

A NEWSLETTER

No. 1 JULY 1985

For Friends and Survivors of FSB RIPCORDER, RVN

No. 15 Dec. 1987



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- * B. Hill
- * R. Bridges
- * J. Sherba
- * W. Smith

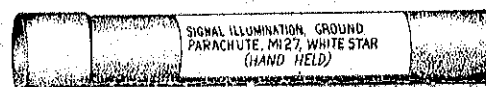
= FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS =
To Treasurer

- * Ripcord Assoc.

= CO-EDITORS =

- * Chip Collins

- * Ray Blackman



A very special thanks to John and Cathy Mihalko for providing the face sheet photo of Chuck Hawkins' reflection in the Wall!



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Col. Charles Garwood
[REDACTED]

INCOMING

20 October 1987

Please add my name onto your mailing list to receive the Ripcord Report. I served with the 265th RR Co., 101st ABN (AMBL) In I Corp.

Would like to hopefully hear from other 265th RR members who were there.

Thank you,
Ed Kemen
Racine, WI

26 October 1987

I was a Phoenix pilot from Feb. 70 - Feb. 71. During the Spring of 70 my company was assigned direct support to 3rd Brigade. We pulled support for 3 months, which was unusual because normally the 3 assault companies at Evans rotated every 30 days so they could stand down and regroup. We got to know the AO around Ripcord, O'Reilly, Bradley and Jerome rather well, to say the least.

In May we lost a crew near Ripcord and in June, after LZ Kelley, we only had 4 flyable aircraft left. At this point we were released from direct support although we still flew a lot of missions in the AO. We were also in on the evacuation in July.

Kenneth L. Mayberry
Bradshaw, NE

October, 1987

Thought I'd drop you a line and say a big HELLO. Keep up the good work on the RIPCORN REPORT. I really enjoy reading this newsletter. I thought it's about time I donated a little for your funds.

Thanks again,
Bennie D. Hill
Vansant, VA



M-14 Rifle

SIT/REP

Beginning with this issue of the RIPCORN REPORT we are giving the face sheet a face lift. We would like to start printing photos or art work sent in by you on the cover and inside the newsletter. All original photos will be returned to you un-harmed.

Mike Miller (C, 1/506) 135 Stahl, Washington, IL 61571 (309)699-2739 writes to mention Memorial Day Spirit of 88 Parade scheduled in Peoria. Anyone interested please call. Expected to be a BIG EVENT. Also reminds us that Vietnam Veterans of Illinois are planning a reunion for anyone serving with Maj. Mark "ZIPPO" Smith of 1/506 during 69/70. Anyone wanting in on this event should get in touch soon.

The 11th Airborne Division Association has asked us to notify you of their coming reunion. It will be held in Fresno, California at the Hacienda Hotel on March 18-20, 1988. All Airborne men are most welcome. For more info contact Charles Gunter, 2521 W. Grayville Dr., La Habra, CA 90631

1987 REUNION

Westpark Hotel, the Wall and Washington D.C.

Reunion participants:

Ray "BLACKIE" Blackman (D 2/501)
Fred Behrens (101 AHB, Eagle Dustoff)
Jim & Ellen Fairhall (1/502)
Chuck & Glenda Hawkins (A 2/506)
John & Cathy Mihalko (E 2/506 Recon)
John "DOC SPEED" & Debbie Sherba (E 2/506 Recon)
Gen. & Mrs. Ben Harrison (HQ 101st Abn. Div.)
Gen. & Mrs. Sidney B. Berry (HQ 101st Abn. Div.)
Maj. Jerry Rodgers (326 Med. Bn. Dustoff)
Bill Ayres (265th Rd. Rsch Co.)
Frank & Esther Gonzales (E 2/506 Recon)
Rande Hall (326 Med. Bn. Dustoff)
Joe & Susan Hasankulizade (A 2/506)
Gary Jestes (HHC 3rd Bde.)
Steve Wallace (B 2/506)
Al Riddle (B 2/506)
Chip Collins (B, E 2/506 Recon)

REUNION REFLECTIONS

What a Reunion it was! Reactions to it for me occur at several levels. From the top are things like the comfort I saw at the Westpark Hotel and what was only one of Chuck and Glenda Hawkins excellent choices as they served as on-site coordinators for this years reunion. This group could never thank them enough for their hard work and dedication. Their task was not made any easier by having to follow John Mihalko and his Whippany support teams' show of last year. I knew Chuck had clout when the excellent weather that descended upon D.C. held throughout our trip to the Wall and saw most of us on our way home via the two airports.

For me it was good to see the rapport the group had established last year at Whippany get us right back together again Friday evening and make it easy for the group of new faces to get to know us. I still can't believe how much all these guys from different units have in common once they start talking.

The trip to the Wall was handled by all of us in our individual ways. I had to make my peace privately at first and then again with the group. Later I sat on a park bench and sat in awe of the individual and group reactions to the Wall. I thought of how the Wall would look different in various weather and of how Chickenman 34 would have looked in the rain composing his comments to his friends there. Obviously the Wall is everything and more than we've heard it to be.

In meeting Generals Berry and Harrison and hearing them speak of Ripcord I was impressed with their dedication, insight and compassion. I had felt for some time based on what I had learned as we went along that the field grade officers at Ripcord were exceptional, particularly against the backdrop of the difficult time period and political situation that we faced at Ripcord. Meeting them personally cemented a certain pride in their performance and integrity that I only sensed earlier.

Seeing old faces made the Reunion special for me, particularly those of Blackie, John and Cathy Mihalko, Doc Speed, Poge, Jim and Ellen Fairhall, Chuck and Glenda

Hawkins, and Fred Behrens.

Seeing new faces was good too. Frank and Esther Gonzales, Joe and Susan Hasankulizade are the sort of folks you feel comfortable around and learn a lot from. Rande Hall's sense of fun and humor has been missed since the reunion.

Meeting Bill Ayres (285th Radio Research) again brought back memories of a night seventeen years ago in which they had sent Bill down to my squad to man a bunkerline riddled from mostly WIA's. This on a night toward the end of the seige when we expected to get overrun. I recalled a young intense man not entirely pleased with prospects for the evening but listening closely to the short briefing that would hopefully help him thru the night.

Seeing Al Riddle for the first time in several years was as good for me as the good natured drunk we pulled on Friday evening. We had had some hellacious good times over a bottle during stand-downs and in the rear. We always seemed to relate to the craziness of the situation better then.

Steve Wallace who we had not seen since Ripcord was much the same as ever. He had served as platoon leader of Bravo's Third Hard. Most of us feel indebted to his getting our heads straight right before Ripcord blew up in our face. Had all platoon leaders had Steve's strict sense of what was operationally correct the outcome of a lot of situations over there might have been dramatically different.

