

RIPCORD REPORT

A Newsletter

No. 36 NOV. 1994

For Friends and Survivors of FSB RIPCORD, RVN

THE FIRE BASE RIPCORD SIEGE AS SEEN BY THE BRIGADE COMMANDER

By Maj. Gen. Ben L. Harrison, U.S. Army, Retired

Taking Command

I took command of the 3d Brigade on June 23, 1970. That same day I was told to establish a forward command post (CP) with the 1st ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) Infantry Division's forward CP on the demilitarized zone (DMZ), and reopen Fire Base Shepard near the Khe Sanh airfield. This action was directed in response to numerous sightings and contacts by the 2/17th Air Cavalry Squadron with North Vietnamese forces moving through the Khe Sanh/A Shau Valley areas.

No one present could remember the last time the brigade CP had been out of Camp Evans [rear base along national highway QL-1]. I was given operational control (OPCON) of the 2/17th Cav., and no one could remember the last time that had happened either. It was also a very new experience for the 2/17th commander, Lt. Col. Bob Molenelli, and Brig. Gen. James C. Smith (assistant division commander for operations) and I had to give Bob a "Leavenworth-type" class on the meaning of "OPCON."

My assumption of command was not as smooth a transition as one would have liked in a combat situation. The deputy brigade commander and the S-3 (operations officer) rotated to the States in the next few days. The position of brigade command sergeant major was still vacant. I had to relieve the S-4 (supply officer) for incompetence. My predecessor had not placed a high priority on continuity of operations.

Focus Shifts to Ripcord

The increased activity around Khe Sanh, the A Shau and around ARVN Fire Bases O'Reilly and Barnett soon were overshadowed by intense activity in the Ripcord area. This movement and concentration of forces near Ripcord is, of course, much easier to see now. We pulled the tactical CP back to Camp Evans after the July 2d attack of Charlie Company, 2/506th, [on Hill 902] and my focus and priority clearly was on the Ripcord area. In my hooch I had a "hot line" to the tactical operations center (TOC) and two FM radios. During my "sleeping" hours, I monitored the 2/506th command net and would frequently try to monitor internal company nets.

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CURRENT EVENTS

WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW WITH RIPCORD VETS.

A new feature will be appearing in upcoming issues featuring the profile or biography of Ripcord veterans. This is a chance for you to tell everyone you served with how you are doing today.

Please send us your profile (300 words or less) explaining what you have been doing, how you have been doing, what your goals are and/or what you think might interest other Ripcord vets. Tell us who you served with on Ripcord and if you have made contact with any of them and what they are doing.

This feature will continue as long as we keep getting your profiles, so don't delay and send them today.

Send to:

VIETNAM, 25 YEARS AGO

On Nov. 3d, President Richard M. Nixon made his most expansive report yet on the Vietnam War to a nationwide television audience. It was an attempt to build support for his policies and at the same time blunt the anti-war effort. The following day showed overwhelming support for the president: A bipartisan group of congressmen introduced supporting legislation; a Gallup Poll showed 77 percent of Americans were behind Nixon, and only six percent opposed his position on the Vietnam War.

On Nov. 4th, South Vietnamese infantry, supported by U.S. planes and artillery, clashed for 10 hours with North Vietnamese forces at Duclop, near the Cambodian border. It was the largest battle of the war in four months, and claimed the lives of a reported 80 enemy, while South Vietnamese losses were 24 killed and 38 wounded.

North Vietnamese forces mounted an assault on Nov. 8th against South Vietnamese navy-marine units in the Mekong Delta. This was the second attack in three days. Eighty communist soldiers were reported killed, and South Vietnamese losses were eight killed and 43 wounded.

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Vietnam, 25 Years Ago*

North Vietnamese maintained pressure at Ducloap, but in the spirit of "Vietnamization," U.S. ground forces were not committed, and the South Vietnamese received continued support from U.S. artillery and air strikes.

On Nov. 11th, Swedish Foreign Minister Torsten Nilsson revealed a three-year economic aid program for North Vietnam. Swedish aid had been limited to only humanitarian missions.

On Nov. 12th, Seymour Hersh reported that the Army would charge William Calley for the murder of 109 Vietnamese civilians in March 1968. Thirty papers ran the story about the war crimes, which occurred at a Viet Cong stronghold known to GIs as "Pinkville."

