

RIPCORD REPORT

For Friends and Survivors of FSB RIPCORD, RVN

A Newsletter

No. 13 September 1987

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Financial Contributors:

F. Edwards

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Retrospectives Needed

What was it like going up hill 1000 over and over again? Why would anyone want to be a door-gunner? What did you see from your command chopper?

Through your retrospectives all these questions and more can be answered. All of us are interested in what the other guys did on and around Ripcord so please take the time to put your experiences and feelings down on paper.

Reunion '87

Don't forget to make your reservations for this years Ripcord Reunion. For information contact Charles F. Hawkins,

Cherries

Twins were born to Ray "Blackie" Blackman & wife on June 30, 1987. Aaron Carl came at 3:27pm, 7lb 4 1/2oz, with Zachary Lee next at 3:49pm, 8lb 10 1/2oz. Doing fine. Mom & Dad worn out.

Photos

Gary Hatley VT-23 NAS, Kingsville, TX 78363 formerly of B 2/506 is looking for photos of friend Roberto Flores, also of B 2/506, who was KIA around 7/22/70.



"It's from my girl - she's going to marry a wonderful guy she met at a Vietnam protest."

Rodney Moore
(C 2/506)

Frank Parko
(B 2/320 Arty)

Ronald L. Henn
(B/326 Eng.)

Francis J. Lynch
(HQ Btry 2/319)

Linda Davis
(Associate)
c/o Ramada Inn

Linda graciously helped us get the last two issues of the Ripcord Report copied and sent to you.

That's Jake

By Jake Vest



"I was drafted into the Army but I don't recall being a murdering drug addict... I must have been on K.P. the day we done all that"

= INCOMING =

17 July 1987:

Thought I'd drop you a line and to send my new address. I moved last month.

I talked with "Blackie" last week on the phone for about an hour. There's this funny feeling we've met somewhere. After we talked we came to the conclusion it might have been in Australia on R&R. Shit it's a small world!

Shit! Damn, that letter written by Chicken Man 34 is a real mind blower. There is a small "Wall" on Water St. in South Ferry N.Y.C. I copied the words written there, but that is a classic.

Take care,
Tony "Wolf" Pawlik

P.S. I never say beaucoup either,

9 August 1987:

I was one of the others you mentioned in the "Screaming Eagle" July - August 1987. I guess you could say my group was the pit in the center of the action. We were the Engineers (a platoon from Company B).

We constructed Firebase Ripcord, the wire around it, the dog house bunkers, TOC, mess hall and ammo bunkers. We even had a little M450 dozer on top of the hill to clear a garbage dump, help the 155's positions and clear the top of the hill after the 105 ammo blew up. We pushed the ammo and the destroyed 105's, some with shells still in the breach of the pieces, over the side of the hill. We roamed over the hill after each attack doing EOD work on dud Charlie rocked and mortar rounds and rebuilding what had been blown up. We had started to rebuild the 105 bunker two days after it was blown up.

We paid a price even though our numbers were small we did our job.

Our platoon leader was 1/LT Fred H. Edwards and out of the ten men that were

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there 2 were KIA and I think the rest of us were WIA.

Ronald L. Henn
Platoon Sergeant Co. B, 326 Engr.
Retired 1SG
Hopkinsville, KY

10 August 1987:

I just finished reading your Ripcord Newsletter. Hopefully this will re-unite me with some of my buddies I mentioned in the letter.

Your newsletter is the best thing I've read on the experiences of Ripcord.

I am hoping to exchange some pictures I have of some Firebases with anyone else who might have pictures from Ripcord, Veghal, Bastonge, Zon, Normandy, Eagle or Vandergriff. Some of my pictures were lost during moving, but I do have duplicates of others.

Enclosed is a donation. Wanted to show my appreciation for the great work you guys are doing.

Yours Truly,
Dan Esposito
Lynn, MA

August 1987:

Saw your Ad in the Veterans paper a couple of months ago and have been meaning to write.

I was a grunt with C/2/508, 101st Airborne from March 21, 1970 - Jan 16, 1971. I can remember going up Ripcord early one morning and then our company helped build and secure the firebase. After about a month we walked off Ripcord. I was wounded on July 7, 1970 trying to take a bunker complex on a hill.

If I can help you with anything, please let me know.

Sincerely,
Rodney Moore
Clarksburg, MA



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10 August 1987:

Better late than never but just picked up the Veteran paper at the Vet Center in St. Louis, Missouri and saw your flyer.

My name is Frank Parko, I served with 101st Airborne 2/320 Arty, Bravo Battery. My unit established FSB Gladiator the morning after the supply helicopter was shot down in the base ammo dump. We gave support by firing H&I on known mortar positions.

The day after we were at Gladiator word came down for volunteers to take supplies and help at Ripcord. I didn't know what I was getting into. I carried a case of C-4, ammo for M-16 and M-80's and extra grenades. We flew in that afternoon at treetop level to Ripcord. There was seven of us from B, 2/320. When we landed it was like old time movies of a doomed patrol. We helped with clearing of debris and cleared travel routes on the firebase. Later we were told that copters could not come in. We were told to split up and help where we could and report back to the hills HQ at noon. We helped hump rounds to the mortars and even fired them that night running back in the bunkers when the rockets and NVA Artillery came in. We helped load the Medivacs and helped with the 155's at night. Spent a few nights in the grunts bunkers on the perimeter shooting at snipers.

I remember I ate two of the most delicious fruit cakes from the C-Rations and smoked Lucky Strike cigarettes. You know how hard it was to eat and smoke those raunchy things but up there it was like pound cake and a cigar. We slept a little and helped a lot. Trying not to be where the incoming was landing and that was pretty hard.

I remember about 5:30 in the morning when the sky cranes came and picked up the 155's and being told to go to HQ and wait for evacuation. The HQ was crowded but we squeezed in. Man was that when the shit hit the fan. The NVA saw what was going on and really started pounding the hill. Helicopters came in in ones and two's and landed in the 155's pit. All we had to do was run out of the HQ 300 yards to the pits and wait for the

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copters, running through the mortar, rockets and automatic fire, thats all!

Some men waiting at the doorway were WIA and KIA by shrapnel. The dead were put aside and wounded treated. An officer read off names and units for teams to go next. I remember the radio somewhere in the bunker and everyone laughed when the Lovin Spoonful played "It's a Beautiful Morning" Boy that was a kick in the head.

