

# RIPCORD REPORT

No. 55

For friends and survivors of the  
Battle of Fire Support Base Ripcord,  
RVN, March 12-July 23, 1970.

December 2001

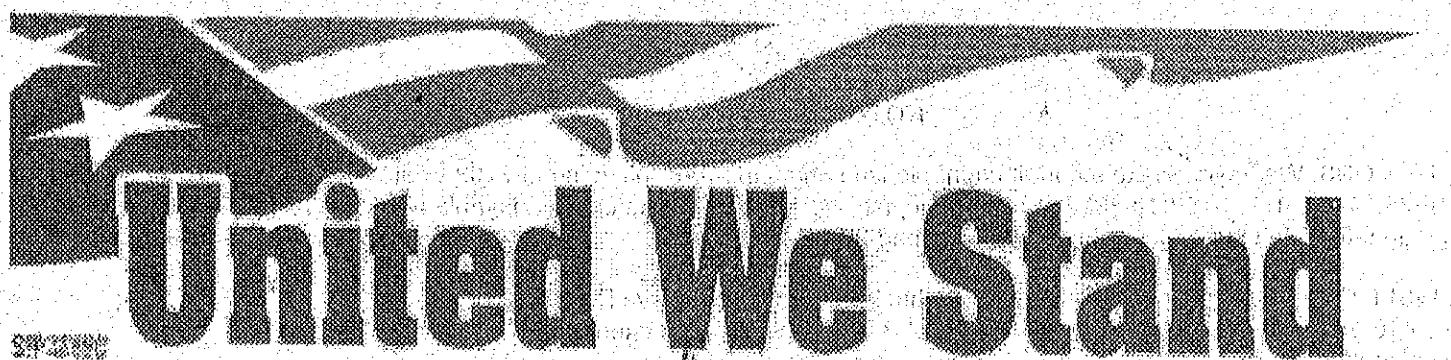


Reunion 2001 would be well attended. These concerns turned out to be groundless as veterans of the battle journeyed from as far away as Alaska and Hawaii to meet with others and share remembrances of those difficult times in the spring and summer of 1970. Pictures on pages 3 and 4.

## Reunion '01: More than we bargained for!

Fred Spaulding and George Westerfelt hold up the new Ripcord Flag, designed by Fred's wife Micki.

CARLISLE, Pennsylvania—About 130 members and family of the Ripcord Association joined together for several days of good fellowship and cheer beginning on October 10 and ending (until next year) on the 14<sup>th</sup>. Given the large turnout at Shreveport last year, there was some concern that

