

RIPCORD REPORT

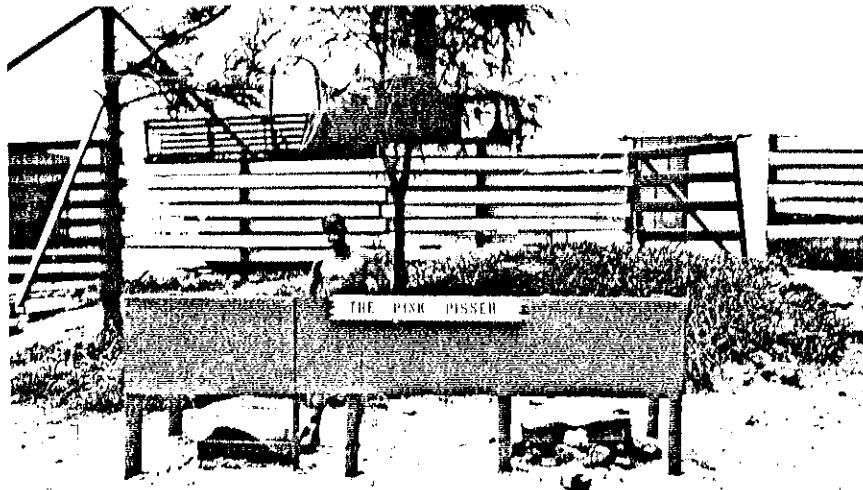
A NEWSLETTER

No. 16, JANUARY 1988

For Friends and Survivors of FSB RIPCORD, RVN



EAGLE BEACH



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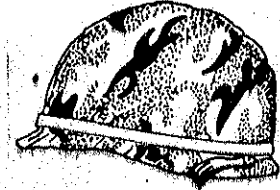
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Face sheet photos of Eagle Beach provided by Ray "BLACKIE" Blackman.

NEWSLETTER INTENTIONS

The intention of this Newsletter is to bring those of us together that are interested in FSB Ripcord, RVN. The events, the people, the humor, the memories of that time are being written by those that served there. We want this to be a healthy experience for the Veteran, his or her family or friends. We encourage you to write, call and talk, or send a taped message to us with your feelings about our Newsletter or Ripcord in general. We wish to improve as we grow and your initial input is necessary.

However, there may be those Veterans who are still troubled by their Vietnam experience. We regret this situation, but can not share responsibility for their reactions regarding the Newsletter contents. Ideally, this Newsletter will help all of us through our past and into a rewarding future.

CONTACTS/NEW FACES

Rick "DOC" Kellogg

LTC Robert M. Seitz



Gary Jestes - "BURNING SHIT"
(photo compliments of Gary Jestes)



SIT/REP

FROM FIREBASE WHIPPANY

As we enter the new year I'd like to take the opportunity to address a few issues. As most of you know, the last few issues of the newsletter have come from Whippany, N.J. This has been made possible by the kindness and support of American Legion post #155.

I want to express my sincerest thanks to Commander Doug Baron, County Commander Dick Japko and a host of others too numerous to mention. The Legion has granted me the use of their copier. Let's face it folks, without a copier we're out of business. I for one, don't ever want to see that happen.

I am very proud of my little town. Here is where my beliefs and values were spawned and nurtured by the greatest man who ever lived, my father. We are very fortunate here in Whippany to have not just one, but two great service organizations. I am a member of both American Legion post #155 and V.F.W. post #5351.

As much as the Ripcord Association has adopted the town of Whippany, these fine organizations have adopted us. I volunteered Whippany as the site of our initial reunion because I knew I would get the much needed support of these two groups. Their support continues to this day.

It's nice to know that our service organizations care about the Ripcord Association. It's also a great feeling to visit one of the posts and have the inevitable question asked of me, How was the reunion? Are you going to bring the next reunion back to Whippany? We'd love to have you back. I can't answer their questions, That's up to you readers to decide, but it's food for thought.

The next item on my agenda is support. I want to thank everyone that has sent contributions to us to keep the newsletter going. We charge no membership fee and hope we never have to. As our membership grows, so do our costs. Postage alone is running close to \$100 a month. One of our major goals is to be able to buy a copier, but we're doing little better than breaking even each month.

We really do operate on a shoestring in more ways than one. Sometimes I wonder how we ever get the newsletter out. As Chip mentioned in the last newsletter it's a four step process. It all starts out with Chip in Virginia. From there the rough draft goes to Blackie in Nebraska. Blackie, like Chip then puts in many hours of hard work making the master copy.

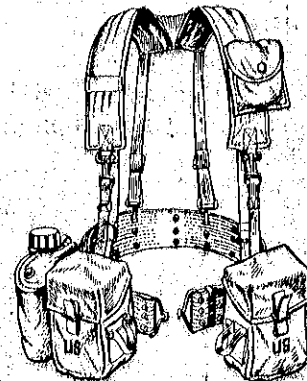
The master copy then comes to Whippany for duplication, sorting, stapling, envelope stuffing and mailing. The mailing labels come from Chuck Hawkins in Virginia. Every issue is a minor miracle with a lot of hard work involved. We are about as non profit as you can get. If you like the newsletter and its contents, and judging by our membership you do, you can say thanks to the staff with a contribution to the cause.

Last but not least, you our readers have a lot of stories about Ripcord and Vietnam that we'd all like to read. Take a little time and do a retrospective. None of us is a Michener or Hemingway. We're not interested in grammar, only in what you have to say.

As I mentioned to some of you at the reunion, I enjoy writing about my experiences, but at the rate I'm going, I'll be out of material soon. Besides, I know what I did over there. I'm very interested in knowing what it was like for you guys. I'm also interested in reading about the Vietnam experience from the point of view of our wives and girlfriends. How about it ladies? They call us the forgotten soldiers, but you too were also forgotten. You had to man the home front, the most difficult job of all.