Well, our turn came and we ran and jumped into the copters. It flew us back to Camp Eagle. At breakfast our Battalion Commander saw me, told me all the men made it out but was scattered on different bases. He told me to get into his command chopper with fresh batteries and some orders for my CO. When I landed at Gladiator just about everyone thought we were dead. We couldn't radio back when up at Ripcord because the incoming kept knocking out the antenna's.

I was on Ripcord. I saw men die. I saw a copter come in to pick up wounded. It was loaded up but never took off cause the pilot and co-pilot were shot by a sniper. I saw what was left of the top of the hill when the ammo dump blew up.

All the way
AIRBORNE,
Frank Parko
St. Louis, MO

P.S. Ripcord to me was like a long, long Mad Minute.

14 August 1987:

I saw your letter in the July-August 1987 issue of the "Screaming Eagle". I was enlisted supervisor of the fire direction center attached to the Headquarters Battery of the 2/318th artillery from January to November 1970. One of our batteries (I can't remember which) was located at Ripcord.

I find that after all these years there are some aspects of that summer I remember vividly, while others are totally hazy. Events seem clear but names are not. I'll just share with you my (probably inaccurate) memories.

First, it seemed that we tried to insert onto Ripcord sometime in the early spring. One of my main jobs was to coordinate "LZ" artillery preps prior to insertion of troops. I recall that we had an extraordinary prep of Ripcord. We fired artillery about twice as long as usual and we used a lot more Cobras than usual. Still, the LZ was "hot" and the insertion was aborted. I recall the troops returning to Camp Evans on Hueys.

After the failed attempt to occupy Ripcord, we became involved in an elaborate attempt to "soften" the 10 square kilometers around Ripcord. For what seemed like a month, I was put on night duty to coordinate the firing of artillery and B-52 air strikes (Arc Lights). Basically, every battery in the area was instructed to fire all night at selected targets in the firing zone. Each evening, the assistant S-3 and I would pick out random plots of ground for the artillery to pound. When the B-52 sorties were coming, I would alert the high altitude guns like 175's, to cease fire until the Air Force liaison told me the birds were clear.

Again, I have another off-the-wall memory of this. Everybody at Camp Evans was complaining about the constant rumble of the Arc Light strikes. Late one night, we were sitting in the Fire Direction Center listening to the rumble of the bombs when, all of a sudden, we heard a noise that made the bombs sound like lady fingers. It was a huge thunder clap. It seemed to us that god was showing us that he could still make the biggest impact!!

After the second insertion on Ripcord, we were able to establish a fire base. I remember being there right after its establishment, and again two or three days before we abandoned it. I recall it as on a very steep hill - even for that miserable area of the world.

Once the battle started, I remember sleeping very little. It seemed that the NVA REALLY wanted us off that hill. I recall a couple of hills that the NVA simply would not let us use as fire bases. It seemed that later in the summer, we had to move Alpha battery off one hill where the NVA was constantly harrasing us to a hill less than a

klick away where they never bothered them.

I remember the target acquisition radar particularly. It kept picking up the artillery out going rounds and reading the battery center coordinates over the air. If the NVA were listening, this made their own indirect fire even easier. Finally, the radar picked up an incoming round, only to have it go through the screen.

I remember that Captain David Rich was sent out to command the battery at some point. He was a very tiny, but very tough soldier. He had received a battlefield commission, and had been assigned to Vietnam for years. I recall taking the wounded reports over secure radio each night. I think he was wounded about 9 times. There was serious discussion about a Medal of Honor nomination, but I don't think it happened.

The day they evacuated, I recall there was real confusion. Rumor had it that the supply officer never did destroy the artillery tubes, and that the NVA had carted those 105's off. I don't know.

I can't remember anybody's name except Rich. Our battalion barber was killed out there. The Command Sergeant Major walked into the FDC one day and threw a flattened helmet on the dirt. He said that the barber was wearing it when an RPG hit him. I also remember losing our chopper pilot and his gunner. Again, I saw them every day, yet I can't remember their names. (probably some psychological defense of mine). Now, I am going to throw out names I do remember from the 2/319 who were probably in either the HQ or one of the batteries during the summer of 1970: Steve Matthews, Steve Mannina, Billy Madison, Dick Charlebois, Wayne Morrow, Captain Forrest Goff (he was the honor grad from the Texas A&M ROTC unit), Captain Michaud (a lot of these guys have "M" names) Major Lewis Martin (the "M" again), another major with the first name Nathaniel, who claimed to have invented the revolving base for the M101A1 artillery piece, Dave Plankington, Rolland Zachman, Lt. Leonard Wintermute.

I also recall TIME or NEWSWEEK running an article entitled something like, "Now its called Firebase Rubble".

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The above constitutes my memories of that summer. I am more than willing to be corrected by persons with other recollections. I make no claim for historical accuracy. I am, however, interested in knowing more about the events and people who participated in this traumatic event.

Francis J. Lynch
Vashon, WA

18 August 1987:

It's been a while since I've written. It has been a busy summer. I can't make the reunion this year. I'm trying to get things together and maybe next year we can go. It's tough when you've got a baby. I would enjoy seeing all of you and talking. We probably could talk for a couple of days with no problem. I got last month's newsletter and was glad to get it. I thought about sending a line to a few of them. There aren't too many of us up this way.

Take care,
Larry Smith
North Conway, N.H.

19 August 1987:

From Grif to all you lucky (?) bastards:

I was relatively new to 'Nam when I CA'd to Ripcord. Other than a sapper attack at S.E.R.T.S., I had never been under close fire. No problem there. The gooks were wasted A.S.A.P. Ripcord was another story.

When we lifted out of Evans to fly there, I remember being told that's where we were headed. I don't remember the actual disembarkation; I don't remember a lot.

I do remember a night we were being over-run. I was with an 81mm crew just down the hill from T.O.C. We were taking heavy fire from everything they could give us & firing charge O's in return. I witnessed an officer, possibly my own C.O., take a direct hit & disintegrate. Shortly after, a howitzer was blown to hell, pieces of people flying

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everywhere. Other things happened, I'm not sure; but we charged out of the gun pit & met the bastards head on. On the way down the hill, I stepped in what was left of a man, apparently from the gun position previously blown up. After that things go blank again (except for strange shit that pops into my head now & then).

