

## HAMBURGER HILL

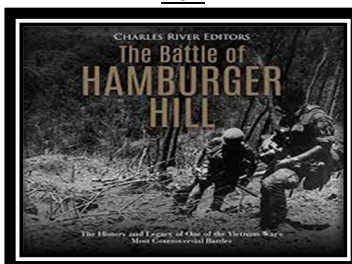
### HILL # 937

#### WHY THE BATTLE FOR THIS REAL ESTATE IN VIETNAM

#### WAS SO CONTROVERSIAL

(SOURCE – HISTORY CHANNEL)

267



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For almost 11 days in May 1969, American troops waged a deadly battle for control of a 3,000-foot-tall hill in a remote valley in South Vietnam. Famously known as “Hamburger Hill,” the battle launched the first phase of Operation Apache Snow, a coordinated attack by the U.S. Army and South Vietnamese forces (known as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN) against units of the Northern People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN). The operation’s goal: was to eliminate enemy forces in the A Shau Valley, including a regiment commonly referred to as the “Pride of Ho Chi Minh.”

Hamburger Hill marked a turning point in America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. After nearly a dozen deadly assaults, on May 20 the U.S. military finally captured Hill 937, known locally as Dong Ap Bia (“the mountain of the crouching beast”). When they abandoned it just days later, controversy erupted over what many saw as a senseless loss of lives—a debate that has continued in the decades since.



*A wounded U.S. paratrooper of the 101st Airborne Division is helped through a blinding rainstorm by two medics after being evacuated from Dong Ap Bia during the 10-day battle for Hamburger Hill, in May 1969. (Credit: Hugh Van Es/AP Photo)*

## HOW THE BATTLE OF HAMBURGER HILL GOT IT'S NAME

The hill and the battle got its infamous nickname thanks to the intensity of the fighting there, in what soldiers dubbed a “human meat grinder.” Sergeant James Spears, a 19-year-old who fought in the battle, told reporters, “Have you ever been inside a hamburger machine? We just got cut to pieces by extremely accurate machine-gun fire.” The name “Hamburger Hill” caught on quickly, in part, because so many journalists flocked to the area to report on the battle.

High casualties resulted, in part, from a shift in the North Vietnamese fighting strategy. “They know they don’t have to win the war, they just have to outlast the United States,” says Meredith Lair, associate professor of history at George Madison University. “It’s not about achieving a decisive victory, but to inflict damage and wreak havoc with the political situation in the United States.”

Bob Harkins, who was the commanding officer of Alpha Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 187<sup>th</sup> Regiment, elaborated: “They read the U.S. newspaper clippings, and they saw the demonstrations and unpopularity of the war. If they could inflict major casualties on us, then that would necessitate a change in our tactics. And to a great extent, it did.”

## HAMBURGER HILL’S DENSELY FORESTED TERRAIN POSED CHALLENGES

Located in the northern region of what was then the Republic of South Vietnam, Hamburger Hill sits approximately 60 miles south of Khe Sanh, and just a little more than a mile from the Laos border, in the A Shua Valley.

*Although the hill itself held little strategic significance, the valley was the scene of fierce fighting throughout the Vietnam War because it was a common supply route for North Vietnamese troops and materiel moved along the legendary Ho Chi Minh Trail, which stretched through North and South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.*

Both the valley and the hill were remote and densely forested, making it difficult for the U.S. military to conduct accurate reconnaissance work. Instead, they were forced to rely on reports by combat patrols, along with information gleaned from PAVN prisoners—leaving them ill-informed about the size and location of enemy forces in the early days of the battle. *Indeed, few of the soldiers who fought there were even told before the mission that taking the hill was their objective.*

## THEY THOUGHT THE BATTLE WOULD ONLY TAKE HOURS. IT TOOK DAYS

When the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 187<sup>th</sup> Regiment landed on the hill on May 10, military command estimated that they would reach the summit in a matter of hours. *Instead, it took 10 more days and nearly 12 full assaults.*

The U.S. Army dropped more than 1,088 tons of bombs, 142 tons of napalm, 31,000 rounds of 20-mm shells, and 513 tons of teargas on North Vietnamese forces. “It looks like a moonscape,” Lair says. “It looks a lot like the Western Front battlefields of World War I...absolute devastation.”