That's about it from Firebase Whippany. Speaking on behalf of Chip, Chuck, Blackie and myself we thank everyone who have helped make the Ripcord Association what it is today and for continued growth and success in the new year.

John Mihalko
Secy., Treas.



INCOMING

December, 1988

The Ripcord Report came to my house and it was another fine job. Enclosed are copies of poems I got at Camp Evens while in P training. You may want to use them in Ripcord Report.

I enjoyed meeting all you guys at Washington D.C. Even though I was a REMF, Vietnam is still sunk deep in me. It's memory will never fade away.

Take care,
Gary Jestes
Manchester, MD

P.S. Enclosed are two photo's you might want to use.

December, 1988

Here is a flyer on the Debt of Honor Parade in May. So far we are expecting appx. 14,000 to 15,000 but more could participate by May. We are working on the Medal of Honor dinner and it really looks good. There were 80 Medal of Honor winners at the dinner they had in Chicago, we expect at least 20. Also I am having a reunion for C Co., 1/506, 69-70 but also included in this reunion are all Ripcord survivors.

I have been in contact with 101st Div. HQ at Ft. Campbell and we are having a Color Guard from the 101st. All of this will coincide with the parade and it will be an all weekend event. I really hope as many members of Ripcord Asso. as possible can attend this event. Please tell anyone interested to contact me.

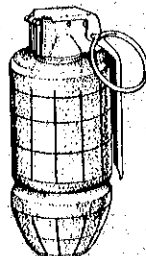
Mike Miller



M26A1
Fragmentation
Grenade



M-185 Smoke
Grenade



M-34 White
Phosphorus Grenade

THE SCREAMING EAGLES' SONG

(YOU LOAD 16 TONS AND WHAT DO YOU GET)

I came into Cam Ranh one early morning
Wishing to hell I'd never been born
Went to P training then to old Phu Bai
Up where the Screaming Eagles fly.

CHORUS

You're humping the bush and what do you get
Another day shorter and a gallon of sweat
People back home having all kinds of fun
But I owe my soul to the 101.

I reported in to Charlie Company
I said me oh my, what's happen to me
Issued a rucksack and a gun
They said the log bird leaves at a quarter
past one.

CHORUS

The 501st is a mean machine
If you ever seen em fight then you'd know
what I mean
The first to come and the last to go
It seems they always call on Old Geronimo.

CHORUS

It's been a long hard summer of sweat and
strain
The monsoon's here and it's beginning to
rain
We don't have a permanent AO but Shit hits
the fan
We're the first to go.

CHORUS

One of these days I'm gonna go on home
The jungles of Nam no longer to roam
Civilian life is where I'll be
But the 101 will live in my memory.

THE SCREAMING EAGLE'S SONG sent in by Gary Jestes

MORE INCOMING

The following are excerpts taken from letters sent to John Mihalko since the reunion:

November 2, 1987

Thank you for your letter and your kind remarks. That was thoughtful of you to write,

My wife and I were privileged to be with you, the other Ripcord soldiers, and your wives and friends. It was a good experience for us. It was moving. It was humbling.

You and your fellow soldiers are the ones who fought and bled and died on Ripcord and in the surrounding mountains and jungles. The Jack Hennesys, Sid Berrys, and Ben Harrisons did our best to guide, direct, and support you. But you privates, specialists, corporals, sergeants, lieutenants, captains, majors, and lieutenant colonels were the gladiators in the arena. And we with the more senior rank take our hats off to you.

You're right. Chip Collins didn't realize what he started 2 1/2 years ago; but I join many others in being glad that he did what he did.

Please give my regards to your wife. I enjoyed talking with the two of you. I trust you'll continue sharing your reminiscences of your days as a soldier around Ripcord with those of us who read the RIPCORD NEWSLETTER. We both enjoy and learn from them.

Sincerely,
Sid Berry

October 31, 1987

Thanks for your part in making the reunion a reality. Also thanks for your continuing efforts to keep the Association going.

I was glad to meet you face to face and also get a chance to meet Kathie. I'm sure you two have a great time.

Enclosed is my review of "Platoon" and, I guess you would say, a lot of my perspective on the war. Feel free to publish any of it anywhere.

Many reunion attendees thanked me for General Berry and myself attending and stated they were kind of surprised that we came. I was surprised by the surprise. The answer is quite simple. We cared then and we care now.

Warmest wishes,
Ben Harrison

December 14, 1987

After three plus years in Germany, we've finally returned to the states. We're happy to be home. I'm doing some schooling now in preparation for a Pentagon job sometime next summer.

We've got a nice place in Alexandria, VA, just across the river from Washington D.C. The 101st Airborne Div. has a nice memorial by Arlington National Cemetery. I understand the veterans gather there on Memorial Day each May.

Your letter to me last year meant, and still does a great deal to me, and I hope we have the opportunity sometime in '88 to meet again after so many years.

Sincerely,
Bob Seitz

Bob Seitz is now a Lt. Col., but Chip and I remember him fondly as 1 Lt. Seitz, platoon leader of Recon, 2/506. The then Lt. Seitz was my last platoon leader during my tour. Lt. Seitz came to Recon after Ripcord. He was new and looking for action. I was short and dreaming of Whippy.

He was West Point, I was a draftee. Our backgrounds were very different, but it didn't matter. I relied on him and he valued my experience. One of my most prized possessions is his Lt. bar and crossed rifles which I used one evening back at Evans to con a hot meal out of one of the mess halls, many hours after they were closed for the evening.

REUNION REFLECTIONS

My thoughts on the reunion are many. Finding the right words to express myself is a different matter. Putting it simply, I had a fantastic time. My only regret is that it had to end.

Chuck and Glenda did a magnificent job in putting it all together. Speaking from experience, it's an awful lot of work, a logistics nightmare. Last year I had a lot of much needed help, Chuck and Glenda went it alone and they are to be commended for their efforts.

