

RIPCORD REPORT

A NEWSLETTER

No. 1 JULY 1985

For Friends and Survivors of FSB RIPCORD, RVN

No. 14, OCTOBER 1987

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SIT/REP

As all of you know, this years Ripcord Reunion is being held in Washington, DC on the week end of October 23, 24, and 25th. A block of rooms has been reserved for us at the Westpark Hotel in Rosslyn, VA so it's not too late to make your reservations. Call Chuck Hawkins at 703/620-3534 and he'll fill you in on the details.

The only thing worse than taking a shit in the Jungle is asking for money. All of the work that goes into each issue of the Ripcord Report is contributed by members of our group, but printing and postage is expensive. Although many of us are pinching pennies to go to the reunion our newsletter could use a financial shot in the arm.

CONTACTS/NEW FACES

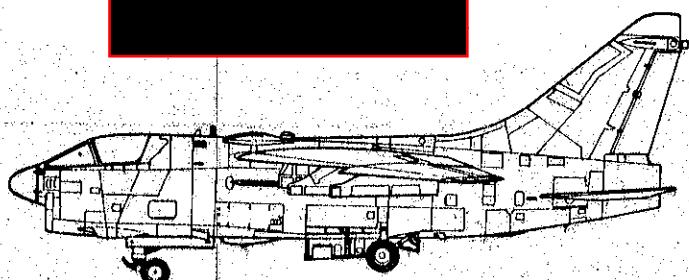
Donald Kennett
(Co.C 101 AHB)



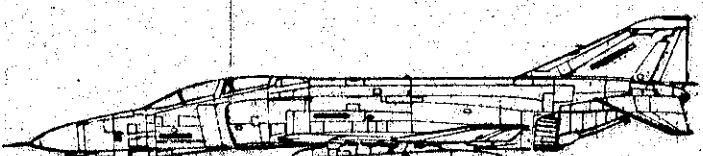
Col. Otis Livingston
(C.O. 2/501)



John Swanson
(B 2/320 Arty)



A-7 Corsair
"SLUF"
(short little ugly fucker)



F-4 Phantom

"PROGRESS REPORT"

The arrival of our two new cherries on June 30th brought our family unit to a normal Vietnam squad size. All we have to do now is settle the power struggle ("Just who the hell is our squad leader anyhow?").

Our continuing mission is to survive as best we can from day to day.

Most of the time (as ACTING squad leader) I am OP-CON to a manufacturing unit in a nearby village while my second in command (the ACTUAL squad leader) takes the point on a truck convoy for re-supplies with the rest of our unit trailing behind like a string of baby ducks....She still brings eggs back to our NDP!!?

Our two new cherries (they both look alike) are still a little wet behind the ears (?) but are coming along just fine. They still break the night silence rule from time to time and need to be babied so much that I swear you have to hand feed them. By the time we take our Freedom Bird out of here they should be ready to walk point or maybe even have squads of their own, even though it will be hard to let them leave our unit.

After every five or more missions we get a one or two day stand down at a rear base called BLACKIE'S ACRE. It's a nice quiet little AO (most of the time) with a large hooch in the center. The hooch is surrounded by a massive Jungle of large trees and underbrush. Our next refresher training course will be on clearing fields of fire!

Danny "The Quiet One" will man the machete (corn knife) while Eric "Machine-Gun Mouth" will walk slack. I, as acting squad leader, will direct the operation and man the beer tubes from the Command Deck while Susan, the actual squad leader, will give the orders. Aaron and Zachary "The Cherries" will give us an early warning cry if a shitty situation should arise during this operation.

Well, Higher Higher has informed me that one of our cherries ("ZACHIE BLACKIE") needs to have his gear changed so this report must come to an end.

GERONIMO

INCOMING

2 September 1987

I served in Viet Nam from March 1969 to Oct. 1970, with C co. 101st AHB (Black Widows). I am currently a member of the National Chapter and the Northern Ohio Chapter of the 101st Abn. Div. Assoc.

I was a helicopter crewchief on the morning that we (Black Widows) flew the mission to extract troops from fire base "Ripcord". The extraction is very vivid in my mind, even though it was over 17 years ago.

I am currently a member of the Ohio National Guard, and I can be reached at one of the following addresses:

(Home) (Ohio Nat. Guard)
Donald M. Kennett Commander
HOW BTRY 3/107 ACR

I am still looking for fellow Eagles that I served with in Viet Nam (my nickname was "RIP").

Respectfully,
Donald M. Kennett
CPT FA OHARNG
Commanding

2 September 1987

I read your story in "Screaming Eagle". First, I must say THANK YOU for your efforts. Keep up the good work.

I served with the 101st Abn. Div. from 1964 thru 1967.

My unit was A-Btry 2/319th Arty and I am very proud of being a member of the 101st Abn. Div.

Respectfully,
John M. C. Clegg
101st Abn. Div. Assoc.