The next day, 122 enemy were reported killed in two days at Con Thien, near the DMZ. U.S. losses were 22 killed and 53 wounded. Near Da Nang, fighting resulted in 130 North Vietnamese killed, against 17 KIA and 60 WIA for U.S. forces.

Also on the 13th, anti-war demonstrators began gathering in Washington, D.C. On the 14th, 2,000 protestors marched on the South Vietnamese embassy, but were turned away by tear gas.

South Vietnamese fighter-bombers struck at enemy forces in the Central Highlands on Nov. 14, killing 95. Friendly ARVN troops were also bombed in the attack, with 20 killed and 53 wounded.

Saturday, Nov. 15, 1969, witnessed the largest anti-war demonstration in the nation's history, as 250,000 protestors rallied in Washington, D.C. A mob of about 6,000 attacked the Justice Department, resulting in the arrest of nearly 100.

Twenty U.S. helicopters were destroyed in a Viet Cong raid at Camp Radcliffe, at An Khe, 260 miles northeast of Saigon, on Nov. 15th.

In action around Duclap and Buprand, Allied bombers struck North Vietnamese artillery positions inside Cambodia on November 16 and 17. The U.S. intervened in what it called "an inherent right of self-defense."

In the first major action in the Mekong Delta since the withdrawal of the U.S. 9th Division, South Vietnamese troops suffered 60 men killed or wounded on Nov. 18th. North Vietnamese losses were put at 14 killed. "Bad fighting on our part," was the reason given by a Saigon spokesman.

On Nov. 20, the Cleveland Plain Dealer published the first graphic photographs of victims of the My Lai massacre, taken by Ron Haeberle. Seymour Hersh filed his second massacre story.

By the 24th, 35,000 U.S. troops had been withdrawn from Vietnam in under 12 months, a timetable set the prior year. At Ft. Benning, Ga., William Calley was ordered to stand trial the murder of 109 Vietnamese civilians.

Communist forces stepped up their attacks against U.S. units near the Cambodian border on Nov. 25th. Ten Americans were killed and 70 wounded, and the enemy lost 115 dead. The attacks destroyed a dozen tanks and tons of ammunition at Allied camps.

See-saw fighting continued in the Mekong Delta on Nov. 28, when a 300-man ARVN unit was ambushed and 36 were killed. An ARVN counterattack netted 45 communists killed.

On the last day of the month, North Vietnamese gunners downed four U.S. Army helicopters near Song Be, beside the Cambodian border. Five crewmen were killed and four wounded.

Source:

The World Almanac of the Vietnam War, John S. Bowman, gen. ed., Pharos Books, New York, 1985, pp. 242-245.

Commentary

Close Air Support: Keep It an Air Force Role

By Chuck Hawkins

OAKTON, Va.--Without being impolite about it, the U.S. Air Force would like to distance itself from the close air support (CAS) function, for which it has had primary responsibility since the Key West meeting in 1947. In February 1993, the Army was given equal responsibility for the CAS role, and attack helicopters were judged CAS-capable, the first such shift in policy in 46 years.

Citing that "attack helicopters" are the "preferred CAS platform," Air Force planners now want the Army to assume a greater position. It's nothing personal. With dwindling defense budgets and declining forces, each service wants to husband meager resources for those missions it feels have top priority. Compared to air superiority, deep strike and battlefield interdiction, close air support of ground troops is deemed less important.

The Army takes a different view, as it should. Air support of ground troops in desperate defensive battles has been critical to American success in World War II, Korea and Vietnam. Ground offenses, in contrast, have historically called for less close air support.

Other factors weigh heavily in Army thinking about CAS. Attack helicopters perform vital CAS missions, but they are different from Air Force fighter-bombers, whose thundering attacks have a psychological effect on enemy troops that helicopters will never match. In addition, analysts say that combinations of CAS weapons, both helicopters and fixed-wing jets, give ground commanders necessary flexibility in dealing with a foe.

Only 652 combat sorties were flown during Operation Desert Storm by Apache helicopters, just over 60 percent of those came during the 100-hour ground campaign. This, compared to the 16,000 Air Force combat sorties (mostly interdiction) flown during the same 100-hour period. This relatively low CAS usage in offensive operations is similar to past U.S. experiences.

Still, it seems there is a continuing role for the Air Force when it comes to CAS. The Army should stick to its guns on this one.