Later on that nite, my bunker mate (Lewinski from Chicago) comes in to tell me about the Quad 50 at the other end of the hill. "We got the son's of bitches stacked up this deep & the mother fuckers are still coming." Far out, man, I can't wait to kill some more. I'm wondering who's crazy. But then it's over. I think me & Lewinski were the only survivors of that gun crew that nite. We never went back.

The next day, we were on ammo detail, while others were policing up bodies. Every time I went down the hill, I had to step over or around a man's arm, blown off above the elbow.

During break between lifts, we stopped in the main ammo bunker for mortars, just down from T.O.C. At that time Sgt. Friend and his recon team told us we were surrounded by 5-6 thousand N.V.A. As the commercial says, "It's a great feeling."

I remember days of being shelled so heavily that you didn't risk sticking your head outside the bunker. Lew & I would sit inside against the far wall & load magazines of ammo; sometimes the dirt would blow thru the door from a close one. And you'd wonder when that one with your name on it would find its way thru the roof or the door.

The last day I was there, everything was quiet in the morning. Mother Nature's call was not to be ignored this time. I slipped out of the bunker while Lew was still asleep & prepared to make up for lost time. While crouched between two bunkers, I heard a rock roll down the hill in no man's land. I reconned the situation & came back to tell Lew to spread the word, we were about to be over-run. Then I left again.

Some time around mid-day, I was called away from the side of the hill to help take an 81mm position out. The chopper

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was waiting for us on the T.O.C. pad. Shit was blowing up everywhere. A chopper went down; gooks were over-running the position I had just left. I was trying to make up my mind as to which way was the best to die. A sergeant I didn't know got me on the chopper. We took off & were hit by ground fire.

I fought for 6 or 7 hours that last day & don't remember most of it. Bits & pieces. And I'm not even sure what's real. Did I kill two with the bayonet that morning after finding our L.P. wasted? Of the two guys I knew there that survived, Mac went to LBJ & Lew was (in my opinion) hill crazy. My closest friend from training was killed in the gun pit with me the nite we were being over-run.

A lot of bad shit happened after Ripcord. I never got over it. But I fought with you on Ripcord. I feel I did right there. I won't say what I did that last day. Too many people died for no good reason. We could have held.

Elbert Griffin
Williamston, N.C.



NVA MORTAR ATTACK

by: Charles F. Hawkins
CO, A/2-506, 30 May - 17 Nov., 1970

"The night is long that never finds the day." by
Malcolm in Shakespeare's, The Tragedy of MacBeth.

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Charlie Oscar awoke instantly from a sound sleep. Alert. Still. Except for the eyes, which tried to pierce the pre-dawn night. He could see nothing, of course, but somehow, trying to see helped his ears to focus on the jungle sounds around him. He heard only what he should have heard. The jungle was always full of sounds, of life, of death. If you listened close enough, some said, you could even hear trees growing. Charlie Oscar didn't doubt that, he just had never listened that hard.

Now he did. Something wasn't right. He moved and sat up. His poncho liner made a slight sloughing noise as it slipped from his shoulders. The Company RTO, up on radio watch, heard and turned his head. He saw only black on darker black, but he knew his CO was awake. He, too, listened.

There is a time of the day, past midnight, yet well before the false dawn, when the mind lives in the distant beginnings of history. It is a time when prehistoric fears and ancient superstitions run rampant through the sub-conscious. It is a time when the animal, man, is most dangerous, and most vulnerable.

The Company RTO checked the radium dial of his Army issue watch. 0325 hours. Something's wrong. Something's bothering the Old Man. Charlie Oscar usually got up the hour before dawn, unless there were ambush patrols out, or there was contact. Right now, there were neither, and everything seemed quiet. First-light was over two hours away.

These two, and another man, the Battalion Radio/Telephone Operator, had formed a close, effective, working relationship. The two RTOs were

experienced, had been with the company for many months, had been seasoned in a dozen firefights. Charlie Oscar was not new to Vietnam, but had been new to them a month ago when he had assumed command. They had welcomed him guardedly, with a wait-and-see attitude.

They didn't have to wait long, the Company RTO thought. Five days. Then the 2d Platoon hit the shit west of Ripcord, and had been pinned down. Charlie Oscar had assaulted the enemy with one other man, and the platoon had rallied. The action was swift and violent, and the NVA fled, giving up their hill. What would have happened if Charlie Oscar hadn't been their CO? The Company RTO felt a chill race down his slight frame.

Now, they had become a team. The nerve center for Alpha Company. And Alpha Company had a mission: penetrate the valley southeast of Ripcord, and find the enemy.

The night and the listening continued.

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The NVA patrol left their underground bunker complex just before sunset. Silently, they took a zig-zag course down a small ridge and doubled back once they reached the ravine at the bottom. They circled back a second time after crossing a small clearing; then, sure that they were alone, and undetected, they headed southwest. The night enveloped them, and the jungle absorbed the sound of their passing.

Each of the nine men was heavily laden: four carried 60mm mortars with bipods, base plates, and several rounds of ammunition; one carried an RPD machinegun with a sixty round drum and two hundred extra rounds of 30 calibre ammunition; the rest carried the remaining thirty mortar rounds, their individual AK-47 weapons, and sufficient ammunition to sustain a firefight for several hours, if necessary. By midnight they would link-up with a larger force of sappers and assault troops. Dawn would find them in position to strike an American unit, a company that had been unknown to them until last evening.

The leader of the patrol was a senior Lieutenant - a small, wiry man, with jet-black hair, and a gnarled right hand missing the thumb and index finger. The

hand, he recalled bitterly, that had so expertly worked the trigger mechanism on his 12.5mm heavy machinegun; that is, until the American squad had assaulted his position. He didn't have a memory of what had happened next; not until he came to in an underground hospital bunker, his hand swathed in bandages, and in pain for lack of morphia. That he had not been captured or killed had been nothing short of miraculous.

That had been a year ago. At that time they had been heavily engaged with the imperialist Division known as the 101st Airborne - the Screaming Eagles. The hill they had been defending had been marked on the maps as Dong Ap Bia. The Americans had called it Hamburger Hill.

Now, they were up against units from the 101st once more. The NVA Lieutenant wondered if any of the Americans he was moving to attack were from the same unit he had fought a year ago. He hoped so. This time it would be they who paid - with their blood, with their lives.

