

# You Could Fight for 20 Years, Too, Up Here

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CHARLIE CO.'S BUNKER VALLEY, Vietnam — Capt. Randy House stooped at the base of a building-size boulder and peered into a small cave opening. "This was the command post," he said. "From here North Vietnamese officers could see a whole valley and direct attacks toward the coast."

"Inside the cave there's room enough for a group of people to stand, and there's a storage area under a bamboo floor," he said. "Even if we spot this rock from the air, we could drop 500-pound bombs on it all day and all they're going to get inside is a headache." House and his men have had a good chance to see how the enemy lives. For several days his company has been probing part of a massive North Vietnamese base area discovered a few miles from the northeastern rim of the A Shau Valley last weekend.

Charlie Co. and other elements of the 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Div. have been combing a two-mile-long complex of trails, bunkers, hootches, caves and fighting positions.

Bunkers and hootches were spaced so only one or two could be seen at a time. They were well-camouflaged and evidently built with great care.

Small logs fastened together tightly with bamboo strips and covered with palm fronds formed the basic structure of the hootches. Roofs were only a few feet

off the ground, with deep trenches and bunkers below. Rock steps and hand rails of sturdy vines helped people up the steepest paths, and in the command post and some hootches running water was supplied through a network of hollow bamboo tubes rigged into clear, fast flowing mountain streams.

In one area was a kitchen, complete with an oven carved into granite and chicken coops fashioned from the forest.

"These guys live better than my troops," House said. "It's cool up here, no mosquitoes, they've got running water and they live in caves you can't hurt. I could fight a war for 20 years, too, if I lived in a place like this." He said his unit had been in the field all but six of the last 140 days.

House said it took his company three days cutting across hillsides to cover ground that could be traveled in just 20 minutes on the well-defined NVA trails.

"Humming is difficult coming up the sides of these hills," he said. "But when we find something like this, it's a real morale booster."

Signs indicated the NVA had recently vacated the base area, but not hastily enough to prevent them from taking the bulk of their equipment. Nevertheless, Charlie Co. found 31 rocket-propelled grenades, fuses, detonation cord and a few thousand AK47 rounds scattered in baskets and ammunition boxes.

"We 'prepped' the area heavily with air strikes and

artillery before we came in," House said, "and I guess they decided not to stay and take it."

House, short, stout and looking younger than his 25 years, said his men approached each bunker as if there were enemy inside and tossed frag grenades and explosives before entering. He said they found no booby traps.

Lt. Col. Joe Bellochi, a 3rd Brigade battalion commander, estimated there were 200 bunkers and 400 hootches in the complex, which he said probably accommodated one or two regiments.

After the enemy soldiers filtered into the base camp from Laos, House said, they were in a position to launch patrols down high-speed trails toward Hue and 101st base camps along the coast.

"The area was relatively safe for the enemy," House said. "The only way you can see any of this is if you are flying real low, and if you are doing that, chances are you'll be blown out of the sky."

House said it would take weeks for his men to destroy the fortifications they had found. Instead, he said he is using gas, which can make caves uninhabitable for months, and marking the positions of bunkers on a map for later air strikes.

He said he thought his men would move out of the area soon and poke along other ridgelines for more enemy base camps.