Echoing Chip's sentiments, it's great getting the old gang together again. You all mean a lot to me. I only wish we lived closer to one another. Seeing Frank Gonzales again after 17 years brought back a lot of memories most notable being the captured r.p.d. which he wrote about in issue #3 of the newsletter.

Meeting new people was one of the highlights. I guess that's what I like the most about our group. We all share a common bond and conversation comes easily.

It was good to see and talk to the wives. Ladies, if your men are anything like me, you have the toughest job of all; putting up with us. Many a night I've said to Kathy, "I have to go to the Legion or V.F.W. for awhile." "I won't be long." Kathy gives me a knowing smile and says, "I'll see you in the morning, John." She's usually right of course.

I must also mention and thank my best friend Poje. Without his help I probably wouldn't have been able to make the reunion, but Poje is that kind of guy. Our friendship spans 3 1/2 decades and has never missed a beat. I introduced him to his first wife, but he got even. He introduced me to mine.

Probably the only experience we didn't share together was our military careers. Poje selected the Navy and saw the world. I got the Army and saw Ripcord. I guess that makes him a lot smarter than me.

Another highlight for me was meeting Generals Berry and Harrison. I had wanted to meet General Berry ever since he shared with us excerpts from his personal letters home during the Ripcord siege published in the anniversary issue, July 1986.

The General is everything I knew he would be which is honest, open, candor and sincere. There is also a spark in the General's eyes which conveys the pride in his military career and the pride he has in us the common soldiers.

The same can be said for General Harrison. I knew I would have no trouble conversing with the General when I noticed his western boots. It's hard for me to comprehend the decisions these men had to make. Without their decisions, as painful as they must have been, there's a very good chance that there would be no Ripcord Association, let alone a reunion.

Talking about all you wonderful people is easy. Now comes the hard part. I'll never forget our trip to the wall. It's hard for me to describe. When the wall was being constructed, I was against it. I wasn't against a monument I just didn't like the idea of a black wall when all the other monuments and buildings are white.

After seeing it and walking through it, I like it. It's perfect. It's peaceful and serene, a very moving experience for me. I'm glad Kathy was there to walk through it with me. I looked at all the names and cried inside, not just for the Ripcord names but for all of them.

The wall has been called the healing place. Whether that's true or not, I don't know. I am sure of one thing. You will feel something. It's a moving experience. I hope to make a return trip some day.

To sum everything up, our second reunion was excellent from beginning to end. As I said to Gen. Harrison on our final day. "I'm going to head back to Whippany walking a little taller and feeling very proud." I did.

John Mihalko
Dec. 1987

A STARS AND STRIPES REUNION

Upon my arrival at the Hotel in Washington I met Bill Ayres in the lobby and Happy Hour began. It ended in a haze sometime just before dawn as what was left of us headed for our rooms. My room was on the 13th floor and SOMEONE staying much closer to the ground decided it would be fun to push all the buttons on the elevator. I got a grand tour of the Hotel. The reunion was well under way.

Later that morning, with me very much hung over, we headed out on our sight seeing mission with Poje as our chauffeur. Washington D.C. is a beautiful place to visit. After driving around looking at the sights for awhile we found a place to park and started walking.

As we got close to the Vietnam Memorial I started to tremble. When I saw the statue from a distance I wanted to turn around and leave but was drawn to it instead. Everything and everyone around me ceased to exist. I was surrounded by hundreds of people, but felt very much alone.

After reaching the statue I looked down at the Wall. It's difficult to describe how I felt. There were feelings of sadness, guilt, relief, pride and a very strong feeling of satisfaction that our fallen friends had finally found a resting place where they could be honored and remembered in a way that they deserve.

As I reached the gate leading down to the Wall my legs finally gave out. I sat down on a park bench and cried.

I didn't want to go down there but it was something I had to do, and I had to do it alone, though it was very reassuring knowing that Chip and John were there for support. I had to say good bye to my friends. There hadn't been time to do it in Vietnam.

We met the rest of our reunion group later and went back down to the Wall together.

General's Berry and Harrison were very friendly and most impressive. You couldn't help but like them, and I do! I did however have to struggle with my deep rooted draftee vs. lifer instincts from days gone by.

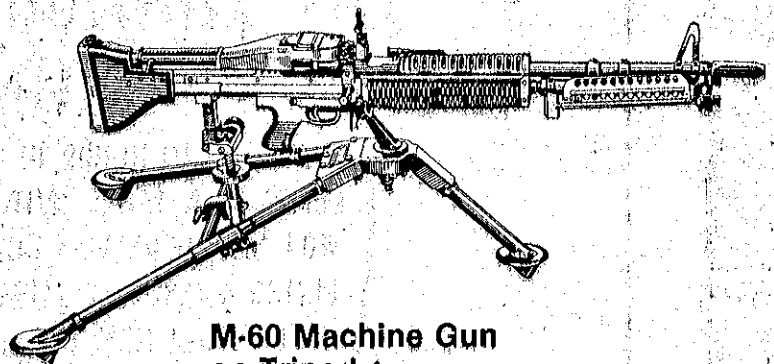
During my short lived military career I learned to dislike all officers above the rank of Captain (after serving with Chris Straub Captains were O.K.). A sort of Will Rogers in reverse feeling... I never liked an officer I didn't meet. I suppose part of that dislike came from a lack of personal contact and the way we were expected to have blind faith in our leaders and their decisions.

After the banquet I asked General Berry a couple critical questions about our stay on Hill 805. After hearing his answers, then thinking about it for over a month, I found that the huge gap between the stars and stripes had narrowed considerably.

This years reunion was very rewarding to me in many ways. I was able to visit with my new found Ripcord friends and said a long over-due good bye to my lost Delta brothers. Meeting and speaking with the Generals has helped me deal with some bad feelings left over from Vietnam and I think that I've matured a great deal because of it.