I have primarily highlighted the positive parts of the reunion for me. Obviously there are less positive ones or ones that require a more serious dealing with. One that easily comes to mind is the terrible grappling with emotions that I know overcomes Chuck Hawkins on his visits to the Wall. For me it is always the tremendous sense of guilt and loss that I always associate with Vietnam, neither of which I can do very much about. For Al Riddle he almost always is concerned about the families of men who died who we've never had time to write. Reunions as a rule remind us harshly of our un-finished business and emotions. This years event was no

different and although there are these things that get dealt with at this more subliminal level that doesn't make the need for reunions and getting together any less valid and worthwhile.

One of my favorite Clint Eastwood movies is "The Outlaw Josey Wales", a movie about a man drawn into the Civil War and his difficult, often impossible adjustment afterward. His closing line which I can only paraphrase but is particularly suited to Vietnam given its context in the movie goes, "I reckon we all died a little in that damn war."

Reacting to that line I'd like to say that I'm glad I have this group of people to help me sort thru our damn war.

C. Collins
11/29/87



Statue photo courtesy of
Ray "BLACKIE" Blackman

BUSINESS MEETING

The Ripcord Association business meeting was held on 10/25/87 at the Westprk Hotel in Rosslyn, VA.

Present were Chuck & Glenda Hawkins, Al Riddle, Gen. Ben Harrison, John & Debbie Sherba, John Mihalko, Fred Behrens, Chip Collins, Rande Hall, Frank & Esther Gonzales, Steve Wallace, Bill Ayres, and Joe & Susan Hasankulizade.

The meeting opened with a review of the goals set last year. Surprisingly although the Association did not go about recruitment as it had planned and there were several newsletter slowdowns, the membership list had easily doubled. New members continue to arrive monthly.

In reference to last years goal of assisting in any way possible Jim Fairhalls account of Ripcord recent contact with Jim revealed a written overview had been sent to Doubleday. It was hoped that that would generate some interest and positive enough response for Jim to set down and begin serious effort toward the entire story.

Much was discussed centered around where to have next years reunion. Fred Behrens reintroduced the idea of linking up with the 101st Abn. Assn. in Omaha, Nebraska in August 88. He offered several attractive reasons why doing so would benefit the group.

There were several serious concerns raised including our ill-fated 1986 effort to do so at Ft. Campbell. There was also concern expressed about the Ripcord Assn's maintaining its identity within that large group and being able to easily have its own agenda within that of the larger one.

Reasons were proffered as to why Ft. Campbell itself was not a good choice and why now as a group of Vietnam Veterans the Association would have much more to offer including this years focus on the Vietnam 101st Vet by the Assn.

Ultimately it was agreed that Blackie would make contact with the Association, whose representative lives nearby, assess the positives of linking up and report back to the group via the newsletter.

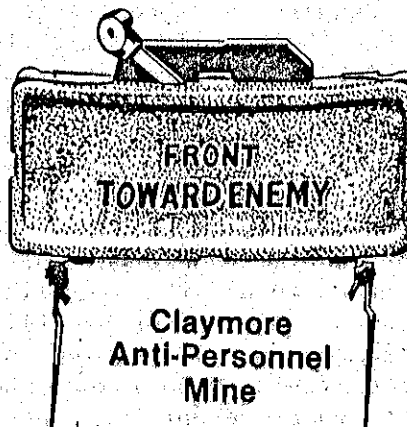
The status of the newsletter operation was discussed. Currently Chip Collins and Ray "Blackie" Blackman serve as co-editors. From Blackie the newsletter is sent to John Mihalko in Whippany, N.J. where then the auspices of American Legion Post #155 and its commander Doug Barin he is able to have the newsletter copied. Then John prepares the newsletter for mailing using labels supplied by Chuck Hawkins. If there ever was a group effort folks, your newsletter is it.

John Mihalko did not formally report on Association finances but contact with him continues to indicate the shoestring nature of Association finances and at the time of the reunion we were barely breaking even. For the most part the Association does better financially when the newsletter is going. Apparently it serves as a reminder to folks that its time to help out. Contributions since last years reunion as of the date of this report total \$550.00. As this is considerably less than that reported at last years meeting this can probably be attributed to those months that the newsletter appeared only sporadically.

The Association has not yet been able to incorporate as had been planned at last years meeting. Hopefully this is something that can occur down the road.

A review of Association officers was conducted. At the recommendation of the group at large Chip Collins, and John Mihalko were to continue as Association president and secretary/treasurer respectively.

The meeting was then adjourned.



Ripcord Reunion, October 24, 1987

After-Dinner Speech by Gen. Sidney Berry

Question-and-answer session (Responses by Gen. Berry and Gen. Ben Harrison)

First, I would like to try to explain to some of the wives here what I have been unable to explain adequately to my daughter, as I tried to today. She said, "You're going to a Ripcord Association get-together?" "Yes." I tried to explain what Ripcord is to her, and I don't think I have succeeded. Let me try--again.

It has to do with how the United States Army fought the war in Vietnam, and particularly in that summer of 1970. Let's look at the bigger picture--1970, the summer.

What was U.S. policy? U.S. policy was to withdraw all of the American armed forces from Vietnam. That policy had begun at least as early, I think, as March of 1968, when then President Lyndon B. Johnson announced that he was not going to run for reelection as President. He decided that, I believe--and it has been well documented--because he knew that he could not be re-elected because of the divisiveness of Vietnam as an issue. So he withdrew himself.

President Nixon--barely elected in November of 1968--took office in January of 1969. In June of 1969--June 8th--on Midway Island in the Pacific, President Thieu of the Republic of Vietnam and President Dick Nixon of the United States of America met. And they announced in a press release or communique--which obviously had been written before then--that the United States was going to start withdrawal of its forces from Vietnam, which began in July of 1969. The first increment was 25,000 soldiers, or armed forces personnel.

At the same time it was announced that what was called--and I think this is a suspect term--Vietnamization was to begin. That is, that Vietnamese armed forces were to take the place of American forces in the combat operations in Vietnam. So, a full year before our experience of Ripcord--which was really from March of '70 until the 23d of July of '70--a full year before then, the American policy was announced: withdrawal of American forces; turn the war over to the Vietnamese. That's the overall context in which you and I were serving around Ripcord.

By the time that I joined the Division on the 3d of July of 1970--and most of you were already there then--many of you were operating in and around and on Ripcord. But by the time I joined the Division, the 101st Airborne Division--the Screaming Eagles--was already the last full American division in Vietnam. And of

course we had the two northern provinces of the Republic of Vietnam. That is, the two provinces closest to North Vietnam--the easiest to supply for the North Vietnamese Army, the closest to their homeland. And that is where--during the spring and summer of 1970--the fiercest, most prolonged ground fighting was going on in Vietnam. It is also, by the way, where the greatest American casualties continued to be taken.