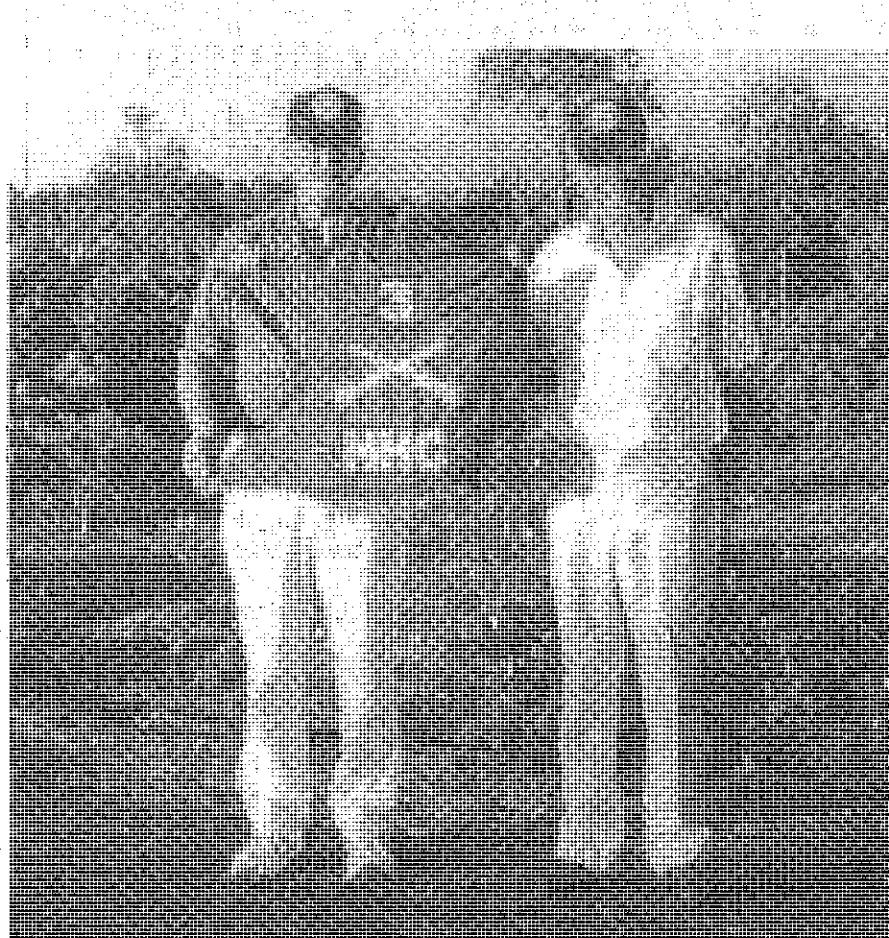


Reunion 2002 will be in Colorado Springs, Colo., October 17-20. Mark your calendars. More details inside.

## LZ KENT ISLAND

STEVENVILLE, Md.—The association wants to say "thanks" to recent contributors, and these include the following stalwarts:

Kenneth L. Hamilton, Bob Seitz, George Westervelt, Tom and Janis Rubsam, Leonard Moore, Gary Watrous, J. S. Crills, Larry Witte, Bill and Sheila Williams, Chip Collins, George Stenehjem, Richard and Pat Drury, Steve Wallace, Charlie and Juanita Tipton, Larry C. Button, Floyd and Diane Alexander. Last, but not least, thanks to everyone at the reunion who gave so freely to keep the association solvent. Cheers and a tip of the Ripcord Steel Pot to you!



where Camp Evans used to be located.)

Spaulding

## DONATIONS!

# Ben and Fred's most excellent adventure

3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup>  
Airborne Division  
gideon stands  
once again over  
Camp Evans! (Or