The 1987 reunion was a great success thanks to the hard work and preparation done by Chuck and Glenda. Hopefully all of us will be able to attend next years reunion wherever we decide to have it. You won't be sorry you did!

Blackie



M-60 Machine Gun
on Tripod

LZ SAUNDERS

In 1986 a new place name--Landing Zone Saunders--appeared on the map of Fort Campbell, Kentucky, home of the 101st Airborne Division. A large sign marks the site of the LZ. The dedication on the sign doesn't mention Fire Support Base Ripcord. Yet it was on a mission to the then brand-new firebase that Warrant Officer Nick Saunders, whose memory the LZ honors, lost his life.

Saunders was a crack pilot assigned to Company D (Redskins), a Cobra outfit in the 158th Aviation Battalion. Back in the World he had gone to college for two years before enlisting in the Army. A young man who had built Model T roadsters from parts and earned his fixed-wing single-engine pilot's rating while still in the Boy Scouts, he had no trouble deciding what he wanted to do in the Army.

Saunders flew Hueys as well as gunships. He did this so often while on loan to the 158th's A Company (Ghostriders) that he was called "Nick the Slick." He got experience under his belt quickly, and survived the loss of two ships, one to engine failure and the other to ground fire. After losing his ship at a hot LZ and getting wounded in a mission to extract some ARVN troops, he stepped into another slick and helped complete the extraction.

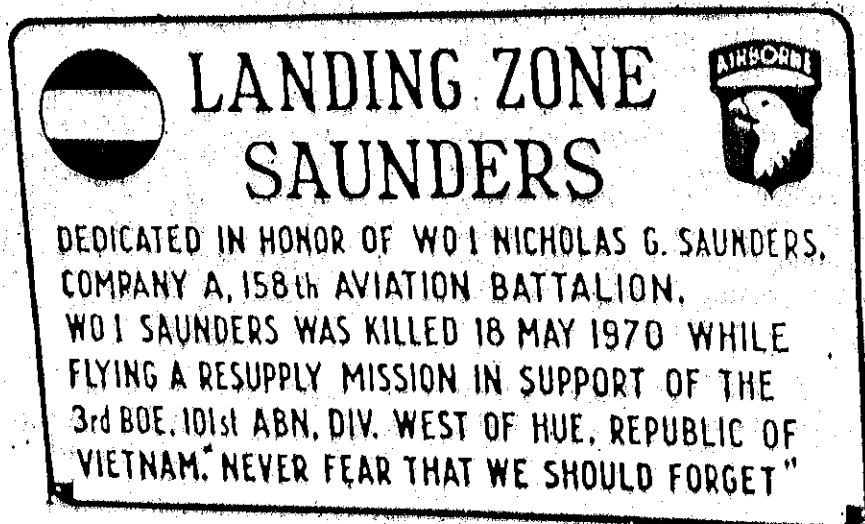
It was quiet around Firebase Ripcord in May. On May 10, three weeks after Currahees from the 101st finally had wrested the mountaintop from the North Vietnamese, Saunders flew Lt. Don Darrling, a West Point grad and an expert in communications, out to Ripcord so that he could clear up a radio problem the firebase was having. He dropped his passenger off without incident. Then he took off, sent his last message--"On the way, see you in five"--and did something nobody has been able to explain.

He headed his ship not in an easterly direction, toward the 158th's headquarters in the lowlands at Camp Evans, but toward the west--deeper into the enemy-held mountains. Had he seen something? Was he doing a recon on his own? The questions will never be answered. NVA troops in the jungle around Ripcord fired an antiaircraft rocket into the cockpit of his ship, killing him and his copilot, Ken Cole, instantly.

The ship crashed. Somehow the crew chief, Spec 5 Easterly, survived. Three weeks later a recon patrol found him, and he led them to the crash site. The bodies of Nick Saunders, Ken Cole and their doorgunner were slingloaded out of the wreckage only to be dropped--and lost forever--on the flight back to Evans.

The Ripcord area would claim many more lives in July, but it was always dangerous--even for a brave and skillful pilot like Nick Saunders.

Jim Fairhall



EAGLE BEACH
by John Mihalko

Everyone has fond memories of Eagle Beach including yours truly. Gool old Eagle Beach; the resort area on the South China Sea where the war was forgotten if only for a day. Some of the carousing we did at night is somewhat hazy due to the alcohol induced euphoria we all sought.

I loved every minute spent there. It was neat and clean. The food was good, the entertainment was good and the people who worked there were friendly and courteous. If I remember correctly, I think we even had beds with mattresses; but I have no recollection of crawling into bed.

I'm a beer man myself, but I couldn't resist the temptation of mixed drinks which would get me where I wanted to be a lot faster than beer. I took in the beauty of the South China Sea. It seemed so calm and tranquil. Even the waves didn't seem to be in any hurry to reach their destination at the shore line.

This was my kind of war; walking barefoot in the warm beach sand with a mixed drink in my hand, debating whether or not I should try my luck in the massage parlor. Some of the guys were carousing in the water. They were taking turns dunking Hai our scout.

Hai seemed to be having the time of his life. The former N.V.A. soldier had come a long way from eating fish and rice while doing his part for the Hanoi war effort. I was willing to bet that in his wildest dreams he never thought he'd be rough-housing with American soldiers and swimming in the warm waters of the South China Sea. War does indeed make strange bedfellows.

Out of the corner of my eye I spotted something that stopped me dead in my tracks. There on the beach was a blonde American woman dressed in a two piece bathing suit. She was no Miss America, but she sure looked like a goddess to me. "Down boy," I said to myself. She had plenty of male attention surrounding her.

Her male companions looked too clean cut. Officers probably. "Damn officers, they have all the luck," I thought to myself. They were like bees around honey and the honey was round eyed; the first American woman I'd seen since the stewardesses on the flight in country, which seemed like an eon ago.

