

Hamburger Hill battle still sparks controversy

By Denis D. Gray
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

A SHAU VALLEY, Vietnam — Today, it's a nondescript hill in a remote mountain valley ringed by the rice fields of dirt-poor peasants.

To many Americans who fought there, Hamburger Hill seemed a useless lump of terrain in the back of nowhere. Definitely not worth dying for.

But the military brass deemed otherwise. So the taking of Hill 937 proved one of the most brutal battles of the Vietnam War — and because of the casualties, circumstances and timing, it sounded an early death knell for America's engagement in this Southeast Asian nation.

Twenty-five years after the end of the war and 31 years after the battle of Hamburger Hill, it still ignites passionate debate — and terrifying nightmares among survivors.

Charles Vander Luitgaren was a squad leader wounded in one of the dozen assaults up the hill along with everyone else in his company. In short, staccato phrases, he recalls a machine gunner buddy torn apart by a rocket grenade, a captain killed by friendly fire, rain turning slopes into vast mud slides and himself regaining consciousness in the dark after being riddled by shrapnel and thinking he had died.

"Was it worth it?" asks the retired 52-year-old veteran in a telephone interview from Buchanan, Tenn. "Definitely not. We should have done anything else but charge up that hill. We could have blown it apart."

Another survivor is 61-year-old Ho Khoa, a major with North Vietnamese defenders

whose unit lost 20 out of 100 men in the battle May 10-20, 1969. Now retired, he lives in the shadow of Ap Bia, the Vietnamese name for the hill, along the Laotian border in central Vietnam.

"We felt isolated, we could not retreat or advance. We were most afraid of aerial bombardment, which killed us but also the Americans," he says. "It was a very special, intense battle. We call it the battle of 'thit bam' (the meat chopper)."

When it was over, 46 Americans had been killed and some 400 wounded. At least 633 North Vietnamese, by American accounts, lay strewn across the battlefield.

There were bloodier battles in the Vietnam War, but what sparked a furor was the meat-grinder image of soldiers being ordered up a hill again and again under withering fire, and the abandonment of the hilltop to North Vietnamese forces just two weeks later. At the time, U.S. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy called the assault "senseless and irresponsible ... madness. American boys are too valuable to be sacrificed to a false sense of military pride."

Many Americans agreed. "It was the last hurrah of American engagement," says Michael Blecker, who was a 19-year-old infantryman in the Hamburger Hill operation. "It took that portion of the silent majority and turned them sour in a very dramatic way against the war. That was the death knell."

Blecker, 50, who works with poor and homeless veterans in San Francisco, said that after Hamburger Hill, the American public could no longer stomach major American casualties.

55 more Ugandan cult bodies found

By Henry Wasswa
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

KAMPALA, Uganda — A month after officials dug up hundreds of victims of a Ugandan doomsday cult, workers yesterday exhumed the bodies of 55 more people — mostly women and children — from a garage rented by a cult leader.

Gravediggers clad in yellow plastic protective gear removed the bodies of 22 women, 15 men, 10 girls and eight boys from three graves in a garage attached to a small brick house in Ggaba, a residential area just south of Kampala, police spokesman Assuman Mugenyi said.

He said the bodies bore no external signs of violence and the cause of death would be determined by pathologists. The remains were wrapped in black polyethylene bags and loaded onto a trailer to be taken to the municipal cemetery for burial.

The exhumations came a month after barefoot prisoners in shorts dug up 80 bodies and a skull from a cult compound in the village of Rushojwa in southwestern Uganda, the last of four properties tied to the cult where bodies were found.

Mugenyi said police had suspected for some time that there might be bodies at the Ggaba house rented by excommunicated Roman Catholic priest Dominic Kataribabo,

a leader of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments — the cult now blamed for 979 deaths.

But criticism over the use in the villages of unprotected prisoners to unearth the bodies, coupled with international media coverage, prompted authorities to suspend the search until they had assembled the necessary equipment and logistics.

It was feared that the grisly discovery in Ggaba would not be the last.

"We have not got the logistics for the whole investigation," Mugenyi told The Associated Press. "This was in the city, and people were concerned, and we were equally concerned, so we had to give it priority."

Iranian hard-liners shut down reformist papers

By Afshin Vajnejad
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

TEHRAN, Iran — Iranian hard-liners shut down three more newspapers yesterday, including one owned by reformist President Mohammad Khatami's brother, pressing their campaign against publications that have fueled public support for reform.

Khatami's allies are being choked by the closures, which now total 16. Only one reformist paper remains able to publish as crucial campaigning gets under way for 66 seats in the 290-seat parliament, or Majlis.

The Press Court, which is dominated by hard-liners, said Mohammad-Reza Khatami's newspaper and two others had violated press laws. It did not detail the violations, but the publisher was warned Tuesday about printing too many daily editions.

Mohammad-Reza Khatami has been closely allied with his brother's campaign to



Vahid Salem/Associated Press

Two Iranian students read the reformist daily newspaper *Mosharekat* Tuesday in Tehran, Iran.

loosen social, political and cultural restrictions. The only reformist paper still allowed to publish is *Bayan*, which has not been as outspoken as the others.

Parliament is due back in session May 27, which would allow reformists to restart their

direct dialogue with the people because the constitution mandates that Parliament debates be broadcast live on state radio.

"The reformists are under siege. They are looking to the opening of the Majlis as the cavalry," said Saeed Laylaz, an analyst who used to write for the *Azad* daily that was closed down Monday with a court order issued by the hard-line judiciary.

There are clear signs the hard-liners are trying to claw their way back into control of the Majlis, which they lost to the reformists in February for the first time since the 1979 Islamic revolution. They have considerable power thanks to their dominance over the judiciary, the state broadcasting media and the Guardians Council that supervises elections.

So far, the Guardian Council has annulled 12 reformist winners on spurious grounds, giving two seats to hard-liners and calling for runoffs in the others.

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