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**A NATIONAL NEWSLETTER
SINCE 1983**

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(in Memory of Tom Shepherd)

Thanks for your support!



STAFF JOURNAL: LZ OAKTON



You've seen the front page headline, so you know we've got a super feature article written by Ben Harrison, the 3d Brigade commander at Ripcord. Ben retired as a major general, so he must have been doing something right. In particular, in my view, these included his efforts to develop abundant close air support at Ripcord. I invite your attention to his piece, and the companion article comparing close air support at Dien Bien Phu, Khe Sanh and Ripcord.

This past spring, I had a breakfast meeting with Tony Cox (D/1-506) here in northern Virginia (Tysontucky, for those familiar with the Washington, D.C., scene). Tony, Merle Delagrance and Gib Rossetter, along with a number of other stalwarts of D Co. of the Currahee 1st Battalion, have established a company association with over 30 members--all of whom receive the Ripcord Report. Way to go, guys!

Delta 1/506's story is not as well known as some outfits which were involved at Ripcord. Now, we look forward to learning more of their part in the battle. Gentlemen, send in those retrospectives.

Another poorly-related aspect of Ripcord is what happened to the 2/501st (Geronimo), when they, less Delta Raiders who were OPCONed to the 2/506th, attacked up the backside of Hill 1000 in mid-July 1970. I was vaguely aware of their operation at the time, and learned more about it researching 3d Brigade TOC journal records over the past few years.

Then, there's the 1st Geronimo Battalion, tasked to reopen and secure Fire Base Gladiator on July 18th, after the Chinook downing and ammo dump explosion on Ripcord destroyed the 105mm howitzers there. Gladiator, and its battery of 105s, was critical to the survival of Ripcord and two companies in the field around it from the night of the 18th until evacuation on the 23d.

I report progress for Reunion '95--the Rocket Ridge Redux near the Colorado Rockies outside of Denver. Reunion pointman, John Mihalko, has secured a perimeter (bring your own sandbags and ammo boxes), and has set PZ and LZ times (write these down): July 19-23, 1995; that's Wednesday through Sunday.

We're already expecting a BIG turnout for our 25-year anniversary, so make plans now to meet with your fellow Currahees, Geronimos, Strike Forcers, Griffins, Dragons, Eighty-Knots, Bilks, Redskins, Phoenix, Pachyderms, Charlie Medics, and any other Screaming Eagles I may have forgotten.

MEMBERS AND READERS ARE KEY

The key ingredient to a successful newsletter is **YOU**, the Ripcord Association member. There wouldn't be a Ripcord Report if readers didn't read it, and respond to the information presented.

If you've got comments about the newsletter, good or bad, let us know. We can't promise to always agree, or fix a perceived problem, but we try to be responsive. Remember, Ripcord Report is different from most newsletters in that it's a volunteer effort supported by **volunteer contributions**.

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Ripcord:

The Brigade Commander's View

We were concerned about the recoilless rifle fire that came directly into Ripcord from Hill 1000. The early July attacks by Delta and Charlie Company, 2/506th, were very disappointing; resulting in several friendly casualties and the refusal of Charlie Company's commander to lead his men up the hill. He was relieved of command, but at Lt. Col. Andre C. Lucas' request, I did not court martial him for cowardice.

Ripcord began receiving 120mm mortar attacks. This was the first use of 120s, except right up on the DMZ, thus indicating a significant logistic accomplishment by the enemy.

My introduction to the 120mm mortar happened when I was standing at the opening of one of the Ripcord bunkers, talking with a sergeant as we both

leaned on the stack of sand-filled ammo crates shielding the bunker entrance. A 120mm round landed at the front base of the stacked crates. It blew both of us back about eight feet into the bunker. The sergeant was evacuated with blood coming out of both ears. A soldier leaning on crates in the same fashion at the next opening to my right was killed instantly. My S-3 was approaching from the helipad to our left, and was wounded in the right leg.

These Were Intense Times

Ripcord began receiving probing ground attacks almost nightly, and Hill 805 had heavy attacks four nights in a row. I coordinated directly with Col. Ed Greer, the XXIV Corps Artillery Group commander supporting our area. Greer had the long-range 175mm guns that could reach beyond Ripcord.