I knew I didn't stand a chance so I made my way back to the bar casting furtive glances at the queen bee and her entourage. Fresh drink in hand I noticed one of the guys coming in sporting a new pair of cammies, nametag and all. "Where did you get the cammies," I inquired. "They're selling them in one of the shops in the village," was his reply.

This bit of news puzzled me. One of the status symbols of Recon was that we were allowed to wear cammies. The only problem was that we never had any to wear. We were always told that cammies were in

short supply. The Army didn't seem to have any. The half dozen pair that were available to our platoon were old, faded and torn and had probably been at Evans for as long as the Battalion.

I decided to investigate. I found the village novelty shop and sure enough there were the cammies. It looked like the mother lode to me. There were enough there to outfit our whole platoon. How could this be? How could Vietnamese civilians have cammies that the Army said were practically nonexistent?

It didn't make any sense to me. Somebody was making a buck on this war and it sure as hell wasn't me. Oh well, who was I to disrupt the economic balance of the civilian population. I was tired of wearing hand me downs that didn't fit, so I picked out about four pair and headed to the counter to make my purchase.

The mama-san asked me if I wanted them altered. I figured why not, I might as well shoot the dog and go for the works. For the first time in my military career I was going to have some fatigues that fit. The mama-san took my measurements and told me to wait as she busied herself at an ancient Singer sewing machine.

I went outside, lit up a Lucky and noticed a little boy playing with a rubber ball. He was a cute little kid, face like a cherub, oblivious to everything but that ball. He looked to be about four or five years old and looked untouched by the war. I watched him at play and remembered the hours that I used to play in much the same way.

I called out to him and held out my hands in the universal sign to throw me the ball. He gave me a smile and we started to play catch. He was pretty good. A future little leaguer if ever I saw one. The mama-san at the sewing machine evidently was his mother, I noticed her look up from her work and give us a smile.

I played with her son without a word being spoken; only our laughter which transcends the language barrier. Our play was finally interrupted when his mother called out that my cammies were ready. The little boy took my hand as we went into the shop.

She held up a pair of cammies and I nodded my approval. I asked her if the little boy was her son and she smiled and said yes. I told her that she had a fine looking son and that he was very athletic. She asked me if I had any kids and I told her no and that I wasn't even married.

She seemed a little surprised and said, "Some day you be good papa-san." I thanked her for the compliment and paid for my purchase. I got down on one knee to say goodbye to her son. He flashed me a grin and then surprised me with a hug. As I walked to the door his mother called me back.

In her hand was a bracelet and she told me to take it. I reached for my wallet but she stopped me with a no. "You take," she said. "No pay, wear this always, it will bring you good luck." I thanked her for the gift and headed out the door with her words ringing in my ears.

I went to our hooch and tried on a pair of cammies. Perfect fit. That mama-san sure worked wonders with that old Singer. The cammies felt great. I was still going to be scared as hell out in the mountains, but at least I'd look good. I was quite pleased with myself even though I thought it unfair that I had to pay for fatigues that should have been issued.

I then looked at the bracelet again. On closer inspection it sure didn't look like much. It was just a cheap little trinket worth next to nothing. I was going to throw it away but since it was a gift of friendship I decided to keep it.

"Wear this always, it will bring you good luck." "Nah," I thought to myself. "No way is this little trinket going to bring me good luck." I'd outgrown four leaf clovers and rabbit's feet a long time ago. She must have used that good luck line on every grunt just to sell the damned things. I put the bracelet on anyway and headed back to the bar.

It sure felt good to amble up to the bar in brand new, custom tailored cammies. The main topic of conversation was the American girl on the beach. It seems that she was an Army nurse and her entourage were doctors. Boy did we want to play doctor with her.

That evening we were entertained by a Filipino rock band complete with two mini-skirted girls for affect. They were pretty good as I remember but then again we would have applauded a quartet of off key winos.

They did a lot of the popular songs and a lot of oldies. When they went into In-a-gadda-da-vida there was a cheer so loud you would have thought that the Paris peace treaty had been signed. We were really into it. Some of us were banging out the drum solo on our legs.

By this time most of us were out in the ozone layer and we didn't care if we ever came back. During one of their breaks I asked a member of the band if they knew Sky pilot. At first he said he couldn't recall it. "Come on," I said. "You seem to know every other song under the sun." "You must know Sky pilot." He said he'd check with the other members of the group.

They went into their next set but I wasn't satisfied. "Sky pilot," I shouted out. "We want Sky pilot." After each song the chorus grew louder. I think they sensed that they were in a tough situation. Recon was getting rowdy.

"What are they going to do to you guys, send you to Nam?" The chant of Sky pilot grew louder and louder. Finally the leader of the band leaned over and said something to the other members of the band. They started tuning their instruments.

The lead singer approached the mike and the familiar words to the song came out. He blesses the boys, as they stand in line. The smell of gun grease, and their bayonets they shine. A rousing cheer went up from the crowd.

He's there to help them, all that he can. To make them feel wanted, he's a good holy man. We all lost it as he went into the chorus. Sky pilot, Sky pilot. How high can you fly? You'll never, never, never reach the sky.

I was in ecstasy, cloud nine, whatever you want to call it, I was there. This was almost as good as getting laid. I knew all the words and I was singing as loud as I could. It's a good thing they had the advantage of a sound system.

When they came to the chorus it seemed like most of us were singing. Eagle Beach was really rocking and Recon was making most of the noise. They finished Sky pilot to a standing ovation. It was their grand finale.

We cried out for an encore but we were denied. The group was finished for the night. They were exhausted and I couldn't blame them. They played their hearts out for us and there was no way they could top Sky pilot.

I made it a point to seek out the leader of the group to thank him. We made some small talk and he said that we were quite an audience. He gave us a night that I'll never forget and likewise, he'll always remember 2/506 Recon.

