

RIPCORD

REPORT

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FOR FRIENDS AND SURVIVORS OF FSB RIPCORD,
RVN, 12 MAR.—23 JULY 1970

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No. 42 Nov. 1996

Ripcord Reunion '96 hailed as a great success!

FREDERICKSBURG, VA, Oct. 11-13—Family members and veterans of the fighting around Fire Support Base Ripcord in 1970 gathered at this historic Virginia town just prior to the Columbus Day weekend. In all, 38 members and guests enjoyed the opportunity to meet, share memories, pay respect to our fallen comrades and take a tour of Civil War battlefields at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville.

Some folks made the trip from as far away as Idaho (Warren Ruen, Recon, 2/501st) and Arizona (Bill Heath, Alpha, 2/506th). John (Custer) Mihalko (Recon, 2/506th) and his wife Kathy arrived from Colorado, and Ripcord Report founder Chip Collins (Bravo, 2/506th) joined the group from his new home in Kentucky. Another Bravo, 2/506th member, Bob Judd and his lady, Red, came from Michigan to attend their first Ripcord Reunion.

Charlie Company, 2/506th was well represented with Paul Burkey from Ohio, Jerry "Doc" Cafferty from Connecticut, Jim Campbell from Louisiana and Charlie (Gator) Tipton and his son, James, from North Carolina. Kent Roland, who had served in both Delta and Charlie, 2/506th, made his second reunion, arriving from Tennessee via motorcycle.

It was a special treat to have the artillery represented by Alfred Martin (Alpha, 2/11th) and his wife Bonnie. Other first time reunion attendees included Cully Warren (Delta & HHC, 2/506th) from Virginia, Chris Garrett (Bravo, 2/506th) and his wife Beverly from Minnesota, Dan Thompson (HHC, 2/506th) from Massachusetts, and his friend Bob Morton, and Clem Neiderer (HHC, 2/501st) and his wife Rachel from Pennsylvania.

Dick Cable (Recon, 2/506th) came in from New York, and Carl and Mary Ann Carlson (relatives of John and Kathy Mihalko) arrived from New Jersey. Fred Spaulding (HHC, 3d Brigade), who did most of the reunion planning and oversaw arrangements, joined us from Indiana. Gary Radford (Delta, 2/506th) and his son Brian came down from Pennsylvania. Chuck (Charlie & Alpha, 2/506th) and Glenda Hawkins were present from their home in Virginia, along with guests Lisa Harris and Marsha Stewart, also from Virginia.

Bob Seitz (Recon & Charlie, 2/506th) and his wife Robin attended the banquet. Bob introduced the guest speaker for the banquet, Maj. Gen. Randy House (Phoenix, 158th Avn. & Charlie, 2/506th) and his wife Jeannie. Randy is the senior military assistant to Secretary of Defense William Perry.

Many members brought military memorabilia to show and share with others. There were Ripcord T-shirts, hats, posters and other items for sale, and each attendee received a Ripcord coffee mug, which were produced in Colorado by the company that John Mihalko works for.

There was more than enough beer but too few sodas (are we getting older, or what?), and the food at the Friday buffet and the Saturday banquet was outstanding!

In all, every company in the 2/506th was represented, plus members from 2/501st and the 2/11th (155mm medium artillery), 3d Brigade HQ and 158th Aviation.

Some members who almost made it to the reunion, but could not, were: Jerry Rodgers (326th Eagle Dustoff) of Virginia, Harold Gaither (Alpha, 2/11th) and Peg Shickler from Tennessee, Gabe Rollison (Delta, 2/506th) and wife Marti from Missouri and Tom Austin (Alpha, 2/11th) from Georgia. Tex Turner (HQ, 3d Bde.) of Virginia sent his regrets, as did Jim McCoy (Delta, 1/506th) of California, Bob Smoker (Charlie, 2/506th) in Pennsylvania, Ken Hamilton (Charlie, 2/506th) in Ohio and Richard Drury (Delta, 1/506th) from Michigan. We hope to see you all, and many others, next year.

Special events made it special.

VIETNAM VETERAN'S MEMORIAL, WASHINGTON, D.C., Saturday, Oct. 12th—No one can visit the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in the nation's capital and come away unmoved or uncaring. The memorial—The Wall—is a special place, full of sorrow and painful memories. But it is also a place of peace and serenity, and of love.

For some in the Ripcord Reunion group the visit to The Wall was their first, and they were visibly moved by the experience. For others the pilgrimage was not new, but was still emotional and moving.

Here, on the grassy sward just north of the Lincoln Monument, just out of sight of the Reflecting Pool, slabs of polished black granite bear the names of our fallen soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen of the Vietnam War. Over 58,000 souls are remembered and revered here in perpetual respect, love and honor.

Civil War battlefield tour a 'must' for reunion group.

FREDERICKSBURG, VA. Oct. 11th—The Friday morning tour of American Civil War battlefields at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville was a highlight of Ripcord Reunion '96. There was a chill in the air as the temperature hovered in the high 30s, but it wasn't as cold as it had been for the Union and Confederate forces who fought at Fredericksburg in December 1862.