And let me give you a figure right now for casualties--our casualties associated with Ripcord. If you have a formal start and end to Ripcord, the beginning is the 13th of March of 1970, when some of you started to land on one hill, but at the last minute the landing zone was changed. That was considered to be, according to the Division after-action report, an undesirable landing zone. The combat assault was made on what came to be known as Ripcord. And there, too, it was an unacceptable landing zone, because both ARVN, of the 1st Division, and Screaming Eagles landed there, and they came out on the 13th. They met too much resistance for the force that we had.

Then the bad weather intervened. And then--this April Fools' Day of 1970 is familiar to many of you right here. That's when we went back in--when you went back in to the Ripcord area, to operate on what came to be called Ripcord and around Ripcord until we withdrew on the 23d of July.

Now--with that as sort of the broad perspective--let me go back to a definition of Ripcord and a firebase.

In Vietnam, the people live--the Vietnamese people--live along the coastal plains. Very few people more than 20 miles from the coast--particularly in Thua Thien Province, the one in which the 101st conducted most of its operations. When you went even 10 miles from the coast, you started getting into the piedmont, jungle land. And then as you went in another--maybe it was one mile, it may have been 10 miles--you started getting into mountains. Mountains that would make the Blue Ridge out here look like foothills. Mountains, strangely enough, that have jungle growing all over them. Triple canopy, as we called it--three levels of vegetation. And maybe more; some of you have examined--conducted more close studies of that than I did. [Laughter.]

It was in that nonpopulated area--which was up against... ultimately against the Laotian border--that's where the North Vietnamese Army--regular army troops of the North Vietnamese Army--established its bases. They brought down their supplies from the north, through the trails of Laos, hooked into South Vietnam and into our province, established caches (as we called them) of weapons, ammunition, put in their hospitals, their base camps. And then, at their own good time, they would strike out. Strike either at the American or Vietnamese forces or do their best to support the Vietnamese communists that were in the pop-

ulated area.

Now, the North Vietnamese knew that they had to dominate the people. And to dominate the people they had to defeat the American Army and the South Vietnamese Army. The South Vietnamese Army simply did not have the mechanization, the firepower, the helicopters, the aircraft that the Americans did. We Americans hoped that the South Vietnamese Army would work with the people to secure them. We didn't speak the language, we didn't know their background; we really didn't understand the Vietnamese. We thought it better for us to go out into the jungle, into the unpopulated area, and do our best to defeat the main forces of the regular North Vietnamese Army that were out there.

How did we go? Well, in our Division we had 426 helicopters that provided our tactical mobility. And we had artillery. And we had armed helicopters. We had the Air Force, with its tremendous firepower that it could bring and deliver right in front of our foxholes. So, we would seize peaks of high ground. By helicopter we would combat-assault, put our infantry there; by other helicopters, bring in our artillery pieces, put them on top of the hill. And within the whole radius in which our infantry could get the supporting fires of the artillery pieces up on these hilltops, we operated.

Those were called fire support/operating bases. Fire support.... This is sort of like the top of Ripcord [pointing to lectern]. We gave names to hills. Most of 'em had numbers that there was on the map. Around Ripcord--and this is Ripcord [pointing to lectern]--elevation, 927 meters. Multiply that by three and you have feet. You do it; I'm slow in arithmetic.

So here is Ripcord. Over here, about one and a half kilometers away, is Hill 805--another peak. And that certainly awakens sweat on the brows of some of you that were on Hill 805. Over here is--about how far away was Hill 1,000? Eight hundred meters. And here's 902--about 1,500 meters away.

Anyway, you've got four hills out here. We put Ripcord on one--or we named it Ripcord. We put two batteries of artillery--that's six guns of 105 millimeter and six guns of 155 millimeter. Why did we put 'em there? So we can attack the North Vietnamese Army that's in great force around Ripcord.

How do you know where to attack 'em? Well, you got to find 'em. How do you find 'em? You send infantry out to find 'em. Not so the infantry can attack 'em--because that's the worst way you do it. Ideally, the infantry finds 'em and calls in the artillery and the air strikes and the armed helicopters.

So you see Ripcord is a firebase because you've got your artillery on it to fire out around the base. But it's an operat-

ing base, perhaps even more importantly. Because from that base--where you have the battalion command post (in this case of the 2d Battalion, 506th Infantry, and B company for most of the time, providing the perimeter defense and defending the hill)--you've got other companies of the battalion, and other battalions, that are moving out through the jungle through the mountains attempting to find the enemy so we can bring fire onto him. So it's an operating base, too.

Remember those three hills? 805, 1,000, 902? They're so close to Ripcord that the enemy on them can put mortar fire onto your own hilltop of Ripcord, and with their machine guns they can shoot all of the helicopters that come in and out of Ripcord. And do--they do shoot both their mortars and machine guns.

On Ripcord we have perhaps 300, sometimes 400 people. We've got the battalion command post, we've got medics, we've got engineers that continued to help us dig the emplacements and put things on top of 'em to keep mortar rounds out, to put barbed wire around--shades of World War One....

But--you ask me, why did we establish Ripcord? And now let me put you into the frame--the thinking of the people of the higher command. That is, down in Saigon, at MACV, and even above there. This is the last full American division in Vietnam. The withdrawal is going steadily on. It's not long before American forces are going to be out. And the higher command wants those of us in the 101st to conduct offensive operations against the North Vietnamese Army. Why? So that, when our division leaves, we can have given the best chance possible to the Vietnamese to survive as a noncommunist state.

And that's why you establish Ripcord and you operate around it. Really because that's the westernmost of our firebases and operating bases as again, we are trying to move out--leapfrog out from one firebase to another, using helicopters as our mobility, going back out toward the Laotian border, through which all of those North Vietnamese Army supplies and reinforcements are coming.

The whole focus, then, is on Ripcord as a stepping-stone back out toward the Laotian border and toward the A Shau Valley.

Now, offensive operations--attack the enemy--but, mind you, don't take many casualties. We are hearing [this] from Washington and from Saigon. Because--and this is usually unspoken, but it's very clearly communicated--because, in this withdrawal phase, Americans can't stand, can't stomach a lot of casualties. They'll raise questions that we who are at the civil level of government cannot adequately answer.

That's what you have to live with when you're at the divi-

sion level. How do you attack without taking casualties? But there's a more basic question for those of us in that 101st Airborne Division. How do you protect yourself without attacking? If we sit passively on that coastal strip, and if we sit in our Camp Evans, and Camp Eagle, and Phu Bai--if we just sit there passively, what the hell is going to happen? Well, you know what's going to happen. They're going to close in, they're going to mortar you, they're going to rocket you and they're going to kill you as you sit there in your base camp.