The rest of the night is very hazy to me. The last thing I remember is bits and pieces of the movie "The Wild Bunch." The Army couldn't have picked a better flick for our viewing pleasure. We certainly were a wild bunch all right, those of us still standing.

I passed out during the movie and awakened hours later to the sound of the waves hitting the beach. I felt very sheepish but I wasn't alone in my plight. Amidst the debris of the concert I spied a few of my comrades in arms snoring away.

It was a sorry looking looking n.d.p., but I figured there was safety in numbers. I didn't think I could navigate my way back to the hooch and risk the hazards of the miniature golf course. I laid back down and joined my sleeping comrades in a peaceful oblivion.

I awakened before wake up call and made my way back to the hooch. As expected, the hooch was a mess. I was changing into a new set of cammies when the dreaded wake up call came.

Another day, another dollar. Police up the area, chow down and prepare to move out. Amidst all the grumbling we managed to put Eagle Beach back together again. The scent of breakfast speeded us along in our task.

We chowed down and then stalled for time. None of us wanted to leave. Eagle Beach was now fully awake. The giggling massage parlor girls and the rest of the Vietnamese civilians were making their way into the complex followed by another rowdy group of G.I.'s awaiting their turn to forget the war if only for a little while.

My physical needs had been satisfied save one, but at least I managed to snap a few pictures of the American nurse while I was still somewhat lucid. I still had a pretty good buzz on from the night before, but my batteries were re-charged.

All in all I felt pretty good. I was going back to Evans, back to the Ripcord a.o., back to the war, but I was going back attired in new cammies and a good luck bracelet on my wrist. I was invincible! Farewell Eagle Beach. Till next time.

J. Mihalko

EPILOGUE:

That mama-san turned out to be quite a prophet. I didn't realize it at the time how lucky that bracelet turned out to be. In the upcoming months I was mortared, shot at, machine gunned and r.p.g.'ed. There were also Chicoms that failed to explode.

The N.V.A. certainly had their chances but so did our side. Our artillery came close, I was fired on by our Cobras, and for good measure I was bombed by a Phantom jet. I came through it all without a scratch. I'm not naive enough to believe that the bracelet kept me from harm, but then again that bracelet is still on my left wrist.

The mama-san hit the mark on something else also. I am the proud father of a three year old girl (Sarah) and she swears that I'm the best daddy in the whole wide world. (She's wiser beyond her years)

As far as the cammies go, I was proud to wear them. I walked a little taller even if it rankled me that I had to purchase them. On subsequent trips to Eagle Beach I bought a few more sets.

The Army finally did get around to issuing me one pair which I got near the end of my tour. When I hit Cam Ranh Bay on my way out of the country all my cammies were confiscated by the Army except one pair; the pair that the Army finally issued to me. Naturally, they don't fit!

As I said we made it to Eagle Beach a few more times during my tour. I always had a great time there, but I think my first trip was the best. Like anything you do for the first time, you never forget it.

The song Sky pilot holds a special place in my heart. Every time I hear it I flashback to Eagle Beach, but the words are very poignant also. I think they epitomize the whole Ripcord experience.

For those of you who don't know the song or forget the words the following are the words to Sky pilot in its entirety..

SKY PILOT
By Eric Burdon
and the Animals

He blesses the boys
as they stand in line
The smell of gun grease
and their bayonets they shine
He's there to help them
all that he can
to make them feel wanted
He's a good holy man

Sky pilot, Sky pilot
how high can you fly?
You'll never, never, never
reach the sky

He smiles at the young soldiers
tells them it's all right
He knows of their fears
in the forthcoming fight
Soon ther'll be blood
and many will die
Mothers and fathers
back home they will cry

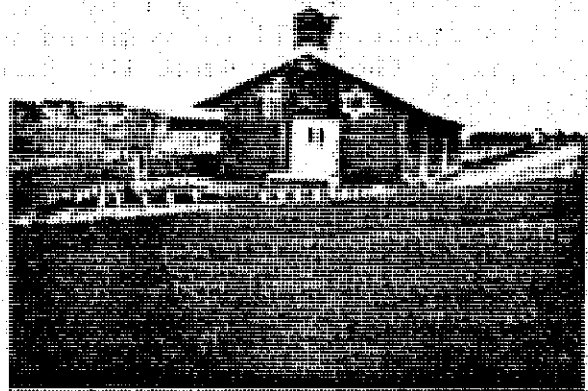
Sky pilot, Sky pilot
how high can you fly?
You'll never, never, never
reach the sky

He mumbles a prayer
and it ends with a smile
The order is given
they move down the line
But he'll stay behind
and he'll meditate
But it won't stop the bleeding
or ease the hate
And the young men move out
into the battle zone
He feels good
with God you're never alone
He feels so tired
and he lays on his bed
Hopes the men will find courage
in the words that he said

Sky pilot, Sky pilot
how high can you fly
You'll never, never, never
reach the sky

You're soldiers of God
you must understand
The fate of your country
is in your young hands
May God give you strength
do your job real well
If it all was worth it
only time it will tell
In the morning they returned
with tears in their eyes
The stench of death
drifts up to the skies
A young soldier so ill
looks at the Sky pilot
Remembers the words
Thou shalt not kill

Sky pilot, Sky pilot,
how high can you fly?
You'll never, never, never
reach the sky



CAMP EVENS BASE CHAPEL
(photo compliments of Gary Jestes)

WHICH PLATOON?
By Ben Harrison
Maj. Gen., ret.

It was a great movie! PLATOON richly deserves the many motion picture industry awards it has received. And any movie that gets millions of Americans thinking and discussing the extended hardships, the frequent fear, the stultifying terror, the physical suffering and the sometimes death that war-fighting men must endure---gets my vote too!

But when the moviegoer turns to the nearest Vietnam veteran and asks, "Is that the way it really was? Did they do all those drugs, kill innocent people? It is very difficult to give a quick, clear and crisp answer.