The tour began at 9:30 a.m., and was given by Trolley Tours of Fredericksburg, with Mr. Davis conducting. When it was over 2 ½ hours later, the 23 members of the tour group had a view of a different kind of fighting than that which we had experienced in Vietnam.

Al Martin said "it's the best value I've had for \$12 in a long time." Others agreed that the tour was well worth the modest cost.

Fredericksburg: 15,000 casualties

By November 1862 Union forces under Maj. Gen. George McClellan had swelled to 120,000 north of the Rappahannock River. To the south, in and around Fredericksburg, Gen. Robert E. Lee's Confederates numbered 85,000. McClellan's ego and his delay in resuming the offensive cost him his job, and Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside took command.

On Dec. 10th Burnside's Army of the Potomac began crossing the Rappahannock River in pre-dawn mist. Engineers pushed pontoon bridges half way across the river by the time the fog lifted, then Confederate sniper fire halted the crossing. It took volunteer infantry to cross the river and clear the town after artillery fire failed to eliminate the sniper threat. By Dec. 12th the Union forces had managed to complete the crossing.

Lee ceded the town to the Union troops. Union artillery fire from heights across the Rappahannock had become too lethal. But Lee had heights of his own beyond Fredericksburg where he placed his artillery. When Burnside's soldiers continued their advance they were met with a withering long-range fire.

Although Federal forces pushed the rebels back, and penetrated Confederate lines in some places, quick use of reserves restored the situation for the South. At day's end on the 13th the battle was practically over.

Lee hoped that Burnside would continue to attack, that he could continue to bleed the Union army white. But Burnside and his commanders had enough. Undetected, and with considerable skill, the Union troops withdrew across the Rappahannock on the 14th. With them they took every last item of supply and equipment, including every foot of communications wire.

For both sides the cost had been high. Lee lost over 5,000 soldiers killed, wounded and missing; the Union lost over 10,000. But the casualty rates were comparable for both sides: 6 percent for the Confederates and 8 percent for the Federals. The North, with greater reserves of

manpower, could afford such losses in the long run. The Confederates could not.

Chancellorsville ... Jackson's brilliant march vs. Hooker's strange reluctance

In early May 1863, five months after the Union defeat at Fredericksburg, North and South clashed again at nearby Chancellorsville. This time the Army of the Potomac was commanded by Maj. Gen. Joseph "Fighting Joe" Hooker, a brave and brazenly ambitious officer.

Here, Lee's force of approximately 43,000 was outnumbered by more than two to one. Yet, as usual, it did not occur to Lee to stand on the defensive, but he waited to see how the Union offensive would develop.

When it became apparent that Hooker was attempting to get behind the Confederates, Lee took a calculated risk. Splitting his force, he left about 17,000 soldiers to defend Fredericksburg and turned the balance of his army to face Hooker's main body at Chancellorsville in an area known as The Wilderness.

Hooker had a reputation as a fighting leader, but at Chancellorsville his aggressive attitude failed to materialize. He paused to await reinforcements, then convinced himself that the Confederates were retreating. In fact, it was a large force under Maj. Gen. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson that was making a flank march of 14 miles to get behind Hooker. Lee had again split his force in the face of superior numbers of the enemy!

Mistakes by Jackson's subordinates and stout resistance by Northern soldiers checked the rebel advance. But Hooker inexplicably did not counterattack, even though a third of his force had not been committed to battle. Lee was thus able to concentrate first against one Union force and then the other, defeating both separately. However, in a tragic friendly fire incident, Jackson was mortally wounded returning to Confederate lines after a reconnaissance mission. Lee had lost his most able lieutenant.

Confederate losses were roughly 13,000; Federal 17,000. Proportionately, the Confederates were worse off, even without considering the loss of Jackson. But the North had again suffered a humiliating defeat. This was a high point for Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, but it was not destined to last. A few weeks hence, at a Pennsylvania town named Gettysburg, the tables would be turned, and the tide of eventual victory would forever after favor the Union.

REUNION 1997

There will be a Ripcord Reunion in 1997!

Dates: October 16-19 (Thurs.-Sun.)

Location: Mobile, Alabama

Details to follow ... stay tuned.

HISTORICAL FOOTNOTES

More than 20,000 troopers of the 101st were casualties—dead, wounded and missing—in the Vietnam War. Just over 9,000 men in the 101st were casualties in World War II. Seventeen Screaming Eagles became casualties in Operation Desert Storm—from the 101st Memorial by the entrance to Arlington National Cemetery.

Roughly 40 percent of all U.S. casualties in the Vietnam War occurred in the northern four provinces of the Republic of Vietnam, where the 101st operated from Tet 1968 until the withdrawal in 1973.—War Without Fronts: Dimensions of the Viet-Nam War, 1965-1972, Thomas C. Thayer, Washington, D.C., 1973.

LZ Dumfries

DUMFRIES, VA.—Greetings from Virginia's oldest town. It's what the municipal sign says, anyway. On the reverse the sign says, "Haste Ye Back." It's nice to be wanted. Maybe Glenda and I will stay awhile.

Ripcord Reunion '96 really was a great success. We just wish more folks had been able to participate, but considering the short-notice situation, the turnout was pretty darn good.