So one of the realities of military life is, it doesn't really matter what's going on at the national and the international level because our imperatives are the same down at the division level. In order to exist and to live and to protect ourselves, by God, we have got to get off of our ass and go out and take the attack to the enemy. That's the way you minimize your own casualties. That's the way you complete what your country has sent you there to do. That is, to give the Vietnamese a better chance to survive as a noncommunist society.

So--withdraw American forces, attack while you're still there, but don't take many casualties. You hear all this, but on our level at the 101st Airborne Division, we do what we think we have to do. Which simply for our survival and preservation of life, is to go out and continue to operate as soldiers must do when they're in a combat zone.

That's why, beginning with the 13th of March, you all were operating in and out, until the 1st of April, in the Ripcord area. And you originally were operating against two identified North Vietnamese Army regiments, and then a third. And then, about the 7th or 8th of July, our 2d of the 17th Cav discovered another regiment in the Khe Sanh area coming toward the Ripcord area from Laos--from North Vietnam through Laos. And that diverted the attention of the Division up there and caused a joint operation of the 101st and 1st ARVN Division.

But now back to Ripcord. Beginning the 1st of July, which was two days before I joined the Division, about a week after the then brigade commander--then Colonel Ben Harrison--took command of the 3d Brigade. Two days after then Lieutenant Colonel Ed Davis took command of the 101st Aviation Group, which had the bulk of our Divisional helicopters.

On the 1st of July, and continuing through the 23d of July, the North Vietnamese Army began a sustained drive to eliminate Ripcord as a very prickly thorn in their flesh. And as those of you who were on and around Ripcord will remember, there was fire received on Ripcord every day beginning with the 1st of July, fire directed against most of the helicopters that came in and out of Ripcord, and mounting casualties. The total casualties during the period 13 March and 23 July, in the Ripcord area, were

68 killed, 443 wounded. And that includes the three that were killed, and the 20 wounded, on the 23d of July when we withdrew from the hill. Sixty-eight dead, 443 wounded.

Now...now we start doing a little calculus--cost and return. When does it become no longer worthwhile to stay in the Ripcord area. That's a lot of casualties. For what? Well, the long or the medium-term--intermediate-term--"for what" is that the Division is pulling out pretty soon. So that makes casualties which are dear by any measure even dearer--if you know you're going to take casualties and then you're pulling out.

On the 15th of July I became the acting division commander for about the next three weeks, because General Jack Hennessey--having been in Vietnam for over a year with that division, and he'd been on a previous tour--was going back to.... Well, he'd married off one daughter to the son of the commander of the 82d Airborne Division. And that's the closest those two divisions have ever been before or since. [Laughter.] And he was going to move his family to the Philippines.

So he left, leaving me with instructions to continue planning for the offensive out toward the A Shau. Shortly before he left, that discovery up in the Khe Sanh area of that regiment coming down diverted our attention up there. And then--really the turning point in my mind--this was three days after I took acting command of the Division on the 15th--most of us, many of us saw this. I happened to be flying in the area when I saw it.

That early afternoon of the 18th of July, a Chinook was sling-loading in 105mm ammunition for the six-gun, 105mm artillery battery--hovering over that ammunition dump, going down to gently place those rounds of artillery on the ground. The helicopter was hit by, we think, 12.7mm machine-gun fire from one of the neighboring hills. The helicopter was shot down, fell on the ammunition, burst into flames, and it looked as if the whole top of the hill was about to blow off. It looked like I imagine Mount Vesuvius looks whenever it erupts.

That really was the beginning of the end of our being on Ripcord. We lost six guns. We lost two 106mm recoilless rifles. We lost a lot of other equipment there, and we lost some people. I can't remember how many were killed--can you, Ben? I think one member of the crew was killed. But a lot were wounded.

At any rate, that raised the question: should we continue staying on Ripcord? Remember, we lost six of 12 guns, and we lost the guns that could fire closest to our infantry that were out around in the jungle. Now there was a very quick reaction to that. The brigade commander, then Harrison, both of us in the air--he contacted me by radio and said, "We've got to open a new firebase."

You may remember that Gladiator had been occupied before by the Division. Between the two of us, we agreed to place another battalion under the command of then Colonel Harrison, and he would combat-assault that battalion with a battery of artillery onto Gladiator. Why? To give covering artillery fire, both to the garrison on Ripcord and to the companies that were maneuvering in the bush around it. And that in itself was a nice little operation. It took what? About three hours, as I recall, from the time that you called me until the time that they secured that base. Maybe four--I may be exaggerating. But it was a very quick reaction, and a necessary one.

Now, one of you asked me earlier today, "Why did we bail out?" Well, I'm telling you why we bailed out. And I'll tell you that it was the hardest decision that I have made in 32 years of military service. We all know the story of the 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne. Over December and Christmas of 1944, the Division commander was back in the States. The assistant division commander, General Tony McAuliffe--actually, he was the division artillery commander--was in command at Bastogne. Surrounded. The Germans asked him to surrender. He said, "Nuts."

Well, I had that in my mind. Here I am, acting commander of the Division, the Division commander back in the States. We've got a real crisis situation. And it's not in my nature--it's not in the history of the tradition of the Division. No soldier likes to bail out. That's the toughest decision I've ever made. Well, we came out on the 23d--it was on the 22d that we made it. All night, the 21st, Colonel Harrison then and his staff and the Division staff worked and developed all sorts of plans and alternatives and options to answer the question, "What do we do now about Ripcord?"

And the early morning of the 22d, we came together, and some time during midmorning--Ben, did you recommend that we bail out? I can't remember.

[Gen. Harrison: It came as a complete surprise to me. I was thinking of kicking butt and hanging on. It never even occurred to me to consider a withdrawal--which is a good lesson for all of you in civilian life. You're given a set of circumstances and you're asked to make a decision. In the real world, you're not given the circumstances and asked to make a decision. You have to decide it for yourself. And I didn't see that. I wasn't even thinking about it, but General Berry did.]

Well, the decision that I made was that the human cost of staying on Ripcord was not worth whatever potential gain there may be. Because I'd also concluded that the offensive concept that had been in mind for the couple of months before I joined the Division--I did not think it was realistic. The more I looked

at it--and particularly in light of what was going on around Ripcord--I just didn't think it was realistic.

But I also thought this. Both for our own morale, and for capitalizing on whatever consternation we put in the enemy's minds and hearts, we did have to have an offensive that immediately followed our withdrawal from Ripcord. And we did two days later. We did combat-assault out toward Laos, but not into the A Shau. We went after cache areas beyond Ripcord, and we had to open another couple of firebases to get there. But I wanted to make sure that we did not stop [with] that withdrawal and have a defensive or a turn-tail-and-run attitude. We had to, in my opinion, go into another offensive, which we did.

Now--that's background. Let me just put in a couple of minutes and get in a couple of generalizations.

