

ARMORED ASS

Using tanks for the first time in Vietnam, the NVA overran the Lang Vei Special Forces camp outside Khe Sanh.

As told by Sergeant Major William T. Craig

I've got a tank sitting on top of my bunker!" This alarming report was received in the early morning hours of February 7, 1968, by a forward air controller circling the besieged Special Forces camp at Lang Vei.

Lang Vei was situated just four miles from Khe Sanh Combat Base in Northern I Corps and 1½ miles from the Laotian border. It was manned by Special Forces personnel, or Green Berets, of Detachment A-Team 101, who mounted patrols into neighboring Laos to observe enemy troop movements along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

With the increased enemy activity in the Khe Sanh area just prior to the Tet Offensive, reinforcements were quickly shuttled to the diminutive outpost. In January, the 12th Mobile Strike Force, composed of Montagnard Hre tribesmen under the command of 1st Lt. Paul R. Longgrear, arrived. Also, in late January, soldiers from the 33rd Laotian Volunteer Battalion, composed of Kha tribesmen, retreated across the border into Lang Vei after being defeated by a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) force augmented by Soviet PT-76 amphibious tanks. The stage was set for the assault on Lang Vei.

During the pre-dawn hours of February 7, Special Forces soldiers, together with South Vietnamese Special Forces (Luc Luong Dac Biet), Montagnards and Laotians, fought a desperate and heroic struggle to drive the NVA from the camp. In the end, Lang Vei was abandoned.

Retired Sgt. Maj. William T. Craig was the team sergeant at Lang Vei. He was wounded during the fighting and received the Silver Star for knocking out two tanks that night. He has written a novel, *Scare Time*, and his *Lifers: From Infantry to Special Forces* recently came out—both published by Ivy Books. From his home in Oklahoma, he talked to *Vietnam* senior editor Al Hemingway.

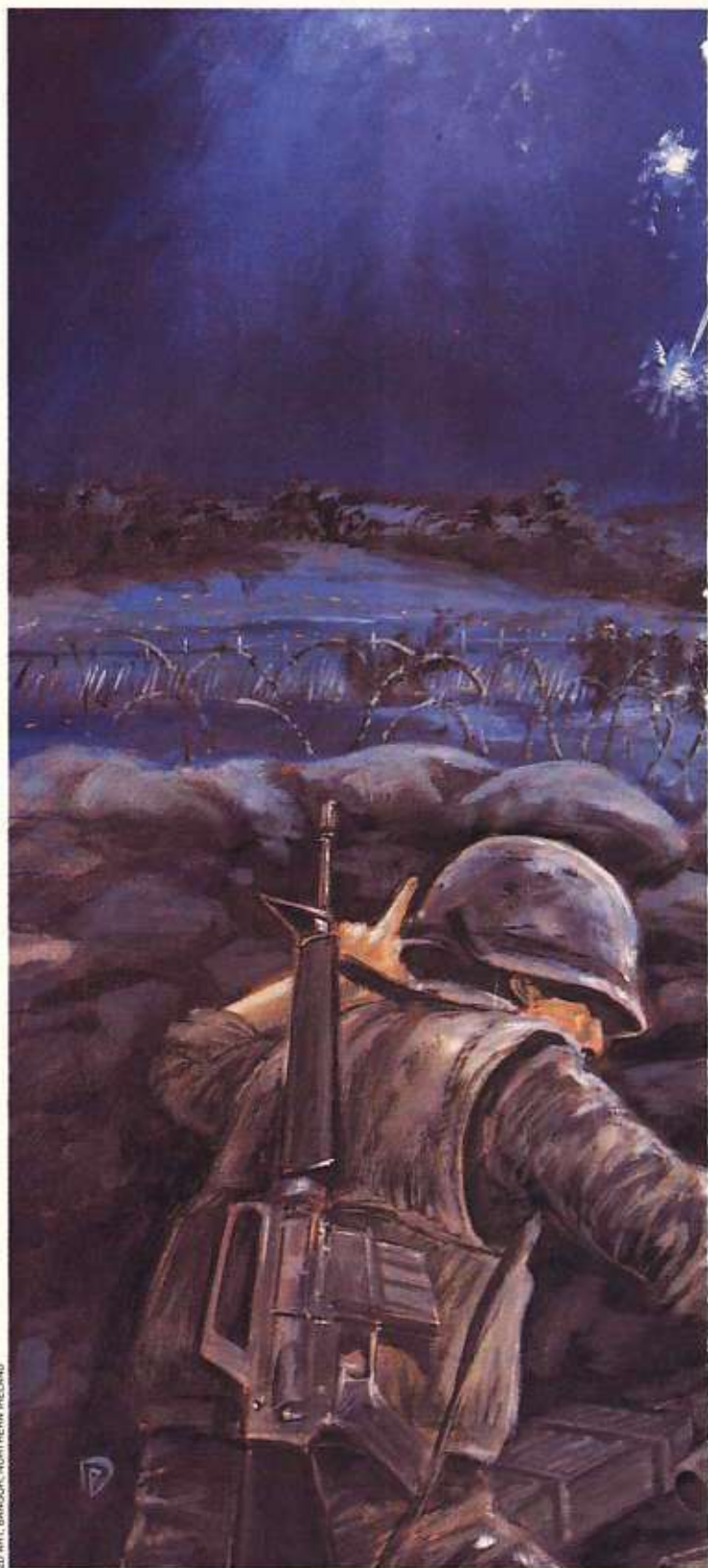
Vietnam: What was the size of the Lang Vei Special Forces camp?