My problem is I lost all contact with my unit when they went to Vietnam.

Except for a few things that I've heard, I know very little.

One of the rumors was that my Battery was hit by friendly Arty fire and that many of the men I knew were KIA. I would appreciate anyone having any information on my unit contacting me.

Louis Cercedez
17820 Valerio St.

22 September 1987

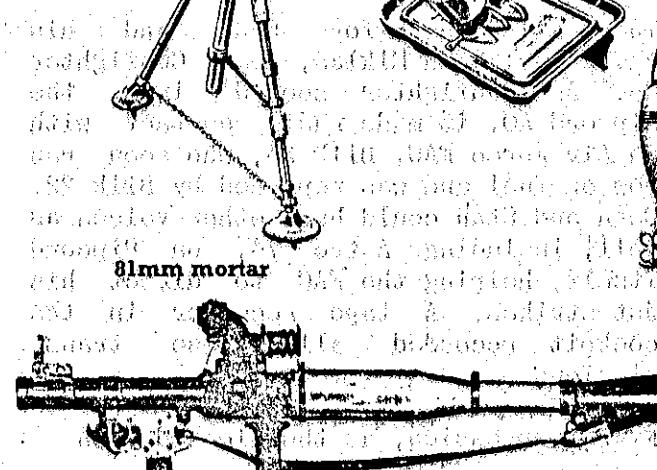
Thought you might be interested to know that I commanded the 2/501 during the battle at FSB Ripcord. I shared my headquarters on Ripcord with LTC Andre Lucas who was later killed and who was awarded the Medal of Honor.

Good luck to you in your search for your compatriots!

Sincerely,

Otis W. Livingston Jr.

 AIRBORNE



THE AIR FORCE AND RIPCORD

Ever wonder who those jet pilots were who seemed to appear above Ripcord, like the U.S. Cavalry, just in the nick of time?

There were pilots from all three services, of course, but the guys who flew those sleek, mean-looking F-4E Phantoms came from the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing of the Seventh Air Force. They taxied down the runways at Danang, the world's busiest airport (over 40,000 take-offs and landings a month), and within minutes could see beneath them the rugged, triple-canopy mountains of western Thua Thien Province.

The Air Force Phantoms were especially busy on July 23, 1970. On that day the largest all-American helicopter evacuation under fire of the Vietnam War was taking place. After three weeks under siege, troops of the 101st Airborne Division were finally being pulled off Firebase Ripcord and out of the surrounding area. The helicopters set out at first light, and the Phantoms weren't far behind.

One of the Phantom pilots was a 35-year-old Californian named Dean Rands. Rands had come back from a mission earlier that hot season with holes from a .51 cal in his jet, but he had also done a lot of boring missions--"just putting bombs on a willie pete." He went through a routine pre-flight check in the light of a beautiful sunrise on the morning of July 23rd, wondering if it would be just another day.

The call sign for Dean and his navigator, Stan Miklas, was Gunfighter 05. As Gunfighter zoomed into the Ripcord AO, it made radio contact with an Air Force FAC, Bilk 22, who soon ran low on fuel and was replaced by Bilk 22. Dean and Stan could hear other voices as well, including Astro 74, on Ripcord itself, helping the FAC to direct his jet strikes. A tape recorder in the cockpit recorded all these transmissions.

First impression, as they looked down

from 5,000 feet: choppers--choppers everywhere, and puffs of white smoke from artillery fire. They circled as their FAC made contact with Ripcord:

"Astro seven-four, OK. I'm gonna put Bilk 22 to work for you here. He'll be your FAC on station. He's gonna get the same targets. He's got two flights holding at this time."

The FAC asked where the downed Chinook was. Astro 74 replied, "He's sitting right next to me on top of Ripcord. He took .51 cal."

Bilk 22 then gave Rands and another Phantom pilot a quick briefing:

"Current elevation is 2,600 feet. The weather is about a 6,000 scattered layer. There should be no problem at this time. My latest altimeter setting was two niner seven four, two niner seven four. Location of friendlies; they're gonna be about 600 meters--I say again, 600 meters to the whiskey. OK, we got numerous helicopter traffic, so you guys can really keep your head up. If you have any trouble, you can expect a lot of automatic weapons fire, possibly .50 cal...."

"OK, now we're gonna be making the headings from about, uh, southeast to northwest. I want you to use a left break. What we're goin' after is a border position, and, uh, we've got some pretty sharp winds comin' out of whiskey. So we're gonna have to try to get this thing. It's right on top of the ridgeline. It's gonna be hard to hit."

The "thing" that was going to be hard to hit was an NVA position from which mortar rounds and .51 cal machine gun fire were coming.

Gunfighter 05 maneuvered, with Rands and Miklas taking note of a "dead chopper" on Hill 805 and several live choppers in the air below them, blocking their approach. Bilk 22 warned them to look out: "OK, guys, .51 cals are bad, but these choppers can really get us down."