We were the last full division in Vietnam. Our ground action during that summer of 1970 was the last real hard sustained fighting that American forces had in Vietnam of the magnitude and with the number of soldiers involved as we had.

On the 21st of July, just a day before I made the decision to withdraw, the J-3 or the Operations Officer of General Abrams in MACV in Saigon came up there and visited us. A major general. What he said was this. "We hope that the 101st can continue offensive operations--but don't take too many casualties."

Let's go back to the couple of days prior to the 23d. We had two actions going on. We had A Company, 2d of the 506th--Chuck Hawkins' company, with some of you there--out around the firebase. And you got into sort of a running fight--sort of like the western wagon train, with the hostile Indians circling you. The brigade commander and the battalion commander and the acting division commander thought they were going to get you out of there, late the afternoon of the 22d of July. We wanted to, for many reasons--both because of your own welfare, but also because we wanted you out so we could focus on the withdrawal from Ripcord on the 23d.

D Company of the 2d of the 506th, about to be combat-assaulted in to go to the relief of A Company and help them get out, had a lot of casualties by that time. The preparatory fires on the landing zone--napalm--set the landing zone on fire, and you simply could not make the combat assault.

So--I'll tell you--there were a lot of us that were sweating out A Company during that night of the 22d. I know that the two immediate commanders above you--and, I'm sure, Colonel Andre Lucas on Ripcord itself--so at least three commanders above you, were doing everything we could. We were staying up, following, trying to get whatever supporting fires you needed, praying--

doing everything we could for A Company.

Then that early morning of the 23d two actions went on. Either one separately would have been a classic in itself. You put 'em together and you've got sort of a double-barreled package. [There was] the combat assault of D Company--Captain Rollison of D Company of the 2d of the 506th--in the early morning of the 23d, to go to the relief of A Company. That took until early afternoon. And then [there was] the extraction by the helicopters of those 300-plus men and a great deal of equipment from Ripcord. Both of these operations [were carried out] under fire--either one a major operation in itself.

Third Brigade was fortunate in having Ben Harrison as its commander at that time--one of the Army's leading aviators as well as a ground soldier. And what was one of the most outstanding helicopter operations of the war--the helicopter withdrawal, the extraction under fire of the people from Ripcord--was led by an aviator and a ground commander combined in the person of Ben Harrison.

As you know, that took all the morning. The Division log shows that the last person was extracted from Ripcord 12:07. It began about 5:40. So that's about six hours. And every helicopter that approached that hill was under heavy fire. Four pads--four small one-ship pads over the hill, at different elevations.

It's a mistake to try to single out heroes in that type of operation. Everybody involved is. And that's sort of a cheap word, anyway, which soldiers don't use really. But I tell you, those four Pathfinders that were up on Ripcord, playing the old chess game or shell game.... As one helicopter would head for, say, Pad 2, the North Vietnamese with their mortars would get mortar rounds in the air timed to land on Pad 2 at the time that that helicopter got there. And the Pathfinder at the last minute would be talking on the radio to the pilot, and would say, "Go to Pad 4." And about the time that that helicopter would have arrived on the pad, the mortar round landed and the helicopter went to Pad 4 and picked up about five soldiers on the average, and off he went.

We lost one helicopter in that operation--another Chinook shot down on top of Ripcord, and during the morning's action mortar rounds hit it and it burned and we lost the whole helicopter. Amazing.

The crews of those helicopters were another set of heroes of that action. And the first persons to say it were the infantrymen and artillerymen and the engineers and all of the other soldiers on top of the hill that were sure happy to see those helicopters come in and get out.

Meanwhile over here was A Company. While Ben Harrison had his hands full commanding the brigade and overseeing the extraction, and responding to the acting division commander who was harassing him over the radio to get information...I was doing a lot of monitoring of the radio to get Chuck Hawkins out. One transmission that struck fear into my heart came when Rollison and Chuck were on the radio, and Chuck said--or words to this effect--"Follow the bodies--the trail of bodies." And I thought, My God, those are his men. He was talking about the North Vietnamese Army bodies. And I think there were 67 counted along the way, as Company D went to Company A's support.

Well, the log shows that it was about 1:30 or so when A Company was extracted, and a little after two when D Company was extracted. Some would say that the extraction of those two companies ended Ripcord. But you and I know differently. Ripcord never does end. It never will be erased from the memories of any of us. That's why we're here.

I've asked a lot of you, "Why are you here?" and got a lot of answers. But it all sort of boils down to the fact that Ripcord was a searing experience in the lives of everyone of us involved. It had its plusses and its minuses, but it seared itself on us and in our lives. And it gave us a bond of common experience, of shared experience--a bond really of values, emerging values, that very few other people in the world have. They don't have this particular one. Some soldiers and Marines and airmen and sailors in other actions have similar bonds. But ours is unique. Hard to explain to ourselves, much less to other people.

But I want to take my hat off to all of you that were involved and the ones that are not here. And particularly, to those of you who came into the United States Army as draftees--didn't volunteer for the military, did not volunteer for service in Vietnam, would just as soon served somewhere else. But when you were put wherever you were sent to do your assigned duty, for a variety of motives, you did a damn good job.

Part of it was simply self-preservation--the instinct for survival. But there were other motives, too. Pride, a sense of responsibility, a growing sense of maturity within you, closeness to those you were serving with in your squad, or your platoon, or your crew. And one thing I'll emphasize: you and all of your fellow soldiers who served in our Division, and with our Division, in and around Ripcord--you should be extremely proud of yourselves. For what you gave, for what you did, and for what you took away and the way that you and I grew together there.

And I think--I'm convinced that our country, our people are stronger than ever before, because you have gone back--you've gone to your printing plant, your body shops, your engineering

jobs and all of the other jobs you had--you have taken your experience and your contribution to our country and your service to our country and put it back into the body politic. And the American people are stronger because of your presence. And I thank you for that.

[Applause.]

[Introduction by Chuck Hawkins to question and answer session.]

Q. [Jim Fairhall] My question has to do with Operation Chicago Peak, which was what Ripcord was leading up to. What was the original concept of Operation Chicago Peak, and how was it changed by the actions that occurred around Ripcord?

A. [Gen. Harrison] We had developed a plan that would move us to the east high ground of the A Shau Valley, and Ripcord was part of that. Our next move was to go further. The overall mission was, as General Berry touched on, to prevent yet another Tet, to give more time to the Vietnamese to get stronger, and for us to take the pressure off of the build-up in the area. And we went out to--was it Barnett was the firebase that the 1st ARVN was occupying at the time?--and we were gonna take one parallel to that. We never got out that far. But the overall object was to get an offensive position on the high ground, near the A Shau, where we could interdict this build-up that was taking place.