Photo courtesy of Fred

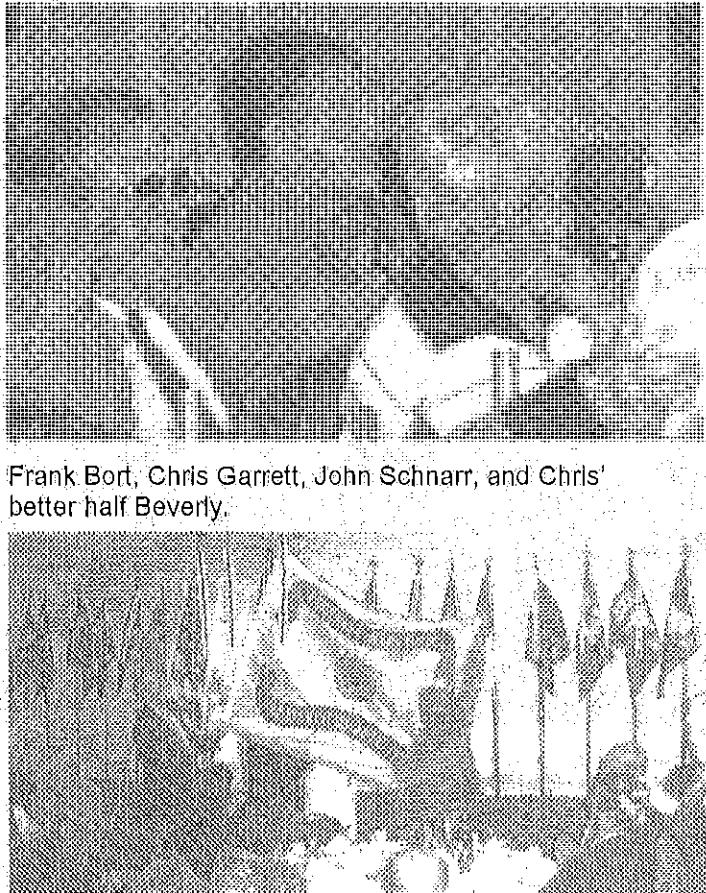
### NOTES and REMINDERS

MEMBERSHIP has now topped the 400 mark. Send NAME and ADDRESS CHANGES to Chuck

## Reunion '01 photos



Fred Spaulding performed master of ceremony duties. Here Fred opens a token of appreciation as his wife Micki looks on.

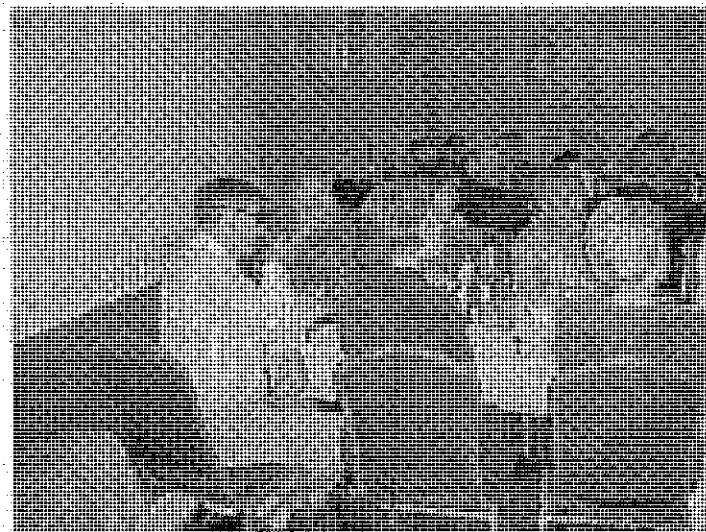


Frank Bort, Chris Garrett, John Schnarr, and Chris' better half Beverly.

Ripcord Flag unfurled—"Firebase Ripcord, 12 March-23 July 1970," with the image of the Ripcord coin in the center.



John and Kathy Mihalko, two of the original members.