The Intelligence Officer of the NVA Regiment was worried. Of the four regiments that the NVA F4 Division had surrounding the American firebase, his had the most responsibility. Not only were they tasked to protect the Division Headquarters, concealed in an underground command post southeast of the firebase, and keep the Americans off Hill 805; they were to be the main assault force when the attack order was given. This much responsibility demanded sound intelligence information about the Americans. Right now, there was something missing.

The day before, the Americans had launched a successful assault against Hill 805, and secured it. That they would eventually be driven off, he had no doubt. But his concern was intelligence. And, it had been his intelligence estimate that had shown a single rifle company from the 101st on Hill 805. Based on this information, an NVA battalion had attacked the hill during the night, and had been soundly beaten. This, due in large part, to the presence of an unexpected American force located on a smaller hill next to Hill 805. Apparently, there was a company-

sized force he had overlooked. Who were they? Where had they come from, and where were they now? And, most important, where were they going?

He had sent his scouts out immediately after the abortive assault on Hill 805. It had taken nearly all day, but in the late afternoon one of the scouts had reported an American company occupying one of their recently started bunker complexes at the head of the valley running southeast from the American firebase. It was within an easy day's move from Hill 805. Everything fit. It must be the unknown American unit. Worse, it looked as if they were beginning a move down the valley, in the direction of the Division Headquarters.

It was unusual, he thought. Americans generally stayed on the hill tops and ridges, only venturing into valleys in strength. Had the Americans played them for the fool? What was happening? Was this an unusual company?

He had asked for and received permission to send a raiding party to strike the unit. Their orders were to attack with mortars, sappers, and conventional assault infantry, and destroy the Americans. They had done this before - on Hill 902. And, would do it against the company now on Hill 805. But, this time, they would have the element of surprise on their side.

The link-up between the NVA Lieutenant and the company of sappers and assault infantry occurred shortly after 0100 hours.

"You are late," whispered the NVA Lieutenant.

"I have more men than you," the NVA Company Commander answered. "And we move quietly. Now, here is the final plan. You must memorize it, and execute it on time to perfection."

The plan was simple. The Lieutenant and his mortars would position themselves two-hundred meters north of the Americans. At first light, they would fire half their rounds during a two minute preparation of the objective. Then, the assault infantry would attack from the east, and the mortar fire would be shifted west, to catch the fleeing GIs.

There was only one hitch; the sappers could not be used in the attack. There had been no thorough reconnaissance, and there would not be enough time for them to crawl silently into the American perimeter. They would be used as reinforcements.

"Do not worry. We will surprise them, and they will be destroyed." The NVA Company Commander put out his hand to touch the Lieutenant.

In the darkness, the NVA Lieutenant felt the touch on his mangled hand. Felt the stiffing recoil of surprise at his deformity. He smiled tightly. "It is I who will surprise them, Commander," he corrected. "You just make sure they are destroyed."

They parted, silently. Each moving back to their men. Each to take their separate routes to the objective.

The NVA Lieutenant paused. He knew the area fairly well and, with his map and compass, the new bunker complex could be precisely determined by referencing known points. They were close enough now, he decided, to place the mortars. The Americans would be well within range. Probably just a few hundred meters away. It was just over two hours until dawn.

He went back along the file of his men, showing the mortar crews where to go. Carefully, quietly, they laid their equipment down and began to set the mortars into their firing positions. Two of the NVA carrying AK-47s moved away to security positions.

"Oooof! - Clunk!" The sound of breath escaping - the dull contact between pieces of the heavy, cloth-wrapped mortar equipment as they struck the ground.

"Bastard!" the Lieutenant swore under his breath. He moved over to the offending soldier and cuffed him with the back of his misshapen hand. The soldier cowered, but did not move, nor did he cry out.

The Lieutenant hoped the jungle had muffled the sound, that the Americans were asleep. For a long moment they waited, listening. Then they continued their preparations.

There is an ill-defined ability in some which is called the sixth sense. In a narrow perspective, it is the ability to know that something is going to happen just before it does. In a much broader view, it is the ability to predict the future. How it works is left open to much debate and interpretation.

But, perhaps it is simple stimuli and response, on a primal level. Perhaps it is the ability of those unused portions of the mind to extract raw information and collate seemingly unrelated events, and give them value in that part of the mind dealing with realities - combat realities. No bird sounds where there should be birds; a muddy stream that should be clear; a trail with a torn spider web hanging; leaves that rustle more than the breeze allows; and other, more subconscious things that only the primitive mind knows.

The dull thud of a mortar base-plate dropping.

It was this noise, this faint, non-jungle vibration, travelling through the ground, that had alerted Charlie Oscar. Though neither he, nor any of his men, could have heard it had they been awake and listening for it.

Charlie Oscar was up and moving quietly from position to position around the perimeter, each location etched in his mind from the day before. First to the platoon leaders and platoon sergeants, then to the squad leaders. For those awake and on guard, a silent whisper; for those asleep, a pat, a gentle touch.

Always the same message: "I don't know what it is or how I know, but we have to leave here. Now."

The rousing of Alpha Company continued.

"Wake up, man." No sound. No voice. Just tactile communication from the Squad Leader.

"Get ready. We're moving out." More silent touching. The foot, the rucksack.

"At this hour?" An unspoken question, unseen in the pitch-black. The Thump Gunner had just gotten off his shift on guard.

"Yes." An unseen nod; felt, but not heard.

Discipline. Faith.

Quietly, carefully, Alpha Company woke up, slipped into their rucksacks, cradled their weapons, and prepared to move out. First Platoon, then Second, and now, Third.

Easy. There's a fine line between noisy haste and silent speed. Good men. Damn good men. A touch for each as they pass.

The Battalion RTO. Cupped hands around the radio handset. The barest whisper. Squelch break. Hiss. "Edit Two One, Edit Two One ... This is Raffles Four Three Bravo. Over." Static hiss. Squelch on.

A pause. Hiss. "Raffles, this is Edit Two One Tango. Over." The radio operator at the Battalion Tactical Operations Center on Firebase Ripcord replied.

Instinctively, the Battalion RTO held his handset close against his chest to muffle the reply.

Hiss. "We're moving. Checkpoint Bravo Three. Don't fire any Hotel Indians," a whisper.

Hiss.