The Ripcord Association has reached something of a new stage in our evolution. Some old members and some new ones have made commitments to help the association in several key areas:

1. Getting the Ripcord Report published and distributed on a regular basis. (Once a month was too much a strain on time and resources; once a year is not enough to maintain interest.)
2. Planning and organizing reunions every year, at different locations, with Columbus Day weekend in October the target date ('97 will be the week after).
3. Seeking corporate sponsors to fund a Ripcord Memorial Scholarship Program.

There were a lot of ideas kicked around at this reunion, and a lot of energy was evident. We want the association to grow and to expand newsletter distribution. Currently, the Ripcord Report is mailed to over 330 members. This is our highest count ever, but there are still veterans out there who fought at Ripcord who don't know about the newsletter or the association. Let's track down some of these guys!

We're still a voluntary, contribution-based organization. There are no dues or subscription charges. Your generosity and financial assistance make it possible to get Ripcord Report out to those who appreciate and look forward to it. Thanks for all your support!—Chuck Hawkins, Editor

SAD NEWS . . .

GRAND CANYON, AZ—Randy Thompson, a former platoon leader in Delta Co., 1st Bn., 506th Inf., died as a result of a tragic accident on Feb. 26, 1996.

Don Donner, a close friend, wrote that "Randy was working with a crew, clearing a trail in the [Grand] Canyon, when a boulder dislodged from above. Randy stepped aside as he had often done before, but the boulder unexpectedly ricocheted into him and he suffered massive injuries."

Randy worked for the Forest Service in Arizona after Vietnam, where he battled forest fires. "I've finally found a good war to fight," he once told a friend. Eventually, Randy settled in the Grand Canyon where he worked for the Park Service keeping trails open and becoming one of the "mule riders."

At the 25-year Ripcord Reunion in Colorado last year, Randy's T-shirt proclaimed his wit and love for Canyon life. "Dances With Mules," the T-shirt read. The Colorado reunion helped relieve the "anguish of Ripcord which had long troubled him."

Immediately after the accident a medevac helicopter was called, Don Donner explained, but "unusually bad weather that day prevented the Park Service helicopter from [being able] to medevac him." An Army Blackhawk helicopter was called, but it too could not rise above the Canyon rim "due to icing on its blades." Eventually, the Blackhawk pilot cleared the Canyon to the west over Lake Meade, and took Randy to a hospital in Las Vegas where he died 48 hours later.

Flags flew at half-mast on March 3d at the Grand Canyon National Park, and a memorial service was held in remembrance of Randy. He was the first park employee to die of injuries since February 1922, when Rees B. Griffiths was also felled by a falling boulder. A street is named after Randy in the Park Service community on the Grand Canyon's south rim.

Randy was drafted into the Army during Vietnam and attended OCS where he received a commission as a second lieutenant of Infantry. He was awarded the Purple Heart and Bronze Star for his service in Vietnam.

Randy is survived by his parents, Mrs. Becky and Col. Rodney S. Thompson of Biloxi, Mississippi. Memorials in the name of Randy Thompson may be made to American Rivers, 3601 North 7th Ave., Phoenix, AZ 85013.

A number of Ripcord Association members got to know Randy at last year's reunion. Thirteen of his company joined us at that gathering, including Randy's former platoon sergeant, Jerry Wise.

Randy, Jerry, John Chamless and I toured the Rocky Mountain National Park together. We had a grand time. Randy shared his considerable white water rafting experience with us, we took some pictures, joked and laughed a lot.

He was a good man, and too new a friend to lose so suddenly.

Randy, our thoughts and hearts are with you.—Chuck Hawkins, Editor & Friend

INCOMING!!!

Mail Call from across the country.

After all these years ...

Aug. 30, 1996

Thank you for sending me your newsletter and the information on the reunion. I'm sorry to say I'm unable to attend this year but if I know far enough in advance for the next one I certainly would like to make arrangements to attend.

I was wondering if it's possible to get copies of past newsletters and if it's possible to get a copy of the video and footage of the battle that will be shown at the reunion? I will be happy to forward the cost of the above if it's available.

It was great to read the newsletter after all these years. It was interesting to see the names of some of the guys I served with.

If you happen to talk to Jerry Wise please tell him "Hi" for me. You can give him my address and phone number and tell him I tried reaching him by the number you gave me but I was told the number was no longer in service.

My brother-in-law was with Alpha Co., 1/501st and was wondering if the organization includes his company?

I was very happy to hear that you went to West Point with Capt. Don (Ranger) Workman. He was such a great person and I still think of him.

If there is anything I can do to help you with the newsletter please don't hesitate to contact me.

Enclosed please find my donation for the Ripcord Report. I hope it helps to keep the newsletter in circulation.

Sincerely,
Richard (Dru) Drury
Wayland, Michigan

Sept. 18, 1996

I can't make the reunion. I would be interested in the video of Ripcord.

Enclosed is a donation for the newsletter.