Craig: It wasn't very big. It was located on a small hill, and Highway 9, the main road that ran east to west, ran down the center of it. We had three rifle companies of Montagnards, but they were never up to full strength the entire time I was there. I don't think there were 300 in the entire camp. We did have a wide assortment of weapons, which included 4.2 mortars and 106mm recoilless rifles. However, they could only be operated by the Americans. We also had an inner perimeter. The command post (CP) bunker was right in the center, and our hooches were along the edge. Only Americans were allowed in the inner perimeter after dark.

Vietnam: Lang Vei was heavily fortified, right?

Craig: All the bunkers were constructed of concrete and could take a direct hit from an artillery round. They put a lot of time and money into the camp.

Vietnam: How many Americans were there in the camp?



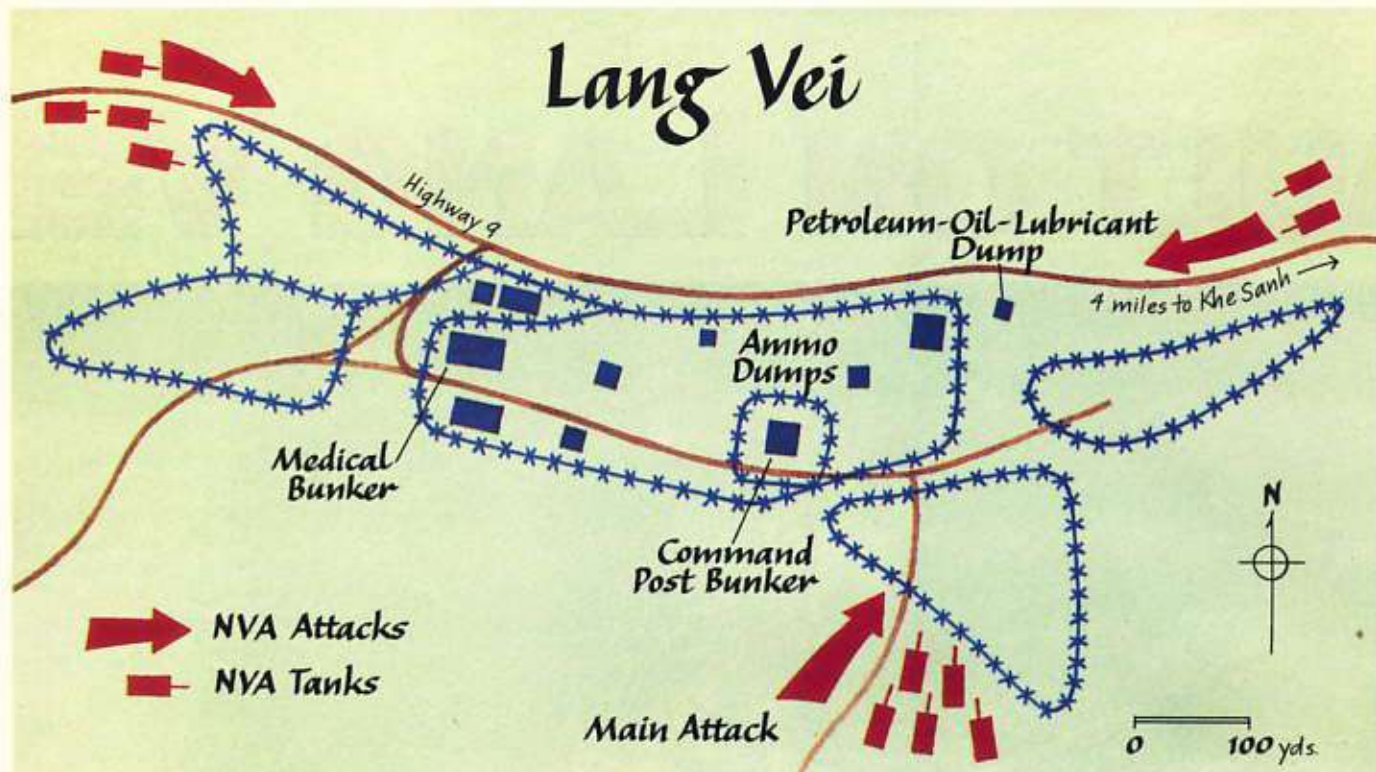
3D ART: BANGOR, NORTHERN IRELAND

AULT ON LANG VEI

As North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces assault Lang Vei, Sergeants William T. Craig and Dan Phillips find themselves in a tight spot. The same might be said of the crew of a stricken NVA PT-76 light tank in David Pentland's painting.



Lang Vei



Although their attack caused initial shock, the NVA's PT-76 amphibious tanks were lightly armored and their assault from several directions was poorly coordinated. As many as nine out of the 11 were knocked out, some of them penetrated by .50-caliber machine-gun fire.

Craig: We had a detachment of 12 men, A-Team 101, and a detachment of Seabees. They were not getting along with each other and acted worse than a bunch of kids. It took a couple of weeks to straighten that out. In December 1967 we started getting hit more frequently. By the time of the attack in February, we had 24 Americans at Lang Vei. The bulk of them were radio operators because we had to stay on the net 24 hours to maintain radio contact.

Vietnam: There were two different tribes of Montagnards at Lang Vei, the Bru and the Hre. How did your A-Team 101 get along with them?

Craig: Fairly well. However, I had my doubts about some of the Montagnards. We did have a very good relationship with the Luc Luong Dac Biet (LLDB) at the camp. For example, when

we went out on operations, we were supposed to have two Americans accompany the LLDBs. When I went out, I only took one. That's how good we got along. We also spoke enough Vietnamese, so there was no language barrier.

Vietnam: You ran quite a few patrols out of Lang Vei?

Craig: Two at all times. We also did a lot of trail watching.

Vietnam: Did you suspect the NVA of having tanks in the area?

Craig: No, not until they hit Tchepone, Laos, in late January. We did have indications of mass troop movements, though.