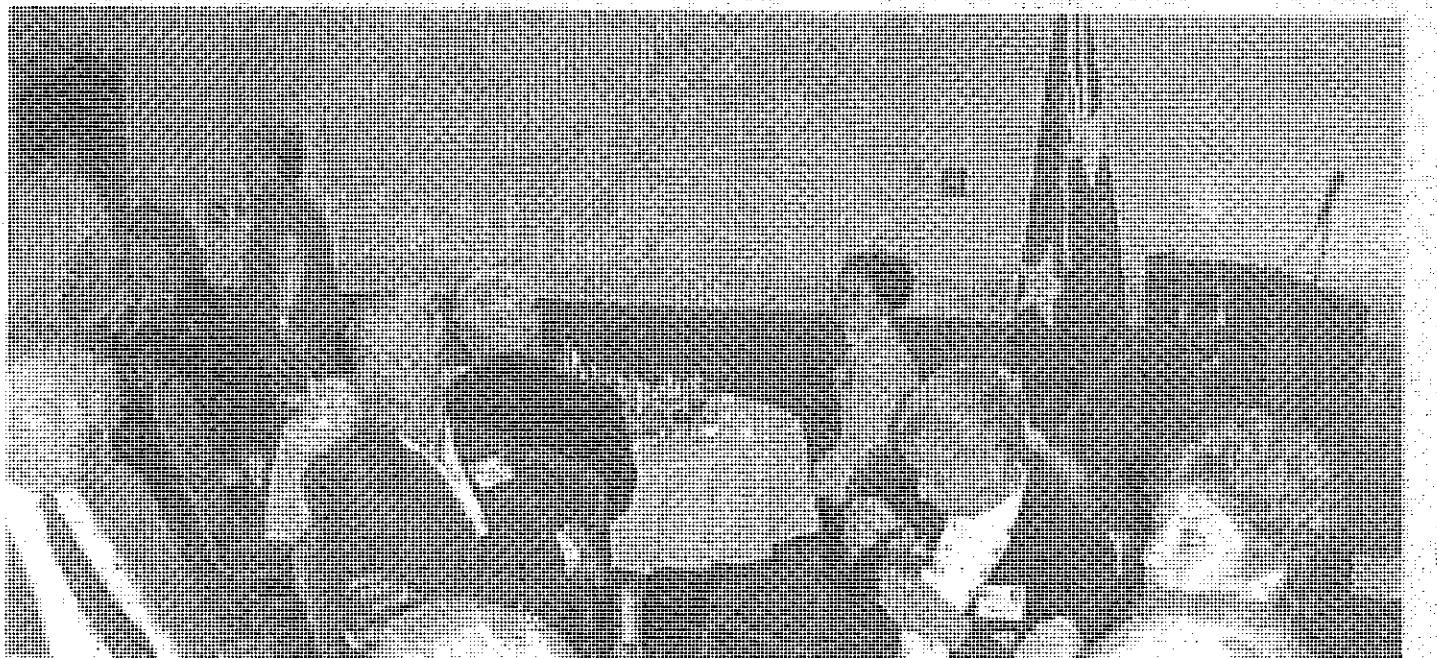


Steve Wallace takes a sip.

Mark your calendars!

Ripcord Reunion 2002 will be in  
Colorado Springs, October 17-20.

## More photos



Terry Stanger, Dan and Lydia Esposito, Bonnie Martin, with Micki Spaulding in background. Note the two-star general's flag, for the highest-ranking FSB Ripcord veteran present, Maj. Gen. Ben Harrison (USA, ret.).



Association founder Chip Collins.



Buffet spread: somewhat better than GI chow.

MAILBOMB

# INCOMING

From across the country and around the world.

Billy Jack Ferrell reports

Please keep me on the Ripcord mailing list. I have a lot of problems from the Vietnam War—PTSD, 50 percent on both ears are gone, I have a pin in my left leg from three AK-47 rounds, and so on.

I like the Ripcord Report and enjoy reading it. Thanks very much for your time.

Sincerely yours,

Billy Jack Ferrell

Madison, Illinois

P.S., Have a nice day.

## New Members

Attached is the name and address of a former aviator who wishes to have his name added to the mailing list.

Col. Gerald Lord

Former CO of Charlie Company, 158<sup>th</sup> Aviation Battalion

Jim Campbell

Also, Joseph Sites was the CO of the 2/11<sup>th</sup> FA Battalion when A Battery was sent to Ripcord to provide fire support for the 2/506<sup>th</sup>. He was a good boss!

Joseph Sites

Thanks,

Tom Austin

## HOT SKINNY ON RÉUNION 2002

When: October 17-20, 2002

Where: Radisson Inn North, Colorado Springs, Colorado. Call 1-719-598-5770 x 305 (or toll free, 1-800-333-333) for reservations. Make sure you say "Ripcord Association" and "Code 101." Rooms are single or double at \$69 per night (normally \$135, but discounted for the reunion), smoking or non-smoking; triples are \$79 per night, and quadruples are \$89 per night. Add 8 percent sales tax. The Radisson Inn North is close to the airport and just off I-25 at the exit for the U.S. Air Force Academy. There is a National Car rental office at the hotel.