A considerable amount of my time went to working the air space control

around Ripcord. With nightly attacks, we needed helicopter flare ships, helicopter gunships, Air Force support and all available artillery. We also used a seldom-applied technique of off-set beacon bombing. Frequently, the Air Force would say they could not support us unless we turned off all the artillery and mortars and placed the helicopters under forward air controller (FAC) control.

I ordered a combat assault on Hill 1000 by the 2/501st (-) at mid-month. They were withdrawn under pressure.

After four nights of pounding by the enemy, we extracted Delta Company, 2/501st, from Hill 805. While standing in the pickup zone (PZ), Capt. Chris Straub's Kit Carson scout pulled the pin

on a grenade, killing himself and seriously wounding Straub and two others. The scout apparently was deeply depressed at the killing of so many of his former comrades the past

four nights. These were intense times.

We Need Fire Support!

The shoot-down of a CH-47 Chinook helicopter onto Ripcord on July 18th, wiped out the 105mm howitzers of Bravo Btry., 2/319th Artillery. The remaining 155mm howitzer battery was not capable of "close and continuous" fire support as its rate of fire and adjustment capabilities are too slow.

I flew my command and control (C&C) bird to Ripcord while the Chinook was burning. I called Brig. Gen. Sid Berry on secure radio and requested the immediate re-opening of Fire Base Gladiator, for the positioning of a 105 battery to support the troops on the ground in the Ripcord area. I asked that an engineer mine and booby trap element be dispatched to Camp Evans to join my recon platoon to check out Gladiator. I also requested an infantry battalion and a 105 battery to meet me

in the air for insertion into and around Gladiator that afternoon. By nightfall, the 105 battery was providing direct support to Andre Lucas' troops.

I now had five of the eight infantry battalions in the division under my command or operational control. All five of them had some elements in contact with the enemy. Notwithstanding, it was clear to me that Ripcord was the key battle. As we extracted more troops from that area, those remaining became more dependent on fire support.

Air Force Wavers, then Wreaks Havoc

I sent for my air liaison officer (ALO), Maj. Brown, USAF, and told him to get his gear together, that we would be spending our nights out on Ripcord coordinating Air Force, helicopter and artillery support. After he recovered from a quick attack of the "vapors," he told me he could do a much better job coordinating air support from his aircraft above and around Ripcord. I told him that I wanted continuous airborne FACs with relief on station. I further told him that if, at any time, I could not instantly talk to a FAC in the air, I would send a helicopter to move him to Ripcord that minute. He and his great team never let us down.

Unfortunately, there were numerous occasions where we needed quick and substantial Air Force support. Also unfortunately, there were numerous arguments about where they could or would fly. I had recorded some fixes on key terrain features as radials off the Air Force radars servicing the area. With these, and intimate knowledge of the current situations, and speaking aviation language, I had many direct conversations with the air crews in the Ripcord area, and was able to get the most out of my colonel's position for delivery of requested help.

3d Brigade Takes on NVA Division

On July 20, Capt. Chuck Hawkins' battered Alpha Company, 2/506th, reported that a tap had been made on a

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Ripcord:

The Brigade Commander's View

commo line between a North Vietnamese division headquarters and an artillery regiment. It was learned that there were four regiments surrounding Ripcord, for the purpose of seizing the fire base. This told me that we finally had them bunched and not going anywhere. I told my brigade staff to develop plans to destroy the four regiments. The staff came up with a plan calling for six additional U.S. battalions.

In the middle of the night, I sat bolt upright and ordered A Co, extracted. Monitoring the A Co, net when the extraction finally came was a very major emotional event.

Senior-Level Decision

Late on July 21, as I was preparing to go to Ripcord for the night, Brig. Gen. Berry came to me and said, "We're closing Ripcord. What do you need in the way of support?" I was dumbfounded. It had never, ever occurred to me to cut and run.

I have many, many times--and still do--use this incident to teach decision making. If the Ripcord situation had been presented at Ft. Benning or Ft. Leavenworth, and I was asked to make a decision, mine would have been the same as Berry's. The point is that you have to step back from the situation and ask (as did Lt. Gen. Hal Moore, I found out later), "What am I doing that I should not; what am I not doing that I should?" General Berry was able to see the battle from a more detached view. I was too close. I was part of it. I was fighting right along side Andre Lucas on Ripcord and in the air. I failed to step back from the immediate problem.

