

RIPCORD REPORT

A NEWSLETTER

No. 18, APRIL 1988

For Friends and Survivors of FSB RIPCORD, RVN



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= FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTORS =

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- * B. Harrison
- * J. Schuelke
- * S. Berry
- * R. Blythe
- * J. Griffin
- * M. Glennon
- * K. Mihalko
- * V. Kenyon

= FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS =
(To Treasurer)

- * Ripcord Assoc.
c/o John Mihalko



= CO-EDITORS =

- * Chip Collins



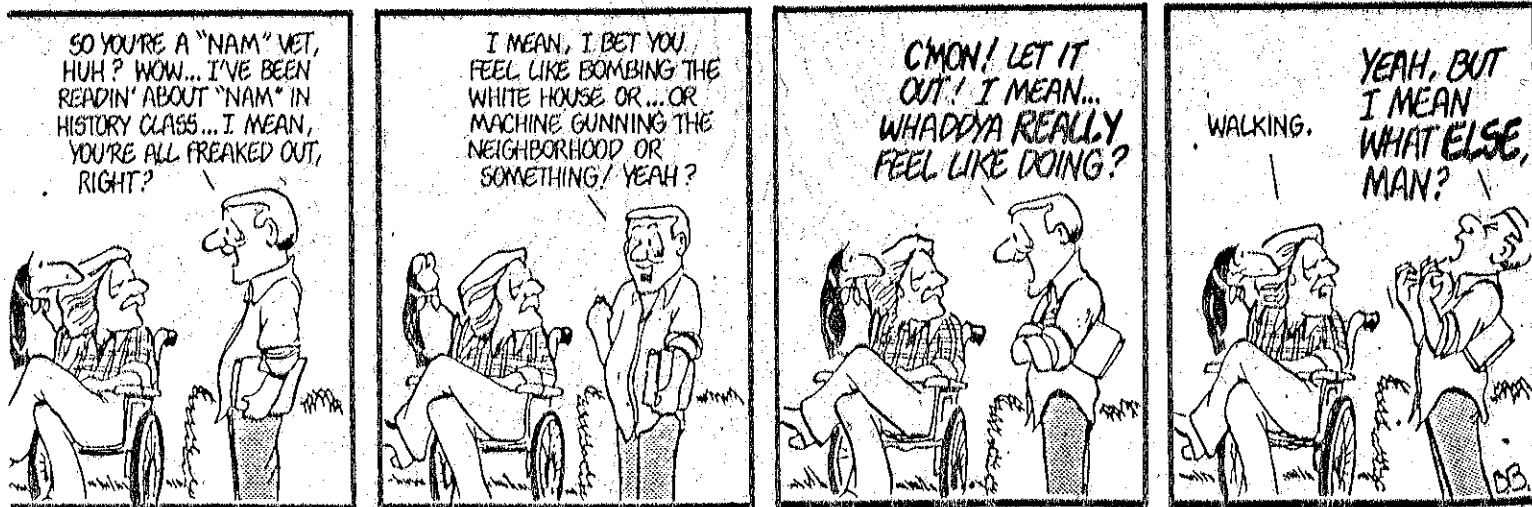
- * Ray Blackman



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.



INCOMING

NOTES

March 3, 1988

I am sending you a picture of a drawing that was done by an artist after telling him of my experience with A Co. 2/506 July 22, 1970 when we were surrounded by NVA soldiers. I thought it was a pretty good reprint on a xerox copy so I am sending it, also a picture of an F-4 Phantom Jet who drop the bomb real close on our position and backed off the NVA July 22, 1970.

Sincerely,
Martin J. Glennon



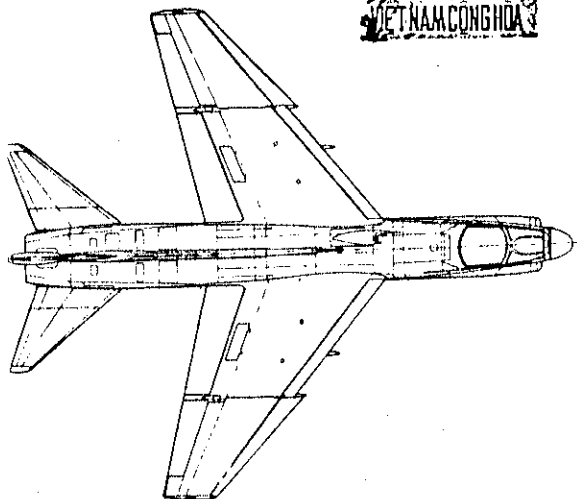
March 15, 1988

I saw your article in STATIC LINE and thought I'd write. I wasn't at the battle you're talking about. I wasn't even born when it took place.

I'm 16 years old and very interested in military history, especially WWII and the Viet Nam War. I've started a small military museum and I contact WWII and Viet Nam Vets. I was wondering if you could tell me about this battle at this Firebase. What the Firebase looked like and your part in the battle would also be helpful.

Thanks for your time and I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,
Wm. T. Ripley
Decatur, IN



Karen Daby whose story appeared in issue 17 has worn the MIA bracelet of Stephen Harber (C, 2/506) a number of years. Stephen was reported missing during Ripcord when Charlie Co. was hit on Hill 902.

One of the drawings that Martin Glennon mentioned in the Incoming section is on page 15. The other drawing will appear in the next issue.

CONTACTS/NEW FACES

LTC. Randy House
(C 2/506)

LTC. Cully Warren
(D 2/506)
HHC, 1st Bde., 3rd Inf. Div.
APO, N.Y. 09702

LTC. Hank Bonn
(D 158th Avn.)

Roger Miles
(D 2/501)



"DOC Dawkins on Ripcord
(photo compliments of Donald "DOC" Dawkins

MORE INCOMING

The following are excerpts taken from letters sent to John Mihalko.

February 5, 1988

This letter is really overdue. First of all, thanks so much for your letter in December bringing me back in contact with you all. I think we all have a lot of pride in our relationships with each other during our time in RVN and it is genuinely felt now as these feelings are rekindled in the renewed contacts with each other that the Ripcord Reports afford.

I passed copies on to a few other folks. Randy House: Then Cpt. in 158th. Avn. Randy flew Ripcord area, and evacuation as flight lead; now Lt. and in the Pentagon. Was C. co. Cdr. 2/506 from Jan-June, 1971. His address is: 4718

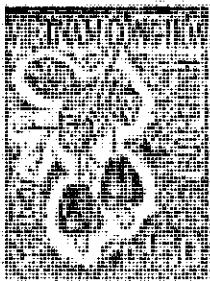
Cully Warren: Was Lt. Gen. Berry's aide then was platoon leader in D Co. 2/506, then S-3 air in Bn. TOC. Now Lt. & Bn. Cdr. in Germany. Address: HHC, 1st Bde., 3rd. Inf. Div., APO, New York, 09702.

Hank Bonn: Cobra pilot from D Co. 158th. Avn. Lt. now teaching flight training.

I really enjoyed the little paragraph you wrote on us in the Jan. report. It made me feel special. This past week John Schnarr called. He had seen my address in the newsletter. We had a real nice talk, but had to cover 18 years all at once.

Enclosed is a small donation for your printing costs, postage, etc. In closing, let me say again how much I admire yours and Chips hard work in putting all this together. I'm proud to be part of it.

Ltc. Bob Seitz



January 20, 1988

Thanks for your quick response. I suppose I also have to agree with you on the movie "HAMBURGER HILL." It was realistic but as you said, "Why are we portrayed as drunken whoremongers." I guess because it sells. My question is why do all the interviews you see focus on the losers and drug addicts? I came home with all my marbles, but that is not newsworthy.

You are also correct in saying that no movie or book will ever capture the feel of what it was like to be in the boonies. I'm trying to write of my experiences (to sell of course) but also so my friends, family, and younger co-workers can get an understanding of how Vietnam really was.