Thank you,
Ken Hamilton
Mendon, Ohio

Editor's Note: The 1/501st (-) was OPCON to 3d Brigade on July 18, 1970, after the ammo dump explosion on Ripcord. Alpha and Bravo companies combat assaulted to FSB Gladiator to reopen that fire base and provide security for Alpha Battery, 2/320th Artillery (105mm). This was necessary to provide artillery support in the area of operations after Bravo Btry., 2/319th's 105mm howitzers had been destroyed by the explosion on Ripcord.

Any member of the 1/501st is certainly welcome to receive Ripcord Report and be a member of the association.

Copies of the video tapes shown at Ripcord Reunion '96 will be made available at a modest cost. However, without a printed explanation of the video scenes, or accompanying narration (which is lacking on the tapes) they don't make a lot of sense. We're working on this matter and will keep membership informed.

Special bond ...

Sept. 17, 1996

This time there is no way I will be able to make it. My oldest son is being married Oct. 12th. But, is there any way that I could see the video of Ripcord/Hill 1000 and the combat footage? If it will be in your possession after that date perhaps we can get together.

I was invited to speak at a local American Legion prayer breakfast on Memorial Day. What an honor! And I am also expecting to make presentations in three of my area high schools when they deal with Vietnam. As a school board member at two of these schools (my district and the county vocational-technical school) I became aware that fewer and fewer of our teachers have been in the military. Not that it necessarily makes them deficient teachers, but there is a missing dimension. And that is alarming to me. Therefore, I made the offer and it was eagerly accepted.

By the way, there is a special bond between me and my future daughter-in-law. She is Vietnamese. She is one of the orphans that were evacuated in the "Baby Lift" in 1975, just prior to the fall of Saigon.

See you,
Bob Smoker
Red Lion, Pennsylvania

Fax message: URGENT

Oct. 12, 1996

To the veterans, family and friends of the Battle of FSB Ripcord:

I'm very sorry that I couldn't join you for the reunion being held this weekend. I wanted, very much, to be there. There are many vets to whom I owe a great deal of thanks. I hope this fax will substitute in part for those things that should be said face to face.

Thanks to the vets from Alpha Battery, 2d Bn., 11th Artillery. You guys did one hell of a job! You provided fire support to the guys on the ground, prepared for march order when the word came down to evacuate, and made as orderly a withdrawal as possible under extreme conditions.

One of the RTOs for Lt. Col. Lucas told me later, on the Sanctuary, that an estimated 800 mortar and rocket rounds were fired onto Ripcord during the evacuation! This doesn't count the incoming which fell while you were still providing fire support during the last 36 hours you were on Ripcord. I don't expect you to remember me; however, I was sent out as the acting battery commander after Lt. Bob Kalsu was killed. I didn't make it back to Eagle with you guys so I never had a chance to say "thank you" for the job you did.

Thanks to the vets who took time to throw me on a Huey after I got wounded for the second time that same morning. I never knew any of you guys but I think of you often. The RTO mentioned above, also told me that one other WIA and I were put on the first of the last three helicopters to come in from Ripcord. Some of you may remember this. On the humorous side, I weighted about 215 lbs. at that point, so the stretcher and I were a little on the heavy side. On the first attempt to throw me on board,

I hit the side of the Huey rather than the cargo floor.
Thanks for trying again!

Thanks to the vets who were chopper pilots and
aircrew. You showed unbelievable amounts of courage.
No, I think "guts" is a better word. You acted like it was
just another day at the office. I do remember that the ship
that picked us up was a slick, not a medevac aircraft.

An apology to the two NCOs (I think) who were standing
outside the TOC when I went up to report to Lt. Col.
Lucas. To the best of my memory I asked, "How's it going,
sarge?" One of you responded, "Not bad, how about with
you, sir?" I'll always regret answering, "I can't complain."
I hope and pray that my big mouth didn't jinx you guys! A
fraction of a second later, a mortar round landed just
below us. I remember falling and not much else. I do
remember coming to just as the guys picked up the
stretcher to put it on the Huey.

Best wishes to each and every one of you.
Thomas M. Austin
Atlanta, Georgia
Acting Battery Commander
A Btry, 2/11th FA
FSB Ripcord
July 21-23, 1970

I'll be there ...

Sept. 10, 1996

Just a short note, with some funds enclosed. It's all I can
afford at this time. I don't make that much here in prison.
But I know that you can use all you can get. My address is
the same, or you can use the one listed above.

The last report I received was on Jan. 4, 1996. So if there
have been others since, I've not received them, and
would appreciate it if you could get me up to date.

I am not able to make the reunion, as the State of
California desires my attention right now, but rest assured
the first reunion I can make, I'll be there.

Dau tranh,
James "Sneaky" White
Vacaville, California
C/4th/77th ARA "Griffins"

A Chinook door gunner reports ...

May 17, 1996

My name is Charles Berger. I was a door gunner on a
CH-47 with B Co., 159th Aviation Bn. at Camp Eagle. I read
your Fire Base Henderson [VFW Magazine, Apr.-May,
1996] article. I was all over that area including Ripcord.

