the clouds. But when he broke through, only 200 feet above the jungle, he saw the real problem – the airplane’s flaps were in the full down position.

Apparently groping to pull himself upright in the back seat, the wounded sergeant had inadvertently jammed a finger in the flap control, forcing it in the “Down” position holding it there as he blacked out. Flying inches above the treetops, Meisenheimer turned in his seat and removed the sergeant’s hand from the flap control, re-trimmed his bird and again headed into the clouds. This time he successfully broke out on top, at 8000 feet altitude, and sped his passenger to the hospital at Da Nang.

A Shau fell to the VC on March 10. All day and the next Meisenheimer and his fellow 220<sup>th</sup> Birddog jockeys continued despite bad weather, to provide the A Shau survivors with aerial observation, forward air control, search and rescue, close fire support and artillery adjustment. General W.C. Westmoreland termed the air support given at A Shau during this difficult time “equal to any in aviation history.”

In those two days, Meisenheimer earned his Air Medal by personally locating over 50 of the camp’s escapees in the rough jungle, and directing rescue helicopters to their aid. On March 11 he found a group of seven, including two Americans, under attack by a VC patrol. Held low by a 300 foot ceiling, he again braved close range, heavy hostile fire to remain overhead circling about their position to mark it for rescue aircraft. He also assisted the friendly troops by suppressing enemy fire via his fighter-style rocket attack, using as ordinance the four white phosphorous target marking rockets mounted beneath the O1-D’s sturdy little wings.

Meisenheimer has logged over 300 combat hours in his diminutive aircraft since arriving here in November. His commander, Major William O. Schmale, of Cullman, Alabama, calls him “one of the finest young pilots I’ve ever seen. In a way though,” the major added, “Meisenheimer is typical of the young aviators we’re getting over here. I think the Aviation School’s latest products may be the most proficient, dedicated group of brand –new pilots we’ve ever had.”

*[Editor: The incorrect original usage of the word “Bird Dog” to describe the military aircraft flown by the eleven Birddog units that served in Vietnam is here correctly rendered as “Birddog.”]*

## COMMENTS:



Raymond G. Caryl, Catkiller 32/42, 1967—68, on his 1967 photograph of the A Shau *aftermath*:

I took this picture sometime in the fall of 1967, when I was flying in the Third Platoon out of Marble Mountain. The A Shau Valley was our VR responsibility then. It was always a two-ship mission. I was the low ship when I took the photo so that would have put me roughly 900-1000 ft. AGL. The big A Shau battle was a full year before my time. As you can see from the photo, there were a LOT of bomb craters. No friendly artillery was able to reach that neck of the woods. From the number of bomb craters, the abandoned A-1E on the pock marked runway and the downed Marine helicopter to the west of the SF triangle (I can't seem to locate it in the picture and I've tried), one could tell that an epic battle had been fought there in '66. You could also see the heavily worn trail that wove around the craters. The A Shau belonged to the bad guys...and that never changed. The A-1E that Bernie Fisher's wingman crash-landed on the strip (and Bernie received the Medal of Honor for landing and getting him out) is just out of the frame to the right.

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<sup>i</sup> This article was transcribed and prepared by Dennis Currie, Assistant Editor, *Catkillers.org*, from original material supplied by Ira W. Meisenheimer III, *Catkiller Mike*, 2nd Platoon, Hue, DFC from the Battle of A Shau.