Impossible Mission

Berry had asked what I needed for the extraction and evacuation. This was easy. I had commanded a combat aviation battalion for 12 months, supporting primarily the 101st on an earlier tour. For starters, I told him I wanted the air cav squadron, the aerial rocket artillery

battalion, and lots and lots of close air support sorties. We set a time for mission planning on July 22d.

All the key players were at Camp Evans on July 22, including the major general commanding the Marine air wing at Marble Mountain, and Air Force and Navy carrier representatives. I told the Marine general that I wanted four sets of air every hour for 12 hours, starting at 0600 hours on July 23d. He said it would be impossible to designate and control that many strikes--48 sets of two to four aircraft each. My ALO assured me he could do it. (In fact, our S-3 air, Capt. Stallings, in a LOH (light observation helicopter), controlled quite a number of the strikes.) I believe we finished the day having used 42 sets of Marine, Navy and Air Force aircraft.

Fighting Withdrawal: Brilliant Airmanship

I was airborne and controlling the operation before 0600 hours. We never shut down the engine until the afternoon, refueling and relieving the bladder with the engine running. When I was refueling, my S-3, Maj. Jim King, controlled the operation from another C&C aircraft. The extraction was complete by late morning. We then pounded Ripcord and the immediately surrounding area with massive artillery and air strikes.

Air cavalry and FACs searched the area for targets. One of my LOH scouts reported a man standing and waving from the top of Ripcord. I made a low pass and recognized that he was Vietnamese in U.S. uniform. I tasked the air cavalry to go in and pick him up under gunship cover. I followed the pick-up bird into Camp Evans. When the Vietnamese stopped shaking and was able to talk, he turned out to be a very frightened Kit Carson scout who had burried himself deep in a bunker until the shelling finally stopped.

I certainly agreed with General Berry's assessment that it was the most complex and most brilliantly executed

airmobile operation ever conducted (before Desert Storm, of course). The flight lead, flown by Capt. Randy House, Phoenix 16, was absolutely superb. (Randy extended his tour to command a rifle company, and is now a major general commanding the 1st Inf. Div. at Ft. Riley.) The Chinook battalion was simply spectacular. There has never before or since been such a mission as was accomplished by the 159th Chinook crews. It was a brilliant operation, but

not totally without tragedy. Three men were killed. A pathfinder controlling the Ripcord PZ was killed by incoming mortars, and Lt. Col.

Andre Lucas and his S-3 of only a few days were killed by mortars as they sprinted for the helipad to get back in the air and finish the operation.

That 23d day of July 1970 was my 42d birthday--easily my most memorable one.

Postscript

Late on the 23d, I was told to conduct a press conference the next day at Camp Evans. Between 25 and 30 members of the media, mostly from Saigon, showed up to hear the story of Ripcord. Some seemed disappointed that it was not a major U.S. screwup.

Ripcord was not the first nor the last fire base to close under enemy pressure. Maryanne closed in March 1971 after a devastating sapper attack. Ripcord was, however, the only U.S. fire base closed in a retrograde operation without breaking contact with the enemy. There were others by ARVN units in Laos in Lam Son 718 in February and March 1971, with which General Berry and I had first-hand knowledge. For these, Berry was the overall air coordinator and I was the advisor to the commanding general, 1st Inf. Div. (ARVN).

"The soldiers and airmen who took part in the Siege of Ripcord were brave and highly professional--truly Great American Heroes!"

EDITOR'S HISTORY CORNER

Dept. of the Army
HQ, 2d BN (Amb) 506th INF
APO San Francisco 96383
Unit History, March 1971

Continued from No. 35

THE 'OFFICIAL' HISTORY OF 2/506TH FOR 1970

This segment is about the nighttime attack against Charlie Company on Hill 902, in the early morning hours of July 2d. Hill 902 was commanding terrain just two and a half kilometers south of Ripcord, and Charlie Company performed a valuable service to the battalion on 1 July, when the siege began, by spotting and directing fire on enemy mortar and heavy weapon positions in the valleys below. Stung by the effectiveness of American counterfire, the North Vietnamese became determined to assault this key redoubt.

The sappers came silently at first, dressed only in shorts and carrying small satchel charges, their bodies painted black against the night. With the sudden violence of exploding satchel charges, it was impossible to tell whether Charlie Company was under mortar attack or whether sappers had actually breached the perimeter. Many men died before they fully realized what was happening, others, fearing a mortar barrage, clambered into their foxholes, where they, too, died from accurately thrown charges.