## Reunion Registration Fee

Year you were promoted

Before March 12, 2002

\$75 per adult; \$50 per child under 18; \$40 banquet only

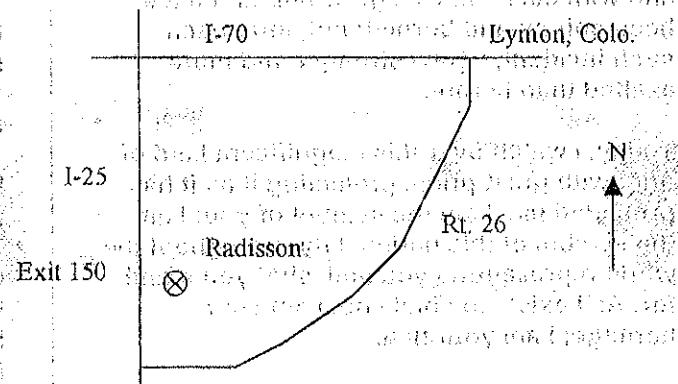
Before July 23, \$80 per adult

Before September 1, \$85 per adult

After September 1, \$90 per adult

Send registration fee to Fred Spaulding at:

[REDACTED]



# I am your heritage, I am your flag!

I was born some 200 years ago, conceived from the hopes and dreams of the people of this young country. As the nation grew, I too did grow. As I look back on the events of the past 200 years, I recall with pride the determination of your forefathers to make this country a free and independent nation.

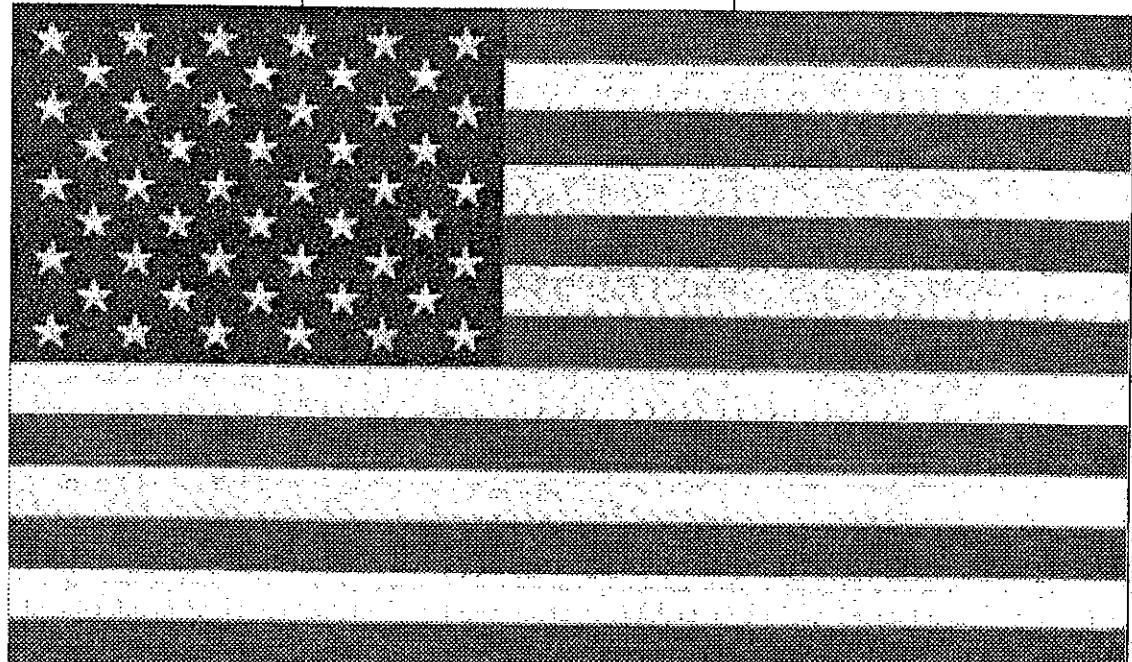
Lexington... Concord... Bunker Hill... Valley Forge; yes, they are all just names now, but then they were a message: a message to the world that this young nation had fought for and gained its independence.