No one can get it from a REMF or a war correspondent; it has to be from people like us (grunts) who had very little to do with the decision making. We are a family and even though I spent most of March, 1970 in the rear, I faintly recall the shit starting to stir, and now the RIPCORN ASSOCIATION has rekindled feelings for a lot of men that I said goodbye to.

I think you will like my retrospective. There is no Bullshit in it and it is all real! I was only there on the final day and A co. 2/506 lost one KIA and several wounded. You may use it as you see fit and it can go into the newsletter if there is enough interest. All of the names in the story are fake except mine and Howard Siner who gave me his permission.

One thing I am trying to locate are photos of Camp Evans, Firebase Jack, Phong Diem. Do you know anything around that area? Even maps. Do you know of anyone I can contact? I've already tried the Still Media Division of the Library of Congress, but they are of no help. Is there a 101st. video covering our AO?

Thanks for listening. It is always good to talk to someone who has been there and understands. Write when you can. Any more reunions?

Art Wiknik



SIT/REP

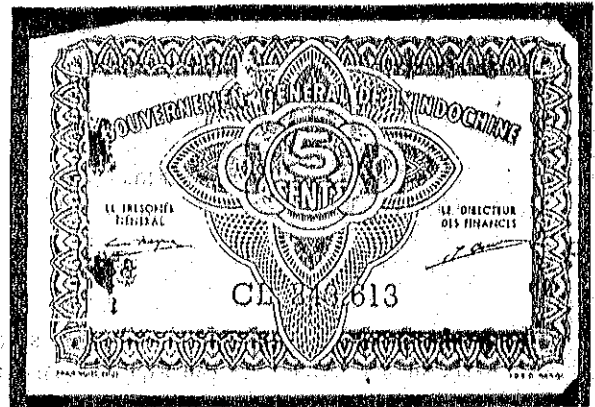
Chuck Hawkins has written to suggest that it might be better to have the official 1988 Ripcord Reunion in Whippany, N.J. this Fall because most of our membership is on the east coast. This would give more people a chance to attend. I might add that Whippany is a beautiful place to visit in the Fall and the people are very friendly and supportive of our group. Chuck went on to recommend that we still have a sort of semi-annual Ripcord Reunion in Omaha along with the 101st Association.

We'd like to hear your views on this so write us a letter, pick up the phone, or yell real loud, but let us know what you think. The sooner we get organized the better the reunion (or reunions) will be.

I recently recieved a package from Bill Laurie of Cyclo Dap Archives in Mesa, Arizona. Bill sent us a gold mine of Vietnam thingies to be used in the newsletter as filler material. Along with this treasure chest was a brief note asking if the Ripcord Report took ads.

We've never really given much thought about running ads in the newsletter as a source of income but it isn't a bad idea. The last thing we want to do is pepper our newsletter with a bunch of junk so you can rest assured that when we do run an ad we'll be very selective of the material and keep the number of ads at a bare minimum.

Please contact us if you, or someone you know, might be interested in running an ad in the Ripcord Report.



RESOURCES

A former door-gunner, whose hobby was photography, has made hundreds of aerial and ground color photographs taken in Vietnam available to you at a reasonable cost. A few of the photo's included in his listings are: Camp Evans, Phu Bai, Hue, Firebases Ripcord, Gladiator, O'Reilly, and even Hill 805. For more information on how to get photo listings drop a line to: Viet View Graphics, P.O. Box 31, Brunswick, OH 44212.

If it's books your looking for write to Cyclo Dap Archives, 1462 West University Drive, Mesa, AZ 85201 for information on how to receive their catalog.

The Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, Washington, DC 20540 has 1:50,000 scale photo copied sheets of Vietnam Maps available to the public. The map with the Ripcord AO on it is on sheet #6441 IV, series L7014. Write them a letter asking for the index for the L7014 series of maps, entitled "Vietnam 1:50,000".

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SPECIAL MODEL BUFFE, LIONS, TEMPLE DOGS, VASES, GARDEN SEAT

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312 Vo Tanh St. Ton Son Nhut

Between BCQ 1 and GENEVA Hotel

(next Stars and Stripes)

HIGHEST QUALITIES - WHOLESALE PRICE

AGNES

If you never received the medals you earned while in Vietnam but would like to have them, send a copy of your DD 214 along with a letter explaining the situation to: U.S. Army Reserve Components Personnel and Administration Center, Attn: AGUZ-PSE-AW, 9700 Page Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63132.

THE WILL TO DIE

by: Charles F. Hawkins
CO, A/2-508, 30 May - 17 Nov., 1970

"If I die on the old drop zone, box me up and send me home." Part of a popular American Airborne marching song.

The point man peered intently across the landing zone. His eyes searched the exploded earth and shredded jungle debris. It stank. Everywhere he looked was a potential hiding place for an NVA soldier. He looked back at his slack man.

"Cover me", he motioned. Carefully, easily, he slid over the fallen trees and through the brush on the eastern side of the LZ.

Behind them came the soft rustle of leaves and cloth as the machine gun team moved forward. The clink of belt-fed ammo indicated they had taken up their position overwatching the point team's progress around the LZ.

The point man stopped. With the same care, his friend, the slack man, moved forward. The two joined, briefly, and then separated. Each man scanned his sector of the jungle.

"They've been here", finger pointing.

"Where?" Silent question.

"Behind that big log", head nodding along his rifle barrel.

"You wanna' toss a frag?" The motion of a hand.

Shake of head. "Uh-uh, they're gone."

"Maybe not." Eyebrows arched.

"Then it's a lick on me." Whispered soft.

The point man slid over to the log, rolled across the

top and dropped to the other side. His eyes opened wide. In the mud, inches in front of his face, was the outline of a fresh footprint - a tire-tread, sandaled, NVA footprint.

Now comes the hard part, he thought. Finding out whether the little fucker is still in the area.

The platoon sergeant waited by the machine gunner. His attention riveted on the progress of his point team. Something wasn't quite right. His mind ticked off the enemy responses possible in this situation. The NVA could be just across the LZ, near the point team. Could be on the west side. Could be laying back to mortar us. Could be gone. Worst case: they're getting ready to jump the point team.

"C'mon", he tapped the machine gunner on the arm. "Let's go."

Running low, and close to the ground, the three men zigged and zagged across the LZ to the large fallen tree. The point team heard them and glanced back.

"Continue", the platoon sergeant motioned.

Crouching, point man and slack man moved forward. Ten meters. Fifteen. A small trail opened up. The thick jungle pushed in from all sides. Twenty meters. The platoon sergeant began to follow. Thirty meters. The trail began to wind down a small slope. Fifty meters.

The point man stopped; motioned. "They're gone."

The slack man checked to the right, moving into the brush. He found nothing. The platoon sergeant did the same to the left of the trail. Again, nothing. Consensus was achieved.

Charlie Oscar stood looking across the LZ with the 1st Platoon Sergeant. It was barely large enough for one Huey, and it was apparent that considerable effort, and C-4 plastique explosive, had been expended to make it a landing zone. Its center was dotted with tree stumps, some of which were quite large. On its periphery were the downed trees, criss-crossing each other for several hundred feet down-slope on each side of the steep ridge. The trees were huge: large mahogany and

ironwood. They made the sides of the landing zone virtually impassable.

"Not much of an LZ, is it sarge", Charlie Oscar cocked his head toward the NCO?

"No, Capt'n-sir. It sure ain't."

"Well, its what we got. You defend the LZ and this little rise we're on. Tie in with the second platoon on the larger hill behind us. Keep security across the LZ during the day and pull 'em back at night. Ain't nobody coming across that mess we can't get."

"Yes-sir, Capt'n-sir." The 1st Platoon Sergeant turned toward his men, seeking the squad leaders. The new CO will be alright, he thought, but he just couldn't bring himself to call him Charlie Oscar. He could call a lieutenant an LT, but the CO? Always it would be sir; Capt'n-sir.