Bilk 22 asked for two passes, but Rands said he needed three to clear his racks. A white marker round billowed. Gunfighter 05 swooped down toward the ridgeline--

"OK, we're comin' in now"--and released a pair of 500-pound high-drag "Snakeye" bombs. Rands raised the sleek machine's nose up again and climbed. Astro 74 asked the FAC for a small adjustment: "If you could move to the northwest about 50 meters, we'd be right on target. One of those bombs came pretty close."

Bilk 22 directed Gunfighter in again. "All right, lead I want you to come in and hit 30 meters to the five o'clock." Rands angled down. Pulling back up, he and Miklas heard exclamations over the radio: "Beautiful! Outstanding work!"

On the third pass they had four "nipes"--cannisters of napalm--to unload. Again choppers got in the way, crisscrossing the sky below them and above the dark-green mountains: loaches and slicks and gunships. Miklas cursed one of them only to catch sight of another one coming in at three o'clock.

"Man I got two helicopters down there now."

"Yeah, I got 'em all over the place."

Finally a clear approach. Another swoop low over the ridgeline, followed by flames and billowing black smoke.

Rands could release only two of the nipes, and asked for another pass. Bilk 22 asked Astro 74 if he wanted them; the reply came back from Ripcord, "That's most affirmed." Rands also offered the use of his 20-millimeter cannons, but the answer was, "I don't think we're gonna use 20-mike-mikes today, guys."

Again, the swooping, roaring machine made its pass, and again the fire and smoke shot up from the jungled ridgeline below.

Gunfighter 05 had done its job. Bilk 22 and Astro 74 still had another fish to fry--the extraction of Ripcord wasn't over yet--but the FAC took time to say, "OK, Gunfighter, beautiful work, thanks a lot for comin' on. I had you on target about five three past the hour. You were off it on the hour. You had 100% on target, 100% within five meters. That was really shit-hot work. Thanks a lot,

guys."

Rands turned his F-4-E around, heading back east toward the distant blue haze of the South China Sea. Rands wondered what it was like down below for the 101st Airborne troops he was leaving behind on Ripcord and in the jungle around it. Well, he hoped he had helped out this time.

Gunfighter 05's seven-minute work-out did in fact help out--a lot. It knocked out the NVA mortar and heavy machine gun. Astro 74 was happy enough about this to call Rand's CO up afterwards and say enough good things that Rands got a Distinguished Flying Cross later. What he also got was a feeling of having made a meaningful contribution--something which, in his experience, didn't happen often in Vietnam.

The next day Rands revisited a very different Ripcord. It was a smoking, abandoned, lunar hilltop, with no choppers darting on and off and nothing remaining of the previous day's frenetic activity. The mission was not to protect the hill, but to smash and burn anything useful left on it. Gunfighter emptied his bomb racks on top of this no longer valuable American property. He was credited with nine secondary explosions, two secondary fires and 10 bunkers destroyed.

On the 25th Rands returned once more to the Ripcord AO. The target was a bunker complex in a small valley between two hills. The FAC explained--unnecessarily, for Rands and Miklas--that the target was "near a friendly firebase that we had out here until a couple days ago... The friendlies are not a factor out here any longer."

Ripcord was just another hill out in Indian country, and would never play a part in the Vietnam War again. Gunfighter did his job once more and headed back to Danang.