Q. [Jim Fairhall] Was it ever intended to send 101st Airborne troops into the A Shau during that hot season?

A. [Gen. Harrison] There may have been a plan to do that, but our reading of what the high command would stand for, I don't think there ever would have been an offensive by American troops in the A Shau again. The A Shau was just too risky, and there was no way you could operate in there without taking substantial casualties.

Q. [Chuck Hawkins] A question that I'd like to pose. We never seemed to deal at our level with intelligence that was more

than what we gathered ourselves. Occasionally you'd get something down that had to do with something that either happened a long time ago or was sketchy at best. Be that as it may, we had a mission or an intention out at the rim of the A Shau. Did we know, did we understand what the enemy really intended? Did we have a sense that they were trying to penetrate to the lowlands, or did they simply want to embarrass some American or Vietnamese units? And, by way of answering that question...because there were so many new commanders...how much overlap and reading in on the situation did you guys have? How much of a comfort factor for the months that had gone before did you feel you gained?

A. [Gen. Harrison] I think we had a fair perspective of where our high command wanted us to go. And we had very tangible evidence and good intelligence that a build-up was coming. You know, we were seeing more and more modern weapons. We were seeing more and more regular troops. And I recounted this afternoon my introduction to the 120 mortar between my feet. And that was a new level of the war. And just all along there was an obvious build-up of regular troops coming in. I think we had one VC regiment of the four regiments that were surrounding Ripcord; the others were regulars.

[Gen. Berry] I'm going to emphasize the other aspect, Ben. I think, yes, their long-range aim was to get to the lowlands and the population. But I think they absolutely intended to eliminate the Americans on and around Ripcord. It seems to me that the whole focus of their gathering at Ripcord is the hole in the doughnut. And if they had been able to eliminate an American unit and seize that firebase, I think--and this is my guess too--I think they thought that would have speeded the disillusionment of the American people and American members of Congress with our being in Vietnam, and would have led to a stronger demand that we come out more quickly. But again, we both are recognizing that as a long-range aim, as always, they looked at control of the country and its people. But I think elimination of Ripcord and the people on and around it was one of their intermediate steps.

[Gen. Harrison] I would agree. Just again, my shortcoming in not thinking strategically at the time. Because it never entered my mind that we would ever lose Ripcord in a ground attack. We had ground attacks out there the last five nights before we closed down, and on 805 I don't know how many successive nights of ground attacks, that we were able to beat back.

That was when I moved out there personally to try and help Andre with the Corps artillery and particularly the Air Force, because there was always a problem of convincing the great Air Force flare ships and gun ships and fighters--whatever--that they could come in while the artillery was still shooting. And I thought I could speak their language as an aviator, and I could shout louder over the radio as a colonel than Andre could, and that's where I saw my job. That's why I spent the last five

nights on Ripcord myself, doing just that sort of thing, and going to bed waiting for the attack that we knew was going to come. And so I was involved in the fight, and not thinking as strategically as General Berry was.

You probably all will continue to think, Did we get out at the right time? And that's all right. I would just advise you to include in that equation what happened in 1968 at Khe Sanh when the Marines decided they were going to tough it out. And they were so surrounded and taking such a beating that they couldn't even send out patrols. They didn't have five companies out there giving them a little help. They were all in one hole in Khe Sanh and they were battered and they were beaten and they took horrible casualties. Got a Presidential Unit Citation for stupidity when they were there. And it got so bad that there was no way they could get out. And the 1st Cavalry Division had to go up there and bail them out. Well, that was never gonna happen at Ripcord or anyplace else in the 101st.

Q. [Jim Fairhall] I have a question from my perspective as a grunt in another battalion. I was in the 1st of the five-oh-deuce; we were operating in the Rocket Belt. We were not hitting very much contact at all during June and July. Not that I'm volunteering myself retrospectively, but why were we not moved in to reinforce the 2/506th and the 2d of the 501st around Ripcord and in the Ripcord AO?

A. [Gen. Berry] The reason that the Phu Bai battalion was not moved into the Ripcord area was because you had a very important mission. You were working with--I believe it was the 54th Regiment you were working with--in sort of close-in operations around the populated area. And if we'd picked you up and moved you out, a vacuum would have existed that the North Vietnamese Army or the Vietcong would have filled.

Q. [Jim Fairhall] Do you think they would have filled it that quickly if, say, we were moved out for a week to help out in the Ripcord AO?

A. [Gen. Berry] Probably not in a week. But you see, even that would be a gain on the part of the North Vietnamese Army around Ripcord. They would have caused us to pull you out of an area to put into the Ripcord area--and frankly, if you've already made the decision that it's not worthwhile to stay in the Ripcord area because of the casualties you're taking, and because of the limited potential gain there, there's no need to throw other forces in there and to open up a vacuum somewhere else.

[Gen. Harrison] I'd like to make a comment that may help to give you some perspective on what was going on a couple of layers above that triple-canopy jungle. What was on the ground around Ripcord represented about 10 to 12% of the Division's strength--fighting strength. And when time came to withdraw from Ripcord,

we had involved in that operation the entire Air Cavalry Squadron, the entire Aerial Rocket Artillery, the entire artillery of Corps that could reach that, and we had the entire 3d Marine Air Wing--which is a two-star command (and the commander came up and personally coordinated it)--and they had on call the Navy and Air Force.

So there was just tremendous activity going on. On the ground it's impossible for you to get that kind of perspective. But it was a massive coordination of literally thousands of people concentrating on that one fight for six hours.

Q. [Jim Fairhall] Is it true on the 23d that other divisions were in a state of readiness to send help to the 101st? This is just a rumor I've heard.

A. [Gen. Harrison] I would see no reason for that to ever happen. Because as you just pointed out, we had forces in the 101st that were available.

[Gen. Berry] Let me make one additional point. No, I think the answer is no to that, because other divisions were drawing down and were occupied elsewhere. One thing that pleased me very much: no senior commander--senior to me--sought to direct or even influence my decision. And once I had made the decision, not a single commander above me did anything other than say, "We think you made the right decision." There was no criticism, there was no second-guessing. As a matter of fact, when I was feeling pretty lonely and trying to make the decision, I would have appreciated a little help. But really, I'm glad that they left me on my own, because this is within the tradition of the Army--and its best tradition--that you leave the commander that is on the ground free to see things his own way and make his own decision. And then you support him from the next higher headquarters. And that happened in our case. As General Harrison said, the entire 3d Marine Air Wing was there to help, and we appreciated it.

[Gen. Harrison] As a postscript to being on your own, that afternoon, on the 23d, I got a message from Division headquarters that I was going to have some independent operations. And that was going to occur at 11 o'clock, on the 24th, when I would brief the press on what happened. [Laughter.] I was less than pleased to be alone. And I got the count that there would be--as of that afternoon--23 representatives of different news media that would be at Camp Evans for a press briefing at 11 o'clock.