Charlie Oscar moved back to the base of a large ironwood where his CP waited: the company and battalion RTOs; the man with the secure radio; the FO and his RTO; and, the company interpreter. The huge roots formed natural sitting and sleeping places, and protection from possible small arms fire.

"Hit?" Charlie Oscar whispered to his Battalion RTO.
"Call battalion. Tell 'em we're in LZ posture. We'll take that resupply bird anytime."

"Roger."

"Vic. Is the 2d Platoon in place?"

"Uh, just called in, Charlie Oscar", the Company RTO replied. "LT's on his way here now."

"Charlie Oscar?" It was the Artillery Forward Observer, Brennan.

"Yes, Tom."

"We've got four defensive targets. Up and down the ridge, and in the valley on each side. About a click out. Two of the Delta Tangos we fired this morning on our move in, so they're registered on the guns. Probably ought to fire one now and the other at last light, so as not to give us away."

"That's fine." LT Brennan was a seasoned FO, and

Charlie Oscar was glad to have him with Alpha Company.

Quietly, each of the men went about their tasks. In a few minutes, the 2d Platoon Leader arrived. He, Brennan, and Charlie Oscar sat together by the ironwood; the three RTOs joined them, not in a group, but off to one side. Every word the officers said would be noted by the RTOs.

At Camp Evans, home to the 3d Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division, and many miles from where Charlie Oscar and his leaders were planning Alpha Company's night defense, sat Sergeant Jimmy Smith. His fatigues were clean; his haircut fresh; and his E-5 stripes three weeks old. He was a new guy. A cherry.

He sat quietly on the edge of the landing zone for the 2-506th Infantry Battalion - Currahae Pad. Painted on the side of the control tower was Snoopy, flying his dog-house-sopwith camel in search of the Red Baron. The motto 'Currahae' emblazoned over Snoopy's raised fist.

Sergeant Smith was not thinking happy thoughts.

This ingrose young soldier had been drafted into the Army five months earlier, straight from the corn fields of Iowa. He had not liked the idea. Had resisted, initially, until his father told him to 'straighten up and act like a man'. So, off he went to basic training, a resigned expression on his face, waving wanly to his parents at the bus depot.

Basic training had not been overly difficult. Physically, it had been about what he expected. The harrassment had been bearable. He actually had enjoyed the classroom work, and had done fairly well on the rifle range.

Advanced individual training had been almost a pleasure. It was there, thanks to his academic prowess, that he had been asked to apply for the NCO Academy - for the opportunity to become an instant non-commissioned officer. Some called it shake-n-bake school. Smith had been eager to apply.

He had applied himself diligently at the NCO Academy. He worked long hours after class, and had been rewarded

with E-5 stripes. And, an MOS of 11F40 - Operations NCO. On graduation day he also got his orders for Vietnam.

An Operations NCO, Smith had been told at school, was different from the normal infantry grunt in Vietnam. They rarely went into the bush, staying rather, with Headquarters elements and working in secure operations centers. His job, he felt sure, would be supervising radio operators, posting operational data on situation maps, attending briefings, and preparing summaries for his operations officers. Why, he thought, I might even enjoy this. As long as he had to be in Vietnam anyway.

But, upon arrival at the 2-506th Battalion Headquarters, his dreams had been shattered.

"Every 11 series MOS spends time in the field. With a rifle company", the Personnel NCO at Battalion told him. "You're assigned to Alpha Company. Damn good bunch of guys."

"But, Sarge", Smith tried to find the words which would restore the dream, "I'm an Operations NCO. 11 Foxtrot, not 11 Bush."

"All the same, Smith. Ya got to know the system, how we do things. Work with Alpha. Four, maybe six months, then ya get a job in the Tactical Operations Center. You'll do fine." The Personnel NCO could sense Smith's disappointment, and something else. Fear, perhaps?

It was early June. For many months, now, the North Vietnamese Army had been stockpiling arms and ammunition, and other combat necessities in the northern end of the A Shau Valley, and across the border in Laos. The amount of accumulated materiel was vast; enough to supply a Field Army of several Divisions for an extended combat operation.

The accumulation of supplies and munitions, however, was only part of the North Vietnamese effort. The other part involved the infiltration of tens of thousands of NVA soldiers down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, into the A Shau, and further southeast. Into the rugged, jungled mountains which were the watershed for the Rao Trang and Song O Lau rivers.

These rivers led southeastward to the coast, and the population centers of Hue and Quang Tri. They were the traditional infiltration routes used by the NVA. They had been used prior to the 1968 Tet Offensive. They were being used again. Astride these routes stood the 101st Airborne Division. And, in the center, on and around a firebase called Ripcord, was the 2-506th Infantry Battalion, the Bast of the Currahees.

The NVA were determined to prevent American penetration of the A Shau Valley. They were equally determined to secure their infiltration routes to the lowland population centers. With characteristic tenacity they tried, during March and April, to prevent the 101st from establishing firebases in the mountains along the A Shau's northeastern rim.

For a time, they were successful. But, the Americans were not going to be denied the gains they had made since fending off the NVA during Tet of '68. And a series of grim, squad and platoon sized firefights ensued, scarring the landscape in their intensity. By the end of April, Fire Support Base Ripcord had been secured.

It was this hill, wrested from NVA control during a two-month long struggle, that now became the focus for an entire NVA division.

Sergeant E-5 Jimmy Smith had spent the rest of the day drawing his field gear from the Alpha Company supply room. He spent part of the night learning, with the aid of a couple of short-timers, how to pack all his equipment into his rucksack.

"Shee-it, Sarge. You don't need all this stuff", a lanky Spec Four drawled.

"Jus' keep yer frags, n' ammo, n' fightin' shit here." The Spec Four adjusted the combat webbing on which hung ammo pouches, canteens, smoke grenades, and other necessities.

"An yer ruck. Jus' household things. Don't take extra boots or fatigues, or nothin'. Leave 'em here. But, socks. Gotta have extra socks." Quickly, efficiently, the combat equipment Smith would need took form and shape.

"Now, lookit here." Vital survival information came free with the packing instructions. "Ya need a ditty box. Keep yer personal shit in. Take this M-60 ammo can. S'perfect. Old Man don' like lotta personal stuff. No air mattress. Makes a noise like an RPG when ya roll on it at night."

"Claymore goes in th' ruck. But near the top, so you can get to it." The Spec Four seemed a blur of motion as he spoke. "Always keep a willy-pete grenade - white phosphorous - on yer web gear. Help ya break contact. Tape it so the white don't show."

The wealth of combat information inundated Jimmy Smith. He felt overwhelmed; helpless. And, when his gear was finally assembled, he looked on it in horror. He would have to carry this load for weeks, months. And, into the bargain, he could be shot at, perhaps wounded, or worse. He sat down on a canvass cot, his head in his hands.

"S'matter, Sarge?" The Spec Four leaned over. "Hey, Sarge. Its okay. Even'one feels this way at first. Ya'll be fine. Alpha's a good'un. You'll see."

Sergeant Smith spent the other part of the night laying awake. Thinking of all the different ways he was going to die.

Now, sitting on the hell-pad, waiting for the chopper that would take him to the field, he still had not come to grips with the reality that faced him. He would, he decided, see his new CO as soon as possible, and ask him for reassignment to an operations position. Satisfied with himself for having come to a decision, he sat back and waited. And prayed.

"It will require six men", the NVA Captain was saying to his Lieutenant. "Three men, each with some skill at infiltration, each with an RPG. And, three others, also with RPGs, but the best shots."

"Yes sir." The Lieutenant already knew who he would send. Four of his best, and two, untested, new men.

"It will be quick in, quick out", the Captain continued. "Three will get as close as they can during the day while the Americans are taking their resupply.