A sapper attack is always supported by infantry, either to cover the withdrawal or to press the advantage to final victory. When small arms and RPG fire began, Charlie Company reacted.

Men fought like demons. Capt. Hewitt was mortally wounded, and in his place stepped the CP medic, SP/4 Cafferty and a CP radio operator, Sgt. Jack Dreher. The perimeter had been penetrated and the dangerous task of clearing the enemy from inside, as well as fighting them from out, fell to these and a few other daring individuals.*

One by one, the enemy died or fell back as the men from Charlie Company fought back. First Lieut. Vancleve, the company forward observer, came out of shock caused by the same RPG round that had killed Capt. Hewitt, and directed Cobra gunships and artillery. SP/4 Mueller, a team leader in 2d Platoon, fought alone in his fighting position, reporting his situation occasionally over the only radio his platoon had left. When the fire fight was finally over, Mueller, exhausted and weak from multiple wounds, had seven enemy dead in front of his foxhole.

In all, the battle on Hill 902 had lasted over an hour. Eight members of Charlie Company had died and scores were wounded, but enemy casualties, too, had been heavy. Twenty enemy dead dotted the slopes of Hill 902, and countless blood trails led off through the jungle.

To be continued ...

* We know more about Hill 902 than the official history presents. Capt. Thomas T. Hewitt, a veteran on his second tour, was sleeping in a hammock when he was killed by the blast of an exploding RPG round--a mistake, because he swung, suspended, just at grazing fire height above the earth.

There were heroes aplenty in the ranks of Charlie Company, too numerous or unknown to fully acknowledge here. However, their number include:

Steve Manthel, 2d Platoon, a new member of the association from Janesville, Wis., for whom the night was "the most alive I've ever been." Bob Smoker, a 1st Platoon member from Red Lion, Pa., an unsung hero who helped rid the killing ground of stay-behind enemy. The late Tom Shepherd, of Elizabeth, N.J., a medic who was wounded again and again going to the aid of fallen comrades.

Jack Wilhite, of Springfield, Mo., was on Hill 902. In response to a question by John Palm, Jack wrote in October 1992, "I read in the last Ripcord Report where John Palm was wondering about the MIA on Ripcord. I believe that would be Steve Harber, who was on watch that night on Hill 902 when we were attacked on July 2d." - *Editor*

Weapons From the Past

The British .303 Lee-Enfield Rifle

This turn-of-the-century infantry rifle first saw service in 1896, and the better-known Short Magazine Lee-Enfield (SMLE) was adopted in 1902. Many SMLEs saw service in the First World War, including the improved Mark III (1907) version.

The Lee-Enfield continued in British Army service after the war, but with modifications based on experiments conducted in the 1920s. Production on the variant No. 4 rifle began in the late 1930s, and this weapon saw service throughout World War II. It was an accurate weapon, capable of placing a five-round shot pattern in a four-inch circle at 200 yards.

A No. 5 Jungle Carbine was developed for use in the Far East.

The rifle continues in service in some former Commonwealth countries, and was popular with Afghan guerrillas during the Soviet occupation of their country.

The No. 4 Lee-Enfield is a manual, bolt-action rifle, 113 centimeters (44.5 inches) in length, and weighs 4.1 kilograms (9 pounds) loaded with its 10-round detachable box magazine. Its effective range is 500 meters, and it can fire up to 20 rounds per minute. Muzzle velocity is 751 meters per second. It has a protected blade front sight, and an adjustable aperture rear sight.

VOLUNTEER DONATIONS MAKE THE NEWSLETTER HAPPEN

Ripcord Report is a non-profit venture that literally survives month-to-month on your goodwill. No one gets a salary. There are no benefits or paid insurance. We depend on Bill and Hillary for health care. Our retirement plan doesn't go into effect until the last sapper attack has been repulsed.

**VIETNAM:
THREE CLOSE AIR SUPPORT (CAS)
DEFENSIVE COMPARISONS**

By Chuck Hawkins

Most students of military history are familiar with the defeat, in May 1954, of the French at Dien Bien Phu, at the hands of Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap's Viet Minh forces; and many remember the bitter siege of Khe Sanh during the Vietnam War, in the spring of 1968. Ripcord, less remembered than the former two battles, was a 101st Airborne Division fire support base, located on the northeastern rim of the A Shau Valley, that came under siege in July 1970.