I remember July 23, 1970, as if it was yesterday. I was on
one of those aircraft that evacuated Ripcord. I have
pictures of Ripcord before and after the evacuation. I
read about you, Capt. Hawkins, in *Stars and Stripes*. I still
have those newspaper articles from over there. I was
surprised to see your article on Henderson and then
going back in time all over again to see in my head the
tragedy that took place. I was just 18 years old then, a kid.
There I was in the middle of it all. Call me if you need
some information for your next article.

Yours truly,
Charles Berger
Port St. Lucie, Florida

Some revealing memories ...

April 8, 1996

Sorry to be out of contact so long. Just got around to
reading the No. 41, Nov. 1995 issue of *Ripcord Report*.

The "Incoming" section is something I always enjoy, but
more especially the one in this issue. I was in Bravo Co.,
2d Bn., 506th Inf., before being assigned to Alpha Section,
Mortar Platoon, Echo Company, which served on Ripcord
during the battle.

I have to fully agree with James Kilgore's assessment of
Delta Co., 2/501st on Hill 805 and Alpha Co., 2/506th
buying time (and lives) for us on FSB Ripcord. There has
never been any question in my mind that the NVA had
planned an all-out attack to completely overrun the fire
base. Like James Kilgore, I was in a fire direction center
section and monitored several radios. (James, what
section were you in?)

This brings to mind some of the comments made by Bob
Lorbeer in his letter to the *Ripcord Report*, same issue. I
can faintly remember some of the discussions on the
radio by Lt. Col. Lucas and the Charlie Co. ground
commander, but I positively remember respecting his
decision NOT to go back up Hill 1000!

We monitored several PRC-25s and had access to a lot
of information on and around the fire base. I don't
remember the C Co. commander as far as meeting him,
but I'm sure I still could remember his voice on the PRC-
25, as I could remember Chuck Hawkins' voice on the
civilian land line some 22 years later. I also remember
Lee Fox, our battalion chaplain, and had a lot of respect
for him.

In reference to James Kilgore's question as to who
policed-up the firecracker rounds after the Chinook was
downed in the ammo dump, I think Chaplain Fox may
have answered it best! As I remember, the day we were
evacuated and made it to Camp Evans, Chaplain Fox met
us and stated, "There is going to be one hell'uva show
tonight!" I asked what he meant and he stated there was
going to be several B-52 runs on and all round FSB
Ripcord that night. And, to use a chaplain's term, "It came
to pass."

I also remember bits and pieces of some of the fire
missions we fired, but one that stands out the most was
one where our illumination round canisters were falling
into Alpha Company's perimeter (the night of July 22). It
wasn't funny at the time, but I sure hope you guys can
laugh about it now. Please???

Better run for now. Please help keep *Ripcord Report*
going—donate!
Currahee to all,
Wayne R. Sinks
Afton, Tennessee

Freedom!

It's not just
another word.

INCOMING (cont...)

A father writes ...

Aug. 20, 1996

Just a few lines to let you know that I received your notice of the reunion and I'm sorry but I can't make it. Got out of the hospital and have to take it nice and easy for a while.

I am enclosing a copy of your article in the *VFW Magazine* and it was great. I am a life member of the VFW and also the American Legion.

I would like to thank you for the nice articles you wrote in your great newsletter regarding my son Thomas J. Shepherd. I get out to his grave site once a week. He is buried with my wife Marion. The cemetery is only 10 minutes away.

I get to church a couple days a week, and prayers are offered for my son and all the boys from Fire Base Ripcord, both the living and the deceased.

In closing, I wish your reunion a success and best wishes to all from myself. I'm sure, had Thomas lived, he would have made it.

May God bless you all.

Sincerely,

Joseph P. Shepherd, Sr.

Elizabeth, New Jersey

Note: Joseph Shepherd, Sr., served with the 69th Infantry Division in Europe in World War II. His son Tom was a medic in 2d Platoon, Charlie Co., 2d Bn., 506th Infantry. Tom left us in 1991. We still miss him.—Editor

After 26 years ...

Aug. 23, 1996

It was indeed a great pleasure for me to talk with you yesterday with respect to a period of time that is indelibly etched into the memories of every soldier who served in the Ripcord operation. As I indicated, yesterday was the first time in over 26 years that I have had the occasion to talk with a former trooper who served with me in Vietnam. I was able to contact SSgt. Paul Burkey, Doc Cafferty and Charlie Lieb, and enjoyed reminiscing with these individuals about past campaigns as well as what has happened in life during the last 26 years. I was particularly happy to find out that you and these individuals have led successful and productive lives since returning to the United States.

Also, thank you for your article that appeared in *VFW Magazine*, which most eloquently sets forth the great campaign for the Battle of Ripcord.

Curraheel

Jim Campbell

Shreveport, Louisiana

C Co., 2/506th

Ripcord ... where angels feared to tread
... was our stomping ground!

Interpreter alive and well ...

June 5, 1996

Here is Mr. Tony Hai's address. He was our battalion (2/506th) interpreter. He was a master sergeant with the 1st ARVN Infantry Division.

Mr. Tony Hai

Cuu Long Tourist Company

1-1/5 TX Vinh Long

Tinh Vinh Long

Vietnam

Sincerely,

Dan Thompson

Weymouth, Massachusetts

HHC, 2/506th

Note: If anyone remembers Tony, why don't you drop him a line? Even if you didn't know him, he'd still enjoy hearing from Americans who served with him. Dan explained that Tony had been five years in "rehabilitation" after the North Vietnamese took over.—Editor

Randy Thompson's folks write ...