Q. [John Mihalko] I have a question about the wire tap.... We sat on that wire for three days, tapping it. Were you aware of that?

A. [Gen. Harrison (responding under the impression that John is referring to the July 21 wire tap rather than Recon's tap of the same wire beginning on the 30th of June)] Oh, yes, absolute-

ly. That's when we started evolving the offensive plan of what it would take to capitalize on the concentration...this was concrete evidence that they were there. And this is when, I guess, General Berry came to the realization that it would be a massive operation. The plan that I developed called for six battalions....

You know, we were thrilled, excited, but then we started worrying about you guys staying alive and getting out--

[Gen. Berry] You gave us the first information we had for sure that there was a division headquarters in the area. And that put a new dimension to the whole thing. So, yes, we were very much aware of what you were doing and following it very closely.

[Gen. Harrison] Gen. Berry and I would switch to the company freqs to listen to those reports.

[John Mihalko] But we found the same wire three weeks earlier. But you didn't know that we'd already found that wire..

[General Harrison] That was not the same headquarters.

[Gen. Berry] Oh, you said the 30th of June, didn't you?

[Gen. Harrison] That was not a division headquarters. The line that Chuck found, that was the evidence of the division.

[John Mihalko] My only question was, Why wasn't something more done with that wire in between the time we found it and when Chuck did?

[Gen. Harrison] I don't know.

Q. [John Sherba (Doc Speed)] How many North Vietnamese were around Ripcord?

A. [Gen. Harrison] I'm not sure, Doc. What was the latest estimate of how many NVA and VC were around there at the time?

[Gen. Berry] There were for sure three, and probably four regiments, and we don't know the strengths of those regiments. So what would you round off a VC regiment? About three thousand, I think. So let's say there were nine to 12 thousand. I think those approximations are about right. Would you guess more?

[Doc Speed] I didn't count that many. [Laughter.]

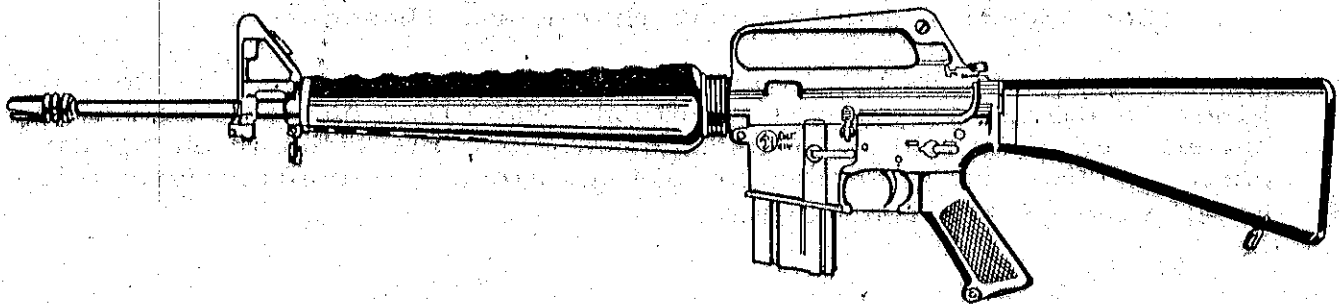
Q. [Jim Fairhall] I have a couple of questions, if we have time, to direct to General Harrison. The first one I'm asking you because of your aviation background. Was the evacuation of Ripcord on July 23 the largest all-American helicopter evacuation under fire of the Vietnam War?

A. [Gen. Harrison] Well, when you say evacuation.... The largest operation, though, wouldn't be anywhere near that. There were tremendous numbers of Division assets there, but the number of troops moved was considerably less than lots of other operations. You wouldn't get any argument from me and probably a lot of other people if you said it was the most intense operation, and probably the best supported, by the air--Marines, Air Force, and Navy, and aerial rocket artillery, Air Cavalry.... It was probably the best supported operation of the entire war in my personal knowledge. I conducted an air assault one time when I had 92 aircraft in the air at one time. That was more than we ever had in the air at one time there. But no one was shooting at us, happily.

Q. [Jim Fairhall] My second question has to do with the attitudes of the journalists whom you had to deal with on July 23. Were there journalists who felt that they should have been in on the Ripcord operation from the beginning, and that they were just finding out about something big after the fact? Or were they just generally curious?

A. [Gen. Harrison] They were generally respectful and courteous. It was not the possible unpleasant exercise that I thought I might have. They were patient and understanding in asking questions. There were a few, including the young guy who blew the whistle at My Lai--I can't recall his name--he got out and became a correspondent. He asked a lot of questions and stayed on with us for a week, because his concern was, and others' concerns were, How many Americans did you leave out there? Are you sure everyone is out?

[Gen. Berry] Incidentally, on that one, let me say that Colonel Harrison then and I were very conscious of not leaving anybody or a body or anything else. Then Colonel Harrison made low-level sweeps around the hill after we had everybody reported off. The Cav did. I made a slightly higher level sweep around the hill than Ben Harrison did. And as soon as the units went off--and some of you will remember this--we took muster as you got back to camp. We wanted to be absolutely certain that we had all of our people dead or alive. And we did.



Into the Maelstrom
by John Mihalcko

The month of March, 1970 was rapidly drawing to a close. As I wrote in "The Ides of March," there was an uneasiness in the air. The rain and the mud tested our patience. Luckily our team made no contact in March except for the fallen tree that made casualties out of Junior and me.

I was enjoying what was left of my "ghost time" in the rear, but the spectre of the future was ever present in my mind. I believe it was Doc Speed who took me to Camp Eagle to get my eyes checked out. My vision still wasn't 20/20, but it was good enough to go back out to the field. Oh well, all good things must come to an end.

March 31st, found our whole Recon platoon back at Evans. That didn't happen too often. Usually our missions would overlap but a change was coming to Recon. I was quite proud of our platoon. We had the right blend of seasoned veterans and the new guys seemed to fit in real well.

We were a diverse group of personalities and accents that worked well together. We were rowdy in the rear and silent in the field. Most of us had tasted combat already. We were good and "Teenager," our platoon leader was proud of us.

The change that came to Recon was a new platoon leader. We were going to miss "Teenager." His age and youthful appearance belied the true nature of the man. He was utterly fearless and our body count under him was second to none. He was the guiding force behind "The St. Valentine's Day Massacre." (see issue #10-Jan. 1987)

Our new platoon leader was Lt. Wilson. I always dreaded new platoon leaders. Is he going to be gung ho? Does he have his shit together? I never did get the answers to those questions. Lt. Wilson's tour of duty would come to an abrupt end in approximately 48 hours.

April Fools Day rolled in. Little did we know that the joke was on us. Here my memory draws a blank. I don't remember if our platoon was scheduled to be inserted on Ripcord or the events of the day necessitated us to be thrown into the breach.