Dien Bien Phu caused French capitulation in the first phase of the Indochina War. Khe Sanh, a costly miscalculation on Gen. Giap's part, forestalled Communist success in the second half of that war. Ripcord was a successful fighting withdrawal, leaving the enemy in control of the jungle, but little else.

CAS at Three Sieges

	D. Bien Phu	Khe Sanh	Ripcord
Average Daily Combat Sorties	170	355	23
Average Daily Bomb Tonnage	85	1,383	41
Total Sorties	9,520	24,512	529
Total Bomb Tonnage	4,760	95,402	943
Days in Period	56	69	23
Bomb Tonnage per Sortie	0.5	3.9	1.8
Defensive Troops	14,000	6,600	800
Offensive Troops	40,000	20,000	8,000
Attacker/Defender Ratio	2.9:1	3:1	10:1
CAS Tonnage per Defender	0.3	14.5	1.2
CAS Sortie per Defender	0.7	3.7	0.7
Defender Total Casualties	14,000	1,799	406
Defender Daily Casualty Rate	2.0%	0.4%	2.2%

These data are an abstraction of grim reality, and cannot relate the many factors and events that shaped each battle, but examination gives cause for reflection. The significance of close air support (CAS) in contributing to the defeat of a surrounding force should not be lost on the casual observer.¹

Substantial CAS resources, including over 2,000 B-52 sorties that delivered 58,000 tons of bombs, were committed to Khe Sanh. Dien Bien Phu, however, was nearly out of range of French aerial support. Of 101st Airborne Division fire support bases in 1970, Ripcord was the most remote, but was more nearly like Khe Sanh in terms of air support than the French experience.

Helicopters, both gunships as well as lift ships, were critical to Ripcord, less critical at Khe Sanh, not a factor in the case of Dien Bien Phu. Helicopter close air support is not represented in the foregoing table. Despite differences in scale, there is more similarity than not in comparing these strongpoint defensive examples. And the importance of close air support, particularly its proximity and weight of application, cannot be ignored.²

End Notes:

1. Data for Ripcord is from 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, daily staff journals and daily operational summaries for July 1970. The data from Dien Bien Phu and Khe Sanh were gathered from archival and secondary sources, and presented in a 1990-91 analytical study to the Air Staff.

Some of the entries represent approximations for the period under examination. For example, strength figures for defenders fluctuated. French forces at Dien Bien Phu initially totalled slightly less than 11,000 men, but paratrooper reinforcements later increased that number. There were 13,640 French casualties at Dien Bien Phu, including captured personnel; fewer than 100 managed to escape.

2. Application of CAS at Ripcord increased sharply in the final days of the battle. On July 21st, 34 jet sorties dropped 54 tons of bombs on targets, well above the average daily sortie and tonnage rates. On the 22d (a critical day for me, personally), 104.5 tons of bombs were dropped by 42 combat aircraft. On the day of the evacuation, an astonishing 150.7 tons of bombs were dropped by 88 combat planes!

COMING IN DECEMBER'S ISSUE

A listing of Ripcord Association membership will appear in the December issue, with addresses and Vietnam unit of assignment (where known or applicable). If you do not want your name and address made public to other members, tell Chuck Hawkins now, 703/648-2520.

REUNION '95: ROCKET RIDGE REDUX

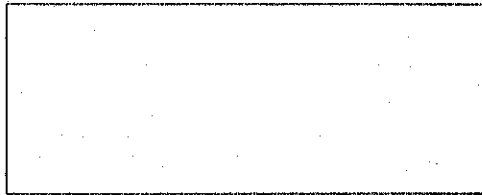
Make plans now for our 25-year reunion by the Colorado Rockies. Dates are July 19-23, 1995 (Wednesday through Sunday). Contact John Mihalko, 303/986-9348.

LOOKING FOR NEW MEMBERS

Call your friends who served with you. If they're not receiving the Ripcord Report, maybe they should. Send their names and addresses to one of the newsletter board members.

SEND IN THOSE RETROSPECTIVES

Got a war story, retrospective or other tale to tell? How about commentary on a military-related subject? Try to keep submissions brief, to the point. Our readers enjoy reading what other readers write. (Say that three times, fast.)



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RIPCORD REUNION '95

Twenty-Five Year
Anniversary!

July 19 - 23, 1995

Denver, Colo.

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