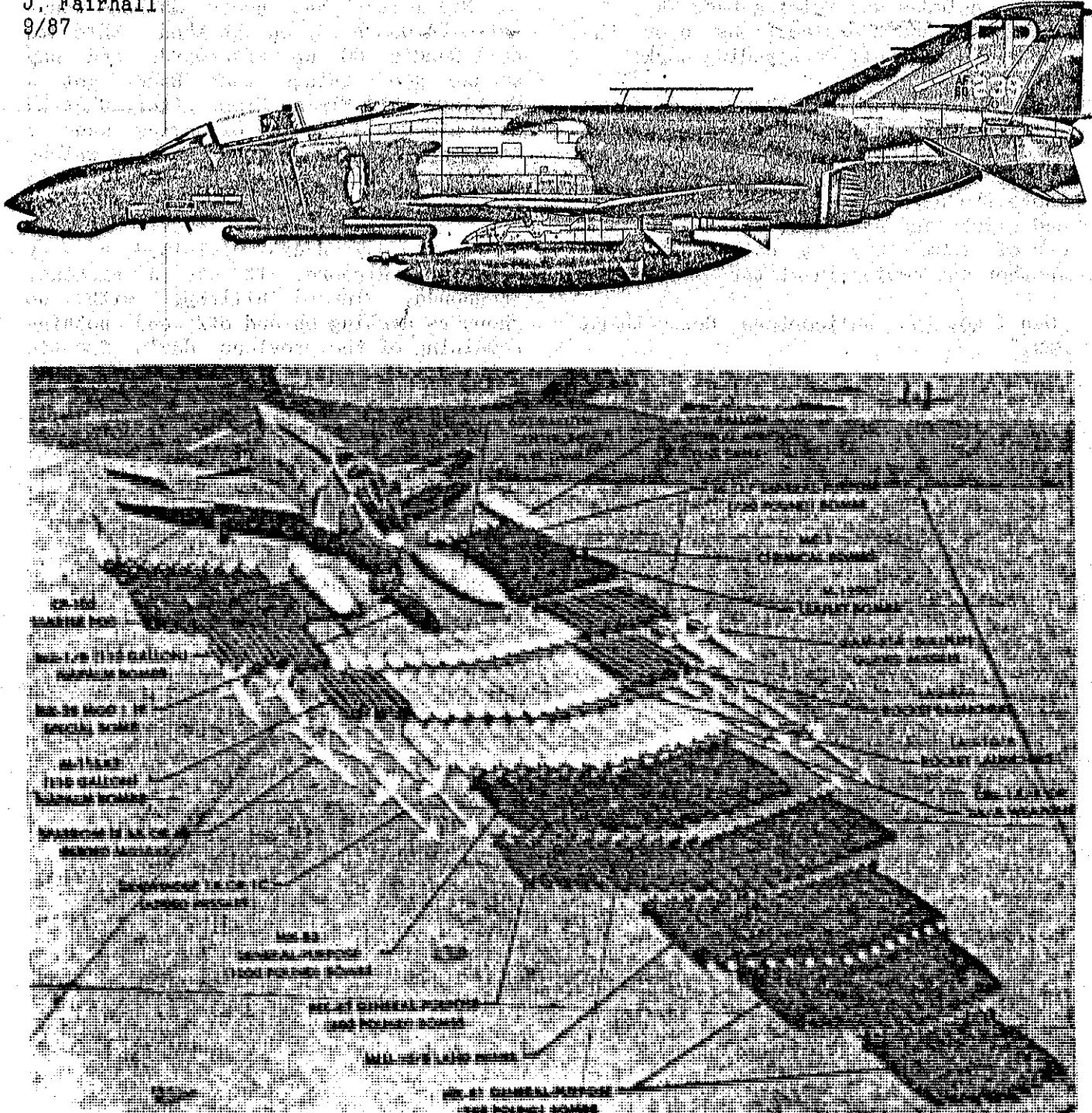
On July 31 the commander of the 101st, General Hennessy, sent a message to the commander of the Seventh Air Force, expressing thanks for support provided during the evacuation of Ripcord on the 23rd. The telegram read in part:

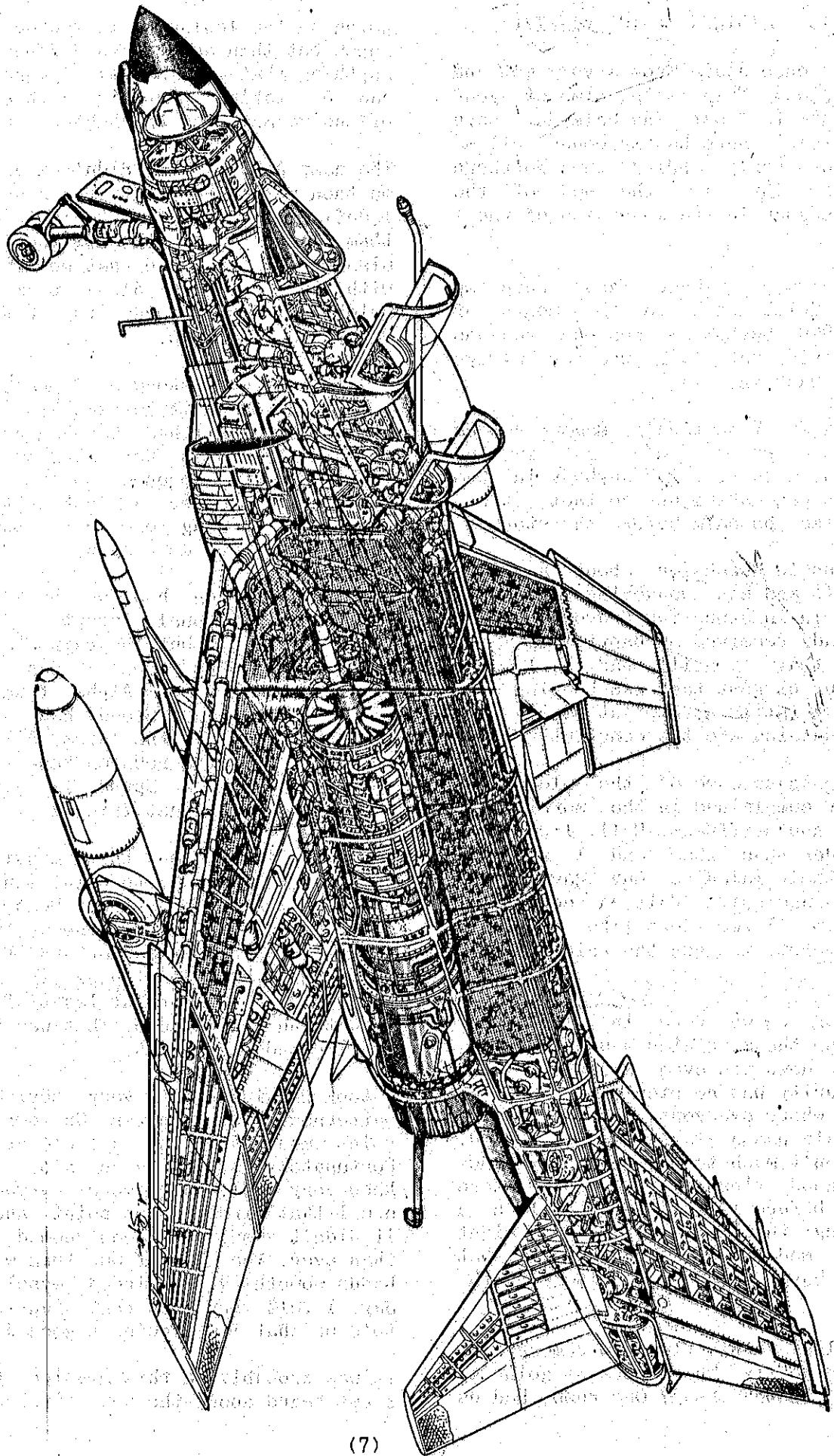
"BECAUSE OF THE EXTREME ENEMY PRESSURE ON THE FIREBASE THE EXTRACTION COULD NOT HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFULLY ACCOMPLISHED WITHOUT YOUR ASSISTANCE. THE ATTACK AGAINST HOSTILE POSITIONS IN THE RIPCORD AREA BY YOUR AIRCRAFT BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER THE OPERATION INSURED THAT FRIENDLY LOSSES WERE HELD TO A MINIMUM. NO ONE APPRECIATES YOUR SUPPORT MORE THAN THE INFANTRYMEN AND ARTILLERYMEN WHO WERE ON THE GROUND."

Flying in support of Firebase Ripcord wasn't one of the Air Force's better-known jobs. It wasn't as glamorous as hitting a bridge in North Vietnam. But many of the pilots of the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing knew that something bad was going on in the mountains overlooking the A Shau Valley, and did their best to help the troops on a battered hill called Ripcord and in the jungle around it. One of these pilots was Dean Rands.

J. Fairhall

9/87





THE IDES OF MARCH

Greetings once again from a very wet and damp Whippany. This is the time of year that I hate the most. The calendar says that spring is here but my bones tell me otherwise. Early spring in Northern Jersey is a lot like the end of the monsoon season in the mountains of the I Corps.

This is also the time of year when my thoughts drift back to the month of March, 1970. Seventeen monsoon seasons have passed but this weather always takes me back in time.

After the St. Valentine's Day Massacre things were pretty quiet out in the mountains. I don't think anybody in the Battalion was making any contact. It was almost like the calm before the storm.

I had been in Recon for about a month and a half and was wondering what the future held in store for Bravo team. I had already received my baptism of fire but knew that I still had a lot to learn. Our biggest task was keeping warm and dry, a futile attempt at best. Damn those mountains and the constant rain.

I used to tease some of the old-timers when they complained in the morning of soreness and stiffness. Hell, I was four years older than them and I suffered none of their maladies. Guy gave me a sly smile and said: "Wait a couple of months, you'll feel just like us." Guy was a prophet. I curse the rain to this day.

As you can see we were in ill humor. Humping up the mountains was bad enough, but going down was even worse. Walking rear security was no picnic. By the time I got to where everyone else had been the terrain was a giant sliding board. There wasn't much to grab on to since all the good vines and branches were torn off before I got to them. It's a good thing that I'm small and light cause I made do with branches that wouldn't have held anyone else on the team.

It was also at this time the rumors were beginning to fly. Where were we going to be in the months ahead? One rumor had us

going to the lowlands. It seemed to make sense but then again when did the Army do anything that made sense? Another rumor had us taking part in a big spring offensive maybe to the Ashau.

The name Ashau Valley didn't mean shit to me then until the old-timers clued me in. I definitely opted for the lowlands. Our team did get to see the lowlands for one mission. It was there that we linked up with the infamous Alpha team led by Cricket with St. George the r.t.o. and Doc Speed the medic.