The others will stand off a distance, but within range of the LZ. No one will notice. Then, they will wait until just before sunset, when they will fire three RPGs. Three only. These will produce casualties. A helicopter will come to evacuate them, and it will be shot from the sky with the remaining RPGs. Then get out. Quickly."

"Yes sir. I understand." The Lieutenant did understand. They could not afford a pitched firefight with the Americans. Not while the build-up around the hill they called Ripcord was in progress. But, they did need to keep the Americans off balance. Keep them guessing. Demoralize them. Besides, it would be an excellent training mission for his men.

The lanky Spec Four was on the bunker line at Camp Evans with his buddy. The mid-day heat was made tolerable by the addition of a cooler full of cokes in the shade of the bunker. He fished one out and stuck two holes in it with his kabar knife.

"Want some?" He looked at his friend who was fingering one of the clackers for the claymores they had to their front.

"Sure." Swallow. "Good shее-it, man."

"Yeah. Don' drink it all."

"What'cha think ah'the cherry sarge? He gonna make it?"

"Sergeant Smith?" The Spec Four took a sip. Ice cold. God! Five days and I'm outta here. Back to the world. He glanced at his friend who was also due to leave in a few days.

"Yeah. The guy we helped pack las' night."

"He don' wanna go to the bush, man. He's scared shitless."

"Charlie Oscar n' Ol' Sarge'll take care of him. He'll be fine."

"Not this one, man. He's talked himself into dying. He don' know it, but its what he wants. Thirty days.

The man's dead."

"Yeah. S'what I figgured too. Its a lick on his ass."

"Yeah. A military, fuckin' lick." The Spec Four looked out over the perimeter wire. "Jeeze! This place stinks."

"Alpha Company! Log bird's in-bound. Lets get it", the Lieutenant hollered over the rising noise of the turbine engine at Sergeant Smith and two other men waiting on the Currahee Pad.

"You men all going to Alpha, right?" The Lieutenant cupped his hands around his mouth next to Smith's ear. The roar of the chopper blades and rotor wash made it almost impossible to hear.

Smith, shielding his eyes from the blowing dust, could only nod.

"Okay!" The Lieutenant held two of them by a shoulder. "Help my guys load up, then you get on."

Quickly, as the helicopter settled, mail sacks, a dozen cases of C-rations, cases of smoke grenades, flares, and other sundry supply items were loaded. Door gunners took off their crew helmets and wiped sweat from their brows. The Lieutenant, crouching, moved to the pilot's door, opened it, and handed the aviator a grease pencilled card on which were written call signs, codes and Alpha Company's coordinates. After checking his map, the pilot nodded, and the lieutenant moved away.

"Lets go, men!" The Lieutenant hollered. And, Smith and the two other soldiers wrestled their rucksacks aboard the huay and climbed on. Before they even had time to get settled, the resupply bird rose in the air. The door gunners were alert now, checking their headsets and ammunition.

The flight time to Alpha Company would be twelve minutes. In that time the huay, its crew, and precious cargo, would leave the security of the coastal savannah region, cross over the rolling piedmont, and enter enemy territory in the mountainous, tropical rain forest. Dozens of such missions were flown each day.

And each time, they were exposed to danger.

The NVA Captain did not know for sure that the Americans on the small LZ would take resupply that day, or what time they would if, indeed, they did. However, he felt it was a safe assumption. His experience had shown that, nine times out of ten, Americans got resupplied when they moved to an LZ.

The American company had moved into his sector almost a week earlier. What intelligence information regarding them that was available had been handed over to him. He felt he was getting to know this particular enemy fairly well. His scouts kept constant track of their movements, and, should the need arise, he could respond quickly to any tactical advantages they might yield. It was such an opportunity that had prompted him to send out his RPG teams that morning.

There was one thing that puzzled him, however. The company was not behaving quite the way he had expected. Their habits; the manner in which they moved; the way they established defensive positions; their patrols. It wasn't quite what had been shown in the older intelligence reports. After comparing these with the current information provided by his scouts, he correctly surmised that this company had a new commander.

Excellent, he thought. We will take advantage of him.

"Charlie Oscar. Log bird's in-bound." The Battalion RTO hooked the radio handset into his web gear and fished out a smoke grenade.

"Okay. Tell the platoons."

"Already did."

"Well, just bring my mail when it gets here." Charlie Oscar went back to studying his map.

The huay circled once as the pilot identified the yellow smoke curling up from the LZ, then came in on

short-final. The door gunners were alert, half standing, half crouching, following with the barrels of their M-60s possible enemy locations.

Before the chopper had a chance to settle on the LZ a half dozen men from Alpha had approached it in that curious, bent-over run characteristic of infantrymen in airmobile operations. By the time the skids were set firmly on the uneven surface of the LZ, half the supplies were unloaded, and two of the new soldiers had tumbled to the ground. Sergeant Smith, not taking any chances, waited until the unloading was completed. Then, he too, struggled free of the chopper.

Almost before his feet hit the ground, the huey was airborne again, and, with a rush of wind and a pop-pop of rotor blades, was gone down the side of the LZ and away, across the green jungle. As the noise of the chopper faded in the distance, Sergeant Jimmy Smith surveyed his new surroundings, fully expecting to be shot at any moment. He had never been so afraid, nor felt so alone in all his life.

All about him was a scurry of activity as GIs moved their resupply off the LZ and into the bordering woodland. While everyone else hustled, Smith stood, frozen, unable to move. A figure approached him.

"Sarge. Hey, sarge." The man looked terrible. He smelled terrible. Helmet cocked back on his head, no fatigue jacket, T-shirt stained, (was it blood?), scuffed boots bleached white by the sun, a crooked grin on a face with day-old stubble. No shower in weeks, maybe months. God! The apparition, which Smith saw the man as, seemed to represent everything he feared and hated about this unholy place.

"Com'on, sarge. Charlie Oscar wants to see you. Sees all the new men. Let's go." Together, the two men, one clean and pressed, the other representative of months of combat, crossed the LZ.

Before Smith could collect his thoughts, he found himself in the presence of the CO.

Charlie Oscar took a moment shaking their hands, asking their names, where they were from, what had they been told about the 2-506th, what their MOS's were, and more.

"Hi Fox. That's great, Sergeant Smith. You'll get good experience with us, and then, an assignment to the

TOC." Charlie Oscar looked directly at them when he spoke.

"One final word before you go to your platoons." Charlie Oscar looked down at his boots, and then back at the three new men. "You each got a year to do over here. It's going to be a long, tough, son-of-a-bitch. We don't have to like it. And, we can complain all we want, that's allowed. But, we got to do it. The trick is, we got to do it and survive."

He paused to see if the words were making an impact.

"My job. My commitment to you, is to get you home. Alive, and in one piece. You put that in your minds right now. You're here a year and you're going home." Pausing again, he looked directly at each man.

"We do this", he continued, "by being the best at what we do. You're the best rifleman, the best machine gunner, the best leader. If you're the best, you win. That means you live. You ain't the best, it's a lick on all of us. We don't want that. Now", he drew a breath, "to be the best, we got to fight. We got to teach the enemy respect. We fight him every chance we get - he respects us. He hides - we find him. He moves - we ambush him. You fill in your foxholes; you burn your trash; you move tactically. Do all this, the NVA'll respect you. He respects you, he stays out of your way."

"Men", Charlie Oscar chose his closing words. "The only way they'll ever nail our ass, is if they come after us with a battalion - five or six to one. They do that", he grinned, "and we got 'em, 'cause our battalion'll come in and wax their butt."

Sergeant Jimmy Smith stood, transfixed with horror. He couldn't believe what he had just heard. He couldn't believe he was here. Here! In this god-forsaken place; listening to some demented Captain tell him he was going to go home alive by killing gooks. This wasn't real. It wasn't happening.

I've got to get out of here. It was his only thought as he followed the 1st Platoon Sergeant to what would be his position on the perimeter.