Sept. 4, 1996

Last Saturday, Aug. 31st, the post brought us a letter from Don Donner within which he enclosed a copy of the *Ripcord Report*, No. 41, Nov. 1995, that you had sent to him.

We laud the effort to keep the sacrifices and tribulations of the troops embroiled in Operation Ripcord. The enclosed contribution is specifically to help keep the memory alive—and with honor.

We are the parents of Randy Thompson who was mentioned twice in the *Ripcord Report* that Don sent to us. He was a member of Delta Co., 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry.

We would also like to be on the mailing list for the *Ripcord Report*.

Sincerely,

Rodney S. Thompspon

Biloxi, Mississippi

A note from the distaff side too. Randy's dear friend, and boss, Dan Blackwell notified John Chamless of Randy's demise and the news spread like the fires Randy used to fight. We received letters from Jerry Wise, John Chamless, John Smith and Jim Lay, which were greatly appreciated.

I have the picture of Randy taken at his graduation from Ft. Benning with his father here on my desk. It was one of our proudest moments. We are so grateful that living in the Grand Canyon and the Colorado reunion helped heal the wounds from Nam and especially Ripcord. We hope that those who still need healing may find help somewhere.

Sincerely,

Becky Thompson

Biloxi, Mississippi

PUTTING THE PIECES BACK TOGETHER ... A RETROSPECTIVE ON GILBERT RUFF

BY CHRISTOPHER GARRETT

BEMIDJI, MINNESOTA—It's always so enlightening to compare each of our own remembrances of what went on while we were over in Vietnam. Although we all seem to have our own thoughts on what actually happened, listening to everybody's story helps me to remember what I experienced.

The event I recall the most vividly happened on Feb. 23, 1971. That was the day SP/4 Gilbert Ruff was killed when he stepped on a booby-trapped bomb. Gilbert Ruff was the RTO for 2d Platoon leader Lt. Allen Boyd, Bravo Co., 2d Bn., 506th Infantry.

I remember that it was a laidback kind of day, the kind where you kick back and just enjoy knowing the choppers are coming take you back to the rear the next day.

We had been working an area 10 clicks due north of Ripcord, and had just spent a couple of harried days down by the Ngon O Lau river chasing NVA who weren't interested in a confrontation. The 2d Platoon did have a brief firefight with the enemy, but 1st Platoon came away with only one incident, a wound in the leg from a small booby trap to PFC Larry King (not the same as the talk show host). It happened when we walked into an NVA campsite with their cooking fire still smoking and clothes hanging on a line, including a woman's bra which we found rather strange at the time. Then we climbed to the top of the ridge line to wait to be pulled back to Fire Base Jack in the next couple of days.

As I think back on it, the area had more than likely been cleared by a B-52 strike or something similar.

Our night defensive position (NDP) had an existing landing zone, so there wasn't the usual hard work of blowing and cutting an LZ. I remember the trees blown every which way. As I think back on it, the area had more than likely been cleared by a B-52 strike or something similar.

My squad in 1st Platoon set up on the opposite side of the LZ from the 2d Platoon. They were on higher ground overlooking the LZ, while we in a saddle with a stand of trees. We were just sitting. Our rucksacks were still packed. We hadn't been assigned defensive positions yet. Someone brought out a deck of cards and we proceeded to get a game of spades going.

Gilbert Ruff happened along and saw our game in progress, and stopped to chat. Well, we invited him to set down and join us. So he put his rucksack down and became my partner, and we proceeded to beat everybody who cared to play against us.

It seems to me that we sat and played for several hours, him sitting on his ruck and me on mine. We talked about our homes and families back in the world, and he told me about his wife and little girl. We laughed at just about anything either of us said, and we claimed that no one could beat us at spades. And on this day no one did. I remember joking about him being a "Ruff," as that was the name of my dog I had when I was growing up. We laughed and I can still see him sitting back on his ruck busting a gut laughing so hard.

One moment Gilbert was walking along laughing, and the next he was gone.

Finally, we had to get to work on our positions, and the game broke up. Gilbert headed back to 2d Platoon. He was still laughing when the explosion occurred.

Jeff Taylor of 2d Platoon saw it happen. He was only 15 feet away, talking to Gilbert. One moment Gilbert was walking along laughing, and the next he was gone.

When the game broke up Gilbert and I agreed to get together the next day and play some more spades. Then he picked up his ruck and headed across the LZ. I was working on my defensive position when I heard the explosion, turned and saw a ball of smoke rise from the top of the hill where 2d Platoon was setting up.

Rumors of what happened started to filter down and I learned it was Gilbert who disappeared. That night I walked up to the site of the explosion. I can still see the hole. I saw Jeff Taylor on top of the hill and he told me that he had been just 15 feet away when the bomb went off.

When I talked to former 3d Platoon leader Lt. Art Olsen, he remembered having just come out from Camp Evans and exiting the chopper when the bomb exploded. Art said he remembered Allen Boyd calling for Gilbert on the radio, and his voice was almost a cry as if he were hoping that Gilbert had just walked off somewhere.