I'd like to do a story on Alpha team but I could never do it justice. The members of Alpha team all had that crazed nervous look in their eyes. Our mission in the lowlands was supposed to be like a vacation, but after a week with alpha team I was looking forward to the peace and quiet of the mountains.

Our next mission had us back in the mountains. As usual insertion day was bright and sunny but the rain started as soon as we touched down. I was somewhat glad to get away from Alpha team but I missed Doc Speed. Speed has a unique personality to say the least. All of you who met him at the reunion know firsthand what I mean. Since Speed is also from Jersey we became fast friends.

I believe it was on this mission that Junior "promoted" me to point man if you can call that a promotion. Damn, I was just getting used to rear security. I had grave doubts but if Junior and the rest of the team had confidence in me, I'd give it my best shot. At least I didn't have to hump the radio. That was the one job I dreaded the most.

I took walking point very seriously. I patterned my style after Ox our former point man but at a slower pace. Fortunately we were in an a.o. that we knew very well. I was more nervous than usual that first day on point and hoped it didn't show. My senses seemed sharper than ever. The fate of our team was in my hands something I reminded myself every day. I felt very good that night when Ox told me that I was doing a good job.

It was probably on this mission that we first heard about the new firebase that

was being built. Its name was Ripcord and things weren't going all too well. The troops that were there were receiving fire. It looked like the mountains were about to heat up.

It finally dawned on me why we were always out in the mountains. We were reconning the Ripcord a.o. all along. Our contact on St. Valentine's Day had taken place deep in the mountains probably in the Ripcord a.o. or even further out. My dreams of a spring and summer in the lowlands was just that, a fading dream. We never did see the lowlands again.

What did Ripcord really mean? Would we go back to the Ashau? Opinions were split. The old timers figured that the Ashau was inevitable. Why else build a firebase so deep in the mountains if we weren't going to use it for some kind of offensive. We had all heard Nixon's line that we were in a defensive posture and the Arvn's would do most of the fighting, but when was the last time we saw any Arvn's?

The old timers were thankful that their tours were short and rear jobs awaited them soon. I didn't know what to expect but I had a sneaky suspicion that the mountains were going to be my home for a long time.

The things I remember most about the month of March was the constant rain which made it very cold, especially at night. I hated the bugs, mosquitoes, spiders, leeches etc., they were a nuisance we could deal with. The rain, the cold, and the mud was a different story. I also remember the total darkness that came with the night. No moon, no stars, no nothing; just rain, mud, cold, and total darkness.

It was on such a night when something happened that I still can't explain. Junior and I were pulling guard together when someone or something walked into the roof of our hooch, bounced off, paused for a split second, and then ran like hell. Who or what the hell was that we wondered? The rain and the darkness made it impossible to see or hear anything. We figured that it had to be a Gook. No animal would be out on a night

like this.

What the hell do we do now? Whatever it was it was long gone. If it was a Gook, judging the speed of his exit, he was alone and just as surprised as we were. We decided to sit tight and wait. We sure as hell weren't going to go looking for him. Nothing ever happened. We searched the area the next morning but couldn't find a clue or a trace as to who our visitor was. The rain had done its job well.

Another episode that was an embarrasment to us was the time our team got ambushed by a tree. I can laugh about it now. I came home without a scratch from the N.V.A., and Lord knows they tried, but it was a damn tree that almost put my lights out.

We were working a ridgeline where most of the big trees were dead and rotting. It was an eerie place, the only sound being those dead trees creaking and swaying in the breeze. It was like seeing the whole life cycle of the jungle right before your eyes. There were bushes, small trees, bigger trees, and then bigger trees which were all dead and bare. The terrain was littered with trees that had fallen and trees that were waiting to fall. Maybe it was a defoliated area that the jungle was re-claiming. I never saw anything like it again.

Battallion policy was no hooches no matter how hard it rained, but in the month of March I doubt if anybody was following policy. The weather was lousy and the missions were boring. We found a nice spot to set up amongst all the greenery and tall, decaying trees. We even decided to build one gigantic hooch to accomidate the whole team.

There we were sitting in our hooch, passing the time when we heard a loud crack. Junior and me looked at each other and our hooch collapsed. I was stunned and my head hurt like hell. There was a God damned tree on top of us. In one split second that tree hit us with the force of an r.p.g. Junior was bleeding from the head profusely and his 16 was twisted grotesquely. Fortunately, Junior and me were the only casualties.

Junior's head needed medical attention

and my eyesight was no longer 20-20, so we called in and reported our casualties. Fortunately we weren't socked in and a slick came out and picked us up and dropped off two unhappy looking replacements.

When we got to the aid station everyone wanted to know about the firefight. Junior kept a straight face and explained that there was no firefight; we were ambushed by a fucking tree. Of course he neglected to tell them the circumstances that brought about our injuries. I mimicked Junior's version of the events while trying to keep the sheepish look off my face.