"Roger, out," the response muffled by fatigue cloth.

Like a serpent uncoiling from its resting place, Alpha Company left their night defensive position and began moving south. Every man was alert, on edge, ready for action. Quietly, they glided deeper into the jungle, and away from the fresh NVA bunkers where they had spent, at least, part of the night.

These American dogs are going to die, the NVA lieutenant was thinking. As they sleep, I shall attack. They will wake, confused, shocked, unable to mount a defense. They will feel the hot bite of my exploding mortar rounds. Our AK-47s will fire into their midst. Yes, they will die.

He readied his gunners. Soon. He stroked the mortar tubes. When the false dawn appears, we attack.

Not this time, you son-of-a-bitch, whoever-you-are, Charlie Oscar thought. Alpha has the best men in the whole world, damn it, and I'm going to watch out for them.

The head of the snake edged further into the jungle. The tail eased off the small knoll. Two men, walking drag, covered the rear of Alpha. Soon, there was nothing. No sign that they had been; no indication they had passed by. A vapor in the night; a rustle of leaves.

The false dawn splashed the horizon with pretend light. Black sky became the deepest blue; the jungle became the darkest green. Earth and sky separated; eyes began seeing again; ancient fears retreated.

The NVA Lieutenant checked his compass. Now! The drop of a gnarled fist. Mortar rounds, held by tense hands, dropped the short length of the tube, struck the firing pin at the base, and were explosively propelled upwards. T'chung! T'chung! T'chung! Deadly, potent missiles of destruction filled the air.

The infantry assault teams began moving forward, up the small knoll to strike the Americans. As khaki clad men with AK-47s wove their way through the dense brush, the first mortar rounds burst to their front. Instantly, the jungle was shredded with hot shrapnel, and filled with firey, acrid smoke.

The men of Alpha heard the sound and quickened their pace. So that's what it was, they thought. An NVA mortar attack. And silent acknowledgement rippled up and down the moving column. How did Charlie Oscar know? What gift had God given this man? What ever it is, please God, let him keep it.

The knot in Charlie Oscar's gut tightened. An icy fire raced up his back and entered his brain. There, the fire became a wind, blowing fog, like a shroud, before him. And, through the misty swirls, he glimpsed, for an instant, the future. It was his gift, and his curse, to know. And not to know.

"I know one fuckin' thing," Charlie Oscar muttered, and turned to his Artillery Forward Observer. "FO."

"Yessir." A cherry LT from Fort Sill.

"You got a target back there. I want it goddamn destroyed."

"Yes Sir!"

It took forty-five seconds for the FO to call in the fire mission. Too long, thought Charlie Oscar. But, he's new, he'll get better.

It took another thirty seconds for the crack 105mm howitzer battery on FS8 Gladiator to feed the firing data into the computer, send the deflection and elevation to the guns, and crank the tubes into position.

FIRE!

Forty-five more seconds for the dozen 95lb., high explosive projectiles to hurtle toward the coordinates the FO had given. It was a fire-for-effect. There would be no adjusting fire. Charlie Oscar wanted it to be a surprise.

The last sound many of the assaulting NVA infantry heard was the high-pitched, whine-scream of the 105mm rounds seconds before impact. They had just crested the small knoll. They had just discovered the empty positions. There were few places to hide.

Scant meters outside of the deadly bursting radius of the American artillery, the NVA Lieutenant knew immediately that things had gone wrong. Bastards! he thought. They fight like us. How could they have known? It has to be an accident of fate. He thought of the dropped mortar base-plate. It wasn't possible. Or was it?

Another time. Americans. Another place. I will find you.



SEDUCTION

She came with him easily enough.

After they had gone a ways,

A comfortable spot to discover one another.

A long look at him.

She thought...lean, young, handsome, and...serious.

A hungry, thoughtful gaze back at her.

He thought...exotic...sculpted jade.

No words came for a long, long time.

The beginning of a probe.

His hand on her hand.

A one man rif along her arm.

Brush of skin across silk and skin.

The beginning of sapper-like movement,

furtive but sure.

His kiss to eyelids.

Her breath against hollow of neck.

Along the perimeter of both bodies

bunkerlines are alerted to the possibility of a penetration.

His lips search out hers.

Contact ignites a trip-flare

next to his brain.

A white phosphorous grenade

burns slowly very near her heart.

Each body's offense gears swiftly into action.

Hands, arms, and lips

going on long-range reconnaissance patrols.

There are no pretenses of a defense.

Mouth seeks out mouth.

Tongue delights in tongue.
He is a pointman.
Probing at first with caution,
expecting ambush.
Finding none he moves on,
into the heart of the beast.
She is a sniper.
Watching every move.
Responding to every touch.
Knowing she is ultimately in control,
if she remains hidden.
He watches her.
Fire-fight comes to mind.
Why was it that every time he thought of this place,
he thought in terms of heat?
The tips of her nipples
like small, inverted bomb craters
stare back at him and beg for more.
A five man patrol is tasked to the A.O.
Moving ever southward,
into where she lives.
He spies bunker complex in deep undergrowth.
A cache of sensual but deadly delight.
Warrior on top of warrior
the penetration begins,
with casualties on both sides.
His thrusts into hostile space
explodes in overdue release
like mini-gun and cannon.

She thrusts back with the certainty of an AK.

On target they take his breath away.

The fires are not slaked
for ever so long a time,
building and cresting,
then somehow finding a plateau,
and building and cresting again.

The end comes
in teeth jarring throes
of arc-lite intensity
and duration.

Her hair lashes him
from side to side.

Only vaguely is he aware of the minor pain.
Later after the fires and smoke have gone away

he gazes at her,
beautiful in her repose.