Then we formed a line down the side of the hill and walked around the perimeter in search of anything we could find of Gilbert. I never did find anything, but I do remember picking up a green sandbag weighing about six or seven pounds with a tag tied around it and placing it on a helicopter to be taken back to the rear. Then I forgot it ever happened until about five years ago.

I was in the process of quitting drugs and alcohol when these visions of that day came roaring back into my head. When they first came back they were so vivid I could see Gilbert's face. I tried to read his name tag because I couldn't remember his name.

I had several visions. One of Gilbert sitting on his ruck, leaning back and laughing; of the hole made by the bomb; and one of myself loading the bag on the bird. I also have this vision like I'm looking down from above at myself laying on a grave, presumably of Gilbert, and I always wondered how I would fulfill this vision.

I went to visit the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in 1992 and again in 1993. Each time it became more apparent to me that I needed to remember the name of this person who seemed to have such an impact on my life. And thus began my search for members of my old company with the hope that maybe someone might remember details better than I.

Many thanks ... and a tip of the Currahee steel pot to all our financial supporters.

First, a big "thank you" to all those who attended Ripcord Reunion '96 and helped make it an outstanding success. Everyone pitched in, in some way to help out.

Mostly, however, we want to thank those who contributed financial aid over the past year without any expectations of recognition. With the sincere hope that I haven't left out anyone, our special contributors for the past year are:

Gary "Teenager" Watrous, Groton, N.Y.

Jim Campbell, Shreveport, La.

Paul Burkey, Youngstown, Ohio

Gary Radford, Pittsburgh, Penn.

Wayne Sinks, Afton, Tenn.

Dick Cable, Frewsburg, N.Y.

Harold Gaither, Bartlett, Tenn.

James "Sneaky" White, Vacaville, Calif.

Rodney & Becky Thompson, Biloxi, Miss.

Don Donner, Fayetteville, Ark.

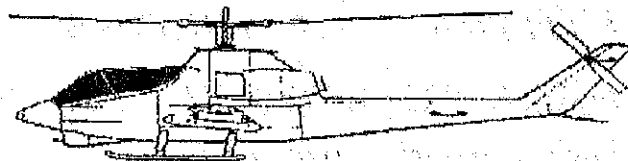
Bob Smoker, Red Lion, Penn.

Ken Hamilton, Mendon, Ohio

Richard (Dru) Drury, Wayland, Mich.

Keynote address for Ripcord Reunion '96, by Maj. Gen. Randy House

FREDERICKSBURG, VIRGINIA, Saturday, Oct. 12, 1996—Currahee means "stand alone." From the perspective of a once young Army aviator, that is exactly what the soldiers of the 2/506th Infantry, 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division did at Fire Base Ripcord on July 23, 1970, Republic of Vietnam.



Now, July 23 may have just been another day in America's 10-year Vietnam experience, but for many of us it was different. For me it was the day before my 25th birthday, and there was more than one occasion on the 23d that I didn't think I'd live to see the 24th. What ended in such a climatic way on a hot, muggy July day really began on a foggy April Fool's Day, 1970. I was Phoenix 16, flight lead for Charlie Company, 158th Aviation Battalion, and it was just another combat assault.

We were up at 0400. I briefed all the pilots, crew chiefs and door gunners on the day's missions. We preflighted our Hueys and then began to send out weather birds to check the conditions across the first ridge line. We were ready for what was expected to be a hot landing zone because we were going close to the northern A Shau Valley—North Vietnam Army country.

The night before at the 2/506th Tactical Operations Center, Lt. Col. Andre Lucas had issued his operations order and briefed his plans. The weather bird called back to report conditions were improving, but the original landing zone, on top of the highest hill in the area, was socked in solid and it was recommended we shift to the alternate landing zone. I flew out to Lucas' command post, briefed him on the situation and awaited his decision.

The North Vietnamese tired of this pounding and in June began infiltrating large numbers of soldiers

The clouds never lifted, so we went into the alternate landing zone, soon to become Fire Base Ripcord, and unfortunately located below a piece of high ground which in July so benefited the NVA. However, during the months of April, May and June of 1970, there were plenty of good guys in the area of operations—1/506th and 54th ARVN Regiment, so the NVA behaved fairly well. All the while, Ripcord, with its 105mm and 155mm artillery pieces, pounded enemy locations in the A Shau.

Obviously, the North Vietnamese tired of this pounding and in June began infiltrating large numbers of soldiers and equipment into the hills and valleys surrounding, and unfortunately overlooking, strongly defended and by now well fortified Fire Base Ripcord. Andre Lucas moved his headquarters to Ripcord. His companies were now making contact daily with large, well equipped enemy forces; even listening to their attack planning.

We helicopter pilots were getting holes in our aircraft daily in support of these brave soldiers. The area of operations went from a milk run in May to a gauntlet in June. By early July we all realized we had a good fight in the making. From early July on we were experiencing up to 10 hot landing zones or pick up zones a day. This was

Continued on next page ...

