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**#FLASHBACK FRIDAY: HERO SKYRAIDER PILOT LANDS ON DESTROYED RUNWAY, SAVES DOWNED PILOT, EARNS MEDAL OF HONOR**



By Bill Walton  
10 March 2017

## **SPADS WERE TOUGH OLD BIRDS AND THIS MEDAL OF HONOR WINNER WAS COOL UNDER PRESSURE.**

On March 10th 1966, United States Air Force Major Bernard Fisher was flying a close air support mission with five other A-1E Skyraider pilots over the A Shau valley, near the Laotian border west-northwest of Da Nang in South Vietnam. Fisher was supporting a Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) / US Army Special Forces camp located in a position to interdict traffic along the Ho Chi Minh trail that was in danger of being overrun by more than 2,000 North Vietnamese regular troops who were surrounding it.

The situation in the valley and at the SF camp was not exactly news to Fisher and his fellow pilots- Fisher had been awarded the Silver Star for his air support role in the same battle the day before. The weather had not improved either- with a solid ceiling lower than the tops of the 1,500 foot hills around much of the valley, close air support was a risky proposition indeed.



During one of several attack runs on the enemy emplacements one of the other Skyraider pilots, Major Dafford W. "Jump" Myers, was hit by ground fire and forced to land his crippled "Spad." Using the 2,500 foot-long steel plank runway

used to supply the camp by air, Myers was able to crash-land his A-1E and exit the aircraft on the ground with only slight injuries. He then found a spot in which to hole up and wait for a Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopter to pull him out of what was one enormous jam.

Meanwhile, as he orbited the downed pilot and took stock of the situation, Fisher realized that the closest helicopter was at least 30 minutes away. After witnessing the crash landing, Fisher believed that Myers was at the very least badly injured. Able to see the North Vietnamese troops closing in on Myers' position and convinced that Myers would not last much longer on the ground, Fisher contacted the other members of his flight and notified them that he planned to land on the torn up airstrip and pick up Myers.



While the rest of the flight pressed covering attacks on the enemy troops, Fisher managed to land on the airstrip and taxi most of the way back down the runway while avoiding holes and debris, under enemy fire, until he was close Myers' position. Then, while still taking enemy fire, Myers bolted from his hide, climbed onto the Skyraider's wing and Fisher pulled Myers head-first into the right seat of his A-1E. Despite continuous heavy enemy fire, Fisher was then able to take off from the now-ruined runway and return to his base at Pleiku. Mechanics found 19 bullet holes in Fisher's Skyraider.

For his heroic action that fateful day in March 1966, Major Bernard Fisher was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. President Lyndon B. Johnson presented the medal to Major Fisher on January 19th 1967. Fisher was the first living Air Force recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor for action in the Vietnam War.



There is an interesting postscript to this story. Fisher's rescue of Myers in the A Shau valley in 1966 was very similar to a rescue that took place during World War II near Ploesti, Romania on August 4th 1944. A P-38 Lightning escorting bombers to the refinery targets in and around Ploesti was damaged by flak and forced to crash land in a field. Another P-38 pilot witnessed the crash, safely landed his aircraft nearby, shoehorned the other pilot into his cockpit with him, and both returned to base. Other similar rescues have been dramatized in movies and television.

Here's where it gets really good: The pilot whose P-38 crash landed (Richard Willsie) eventually became the commanding officer of "Jump" Myers' squadron and was in command of it that day as Fisher rescued Myers (!) The pilot who landed his P-38, picked up Willsie, and flew him back to base (Dick Andrews) was flying top cover during the Fisher rescue (!!!) What are the odds?

Another postscript. That tough old A-1E Skyraider that Bernie Fisher landed on that torn-up strip in the A Chau valley in '66? It is now prominently displayed at the National Museum of the United States Air Force in Dayton Ohio as one of the very few surviving Medal of Honor aircraft.



## Biography

Bernard Francis "Bernie" Fisher was born on January 11th 1927 in San Bernardino, California. Raised and educated in Clearfield, Utah, Fisher served briefly in the Navy V-6 program at the end of World War II. He then enrolled at Boise State Junior College in 1947 and transferred to the University of Utah in Salt Lake City in 1949.



Thanks to his ROTC work in college, Fisher was a member of the Air National Guard between 1947 and 1950. Even before he completed his degree, Fisher was called to active duty in 1951 and commissioned in the Air Force. Fisher underwent pilot training and then served with Air Defense Command as an F-106 Delta Dart interceptor pilot until 1965, when Fisher volunteered for duty in Vietnam.

From July of 1965 to June of 1966, Fisher flew 200 combat sorties in A-1E and A-1H Skyraiders. Known in Vietnam as the "Spad", the Skyraider was tough, carried plenty of ordnance, and was able to loiter over a given location longer than the jet fighters and attack aircraft of the day. Fisher was a member of the 1st Air Commando Squadron.



After he returned from Vietnam, Bernie Fisher returned to Air Defense Command and flew jet interceptors until he retired as a Colonel in 1974. He then returned to his hometown of Kuna, Idaho. He lived with his wife Realla until her death on April 27th 2008.

It only took 57 years to do it, but on May 3rd 2008, Bernie Fisher finally received his degree from the University of Utah.

Colonel Bernard Fisher USAF (ret) passed away on August 16th 2014.

## **BERNARD FISHER'S CONGRESSIONAL MEDAL OF HONOR CITATION**

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*For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty. On that date, the Special Forces camp at A Chau was under attack by 2,000 North Vietnamese Army regulars. Hostile troops had positioned themselves between the airstrip and the camp. Other hostile troops had surrounded the camp and were continuously raking it with automatic weapons fire from the surrounding hills. The tops of the 1,500-foot hills were obscured by an 800 foot ceiling, limiting aircraft maneuverability and forcing pilots to operate within range of hostile gun positions, which often were able to fire down on the attacking aircraft. During the battle, Maj. Fisher observed a fellow airman crash land on the battle-torn airstrip. In the belief that the downed pilot was seriously injured and in imminent danger of capture, Maj. Fisher announced his intention to land on the airstrip to effect a rescue. Although aware of the extreme danger and likely failure of such an attempt, he elected to continue. Directing his own air cover, he landed his aircraft and taxied almost the full length of the runway, which was littered with battle debris and parts of an exploded aircraft. While effecting a successful rescue of the downed pilot, heavy ground fire was observed, with 19 bullets striking his aircraft. In the face of the withering ground fire, he applied power and gained enough speed to lift-off at the overrun of the airstrip. Maj. Fisher's profound concern for his fellow airman, and at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty are in the highest traditions of the U.S. Air Force and reflect great credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of his country.*

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**Written By**  
**Bill Walton**

Bill Walton is a life-long aviation enthusiast and expert in aircraft recognition. As a teenager Bill helped his engineer father build an award-winning T-18 homebuilt airplane in their Wisconsin basement. Bill is a freelance writer, an avid sailor, engineer, announcer, husband, father, uncle, mentor, coach, and Navy veteran. Bill lives north of Houston TX with his wife and son under the approach path to KDWH run way 17R, which means they get to look up at a lot of airplanes. A very good thing.