Vietnam: In a recent book by authors John Prados and Ray Stubbe, *Valley of Decision*, they mentioned a tank-infantry battle in Laos several weeks prior to the NVA assault on Lang Vei. That was the first time the enemy used armor.

Craig: That's right. It also meant that the enemy armor was heading in our direction.

Vietnam: When you first saw the tanks in the wire, what was your reaction?

Craig: I really wasn't that surprised. When the Laotian battalion came from Tchepone after that battle in January, I knew it had to be something big to scare those boys off. I knew more about the Laotians than people thought I did. I had worked with them on my previous tours in Southeast Asia. They were tough soldiers. I admired them.

Vietnam: About four miles down the road from Lang Vei, heading east, was the U.S. Marine base at Khe Sanh. I understand there was some animosity between the two groups.

Craig: We didn't have to go into Khe Sanh very often. But you're right. There was some animosity. I recall one day having two truckloads of Montagnards on the road between Khe Sanh and Lang Vei. All of a sudden, here comes Colonel David Lownds (commanding officer, 26th



A rear view of a recovered PT-76, knocked out by an M-48 in the only duel between American and North Vietnamese tanks, at Ben Het on March 3, 1969.



With Lang Vei overrun, surviving South Vietnamese troops of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) arrive at the U.S. Marine base at Khe Sanh, four miles away. Cooperation between the Marines and Special Forces was poor, both before and during the NVA assault.

Marines, at Khe Sanh) in his jeep with his driver. They were both out in the middle of nowhere! I stopped them and said, "Do you know where you're going?" He replied, "Don't worry about it." And I didn't worry about it. The enemy would have given a million dollars for him.

Vietnam: He was either very brave or very foolish.

Craig: This is the conclusion I came to: He thought that there wasn't a war going on. That is, until the siege actually started. I sincerely believe that. For instance, when the Marines would come off the hills, they would stay in tents. They were not dug in. I remember getting hit one day at Lang Vei with NVA artillery, and the combat base took some rounds at the same time. They had 42 casualties when it was over. That included KIA (killed in action) and WIA (wounded in action). We had none. You had to be dug in against that NVA artillery. Right after that the Marines started taking it more seriously.

Vietnam: One of the Americans at Lang Vei, Spc. 4 John Young, was captured by the NVA. There has been some controversy surrounding that incident. What happened?