The NVA Lieutenant and his men moved down the gently sloping ridge, parallel to the one where the Americans secured the small LZ. The dense jungle covered the sound of their movement. Above, the bright sun glistened off the leaves of the forest. Below, where the sun could only suggest its presence, the flickering green and brown shadows blended with the movement of khaki uniforms.

Here and there the sun shone through, casting a halo on the jungle floor. And here, an opening in the trees provided a view of the sky, and a field of fire above, the American LZ. Three NVA with RPGs, the best marksmen; drooped off, and readied themselves.

Further, in the valley below the LZ, the lieutenant directed the remaining three soldiers to move into their positions. They waited patiently until they heard the sound of the approaching helicopter. Then, silently, they moved forward.

"Capt'n-sir?" It was the 1st Platoon Sergeant.

"Hey. What's up?"

"Capt'n, beggin' yer pardon, sir. Its Sargeant Smith. He's got a problem."

"Okay. He's the new guy, right? What is it?"

"Well, I'm sorry sir. I should'a handled it. But, with respect, sir, he wanted to see yerself." The 1st Platoon Sergeant leaned closer. "He's got the snakes, sir. Says he's gonna die. Wants to go back to the rear, sir."

"Dick, we can't have this. You know that. He's an E-5, for Christ-sakes."

"Oh, I know that, Capt'n. But, I've talked with'im. He's bad up. Maybe ... Sir, can ya talk to him?"

"Sure. Sure, I'll talk with him. But, Dick?"

"Yessir, Capt'n?"

"You've been here before. 25th Division? You ever see this sort of thing?"

"No sir." The 1st Platoon Sergeant hesitated. "Except once, just before we hit that regimental ambush in '66. Guy comes to me with all his letters from home, personal things, stuff like that. Says to write his folks ... somethin' happens to him. This ain't quite the same. Smith believes he's gonna die. Whatever happens."

"Bring him here, Dick."

"Yas sir."

Goddamn! Charlie Oscar thought. I ain't even established here yet. And I have to deal with this shit. Son-of-a-bitch ain't even been here two hours, and he wants out.

There was another man, when Charlie Oscar had been a platoon leader. He was scared. Talked himself into it. Wouldn't do his job. Worthless. Screwed up a whole ambush one night.

Do I risk the unit for one man? Do I make him pull his weight? If I give in, will there be others? Got to strike a balance.

"Sir. This is Sargeant Smith."

Charlie Oscar stood up. "What's the problem, sargeant?"

Jimmy Smith and Charlie Oscar talked for fifteen minutes, a long time for a commander to spend on a personal problem in combat.

Smith, honest with himself as well as Charlie Oscar, explained his fear, his cowardice. That he was convinced he was going to die. It was a premonition. He wanted to be away from the field. Anywhere, but away from combat.

Charlie Oscar, stubborn, but reasonable in turn, listened and then called on all his powers of suasion. He couldn't let someone go to the rear, just because they had a bad feeling. Especially a leader.

"Smith. Is it the jungle? The heat", he queried? "Are you just not able to adjust to the environment?"

"No, sir", was Smith's honest reply. "It isn't that. I'm just scared. I know I'm gonna die."

"Sarge, its just like a hunt." Charlie Oscar played another angle. "You ever been hunting? Bet you've hunted deer in Iowa."

"Yes sir, but it ain't the same. I mean, I'm gonna die here. I know it."

"Damn it! It is the same. And you ain't gonna die. Listen to me. You move quiet. Stalk your prey. Learn their habits. You lay up. You wait. Deer come to you. You shoot. Its a hunt, Smith. Just a hunt."

"Sir, I hear what you're saying. But, I'm gonna die. I know it. I feel it. I'll die. Whatever you say, it ain't right. I got to get outa' here."

Charlie Oscar looked at the man. Looked deep into his scared, young soul. A shiver raced down his spine. We're all like this, he thought. Deep down inside, we're all like this.

"Smith, I can't have you this way, not and be a sergeant. I can't have you lead men and be this way. I can't even have you as a rifleman."

A glimmer of hope. "Yes sir."

"I'll send you back."

Oh, please God. Let it be now. Get me outta here.

"We got a stand-down coming up in a week. I'll transfer you to Headquarters Company then. You can work in the TOC or whenever they put you."

A week! Smith's mind screamed. A week! I can't stay here a week. I'll be dead. "Charlie Oscar, sir, I'll be dead by then. God, sir. Can't I go now?"

"Settle down, Smith. You'll get outta here. One week. But, I'll tell ya, Smith. You'll go as a spec four, not a sergeant, I'll see to that."

"Yes sir." Smith hung his head. "Yes sir."

"Report back to your platoon."

Sergeant E-5 Jimmy Smith turned and walked back to his foxhole.

"Platoon Sergeant?"

The Platoon Sergeant inclined his head. "Capt'n?"

"I'll send him back. Next bird. But, goddamn, we don't need this snit. Other men see this. Other men get the idea ..." He left the thought unfinished.

"I wouldn't worry, Capt'n. Other men ... they have to live with themselves, and they live for each other. Smith? He's livin' for himself. There's a difference."

"Thanks, Dick." Charlie Oscar squared his shoulders. He felt drained. "See you."

"Yessir, Capt'n." The 1st Platoon Sergeant turned after Sergeant Smith.

The sun began to set.

The FO called in to register his last remaining defensive target.

Charlie Oscar bent over his C-nation-can stove. Pound cake and peaches. He added cream substitute and sugar. Hot cobbler. It was almost ready.

The 1st Platoon Sergeant stood, looking across the LZ. He had just pulled in his security team from the far side. It would be dark in thirty minutes.

Sergeant Jimmy Smith headed for the platoon CP. An aimless mission. He wanted to speak with the Platoon Sergeant.

Alpha Company settled in for their night-time routine. Men checked their ammunition, secured claymore wires to stakes, read letters from home.

Three NVA soldiers fired their rocket propelled grenades.

"Hey, Stretch." It was morning at Camp Evans.

"Yeah. Mfff. Sputt. Wha'the fuck, man." The lanky Spec Four rolled over in his cot. It was eight o'clock in the morning. The sun was up. He had just come off a second bunker guard shift a few hours earlier.

"Man, you hear what happened las' night? The company got hit, man. Big time."

"So what happened?" Stretch was awake.

"1st Sergeant told us at roll call, man. RPGs hit the perimeter. The Old Man, Sarge, 'n-a couple a' others counter-attacked. Said Charlie Oscar went crazy; ran across the LZ; no helmet; tossin' frags and shootin' his '16 n' shit."

"Yeah?"

"Brought in cobras, mortars, ever'thing. Shitheads got away, though. Dust off came in. Our guys laid down suppressive fire. Couple of RPGs went haywire into the sky. NVA must'a had a' ambush planned, but we fucked 'em up."

"Dust off? How many got hit?"

"Three guys, from what Top said."

"Who were they?"

"Couple a' guys from 2d Platoon, just wounded, and the new guy ..."