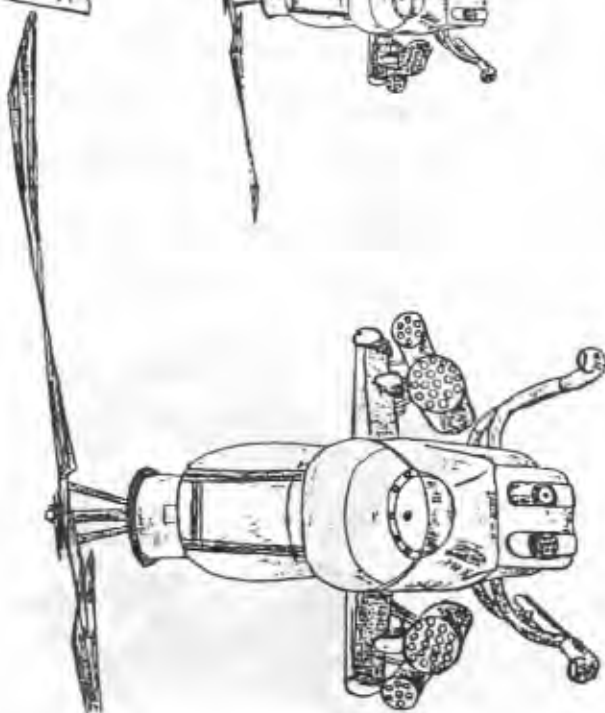
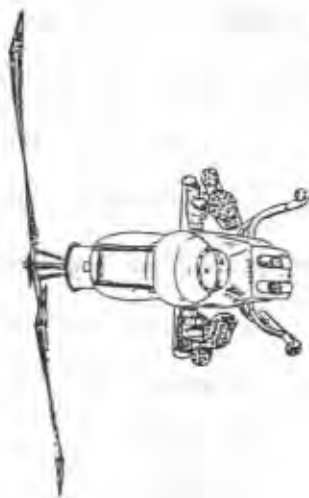
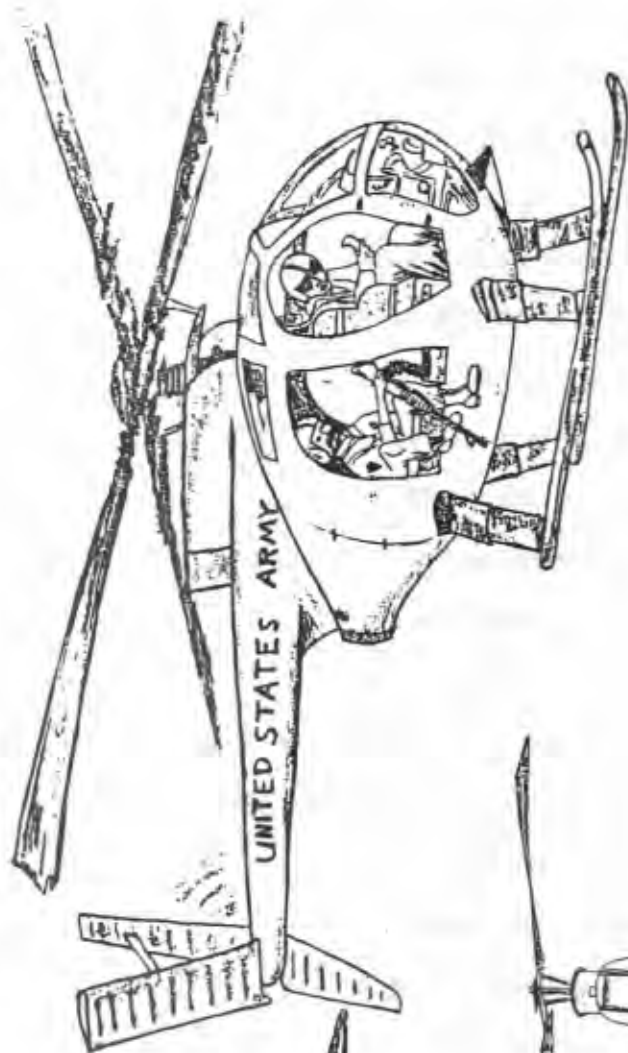
He sorts thru his thoughts carefully.

He is pointman again.
Somehow, she troubles him.
She seems so...unattainable..
Softly he asks her name.

"Asia", she replies.



C. Collins
8/87



"CHOPS"

Someone once said that your eyes are the windows to your soul. I've found those words to be pretty accurate. My entry this month is about a friendship that was forged that couldn't have happened anywhere else but the Nam.

I firmly believe that we are all products of our environment, and Chops and me are no exception. I first inquired about Chops at a Recon reunion back in 81. The news on Chops wasn't good. It seems that after I left country, he went bad.

He got into hard drugs, fighting, fucking up out in the field, and generally not giving a shit about anybody. He ended up in the slammer and nobody knew or cared what became of him.

I guess that news kind of shook me up. It certainly didn't sound like the Chops I got to know and trust. A lot of guys knew Chops, but no one ever got into his soul like I did. It's no fault of anybody's really. Chops was that way. He only showed what he wanted you to see.

To know and understand Chops, one needed a lot of patience. Fortunately, that's one of my better qualities. For all of you who don't know us, Chops is black, and I am white.

Let's not kid ourselves. We had some racial tension back at Evans in 1970. I never saw it out in the mountains or on the firebases, but it did exist back at Evans. Why did Chops go bad? I don't have the answer. Nobody does. All I can do is share with you my memories of a young man who came out of one jungle and into another one. I don't know which one was deadlier.

The date was probably early or mid August. Ripcord was history, but the memory lingered on like a festering wound. The Battalion was licking its wounds and replacements were coming in; some of them cherry and some from other outfits. New bodies were a welcome sight.

I was about two thirds of the way through my tour and had many things on my mind. Ripcord was still fresh in my mind. I was ever so thankful to be in Recon. We had a lot of walking wounded

but had lost only one man during Ripcord.

His name was Ray Johnson and he came into country the same time as me. He was a point man like me. He had come through a lot of shit and now he was dead. The sad thing about his death was that he had the misfortune to trip a mechanical ambush. Unknowingly, he blew himself away.

I thought about my own mortality. Where does luck end and fate begin? I sure had been lucky so far. I was one of the very few in Recon who did not have a purple heart. How much longer could my luck hold out?

It was with these thoughts and many more that I found myself heading out to the bunker line for guard duty. God, how I hated bunker guard. Give me shit burning detail or anything else for that matter. I was not in a good mood when I reached my bunker.

As I put down my gear, I looked at my partner for the evening. He was tall, lean, black and he had cherry written all over himself. Our eyes met for a second, and I saw something else. His eyes had the look of hate and they were sending me a silent message. Back off Jack, and don't fuck with me, was the message I was receiving.

This was something very new to me, something I didn't understand, and something that put me on the defensive. This was just what I needed; bunker guard with a tall black dude who couldn't stand the sight of me. Lord, cut me some slack. Why are you so strict with me?, I thought to myself.