The first thought that comes to mind is WHICH Platoon? There were about 900 Army and Marine infantry platoons in Vietnam. Given the high rate of personnel turnover of both leaders and troops due to rotation, sickness, R & R, KIAs, and WIAs, that would give you at least 1800 distinctly different platoons in one year multiplied by 6 of the 8 years we had ground combat troops in Vietnam (1965-1973), you get at least 10,800 different platoons. Then you ask WHICH WAR in Vietnam? There were at least six unique wars fought. Coastal pacification, the rice paddies and rivers of the delta, the tea and rubber plantations west and northwest of Saigon, the central highlands of Ban Me Thuot and Pleiku, the Marine war in northern I Corps and the war in the Ashau and Khe Sanh against the well equipped and well supported regulars of the North-Vietnamese Army.

Oliver Stone chose the right year, 1967, to get experienced NCOs in the platoon---the good guy, bad guy central characters. By 1970 most experienced NCOs were on their second, third or fourth tour and avoided assignments to rifle platoons. The non commissioned leadership in rifle platoons was usually limited to outstanding young soldiers who had done well in basic training and received additional training in "shake and bake" NCO schools before going to their first Vietnam assignment. They were brave and dedicated, but inexperienced. The lieutenant platoon leader was often weak after 1968, frequently sharing the anti-war sentiment of the college campus he came from and questioning the "justness" of a war not fully supported by the American public. But back to our 1967 platoon and movie.

The troops of 1967 were well led. We had a professional Army and Marine Corps in Vietnam at that time. Here in lies the major inconsistency of the story of PLATOON. When you have good officers and NCO leadership at the platoon and company level, you simply do not have major drug and discipline problems and mistreatment of prisoners and civilians. In 1967 drug problems were very rare and "fraggings" unheard of. The drug scene in Platoon was really far out even for the late years of the war. Drugs were common in the base camp, but fellow soldiers just would not allow their buddies to be spaced out when they were being depended upon for mutual security in the bush.

Portrayal of Blacks in combat in PLATOON was probably the most balanced presentation of the movie. The full range of emotions and relations were there, real and believable. Superbly done.

Were prisoners tortured, beaten, killed? It happened in WWII, Korea and it happened in Vietnam. In every war it was always a most rare exception, clearly in violation of enforced law and regulation.

Were innocent civilians killed? Never have Americans fought a war where it was harder to distinguish friend from foe. When frustration and fear build to

the breaking point, innocent civilians are sometimes the victim. But again, this was exceptionally rare and in cases where properly reported, men were tried and punished if found guilty.

Did American soldiers murder American soldiers? There were a few murders and attempted murders for which men were tried and where convicted, punished. These were indeed rare. Perhaps much more rare than the murdering of Americans by Americans in the United States everyday. On the other hand there are probably no limits to what humans will do to each other under the extreme stress of war. General Harold K. Johnson, former Army Chief of Staff, now deceased, made this point in cautioning officers to never underestimate what men can be driven to. He related his experience after surviving the Bataan Death March and was enroute via ship to a prison camp in Japan. He told of American soldiers killing fellow prisoners and sucking their blood in order to survive themselves.

Would a company commander call in "snake and nape" (high drag bombs and napalm) on his own position? Yes, one did at Dak To in 1966. It apparently was so rare, however, that he was recommended for award of the Medal of Honor.

Was the fighting that intense? When you are in a firefight, it doesn't have to have a whole lot of shooting or last very long for the participants to get caught up on war real fast. Yes, some of the fighting was that hairy and worse. On the other hand many platoons went days and even weeks, and even some went months without hearing a shot fired in anger. The short, intense battles depicted in PLATOON were characteristic of the Vietnam War, most fights lasted minutes to hours. The average battles of WWII and Korea usually lasted much longer. The battle scenes were most realistic--the equipment, clothing, weapons and explosive effects. Even more impressive were the actor portrayals of physically and mentally exhausted troops.

An unchallenged truth that has emerged from every war we've fought is that when American soldiers are well led, they do the right things and they do them well. So what happened to our front line, small unit leadership? When a nation fields tens of thousands of platoons, leadership at the point of physical contact must come from young men. What happened to our young men? Our government led by Johnson and McNamara decided in early 1966 to field a force of over 500 thousand Americans in Vietnam, and do it without mobilization of our reserve components. This meant a stretched out buildup of at least three years and depending primarily upon draftees.

By late 1967 the quality of "selected" draftees had become so poor, that it was decided to no longer exempt college students who had completed four years of college. Effective the summer of 1968, men with four years of college could be drafted. It was estimated that over 40% of the draft the last half of 1968 would come from the college campus. It is history that starting in the spring of 1968 the anti-Vietnam war movement that began on the campuses grew and grew until our congress and our government betrayed the solemn commitment made to the Vietnamese when we withdrew our troops in 1973.

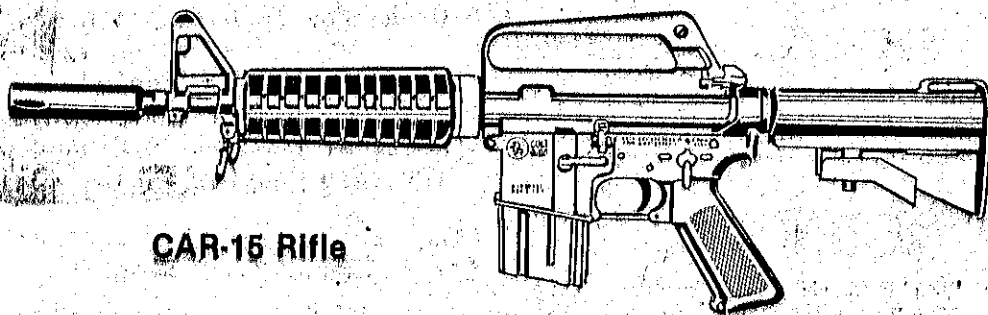
How bad was the disaffection for the war and our fighting troops? You remember the treacherous and traitorous visit Jan Fonda to the leaders of our enemy in Hanoi failed to cause any serious outcry for redress by the American public or the American congress. Anti-Vietnam War indeed became a popular mass protest--the "in thing to do." Even in the top ranks of the military, they knew that "the fat lady had not sung" but in 1969 it was over. The Nixon administration ordered "Vietnamization" of the war and secretly ordered the beginning of a phased withdrawal before we had even completed the buildup. We commanders in the field in Vietnam in 1970 got the word, "Don't take any casualties." The troops had already begun to doubt the justness of the war, especially to ponder if the cause