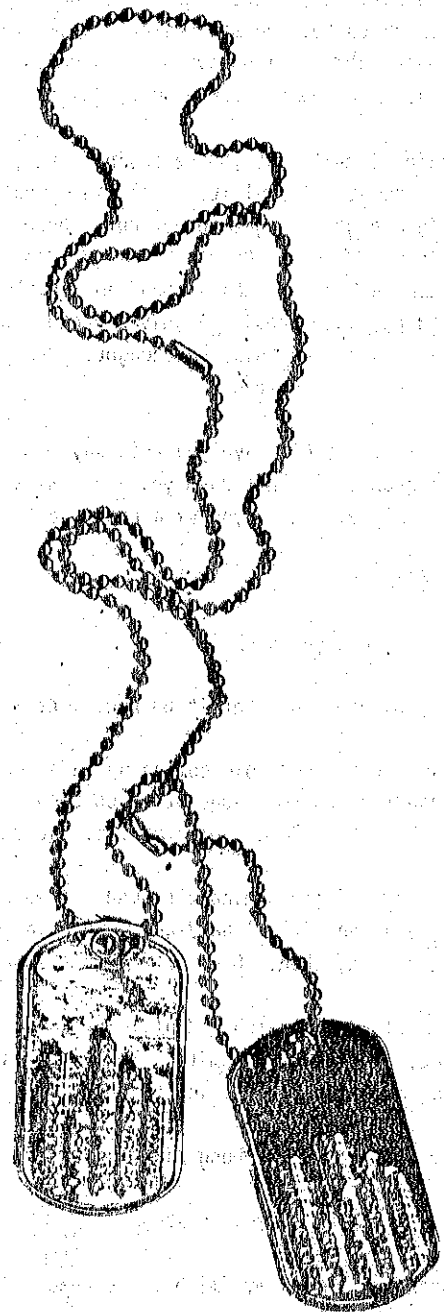
"Smith?"

"Yeah, Smith. He bought the farm, man."

Silence.

"Ya hear me, man. Smith. He's dead."

The lanky Spec Four rolled over in his cot. "Well, that's a lick on his ass." A tear rolled down his cheek. "Now, shut the fuck up, man. Jus' shut the fuck up."





HAMBURGER HILL

By Arthur Wiknik

I had just completed a full month in country when our company was sent to Eagle Beach, the 101st Airborne Division rest site, to enjoy a three day stand-down. Eagle Beach is located on the South China Sea just outside of DaNang and gave you the feeling of being at a summer camp. Cabin styled hoochies were surrounded by pine trees and warm sandy beaches. There were hot showers and clean clothes. We ate hot dogs, hamburgers, and steaks, and washed them down with all the cold beer and soda we could handle.

There was basketball, volleyball, shuffleboard, swimming, and even water skiing. During the day you slept, wrote letters home, or hung around the jukebox listening to the latest mix of music from the world. At night we had live entertainment from a Philippine band followed by a movie.

The only responsibility we had was to take turns guarding our weapons and equipment. Since I was still considered a "cherry," and feeling a little guilty about celebrating with old-timers that had been in the field a long time, I volunteered for occasional guard duty. Besides, I earned a little more respect from the men in my squad who appreciated the offer. This blowout gave everyone a chance to enjoy life without the Army crap, and a chance to get away from the officers and senior NCO's.

When we returned to Camp Evans our Company Commander called us together to tell us about the new area of operation. "Men," he started, "we have a new AO, we are going into the A Shau Valley." "Some of your buddies are running into a little problem out there and we're going in to help." "Each man will be required to carry a minimum of 300 rounds of M-16 ammo, 100 rounds of M-60 ammo, six frags, and six M-79 grenades." "We are leaving at first light, so I suggest you get your shit together and be prepared for anything."

The A Shau Valley lies along the Laotian border, and with the exception of a half dozen firebases, has seldom been penetrated and held by friendly forces. A major artery of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, we called the "Yellow Brick Road," zig-zags along the valley in which the NVA had been boldly driving their supply vehicles on. Now the 101st presence has created a nagging roadblock for the enemy. Up to this point we only contended with booby traps and small elements of Viet Cong but soon we would be facing a fierce opponent that is not afraid to attack openly and in large numbers.

Sunday morning, May 18th. We were on the helipad before daybreak in full combat gear. Dawn was nearly breaking as the familiar sound of the big Chinook helicopters broke the stillness. Three of these giant choppers carried our entire company of 100 men deep into NVA territory. No one spoke as we looked out of the windows watching the sunlight touch the mountaintops.

We landed just outside an impromptu fire support base on the valley floor and waited for our next mode of transportation. It wasn't so humid here, but the tall mountains rising all around didn't make you feel at home. It gave you the sensation of being watched. Within minutes, a fleet of Huey slicks approached and we would be heading to our final destination.

We piled aboard, six men to a bird, and with our feet dangling out the open doors we lifted off gaining altitude, but we weren't going anywhere; we simply flew in a huge circle. I asked the doorgunner why aren't we heading in any direction and he pointed to a barren mountain and said we couldn't land because the LZ is taking enemy fire.

The mountain looked oddly brown against a green backdrop. From our one and a half mile airborne distance, the landscape appeared to be unusually barren except for dozens of limbless trees that stood like twisted telephone poles after a fierce hurricane.

Suddenly the choppers descended to an LZ about a half mile from the hill. It was too hazardous to land because the enemy continued to shoot at each chopper as G.I.'s attempted to unload. We had only five seconds to jump out as the slick hovered six feet above ground level. The doorgunner was firing his M-60 into the jungle while infantrymen on the ground did the same.

I leaped from the bird and fell flat on my face from the weight of my equipment. As the chopper flew away I scrambled to the treeline where a one-star general was smiling as he watched our unloading acrobatics. He seemed to get a big kick out of it. I gave him a (what the fuck are you staring at?) look, but he kept on smiling. It didn't matter, once it started to get dark, he sure as hell wouldn't be hanging around in these boonies. Wait a minute! What in the world is a General doing way out here? There were hundreds of G.I.'s on this location, making me realize that something really big is going on.

Evidently the 187th Infantry Battalion had been fighting here for eight days, starting on May 10th., when they were conducting a sweep of the area and received heavy enemy fire from the crest of Dong Ap Bia Mountain, hill #937. The mountain was dubbed "Hamburger Hill" by the attacking G.I.'s who witnessed their friends getting chewed up in one of the bloodiest battles of the entire Vietnam war.

The paratroopers were ordered to take the hill but they ran into "garbage," rocket grenades, automatic weapons fire, and lethal command detonated claymore mines that dangled from bushes and trees. Artillery and tactical air strikes were called in causing the top of the mountain to rock and belch fire and debris at each impact.

The next morning the Americans moved along the fingerlike ridges leading to the top of the hill testing the enemy's

strength. Riddled by enemy fire, two squads managed to briefly make it to the top, but were unable to hold their ground. They fell back and again radioed in for support. Cobra gunships and artillery raked the mountaintop, pulverizing the terrain.

On the third day, the 187th. tried to maneuver to a better position. That failed. The NVA, deeply entrenched in bunkers and spider holes, laid down an intense barrage of small arms, RPG and mortar fire. For the next three days the situation barely changed. Allied units probed the enemy positions, found the location of bunkers, and called in more air strikes and artillery. The pounding softened the NVA enough to allow troopers to again sweep over the crest but as they tried to push further along the mountain they received greater enemy resistance than all the days before. For an additional three days the situation remained frustratingly dormant.

This was a rare engagement against an estimated fifteen hundred enemy soldiers and the action became a battle of attrition between opposing infantry forces. The 101st. decided to commit additional manpower to confront an enemy that continued to fight while the conditions remained unnormally to their advantage.

Being part of this is what I get for allowing myself to be drafted. If I had enlisted I could have become a chaplain's assistant or a bookmobile librarian. Instead I'm here with a thousand other guys preparing for a rendezvous with destiny.

We moved a short distance from the LZ and spent the afternoon constructing bunkers and fighting positions to protect us from anticipated mortar and infantry attacks. After dark, the jungle came alive with strange noises far below us. It sounded like enemy movement but was only splintered bamboo reacting from previous artillery barrages. On the hill the NVA lit several small fires and kept them burning through the night to demonstrate their defiance and dedication. Since both sides knew exactly where the other was located, there was little doubt that this was also a game of psyche, two determined rival forces, only a half mile apart, taunting each other under starlit skies.

Monday morning, May 19th. Two F-4 Phantom jets arrived to provide tactical air strikes at locations that enemy bunkers were spotted and in areas that we would need clear to assault the hill. We cheered at each explosion and were delighted when the ground shook as the planes took turns releasing their firepower. The display concluded as napalm canisters crashed to the earth engulfing the entire hillside in a ball of flames so intense, that for an instant, we felt the heat where we stood. The savagery was awesome.