I broke the ice by saying hi, but the only response I got was an icy stare that could have chilled a warm beer. Okay, I thought to myself, I'll play your silly game for awhile. It looked like I was in for a very long night.

I could sense him sizing me up so I finally broke the silence by asking him the standard question. "Where're you from?", I asked. "Jersey", he said defiantly. "Yeah, me too." "Where in Jersey?" I said.

He didn't have to tell me. His eyes said it all. "Newark", was his response. "Hey, that's not far from me." For a second

he let his guard down. He was curious and wanted to know more. "Where're you from in Jersey?" "Whippany", I said. "Never heard of it", he said as he turned his stare back out to the darkness that was settling in.

In reality Newark is only about a twenty minute drive from Whippany, but it may as well be as far away as the moon. The two places are as different as night and day. They're as different as Chops and me. Newark is a big, bad city. Whippany is a small peaceful town. Newark is what most people think Jersey is like. Whippany is the side most people never see.

Chops got his education in the jungles of Newark, and Newark in the 60's was not the place to live or raise your kids. There were a lot of jungles in Newark, black and white, and you didn't dare cross the color line unless you were armed and with friends.

I got my education in the woods behind my house. I had no fear of boundaries and skin color. I went out armed with a six pack or two. Chops grew up with a hatred and fear and with little hope in the future. I grew up with a lot of love and the belief in the American dream. Like I said, we are all products of our environment.

Now I was beginning to understand the fire in his eyes. Chops didn't hate me personally, he hated all white people equally. I sure as hell didn't like it, but I could see where he was coming from. Back in 67 I watched Newark burn on the newscasts. I saw the rioting, the looting, the protests, the burning and the beatings. I saw the hate that burned in peoples eyes.

I couldn't comprehend it. It shocked me into reality. I never thought that rioting and hatred could hit so close to home. I saw first hand the destruction in Newark when I rode the bus to take my physical. The streets were mostly deserted and the buildings were gutted and boarded up.

It was very eerie. I cursed my luck. In the middle of all those battle scarred buildings, the induction center still stood practically untouched. Why couldn't that place have burnt down?

To give you an idea how bad Newark was

in 67, my neighbor, who was in special forces said this, "We were hitting a lot of shit back then." In the middle of it all one of the brothers extended his tour. When asked why he replied, "It's still a lot safer here than in Newark."

The casualty figures from Newark were approximately 30 dead and over 400 wounded; casualties similar to Ripcord.

As the evening progressed we made the usual small talk about Jersey. I guess we were looking for more things in common besides our home state. He was very curious. He found it hard to believe that there were towns that were peaceful and tranquil in Jersey.

After we had exhausted the small talk, Chops started to talk about himself. He had been in trouble most of his life. He hated the Army. No big deal. I wasn't crazy about it either. His military career came about by a judge's decision. Go to jail and cool your heels for a few years or say hello to Uncle Sam.

The decision wasn't hard to make, but to make sure he kept his part of the bargain, he was brought to the induction center in handcuffs. I told him that I didn't have much of a choice either. I had been drafted.

He didn't want to be in Viet Nam. I told him that this place didn't make my dream sheet either. "Look around", I said. "Not many of these guys volunteered for this place." I explained to him that we were both in the same boat. Our boat was the Nam and we were the crew whether we liked it or not. Just make the best of it.

Chops definitely had a chip on his shoulder. He then got into the racial issues. He spouted a litany of oppression and hate. I told him that I couldn't change hundreds of years of past history, but I could help to keep him alive in the future. I felt sorry for him. With his outlook his life expectancy was going to be shorter than a point man with glaucoma.

Next he wanted to know about the jungle and the Gooks. I told him what had been going on since I got in country. Since he liked to fight he was going to love the mountains, I said. "The Gooks will cut you no slack, and they don't care what color you are either", I said.

He was scared and it showed, although he tried to hide it. I told him that we were all scared. We just did our best to survive. Out in the mountains we were all the same color. When the shit hits the fan we all pray to the same God.

I guess I made an impression on Chops. It felt like I was getting through to him. Probably no one had ever talked to him that way. Certainly no white man. We both found out that we had a lot more in common than our home state.

I don't remember exactly when Chops came to Recon. I know that I talked a lot about Recon and teamwork that night on the bunker line. The next time I saw him he was in our Company area. He gave me a smile and said, "Hey man, what's going on." "I didn't think you knew how to smile", was my reply.

From that point on I took Chops under my wing. I showed him how to pack his ruck the same way I was taught which seemed like an eternity ago. He was very quiet but his eyes showed only suspicion. I didn't see the fire anymore. At least that was a good sign.

Chops became a special project to me. I don't know what it was, but I liked him. Maybe it was because he was from Jersey. Maybe because he was so young and in some ways he reminded me of myself at that age. Maybe it was because of his race and I wanted to change some of his ways of thinking. I felt that I was the only chance he had.

Our first mission together was off of Kathryn. Luckily the a.o. was cold. I began teaching Chops the ways of the jungle. He was a good student. His apprenticeship in Newark had taught him well. He was quiet and cautious. I think he was surprised at how quiet and peaceful the mountains were. That could change in a hurry.

We set up together at night. Chops was full of questions and I answered as best as I could. He was doing his job but I sensed that something wasn't right. He wasn't interacting much with the rest of the team. I let it slide figuring he needed time to get to know the rest of the guys.

Our next mission was again off Kathryn. Same results. It was like it was just

him and me out there against the N.V.A. I didn't like the odds. The chemistry of the team wasn't right.

One night after we had set up I asked him what his problem was. He told me that he just didn't trust anybody else on the team, only me. I explained that he had to get that shit out of his head. I trusted these guys with my life and they trusted me. That is the key to our success. That is how we survive.

I then asked him what he was going to do in a firefight. He said that he didn't know but he would look out for himself and me first. I then said that he'd better hope he never sees a firefight. When he asked me why I told him that with that attitude if the Gooks didn't get him, I would.

I saw the hurt in Chops' eyes. He saw the anger in mine and he knew I wasn't jiving him. He had to give the rest of the team a chance. They were no different than me. "forget about race out here, it just doesn't exist."

I guess my message got through to him. He changed after that mission. He partied with us during standdown and became one of the team. He cracked jokes about the salt and pepper team. His attitude changed and he smiled a lot. When he smiled even his eyes lit up.