was worth sacrificing their life. They heard it not from their commanders, but from their friends, relatives and loved ones. Without belief in and dedication to a cause, discipline to do the right things on a battlefield is most difficult. Any military leader worth his salt knows that Americans do not respond well to authoritarians simply issuing orders. This is where we circle back to the criticality of small unit leadership and the bonding of buddies that keep men fighting aggressively, because to become defensive and weak willed is the certain path to defeat and death.

It is remarkable that so many young men fought so bravely and so well-and the overwhelming majority of them did!

The mobility of the helicopter and its ready access allowed battalion and higher field commanders to exert experienced personal leadership during a fire-fight that was absolutely unprecedented in any previous wars. The many, many (not well known) failures on the battlefields of WWII and Korea usually occurred because field grade level commanders did not understand the true situation and therefore did not take immediate, appropriate action. That was certainly not the case in Vietnam. Commanders were constantly in touch with the situation through personal visits and reconnaissance. When a fire fight began, the Battalion and/or the brigade commander, as a matter of routine, inserted himself, his artillery liaison officer and his Air Force forward controller right into the fight. Sometimes on the ground, sometimes circling immediately overhead, wherever he could best assess the situation and coordinate additional fire support, reinforcements, night illumination or medical evacuation-whatever was needed. Those commanders not so aggressive or not so adept, were quickly relieved of command and replaced. It was such actions by field commanders that helped bridge the leadership gap down to the troops in the platoons. Indeed most Vietnam vets viewing PLATOON will find it nothing short of amazing to watch a firefight for so long without seeing a commander swooping in in his helicopter. The commanders were known to the troops, sometimes not too affectionately, as "squad leaders in the sky." In any event, the system worked quite well and helps to explain why the casualty rate for Lieutenant Colonels was higher in Vietnam than it was in WWII. Is PLATOON a good movie? It's a GREAT movie! Is it representative of Vietnam veterans to whom it was publicly dedicated? HELL NO!!

Ben L. Harrison served three years as a volunteer soldier reaching the rank of sergeant first class at age 20. He retired as a regular army major general after 28 years commissioned service. Harrison commanded a battalion and a brigade in two years of combat in Vietnam. He holds a BA in Psychology, an MA in Counseling, an MBA and completed the Advanced Management Program at the Harvard Business School. Harrison was graduated from three service colleges and awarded the Distinguished Service Medal, two awards of the Silver Star and numerous other decorations. He currently conducts leadership and management training programs for large corporations as a licensee of the Center for Creative Leadership, Greensboro, North Carolina.



CAR-15 Rifle

1988 REUNION ?

While sitting around sipping suds during this years Ripcord Reunion in Washington it was suggested that we might consider having next years Reunion in CORN COUNTRY along with the 101st Airborne Division Association. With that in mind I called Terry "RANDY" Zahn, the Midwest Chapter President of the 101st Div. Association, to get a few details on the big event.

Now, some of you might remember that we tried to have a reunion with them once before and it didn't work out. We would have been scattered in several different Hotels, and even towns, around Ft. Campbell. Terry has assured me that it wouldn't be like that in Omaha. He said that this reunion will be geared for the Vietnam Vets.

We can reserve a block of rooms in the Hotel of our choice, have our own courtesy suite, have a private Ripcord Banquet and join in any or all of the 101st Assoc activities that are planned. In fact we can have our Banquet on a Riverboat with a live Dixiland Band if we so desire.

There is one small catch. To attend you must be a member of the 101st Abn. Div. Assoc. A small price to pay considering all the work and planning that they do in setting these things up. Besides, the 101st Assoc. Courtesy suite at the HQ Hotel will have free beer!

Since we are no longer in the military the decision for this operation will be made by the whole group. We want to hear from all of you on this one.

More details will follow if interest is high!

"BLACKIE"

101st Airborne Division Association



Terry "Randy" Zahn

President

10811 N. Mill Ct
Omaha, NE 68154

MIDWEST
CHAPTER

The SCREAMING EAGLE 101st AIRBORNE DIVISION ASSOCIATION THE MIDWEST CHAPTER

of the
101st AIRBORNE DIVISION ASSOCIATION
INVITES YOU TO NEBRASKALAND
FOR THE 43rd ANNUAL REUNION
AT THE HOLIDAY INN CENTRAL
OMAHA, NEBRASKA
AUGUST 17-21, 1988

Listed below are some of the special activities that are planned for the 101st Airborne Division Association Reunion:

- * Golf at Offut AFB
- * Bar-B-Que with Country/Western Band
- * SAC Tour
- * Full day at Peony Park
(Swimming & Theme Park)
- * Breakfast & Tour of Boys Town
- * City Tour/Old Market (shopping)
- * Golf at Benson Golf Course
- * Firehouse Brigade Matinee
- * Ak-Sar-Ben Thorough-bred Races
(101st Claiming Race & Skydiving)
- * Henry Doorly Zoo Excursion
- * Omaha Royals Baseball Game
- * Bluffs Run - Dog Racing
- * Belle of Brownville Dinner Cruise
(Private Charter + Dixiland Band)

Other activities will include a fly-by of Slicks, Gunships & Chinooks, the portable WALL, and a show by Bret Small & Festival with a walk to the WALL through the Riverfront Park.