In 1812 this independence was threatened. At Fort McHenry, as I flew high above the ramparts, I became a symbol: a symbol to all, that as long as I reign, unfurling my colors with each passing wind, this nation will exist as a bastion of freedom for all that abide here. When this country became a house divided, it hurt me deeply. During that long and regretful Civil War, I wept. I wept for the dead, for the living and for the devastation of my beautiful country. At the close of that ugly war, my people once again united, bound the nation's sounds and started this country on its way to becoming the greatest nation on earth.

Since that time, I have watched this country struggle through wars, depressions and scandals. I have been sung to and praised and with each stanza I grew nobler. I have been spit on and burned; but, after each such incident, I grew stronger and more exalted than before.

Today, I watch over this magnificent land of ours with great pride, protecting it as it has protected me. I am the symbol of you; I am the symbol of this nation. I fly throughout the world representing you and what you stand for. As I exist, so shall you. I am your heritage; I am your flag.

© 1978, Fred Spaulding



Delaware, Dec. 7, 1787  
Pennsylvania, Dec. 12, 1787  
New Jersey, Dec. 18, 1787  
Georgia, Jan. 2, 1788  
Connecticut, Jan. 9, 1788  
Massachusetts, Feb. 6, 1788  
Maryland, Apr. 28, 1788  
South Carolina, May 23, 1788  
New Hampshire, June 21, 1788  
Virginia, June 25, 1788  
New York, July 26, 1788  
North Carolina, Nov. 21, 1789  
Rhode Island, May 29, 1790  
Vermont, Mar. 4, 1791  
Kentucky, June 1, 1792  
Tennessee, June 1, 1796  
Ohio, Mar. 1, 1803  
Louisiana, Apr. 30, 1812  
Indiana, Dec. 11, 1816  
Mississippi, Dec. 10, 1817  
Illinois, Dec. 3, 1818

Alabama, Dec. 14, 1819  
Maine, Mar. 15, 1820  
Missouri, Aug. 10, 1821  
Arkansas, June 15, 1836  
Michigan, Jan. 26, 1837  
Florida, Mar. 3, 1845  
Texas, Dec. 29, 1845  
Iowa, Dec. 28, 1846  
Wisconsin, May 29, 1848  
California, Sept. 9, 1850

Minnesota, May 11, 1858  
Oregon, Feb. 14, 1859  
Kansas, Jan. 29, 1861  
West Virginia, June 20, 1863  
Nevada, Oct. 31, 1864  
Nebraska, Mar. 1, 1867  
Colorado, Aug. 1, 1876  
North Dakota, Nov. 2, 1889  
South Dakota, Nov. 2, 1889  
Montana, Nov. 8, 1889  
Washington, Nov. 11, 1889  
Idaho, July 3, 1890  
Wyoming, July 10, 1890  
Utah, Jan. 4, 1896  
Oklahoma, Nov. 16, 1907  
New Mexico, Jan. 6, 1912  
Arizona, Feb. 14, 1912  
Alaska, Jan. 3, 1959  
Hawaii, Aug. 21, 1959

# Attending a Ripcord reunion for the first time

Fred Spaulding writes:

This guy (Ken Miller) is a school teacher. I asked him to put into words what he felt about coming to the reunion for the first time. I thought that if it could be put in the newsletter that perhaps others out there who are hesitant might come to the next reunion.

**G**reetings fellow troopers. At our reunion at Carlisle, Fred Spaulding asked me to jot down a few thoughts on my impressions of our gathering both before and after the event. I offer the following:

I suffered so. I had misgivings about attending and even though I knew two attendees personally, I didn't feel I would belong.

When I arrived on Friday morning, the first person I met was Fred, along with my friend Leonard Moore. I began to feel part of something. Throughout the days' activities I invariably mixed with other vets and their wives and began to feel a kindred spirit, a camaraderie that I had not experienced in years. From grunt to aviator we had shared something that few people of our generation, for good or

In retrospect, it was sometimes difficult for me to relate to some of my feelings during the event. But now, two weeks later, I have a different perspective. I have never felt so comfortable with a group of people as I did that weekend. I discovered that I had much to be proud of due to our service in a war that some of our countrymen viewed as less than honorable. I for the first time met professional soldiers who provided the larger view of the battle that I never had. The experience rekindled my pride as a veteran and as an American.