Craig: Young came from Da Nang as one of the reinforcements I spoke of earlier. I called the sergeant major in Da Nang and told him I didn't want any Spc. 4 weapons people. I wanted someone with more experience. The sergeant major told me that he just didn't have anyone else available. So when Young arrived, I put him with Sgt. 1st Class Eugene Ashley, Jr., in the old camp where we put the Laotians after they arrived. Ashley called me one afternoon and said that Young wanted to go on patrol. I told Ashley that Young could only go out on listening post (LP). I didn't want him out of sight of the camp. Ashley let him go out on LP with the Laotians. Well, Young talked the Laotians into going to Khe Sanh village, which had already been captured by the NVA. And they got him. Under normal circumstances, he should have been court-martialed.

Vietnam: There were allegations that Young collaborated with the enemy, revealing information about the layout of Lang Vei.

Craig: I don't think he told them anything of importance because he really didn't know anything. He wasn't at Lang Vei long enough. There were hard feelings between Young and

Harvey Brande. Brande was with the Mobile Strike ("Mike") Force that came to Lang Vei just before the battle. The Mike Force attacked some NVA in the rubber plantation. They must have killed 20 or 30 of them. Unfortunately, Brande, along with Dennis Thompson, was captured by the NVA and taken to where Young was held. Brande was tortured by the NVA because of something Young said. I don't see how Young can live with himself. Brande and Thompson were released in 1973. I've seen Brande once since the war ended. He comes and goes; never says goodbye. But I can't judge him. He had some tough experiences and will always be a hero to me. Glad I never had to go through that.

Vietnam: The battle for control of the Lang Vei base started shortly after midnight on February 7. What happened?



Sergeant First Class William T. Craig takes a break during a Special Forces patrol in Vietnam. Knowing that Lang Vei was a potential hot spot, Craig wanted only experienced Green Berets on his team.



SHELBY STANTON



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

TOP: The command bunker at Lang Vei, scene of a final stand and a remarkable escape by Captain Frank Willoughby and several of his comrades. ABOVE: Lang Vei survivors Sgt. 1st Class Nikolas Fragos, Sergeant Emanuel Phillips, Staff Sgt. Peter Tiroch and Spec. 4 Franklin Dooms met newsmen in Da Nang on February 9, 1968.

Craig: I had just gotten off watch. Sergeant Nikolas Fragos had taken over for me. We started taking some incoming artillery rounds. I mean that heavy stuff—152mm. I told my bunker mate, Dan Phillips, to put his gear on because if we got attacked we were not coming back to the bunker. I learned in Korea to stay out of the bunkers when your position came under attack. They were easy targets. Now, this doesn't include the CP bunker where the detachment commander Captain Frank Willoughby and his staff were located. They had to remain in there to keep in radio contact with Khe Sanh, Da Nang, etc.

Vietnam: You felt an assault was coming?

Craig: Definitely. Our position that night was near the 81mm mortar pit. When Phillips and I reached the pit, someone was already firing flares. I saw only one tank in the wire, and right behind it were NVA troops. Phillips and I put small-arms fire on the NVA. Then we started lobbing 81s into the wire. Then

there was an explosion and we both got knocked down. I'm not sure if it was a round from the tank or not. Whatever it was it hit the parapet on our mortar position. It didn't knock us out, but we were dazed. Staff Sergeant Arthur Brooks ran over to us and wiped our faces with a damp cloth. We got up and continued throwing mortars into the enemy troops. Nearby I could see Jim Holt firing a 106mm rifle at the tank. By the way, the tank never did advance. Holt knocked it out.

Vietnam: How long did you stay in the mortar pit?

Craig: Right behind the mortar pit was our motor pool. We had a couple of deuce-and-a-half trucks. Fuel from there started running down into our bunker and into the pit. I told Phillips, "We got to get out of here." We moved to another bunker near the mess hall. Soon after we left, the gasoline from the motor pool ignited the 81mm mortar ammo and there was an explosion. I told Phillips to wait near the mess hall while I ran down into the bunker to radio the aircraft that were overhead. I informed them of the explosion and gave them the position of the enemy, using the fire as a bearing. I thought it would help. When I came back up, Phillips was gone. I never found out what happened to him. He is still missing today. That's when I ran into Staff Sgt. Peter Tiroch. He and I knocked out another tank.

Vietnam: How did the two of you manage to take out another tank?