We loaded ourselves with all the ammunition we could carry

and left our rucksacks behind in a huge pile. Since a rear guard would be staying, Howard Siner and I hid our packs in the bushes thinking that we would be returning to that spot and it would be far easier to reclaim them rather than sort them out from hundreds of others. Carrying enough ammo for two people, a can of peaches to snack on, and a canteen of water, I moved out in single file with the rest of the company to link up with fellow troopers.

The ridge trail we followed was well used and littered with discarded U.S. Army equipment, half used belts of machine gun ammo, empty M-16 magazines, canteens, ponchos, and web gear. As we rounded a turn, three green body bags with dead Americans inside were lying on the trail edge. Our procession had stopped so we sat down to rest. Vega didn't stop though, he kept coming until he reached my position.

"What's the holdup?" he asked. "Dunno, we just stopped." I answered as Vega looked around for a place to sit, then walked over and sat right on one of the body bags. "Hey!" I yelled. "There's a dead G.I. in that bag, are you crazy or something?" "What's the problem?" "He's dead, he don't feel anything." "you bastard." "Watch it Wiknik." "I'm remembering everything you do, and you're just digging a deeper hole."

It was hard, but I resisted further conversation with the son-of-a-bitch. A few minutes later the column was moving again. Further along the trail we came across two dead NVA who must have been killed at least a week ago. They were decomposing rapidly in the tropical heat, their lips had receded exposing the teeth and their eyes were shriveled remnants. Maggots were busy crawling in and out of the mouth and nostrils. My only reprieve was that the wind was blowing the other way.

As we neared the base of the hill we came upon the 187th. Infantry who had been assaulting from this position. The G.I.'s were unnaturally quiet as we approached, many were filthy and unshaven, others had a blank stare that seemed to go right thru you. An unknown soldier focused on me.

"Hey sergeant, you'll never see the top of that hill, not with those stripes on, the gooks are picking off the leaders first." "And you, he pointed to one of my men, you'll never get to the top either, none of you will, nobody will!" He started to sob, "Everytime we get up on top the Gooks come out of nowhere shooting the shit out of us and we run back down." "Some of my best friends are lying dead up there!" "Why can't they just let it be and get the fuck out of here?" He cried freely as a fellow G.I. consoled and led him away. Other troopers gave us the same look of despair but everyone knew that we weren't about to give it up.

We kept moving but this time we had to cut our own trail along one of the fingerlike ridges far below the enemy. We set up that afternoon in a line formation, so as not to allow any NVA to sneak up behind us, and to be in position

for the assault in the morning. We dug in again, but no bunkers or fighting positions because the ridge was too steep. We simply leveled the ground enough to sleep on. For some reason I wasn't as scared as the night before but thinking of the impending battle and first real contact with the enemy kept me on extra alert.

Tuesday morning, May 20th. It was barely light as we awoke to the shattering sounds of our artillery pounding the mountain mass above us. From daybreak until 10:00 a.m. all that could be heard was the screeching whistle of the projectiles and the destructive explosions that followed. The four solid hours of bombardment was deafening. I wished we dug in deeper because shrapnel was hitting the tall trees above us and branches kept falling down.

Exactly at 10:00 a.m. everything stopped and we were immediately on the move. In the not so far distance shooting was heard as the other companies came into enemy contact. We moved through some thick vegetation when all of a sudden it thinned out to almost nothing because of the air strikes and artillery. The "hill" looked monstrous, although completely denuded by this morning's artillery barrage, it was like gazing up at a skyscraper. With no cover, the first few guys were instantly wounded, luckily not too bad. It seemed like the enemy fire came from nowhere because that hill was just stumps, splintered trees, and loose dirt.

Quickly we pushed forward, running and dodging from stumps to holes and back to stumps again. Before I knew what happened, I got myself stuck in an open area with no stumps. I didn't have time to look for a safe spot because I was already crawling as fast as I could to the nearest bomb crater. I wasn't the only nut out there, plenty of other G.I.'s were doing the same. I looked partway up the hill and saw dust and muzzle flashes everytime the enemy fired. It was hard to believe that after the shower of bombs for the past week, they were still there and fighting.

Off to our right, it looked as though the other companies were making good progress. They were running and shooting while we were still crawling. I saw a lone NVA soldier run from his bunker in a effort to reach the crest and his own safety. Before I could aim and fire, someone else nailed him and he disappeared behind a rock so I fired two full clips at the muzzle flashes but that only brought attention to myself.

Plunk, plunk, plunk. Bullets started hitting the dirt all around me so I made a crawling dash to a fallen tree up ahead. Splinters flew off the log as bullets ripped into it, so I stayed put. While lying there I realized I had to urinate. Boy, what a time to have to piss! I actually took time out to consider if I wanted to wet myself or pee on the ground.

Well, I'm not pissing my pants for anyone, so feeling a little silly, I un-zipped my pants and let the urine fly. All of a sudden the tree started shaking as heavy machine gun fire began pulverizing the wood. The Gooks were trying to shoot my penis off! Splinters were spraying in all directions, the dirt all around me was churning as the intense volley continued. I finished by wetting myself.

The barrage stopped as our machine gunner returned fire and M-79 grenades started exploding on the summit. I crawled forward again, gaining almost a hundred feet, and met a buddy from my platoon. The bullets began to hit around us again so we squirmed into the nearest crater trying to figure a quick way out of that spot. Laying on the ground, facing each other, I was suddenly splashed with water.

My companion was carrying a canteen in his side pants pocket and was just shot in the leg. When the bullet exited, it went through the container causing it to burst as if part of an eerie movie. I witnessed the entire sequence in slow motion. He was shot in the fleshy part of the thigh but wasn't bleeding bad. He winced as I ripped the pants leg open and applied the field dressing that each one of us carried. Our fearless medic, who never carried a weapon, appeared out of nowhere to make sure nothing else was wrong with him.

Now I was scared, a guy right next to me was shot, they're really shooting at us! I didn't know what to do, dirt was erupting everywhere as the bullets hit the ground around us. I started firing like a madman, not aiming at anything, just shooting at the massive hill. I had to get away fast because the three of us made too good of a target.

I got up and ran to the next hole where another member of my squad was hugging the ground. Dirt was still flying as the enemy continued to fire. It seemed like the Gooks had singled me out because wherever I moved, the bullets zeroed in on my position. I wormed up to the edge of the crater, held my rifle high over my head, and sprayed two full clips back up the hill.

When I looked above the dirt for an escape route, something suddenly blinded me! I couldn't see! My eyes were stinging and when I reached up to protect them, something slammed into my chest, throwing me backward. I'm shot...they got me! Lying on my back, both my eyes and chest in pain, I began to drift off.

So this is how I'm going to die, at the bottom of a pit in the middle of the boonies...but aren't the battle sounds supposed to fade away like they do in the movies? I suppose I have to suffer first. My chest is hurting more. I blinked my eyes a few times. I can see again! I instantly beat out the flames with my hands and checked for bullet holes. Nothing. Just a minor burn. Whew!

Evidently the NVA chose to shoot more at me because I never did remove my sergeant stripes. (I thought that guy was bullshitting) One of the enemy bullets hit the ground in front of my face getting dirt in my eyes. A second slug, apparently a tracer, hit an M-16 magazine in the bandolier of ammo I carried across my chest, knocked me to the ground and caught my shirt on fire. That Gook had me cold. Somehow I was lucky enough to cheat death.

I ripped the destroyed magazine out and cast it aside trying to decide what to do next. That's when I went berserk. These NVA mean business! I jumped out of that hole and ran full speed for the treeline, holding my weapon like a pistol and firing at the hill. Enemy bullets followed me as I flew past crawling G.I.'s who yelled for me to get down.