I went on a lot of missions with Chops and the camaraderie was always there. I was proud of him. He was a good soldier. He had come a long way since that night on the bunker line. We learned a lot from each other and he found out that we all had the same fears, joys, wants, and desires.

He was proud of his race and he was proud of his team and that's the way it should be. I never saw the fire in his eyes again. One night back at Evans he gave me one of those big black crosses made out of bootlaces that all the brothers wore. He told me that I was the only white dude he knew of that had one. It meant a lot to me.

I remember my last mission with Chops. I was practically a single digit midget. Short time fever had struck and my nerves were shot to hell. Chops kept me cool and helped to preserve what sanity I had left.

We made plans to get together after the war. He wanted me to meet his mother and he wanted to meet mine. We had a friendly argument over whose mother made the best pork chops, which were his favorite food. His craving for pork chops is how he got his name. I don't remember his real first name. I don't believe he ever told me.

I guess the easiest and hardest thing to do was leave Viet Nam. Easy, because I was going home; hard, because I was leaving friends behind. Friends like Chops. I remember how I felt when my friends went home. I shared in their happiness, but was saddened because of the void they left.

I don't remember if I got to say good bye to Chops. You know how it goes. Here today, gone tomorrow. Life goes on, the war goes on. I wonder what Chops felt when I left country? I guess I'll never know, like I'll never know why he went bad. Drugs? Maybe, or maybe 17 years of Newark was just too much.

I consider myself lucky in more ways than one. I've got only good memories of all of my teammates. For me, that's what the Viet Nam experience is all about. Good times, memories, but more than anything, the friendships.

EPILOGUE:

More good came out of my friendship with Chops than he'll ever know. My next duty station was Fort Carson, Colo. While there I ran into a lot of the brothers from the mortar platoon. It was at their urging that I got involved with the Racial Harmony Council.

I interviewed for and got the position of Brigade rep. to the Commanding General. I saw a lot of shit on both sides and got a once in a lifetime education.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Newark riots. A lot has changed in Newark in those 20 years. The rubble and war-like atmosphere is long gone. The man who was mayor was arrested, tried, and sent to prison. It seems that his administration was not quite on the up and up.

A black mayor was elected, Newark's first, and there is a black mayor today. There is a lot of new housing and industry, which brings with it new jobs. It's a far cry from being America's "model city" which Life magazine called it back in the 40's.

I'm still not crazy about Newark, not because of what happened there 20 years ago. I'm just not fond of big cities in general. I'll take the tranquility of Whippany any day.

Till next time.

John Mihalko

Look at an
infantryman's
eyes, and you
can tell how
much war he
has seen.
—G.I.
MAULDIN,
"Up Front"
(1945)



The Vietnam Vet
The Vietnam War never ended
I still fight the war when I sleep
Too many men fell
in the jungle of hell
And their memories are planted too deep
The Vietnam War never ended
The memory of war stayed alive
My friend's in a chair
But his legs aren't there
And he fights every day to survive
Another friend walks with a walker
Another friend walks with a cane
Have another friend
Shoots with a needle
Escaping the Vietnam pain
No, the Vietnam War never ended
It will live till the day that I die
War won't let you forget
See, I'm the Vietnam vet
And at night when I sleep
I still cry . . .



HEY, REMEMBER WHEN

The Headquarters Company 1st Sergeant stubbed his toe on the way to a bunker during a rocket attack at Camp Evans? Put himself in for a Purple Heart. The S-1 caught it in time and refused to put it through.

The S-1 HHC Commander and the Assistant S-3 got drunk at the Brigade Officers Club and stole one of the captured NVA anti-aircraft guns outside the Brigade Headquarters? They thought they were being chased by the MPs, so they cut the wheeled gun loose on the only bridge over the only stream at Camp Evans. Turned out, it was the Forward Air Controllers (the Bilk Boys) following them to see what was going on. Then, the MPs caught up with the FACs. Took 'em two days to explain to the Brigade CO that they were just bringing the AA gun back. The Article 32 investigation that followed never did uncover any hard evidence.

You could get free drinks during rocket attacks at the 1-77th Aerial Rocket Artillery club at Camp Evans? Accidentally step on the mosaic of their snake mascot on the floor, however, and you got to drink a horrible concoction of the bartender's choosing.

The hottest water was at the top of the shower tank? So, you waited until most of the water was gone, hoping it wouldn't run out, so you could take a hot shower.

The one guy in the platoon who liked 'John Wayne bars' also liked ham and limas? And, a little Louisiana hot sauce could make even a boot heel taste good.

Hot meals in the field (huh?) were flown out in artillery shell canisters instead of murret containers? Musta' been a shortage.

All the stuff in the sundry packs we didn't want ended up with the Kit Carson, who sold it on the black market during stand down? And, if there wasn't

a stand down coming up, he'd make himself sick and get one anyway.

You were happy when you got in-country and found out you were going to fight in the mountains instead of the rice paddies down south? You figured you wouldn't get quite so wet. Then, you discovered up north was where all the NVA were. And, the monsoons lasted six months. That's a lick on 'ya.

Your company commander and his RTO were singing so loud you had to holler at them to shut-up? The harmony wasn't that good either.

You learned that shotgun rounds for the thump gun didn't shoot straight? The rifled bore made the shot come out like a pitcher throwing a curve ball, low and inside.

You went on your first combat assault and the cobras fired their rockets on each side of your ship just before you landed? They prepped the LZ, and we prepped our pants.

You thought it was a break to go to Ripcord for a day?

You got back to the world and realized that beer didn't taste like rusty tin?

The time your mechanical ambush nailed a black bear?

You got socked in on Rocket Ridge and lived off of three LRRPs and a John Wayne bar for a week and a half?

You discovered that most of the guys in 'Nam thought Camp Evans was a forward fire base? Wonder what they called Ripcord?

You hadn't seen a woman in so long you thought a donut dolly was a hand truck for moving food stuffs?

We had a battalion commander who could stay in the field a day and still have starch in his fatigues? During the monsoons!!!

C.Hawkins
8/87



A SHAU VALLEY
MASSACHUSETTS STRIKER
March 1-May 6
APACHE SNOW
May 8-June 7
MONTGOMERY RENDEZVOUS
June 8-August 14