Craig: Tiroch was manning a .50-caliber machine gun. It must have had armor-piercing rounds because when I told Tiroch to turn it on another tank, it took it out. We ran out of ammo for the .50, and Tiroch and I made our way to the wire. We had a radio with us, so we knew what was going on. We hid near the wire until daylight. That's when we teamed up with Ashley and his group, who were attempting to free Willoughby's CP bunch from their command bunker. As we approached, Lt. Col. Dan Schungel emerged from a bunker. He had arrived at Lang Vei to talk to the Laotian battalion commander and was there for the battle. He had been

hit in the leg, and it looked bad. We helped him to the old camp where the Laotians were. We had a medic there to tend to his wound. Then Tiroch, Ashley, myself, plus our group, went back to Lang Vei.

Vietnam: Had the NVA broken off the attack?

Craig: They were not on the side of the camp we were on. There were a lot of dead NVA, though.

Vietnam: Was the Laotian camp assaulted also?

Craig: No. The NVA used loudspeakers to tell the Laotians to keep their noses out of it. However, Ashley did round up two platoons of them to help get Willoughby out. I don't blame the Laotians. They were caught in the middle of it.

Vietnam: How did you extract Captain Willoughby from his CP bunker?

Craig: Willoughby had an idea. He told the aircraft circling overhead to make a couple of dry runs, then a couple of hot



Under new management—again. U.S. Army air cavalrymen pause to rest and clean their weapons in front of a 106mm recoilless rifle during a counterassault to retake Lang Vei from its North Vietnamese occupiers on April 22, 1968.

runs, and they would make a break for it. He thought this would confuse the enemy—and it worked. Then Ashley got killed.

Vietnam: How did that happen?

Craig: He was wounded leading an assault. I got a jeep and drove him to the old camp for medical attention. While the medic was working on him, a mortar round landed nearby, killing him. He took some shrapnel in the head. (Sergeant First Class Eugene Ashley was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions at Lang Vei.)

Vietnam: Were you wounded?

Craig: Yes, but I didn't notice it much. They medevaced us to Khe Sanh and from there to Da Nang. As a matter of fact, as we lifted off from the airstrip at Khe Sanh, our C-130 came under fire from NVA gunners.

Vietnam: There were reports of women driving some of the NVA tanks. Did you see any?

Craig: That's correct. I saw a woman climb out after we stopped one of the tanks. Vietnamese women are very aggressive, so they were a pretty good choice to drive the tanks.

Vietnam: There was a problem with the LAWs (light anti-tank weapons), isn't that so?

Craig: They were bad. I made a mistake. I gave the Laotians the 3.5 rocket launchers and took the LAWs. I'll take the blame for that. According to the person that brought them out to us, these LAWs were the greatest thing since nuclear weapons. Hell, we were getting 80 percent misfires! Then I thought about how those weapons had been airdropped to us and had bounced all over the place. That's probably the reason why they malfunctioned. I wish I had kept the 3.5s. They were reliable.

Vietnam: The Marine Corps had a contingency plan to relieve Lang Vei in the event of attack. It never materialized. What happened?

Craig: I'm not sure I would want to try a rescue attempt at night. By foot, it was four miles from Khe Sanh to Lang Vei,

and I'm sure the NVA would have ambushed the Marines. A helicopter assault at night is extremely tricky.

Vietnam: Since there was some animosity between Special Forces personnel and the Marines, was the coordination between the two bases poor?

Craig: There was no coordination between us. You don't wait until you're under attack to talk about relief plans. That should have been straightened out earlier. They should have told us that if we were hit at night, hang on until morning. That would have made sense to me. I really don't believe coming out at night would have helped much. It was already mass confusion. Throw some Marines in there, and it could have been a disaster. Some of the others were angry. Back in the hospital in Da Nang, Brooks and I talked about it. At the time, I don't think we were looking at the Marines' side of it. Our missions were different. The Marines were a conventional infantry unit involved in search-and-destroy operations. We were concerned with pacification, training the CIDGs (Civilian Irregular Defense Group members), recon patrol, and what have you.

Vietnam: When you reflect back on Lang Vei, and Vietnam in general, what are your feelings?

Craig: I try to keep in touch with my Special Forces friends. I belong to their association and get their newsletter. There is one person I haven't seen since Vietnam, and that's Captain Willoughby. I'd like to see him again. I've never been able to track him down, though. I'm going to keep trying. In 1975, when Vietnam fell to the Communists, I was a command sergeant major at Fort Bliss, Texas. When we heard the awful news, we cried. We all cried that day. □

For further reading: Sgt. Maj. William T. Craig's books—Scare Time and Lifers: From Infantry to Special Forces—and David B. Stockwell's Tanks in the Wire (reviewed in the April 1990 issue of Vietnam) on the fall of Lang Vei.