I must admit that we certainly looked like we had been in a firefight. We were both covered with Junior's blood and the knot on my forehead was the size of a golf ball. There was even mention of purple hearts which we respectfully declined. How could you justify a purple heart for an attack by a tree?

We left the aid station feeling stupid as hell, but happy in the knowledge that we had earned some ghost time in the rear. Ghosting was a new experience for me and it was made even more enjoyable with the medical profile I tucked away in my pocket.

The next morning Top sent for me to send me out on a garbage detail. I told Top

that I'd like to go as I reached in my pocket and handed him that magic piece of paper. I didn't have to say anything else. Top sent me back to our hooch where I spent the rest of the day doing nothing and enjoying my good fortune.

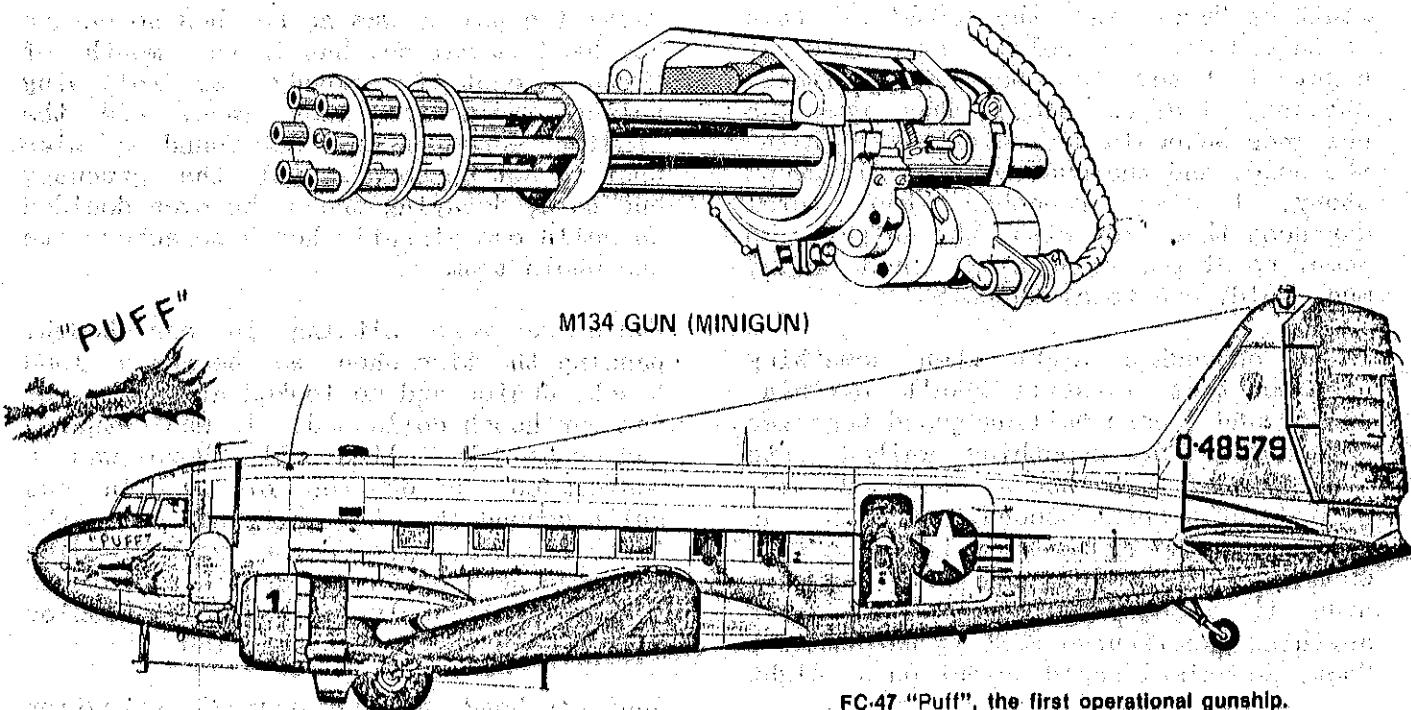
The next day Doc Speed took me to Camp Eagle and the eye test confirmed what I already knew; I was fit to return to the field. My good fortune held out for a few more days though. There was no sense sending me back out to the field. Recon was due in in a few days.

I learned a lot that month of March. Never again would we build a hooch to house the whole team. I also learned that Mother Nature was just as formidable as seemingly invisible N.V.A. I was now a point man, a job I was to hold for the rest of my tour.

I also heard the name Ripcord for the first time and I didn't like it. It had an ominous ring to it. I thought about that ridgeline with all the dead trees waiting for that moment in time when they'd come crashing back to the earth and pass into history. Mother Nature would re-claim them without leaving a trace. I didn't know it then, but those trees were a harbinger of things to come. April 1st, was only a few days away.

Till next time.

John Mihalko



FC-47 "Puff", the first operational gunship.