Once the fighting was over, 72 Americans were dead (some from friendly fire) and more than 370 were wounded. Estimates of North Vietnamese losses vary, but at least 630 were killed. According to James Wright, emeritus professor of history at Dartmouth College and the author of *Enduring Vietnam: An American Generation and Its War*, *the four companies of the 187<sup>th</sup> that landed on that first day suffered casualty rates of 50 to 75 percent.*

*And yet, just days later, on June 5, 1969, U.S. forces withdrew from the hill. The North Vietnamese soon reoccupied it.*

While American withdrawals of this nature were common during the war, Wright believes the decision to abandon Hamburger Hill may have been influenced by the nearby Battle of Khe Sanh in early 1968. That led to a 77-day siege during which U.S. Marines struggled to hold on to a garrison under fierce attack by the North.



*A wounded U.S. paratrooper grimaces in pain as he awaits medical evacuation at base camp in the A Shau Valley near the Laos border in South Vietnam on May 19, 1969, during the Vietnam War.*

#### THE US MILITARY QUICKLY PULLED BACK

Harkins thinks much of the controversy surrounding Hamburger Hill can be attributed to misconceptions of the mission's true aims. "The battle got caught up in (old) WWII terminology about capturing terrain," he says. "In Vietnam, as long as there were no bad people on that hill, that hill had no significance. We didn't fight it for terrain; we fought it to destroy a (enemy) force."

#### BACK HOME, CONTROVERSY BEGAN EVEN BEFORE THE BATTLE HAD ENDED

On May 20, the day the hill was captured, Sen. Edward Kennedy, the Massachusetts Democrat, took to the Senate floor and denounced the battle. Other politicians and activists joined a chorus of voices who believed American blood had been needlessly shed.

This in itself was a turning point in the war. Previously, says Wright, critics had focused primarily on the geopolitical wisdom of fighting this war, or on the casualties and the cost of military engagement. Increasingly, they decried civilian casualties, on the morality of the war. Now, he added, "criticism expanded to include tactical wisdom, military judgment, and the competitive egos of commanders.

However, the public wasn't willing to absorb casualties in 1969 to the same degree they had four years earlier. Some 30,000 G.I.s had died in the interim and the antiwar movement had reached full flower. Hamburger Hill, Lair says, "was a real shock to the system."

But while some criticized what they considered a senseless loss of life, many who fought at Hamburger Hill had a different opinion. As Harkins recalls, "I was lying in a hospital bed and my kids brought the newspaper to me, and the headline was 'Senator Kennedy says it was a waste of life.' Well, you could imagine the kids who just got shot and saw their buddies get shot. And they asked me, 'Sir, do you think we did the right thing?' Yeah, we did the right thing. To hell with Kennedy. He doesn't know what we were doing."



*Paramedics load wounded paratroopers following the fierce fight on "Hamburger Hill" in South Vietnam's A Shau Valley.*

#### HAMBURGER HILL CHANGED US MILITARY TACTICS

In the immediate aftermath of Hamburger Hill, the United States shifted its tactics. Over the protests of some senior military leaders, the Defense Department significantly restricted the size and scope of U.S.-led missions.

On June 8, less than three weeks after the battle ended, President Richard Nixon announced a new policy (already well into the planning stages before Hamburger Hill) known as Vietnamization. The South Vietnamese army would now be primarily responsible for combat operations, and U.S. troops would begin to withdraw.

“We tried to not engage with North Vietnamese units, and push the South Vietnamese to do that. And that worked until 1974-75 when the North Vietnamese launched its all-out assault into South Vietnam,” Harkins says.

#### **THE HAMBURGER HILL LEGACY LIVES ON**

For those who fought in the battle, there are still lessons to be learned. In the 1990s, Hamburger Hill veterans began an annual gathering at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, home to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. Each year, some 50 to 80 former members of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment gather there. The goal, Harkins says, is “to connect with the current soldiers of the battalion. We spend time with them and talk to them about how we did things, and how they did things. Listen to them and try to bond with the current members of the unit.” The reunion provides both an opportunity to remember and honor those lost on Hill 937, and an opportunity for those who survived it to pass along their knowledge to a new generation.

The Battle of Hamburger Hill continues to have a hold on American memory. The fighting there has been immortalized in films, television shows, video games, and even referenced in a song by rapper Eminem.



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