Adrenaline gushed as I darted into the trees, never stopping or looking back. The cover was sparse but started to thicken as I advanced up the hill. Jumping logs, shoving bushes aside, running until I tripped and fell, then scrambled behind a fallen tree to rest. What a view I had! I was at the summit watching the action below me. BELOW ME? Holy shit, I ran past everyone! I tried to move so I could rejoin my men, but exhaustion had taken command of my body. I was so worn out that it became an effort to turn my head to see if anyone was near, friend or foe.

Fifteen paralyzing minutes passed while I watched the fight continue. The G.I.'s were making tremendous progress killing the NVA in their bunkers where they chose to stay and die to the last man. Someone called my name; it was Siner and another member of our platoon, Lennie Person.

"Where's everyone else?" I asked. "We are everyone else," said Person, "but there are guys right behind us." "Hey, what happened to you?" "You look like a raccoon." "Well, I kinda got some dirt in my eyes." "What did you do, piss your pants too," asked Siner. "I don't want to talk about it....at least I didn't shit in them."

The shooting was dying down, except for sporadic rifle fire and an occasional hand grenade, as dozens of our infantrymen swarmed over the crest of the hill. To my knowledge, the three of us were the first ones to the top, although my reason for getting here so fast wasn't something I was going to tell anyone about. Cobra gunships appeared above us firing rockets and grenades at distant NVA who were fleeing the hilltop. The battle was ending. We won. The final assault lasted for four hours.

Tired, sweaty, and filthy soldiers straggled past us. Vega was with them, but he wasn't tired, he wasn't even dirty. "Pork Chop Hill was tougher than this," he said motioning us to follow. "That was a real battle." "I'll kill him," grumbled Person. "No, I'll kill him," I whispered. "Forget it," commanded Siner. "He's nothing but a fucking asshole

lifer." "He hopes you try something, that's his style." "Don't let him get to you."

Our company set up positions alongside several bomb craters each big enough to park a truck in. Vega told us that Lieutenant Fafner had been shot in the leg and that he was taking charge of the platoon until we get a new commander. I felt sick. Oh well, one down, one to go.

All shooting has stopped now but the gunships still roared the sky above us while more G.I.'s made their way to the summit trying to locate their outfits. As the regrouping continued, Vega had me and two other men help the walking wounded back down the hill to an LZ where medevacs were busy flying casualties to the rear.

Our route down the hill passed the area where the 187th was first hit ten days earlier and the trail was littered with a dozen body bags, each containing a dead G.I. Lifeless NVA soldiers also laid on each side of the footpath but they remained uncovered and some were partially decomposed. The afternoon air became still and the stench of decaying human flesh hung around you like a thick fog. The various stages of the corpses, the odor, the body bags, the massive destruction was carved into my brain. How could this obliteration have been allowed?

As the last of the wounded were loaded, the heat began to bother me, so I stood as close as possible to the chopper to feel the temporary relief of the rotor wash. As the bird sped away, the intense hot stillness surrounded my body. Everything was spinning and before I could sit down, my rubber legs gave out. I woke to the scent of smelling salts as a medic laughed and said, "No one leaves here with battle fatigue, go back and join your unit."

We started heading up the hill when I thought about the M-16 magazine that saved my life and went back to look for it. The clip was right where I tossed it. After a quick examination I stuffed it into my side pants pocket where it was carried for the next three months.

Everywhere G.I.'s were digging in. There were a few souvenir hunters, checking over the dead NVA and their bunkers, who found evidence of the enemy's determination. Shirts with sewn on commands, "KILL AMERICANS" and "STAY AND FIGHT," and "DON'T RUN."

When I got back to the top, there were more "brass" stumbling around than at the Pentagon. There was also a cardboard sign, "HAMBURGER HILL," pinned with a bayonet to a huge blackened tree trunk. A battle weary soldier calmly walked over and attached a note to the bottom that read, "Was it worth it?" I stood staring at it, contemplating the question, when a REMF officer ran over and tore the note off. "Bastards," I mumbled to myself.

"Sergeant Wiknik!", Vega yelled, waving me to come over. "Choose three men and go down to the bottom and pick up four cases of C rations." "What for?" I shouted. "If the brass could be flown up here, why can't our food be flown up too?" Everyone stopped what they were doing and turned their attention to us. "Our rations are already at the bottom!" "Fine." Pick someone else for a change." I'm not going." "As your platoon leader I am giving you a direct order, so do it."

The situation turned into a staring contest when three platoon buddies walked between us saying: "C'mon Wiknik, we'll go with you; let's get them C rations." Their intervention probably saved Vega's life because at that point I was ready to blow him away. We turned and headed down the mountain as a chopper hovered near the top dropping off rucksacks. That was nice. Siner and I hid our rucksacks in the bushes so they wouldn't get mixed up with the others. Well there was no worry about them getting mixed now because they'll be hidden there forever.

I again passed the location that was earlier surrounded by body bags, but they were gone now, airlifted to Graves Registration. An estimated 600 dead NVA soldiers were left behind to rot.

We met other G.I.'s carrying C rations up the hill who looked more like safari porters than battle victors. Placing a case on my shoulder, I gazed at what would be my third trip up that hill. Will this day ever end?

It was late afternoon when we dropped the C's at the platoon CP and headed for our positions. I got a slight reprieve when I saw that the guys I was to dig in with already took care of it and even leveled off a place for me to sleep. We sat talking about the events of the day and how our lieutenant got shot. It seems that he was pinned down behind a big rock and in an effort to shoot back, he raised his rifle over his head without looking where he was aiming, shot the rock several times and one of the slugs ricocheted hitting him in the leg. Theoretically he shot himself, so we told everyone that it was self inflicted and that he deserved to be court martialed.

We sat there laughing over it when a supply chopper came in and dropped two dozen cases of C rations and thirty gallons of water at our company CP. I didn't react, I couldn't. I was so frustrated that my brain went numb with the rest of me. I told Siner, "Maybe I'll be lucky and die in my sleep tonight." I was truly thankful to be alive but was so drained that I wished I were dead.

We didn't bother to pull any guard that night because there were so many guys clustered on that hill that we would be just guarding each other. Sleep came easier than expected. With Siner and Person in my position I felt safe. Sometime during the night I was dreaming that I lost my entrenching tool and that I had to find it to dig in.

Ironically, Person was having a nightmare that the NVA were coming out of the ground and were trying to kill us as we slept. With me fumbling around in my sleep and Person dreaming about the Gooks, I started searching around his body touching him several times. He woke up screaming, grabbing me around the neck. Then I shrieked, because I didn't know what was going on, and we tumbled into a hole locked together. The entire hilltop woke up to the clamor and luckily Siner pulled us apart because I think Person would have beat me to death. The night continued without incident.

In the morning more rucksacks were brought in so I told the doorgunner where mine and Siner's were hidden and maybe he could find them. We were preparing to go help build up a firebase across the valley and he said if he finds them, they would be dropped off. The packs were located, but as the chopper was flying to the firebase it took sniper fire; the pilot went into a steep bank to avoid being hit and the rucksacks fell out the door. So right now some Gook is out there taking pictures with my camera and reading my letters from home.

At mid morning our company was airlifted off the hill, and as each chopper slowly rose above the disfigured mountain, the survivors glanced down at a nightmare that came to life. Little did we know that Hill 937 was not regarded as a piece of real estate worth keeping and within days be completely deserted by American troops.

The commanders of the 101st Airborne Division called the Communist defeat a tremendous and significant victory. However, while the 107th Infantry was being overwhelmed by a higher number of enemy forces, the rest of us were at Eagle Beach having a picnic and getting drunk.

The battle for Hamburger Hill claimed 60 American lives and 480 wounded. Another 25 were missing and all of them presumed dead. The rapid abandonment of such a hard won territory continued to fuel the growing lack of support for the war and soon caused President Nixon to announce a plan for systematic allied troop withdrawals.