MOVIE RECON

Hamburger Hill

by: John Mihalko

I went to see Hamburger Hill last night. Maybe my expectations were too high but I was critical of most of the movie. Their technical adviser must have been Sly Stallone. There was blood and guts galore, but little else.

I was turned off as soon as I saw the subdued Screaming Eagle patches. One guy even had one on his right shoulder. The butt packs and feather weight rucks didn't help either.

It was pure Hollywood from the dialogue to the frags a-la John Wayne dangling from the web gear. Noise discipline was non-existent. I really lost it when one of the guys lit up a cigarette at night, not only that, the platoon sergeant says, "If you must smoke at night, throw a poncho over your head." I was never in a line company, but somehow I just don't think it was that way.

The dialogue was bad and the characters weren't much better. Death was a well deserved reward. Also does everyone have

to fire their 18's on rock and roll?

Whatever happened to ugly Vietnamese women with black stained teeth? The girls these guys were banging in the beginning of the movie were not the women I remember.

Where in the hell were these pleasure palaces with the good looking women? I never saw any. The only thing I could relate to was the rain and the mud with people slip, sliding everywhere.

The movie appears to insult us more than anything. I don't like being portrayed as a grunt with enough free time in the rear to seek out beautiful Oriental women, fuck, suck and drink hard liquor all night in a tub of warm water. Then after a night of revelry, head back to my unit, put on a ruck my three year old daughter could carry, and fly out to a cold LZ in the Ashau no less, and do my thing. It just wasn't that way.

I bet Chuck Hawkins would get a chuckle out of the way the platoon leader was portrayed. Somehow I just can't picture a platoon sergeant calling the shots with Chuck.

"Spooky"

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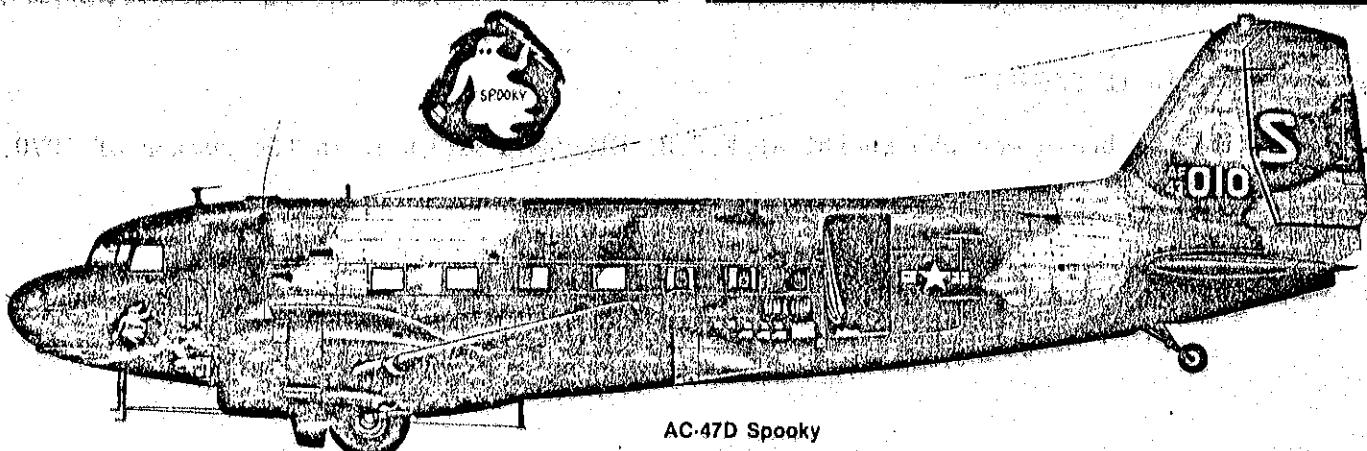
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Who Knows What Evil Lurks Below the Jungle Canopy?
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AC-47D Spooky

VIETNAM VET

I fought in the mountains of Vietnam

Against the N.V.A., not the Viet Cong

They were trained like me but from a younger age

And in battle they fought like a tiger in a rage

They had no fear or so it seemed

And about them all of these years I've dreamed

I've seen them alive and I've seen them dead

They killed my friends as the ground turned red

From the blood of these Americans who had no quarrel

With the Vietnamese or the rest of the World

The N.V.A. were fighting for the land

Knowing they would remain until they gained the upper hand

But the brave G.I. was only trying to survive

If for a year he could stay alive

Then he could return home and forget this awful war

But forget was not a word that he could use anymore

For its always on his mind, down deep in his soul

Gripping so tight that it won't let go

Many have scars and some can't walk

Some wounded so bad they can't even talk

They fought for this Country so please don't forget

The freedom we love and the Vietnam Vet

by: Jim Griffin (B 2/501)

Dedicated to the brave men who fought at F.S.B. Ripcord, Vietnam, in the summer of 1970.