Vietnam was a very personal event for each of us. Each soldier's tour was unique and distinct. Memories of events that we lived through were always vivid but rarely revisited. Thirty-one years had elapsed between Ripcord and the 2001 reunion. My service was with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade Air Cavalry and A Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry, both units on the periphery of the actual siege. Although I had served on Ripcord twice in May 1970, I didn't feel worthy of attending an event where survivors had

bad, had experienced. Throughout the rest of the weekend I had an opportunity to experience dormant emotions that had not been touched in those intervening years. Because of our diverse combat experiences, the circumstances of war were different for each, but the bond of soldiers was the same.

In closing, I will always cherish the contacts I made with the veterans of Firebase Ripcord, and hope to begin a long relationship with the Ripcord Association.

Kenneth Miller

Some of the men in C Co., 2/506<sup>th</sup> will remember this. It happened on April 10 or 11, 1970, after FSB Ripcord had been secured by ground assault.—Chuck Hawkins

## NOT A NORMAL PLACE TO BE

Dirt, dust, windswept mountaintop.

**Hueys come and go, Chinooks drop heavy loads of ammo, wire, blivets of water, fuel oil for the generators.**

**We labor under the sun and wind, stringing barbed wire and concertina and digging holes in the ground—holes for our protection.**

**Something nags at us; something inhuman floats above our labors and tugs at our souls. This is not a normal place to be.**

**Denny Heinz digs, and digs, lifting dirt from a place he will call home for the time we are here. Shovel-full after shovel-full he digs.**

**He does not know, cannot know that where he digs has been dug before. Metal strikes metal, but he feels it not, and lifts another shovel-full of earth.**

**The grenade explodes.**

**Lifted to face level, it blasts Denny Heinz with the force of demons. How could he know it had been there since the last occupants buried it?**

**Doc is there immediately, so is Foret, the sergeant, I am close behind. Heinz is shattered, dying.**

**Gasping, Doc gives CPR. A medevac is called ... anxious moments. The clatter of rotors slap the air, Heinz will be saved.**

**I remember this as clearly as if it were yesterday. The medevac hovered over our position. We loaded Heinz on the chopper, fixed to a stretcher. The transfer from one**

**medic to another took place. The medevac Huey lifted off, and Doc began to cry, "Give him CPR, give him breath!" But it didn't happen.**

**The chopper medic was too new, a cherry, and was shocked by the sight of his first casualty.**

**Doc was inconsolable, and for good reason. In a few minutes we knew. Heinz had died in route to the aid station in the rear.**

**There's a Wall now, in D.C. A place we go to remember heroes like Denny, a place we go to remember all those who died, serving their country in a dirty little war.**

**The Wall, too, is not a normal place to be.**



# A book review by reunion guest speaker Dr. Henry G. Gole, col., USA, ret.

*Ripcord: Screaming Eagles Under Siege, Vietnam 1970*, by Keith W. Nolan, Presidio Press, Novato, California, 2000, pp. 447. \$29.95.

Ripcord is a well-written and thoroughly researched account of ferocious close combat in the context of tactics, strategy and policy. It evokes admiration for American and North Vietnamese infantry soldiers engaged in intense fighting and contempt for what passed for American higher military and political leadership. Nolan writes that:

*The men who did their best at Ripcord won a personal victory inside a larger defeat, the circumstances of that defeat—the indecision, the restraints, the limited effort against the enemy's total commitment—make Ripcord something of a tragic metaphor for the entire Vietnam war.*

He then takes us through tactical decisions made at division, brigade and battalion levels, decisions made as senior officers divined national policy intent while brave soldiers fought and died. His focus is primarily on the grunts that exchanged hand grenades and satchel charges with a determined and skillful enemy, but he is attentive to American leaders equivocating in limited war as the men in Hanoi conducted total war.