House, continued ...

not a very friendly place. Our sheet metal guys back at the Phoenix nest were working around the clock patching bullet and shrapnel holes in those old "blue dot" Hueys. Then the 1/506th and 54th ARVN Regiment were extracted from the area of operations, leaving only the 2/506th.

The enemy all the while continued to set the stage for a major assault on Ripcord. By the 19th of July it was obvious Ripcord and the surrounding area would either need massive reinforcements or the soldiers would need to be withdrawn. We were too outnumbered to stay. Brig. Gen. Berry, acting division commander, decided to pull the Currahees out.

Plans were developed and briefed—all the while the fighting and flying around Ripcord intensified. All flights into Ripcord were receiving heavy fire on approach and mortar and recoilless rifle fire on the pads. The enemy had the high ground and could observe our every move.

The date was set to evacuate the area of operations and Fire Base Ripcord to begin at predawn on July 23d. I was given the mission as flight lead. At 0300 hours we gathered the 60-plus helicopters which would support this mission. I briefed the pilots, crew chiefs and door gunners. Gunship pilots and aerial rocket artillery pilots were given their targets and suppressive areas. We confirmed the specific locations of the United States Air Force F-4 strike areas and all the artillery targets and deconflicted our flight corridors in and out. By 0400 all were set.

We picked up Rollie Rollison's tough Delta Company to assault them to go to the aid of Chuck Hawkins' Alpha Company before first light. We took fire, but not an aircraft made a "go-around"—hovering down into a single ship landing zone with fire from all sides, I was so proud of my guys. We knew Alpha Company's extraction depended on getting Delta Company's troopers in to help.

As soon as Delta Company was in and fighting its way to Alpha Company, we sent in the CH-47s to begin extracting the big 155mm guns and ammo. The fire base was alive with incoming and outgoing fire—obscuration from both enemy and friendly fires had us flying in and out of clouds of smoke—trying to avoid friendly fire, streaking Phantoms, attacking Cobras, not to mention enemy machine gun fire, RPGs, 57mm recoilless rifles and all sizes of mortars.

Ripcord was really a mess, made worse by a CH-47 that had been shot down on the 18th and crashed into the ammo dump, which exploded. We would have to extract soldiers from three small, low pads on the east side of the fire base.

The area of operations went from a milk run in May to a gauntlet in June.

After Ripcord we would extract Alpha and Delta Companies from a very hairy hover-down pick up zone. I'll focus on Ripcord itself here. Andre Lucas was orbiting in a Charlie Charlie bird and ordered the extraction to begin. Initially, we went in with three Hueys landing at all three pads, picking up to six to eight soldiers each load. The final approach was exciting—very fast, door guns

ablazing, Cobras providing cover and friendly artillery firing. I knew we had great U.S. Air Force close air support when I read a F-4 Phantom pilot's name on his canopy!

As the extraction flights continued, the enemy became more focused on our route in and out and were putting effective direct and indirect fire on the three pads and into our Hueys. I decided to switch our tactics—go in with three birds and at the last minute have two break off and make a go-around and only one land, and then only stay on the pad for 10 to 15 seconds.

It was during the last phase of the operation that Lt. Col. Lucas decided to go into the fire base to be sure we would not accidentally leave a soldier in a bunker or trench, wounded or without ammo. After the bird touched down and Lucas got out, mortar rounds impacted, killing Lucas and others.

I prayed we had everyone!

We kept flying until we felt we had everyone out. I went back three more times while no one got on my bird. I prayed we had everyone!

This short story took almost all day. I witnessed heroism everywhere I looked. It was so commonplace, it didn't seem unusual. It was what we all had to do; no questions, no soul searching, just do it.

That night I flew over the fire base in a specially equipped "Night Hawk" Huey. Looking down on it with a huge first-generation starlight scope for any sign of friendly life—ready to dive down to pick up anyone we might have left. We saw only enemy soldiers and fired the up with our mini-gun.

The next day we were back flying, supporting someone else, but never, ever forgetting the 23d of July, 1970, or what we saw on that day. I later extended for another tour in Vietnam, to become a Currahee. My respect and admiration for soldiers of the 2/506th was so strong I had to be one. To you who lived through that fight—thank you for all you so unselfishly did. For those who died—I salute them and I'll never forget what I saw, heard and felt. Curraheel! Stand alone! And, I'll meet you on the high ground.

Maj. Gen. Randolph W. House is a long-standing member of the Ripcord Association. He wrote to the newsletter during Operation Desert Storm in 1990-91 to express his feelings and pride in the brigade he commanded, 2d Brigade (Blackjacks), 1st Armored Cavalry Division. More recently, Randy commanded the Big Red One, the 1st Infantry Division, at Ft. Riley, Kansas. He is currently the senior military advisor to Secretary of Defense William Perry.

Ripcord Report is a publication of the Battle of FSB Ripcord Association, and is the authoritative voice of history of the battle. Comments, letters and articles should be sent to: Chuck Hawkins, Editor, 4259 Exeter Drive, Dumfries, VA 22026-3108; ph./fax: 703-730-5286. Advisory board members: Chip Collins, John Mihalko, Fred Spaulding, Jim Campbell.