To understand deadly combat in a bad place and to experience the tension between the individual soldier's hope for survival and his willing self-sacrifice for others—the men in his squad—read *Ripcord* side-by-side with John M. Del Vecchio's *The 13<sup>th</sup> Valley*, a fictional treatment of the same battle in the A Shau Valley from March to July 1970.

The objective of the American operation was to destroy enemy supply installations and the two regiments that protected them in the mountains where several branches of the multi-veined Ho Chi Minh Trail from North to South Vietnam crossed

from Laos into Vietnam. The concept was to establish a fire support base—with Ripcord as headquarters—from which patrols would fan out to find, fix and fight the enemy supported by readily available and abundant artillery and air firepower. The American combat role was winding down. Once the Screaming Eagles had the battle in hand, it would be turned over to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, a step toward "Vietnamization." That's not how it turned out.

Those familiar with "search and destroy" missions—U.S. troops hunting the enemy who faded away, leaving booby traps and snapping off sniper shots—will find another kind of war at Ripcord. That place had become "an invisible fortress, the most elaborate and well-defended enemy staging area in all of South Vietnam." The enemy dug firing pits for mortars that constantly menaced friendly troops and anti-aircraft positions that took helicopters under fire as they approached Ripcord. On the 21<sup>st</sup> day (the battle for Ripcord began on July 1, 1970), "the 1/506<sup>th</sup> company—surrounded, under mortar fire and ground attack—was forced to leave its dead behind as it straggled to another hill for extraction." Six NVA battalions were massed around the firebase. The decision to withdraw was made on the 22<sup>nd</sup> day.

*Before Ripcord could become an American Dien Bien Phu, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division did what the U.S. Army did not do in Vietnam: It backed away from a major engagement, ordering the evacuation and destruction by air strikes of Firebase Ripcord.*

This is powerful stuff. How did it happen? Why the 30-year wait to get the whole story?

Part of the answer is that a primitive enemy intelligently used geography, weather, tactics, courage and skill to defeat American infantry supported by brave aviators and tenacious artillerymen. The A Shau was a place where on previous incursions into

this enemy sanctuary disease significantly reduced American combat strength before a shot was fired. Steep hills and dense jungle favored those who would rely on stealth. High winds challenged pilots who risked smashing into mountaintops as they sought to support comrades on the ground. Enemy tactics, learned in the Ia Drang in November 1965 and rehearsed for five years, instructed NVA troops to get belly-to-belly with the Americans, thus neutralizing American air and artillery firepower. The pure guts of NVA soldiers—most particularly the sappers, who wormed their way into American night defensive perimeters from which there is no escape—earned respect. The grunts didn't have to hunt for the usually elusive enemy. He was right there, spoiling for a fight and determined to defend his base.

U.S. grunts knew what to do. They fought and died. But American senior commanders were indecisive, even petty. They were torn between doing what was necessary to win the battle—commit more combat strength—and an awareness that a blood bath like that on Hamburger Hill one year earlier was unacceptable in 1970. Political leadership wanted out—"with honor." No one told the generals that they could not be *kind of* engaged in decisive battle. So the one brigade duked it out while the commanding general of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division went on leave to the United States to attend his daughter's wedding. The battalion commander was killed in the last moment of the evacuation of Ripcord.

The last great battle of the Vietnam War ended ignominiously as the 101<sup>st</sup> handed the mess over to the ARVN. Those who buy the tired mantra, "we never lost a battle," need to consider two facts. Every day that a U.S. rifle company took casualties while failing to find the enemy, a battle was lost. At Ripcord gutsy American soldiers were let down by senior leaders, just as the Republic of Vietnam was let down by the United States. In both cases, when the going got tough, the blusterers got out. This reviewer thinks Nolan got it right and tells it well.