The reports coming in were not good. All hell was breaking loose on Ripcord. The troops on Ripcord were taking a pounding from mortars, R.P.G.'s, small arms, the whole nine yards the N.V.A. had to offer. The Gooks that we couldn't find in March were sure in abundance now.

April Fool's Day had arrived, but none of us were laughing. The Maelstrom was upon us and it was about to suck us in. Word came down to saddle up. We were bound for Ripcord. Now I knew how Brooklyn Dodger fans felt in 1951 when Bobby-Thompson hit the shot heard round the world.

We headed out to the pad in stunned silence, deep in thought, pondering our fate. The situation was getting worse. Reinforcements were having a hard time getting into Ripcord. Our choppers were delayed. The casualties were mounting. The Gooks showed no sign of letting up their attack.

The hours dragged by. We were told to hang loose and wait. We'd be sent out as soon as the birds were available. Our part in this operation just didn't make any sense to me. There was no way that the Recon platoon was going to be able to tip the scales of battle in our favor.

The Recon platoon had been effective in the past because of the way we were employed. Our small teams gave us the luxury of cruising through the jungle as silently as our elusive enemy. The element of surprise was usually on our side and our ambushes were swift and deadly. Hit and run was our way of life.

The situation looked dim to say the least. We wouldn't be throwing the first punch and there sure as hell wasn't going to be any element of surprise. We didn't have the firepower of a line platoon. Hell, I don't think we had more than two over and unders in our whole platoon. John Wayneing it seemed like suicide to me.

Our birds finally arrived and we had another wait while they were refueled and their crews were briefed. The reports from Ripcord were not getting any better. Not only were the casualties mounting, but a few slicks had gone down during the course of the day. As scared as I was, I didn't envy the helicopter crews who had to go out to Ripcord time and time again. I wondered what their feelings were.

We finally got the word to board. We had been waiting at the pad most of the morning. It was now some time in the afternoon. That's a long time to wait and have all your innermost fears work their way to the forefront of your brain and wreak havoc with your nerves. There was no thumbs up sign between the teams as we boarded our slicks. I was gripped with the fear of impending doom.

Webster describes fear as an unpleasant often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger. That's a pretty sanitized description of the word, but then again, Webster never boarded a slick on April 1st, with his destination being Ripcord. If he had, I think his definition of the word would have a much stronger meaning.

The synonyms of the word fear are not much help either. Dread, fright, alarm, panic and trepidation do not describe what I felt in my brain and the pit of my stomach as our slick lifted off the pad and headed out to Ripcord.

Not a word was spoken as we passed over the lowlands and rocket ridge. Were we headed for glory or doom? Only the man upstairs knew for sure and I spent some time making my peace with him. There's a line from one of my favorite movies that goes: "The greater the odds, the greater the glory," but on April Fool's Day, I didn't like the odds.

We arrived on station and began circling. I noticed we were flying much higher than usual. As our slick banked into a turn I looked down. The trees and the mountains looked very tiny from the altitude we were flying. We circled for what seemed like an eternity. The insertion must not have been going well cause we kept circling.

During one of the banks and turns I glanced down and got my first glimpse of Ripcord. It sure as hell didn't look like much. From our altitude it looked very small and vulnerable; just a bald mountain top surrounded by the lush, green jungle. I didn't like it at all.

We lowered our altitude and on closer inspection it looked bigger but it didn't look any better. I could see incoming mortar rounds impacting on the hill and I also saw a downed slick that made for a sickly sight. We kept on circling and finally the door gunner shouted out, "We're going in, get ready."

His words started the adrenalin to work overtime. I always wondered what a hot l.z. was like. It looked like I was going to find out very shortly. I was like a coiled spring ready to go. We started descending and made our approach.

Ripcord was looming ahead getting closer and bigger with each passing second. Our door gunner shouted out that we were taking fire and he appeared to be laughing as he opened up with his 60. My mind was racing faster than the speed of light.

"What kind of fire," I thought to myself. Small arms, machine guns, rockets or what? The noise was deafening. Cobras were working out, our door-gunners were firing, and the mortar rounds were impacting on the hill. I didn't see how we would ever make it in.

Our door gunner had to be the most gung-ho person in the Army or else he was operating with a crank case that was one quart low. With death poised ready to strike he shouted out, "Isn't this neat?" I wished I could steal a drink out of the bottle of courage he had to be using.

Wham, wham, wham. The mortar rounds came in like a hail of rain. The landscape ahead of us was being spewed up to the sky. Our slick was quivering and shaking and we were still heading in. We were still too high to jump. Closer and closer. Time seemed to stand still.

Another barrage came in and this time our slick pulled up and away, gaining altitude and distance. As I glanced down and behind I saw another barrage impact just about where we would have hovered. An icy chill ran up my spine.

We re-gained our altitude and awaited our turn to try again. I didn't see how any slick was going to make it. Dodging mortar rounds will catch up with you sooner or later. Evidently some of the slicks were getting in between the barrages. Our turn was coming up once again.

Our second attempt was an instant replay of the first. On our third attempt we didn't even get as close as the first two. I don't remember how many times we tried. My brain was numb by this time. Through it all our gutsy door-gunner was keeping us informed.

We circled and circled but made no more attempts to get in. We had been flying for what seemed like an eternity. Finally our door gunner shouted out, "We're heading back to Evans." I think we all breathed a sigh of relief. It was short-lived however. His next words were, "We're going to refuel and try again." He said it nonchalantly, like it was all in a day's work.

"You can't be serious," I thought to myself. "You can't put us through that again." My spirits sunk faster than the stock market crash of 29. I was emotionally drained and felt like I had aged about ten years since morning. We got back to Evans, dropped our rucks, and took a quick head count.

It looked like only about half of Recon made it into Ripcord. I don't think any complete team made it in. Part of our team made it but what good were they without a point man, team leader, or r.t.o.? It didn't look good. I hoped everyone was safe and sound, but I sure wasn't looking forward to another c.a. that day.

It was probably very late in the afternoon when we got the word that our c.a. was cancelled. We were relieved of course, but what about our buddies that made it in? A lot of us hung around the toc which was buzzing with activity. The reports weren't getting any better. There were many casualties on Ripcord and the fighting was intense.

I guess we were all stunned by the events of the day. This was no little firefight. This was a big time, heavy duty battle. A life and death struggle between our Battalion and the largest enemy force the 101st. had seen in many moons. The mountains were alive once again with the sounds and the fury of total war.

What I remember most is the feeling of gloom and concern, not only for my teammates, but for everyone that was on Ripcord on that fateful April Fool's Day, 1970. There was no partying in our hooch that night. The silence broken only by reports of the battle that was still raging into the night.

My thoughts were on Doc Speed most of all. He must be one busy son of a gun out there. I hoped he was okay and prayed for his safety. I wondered who are casualties were. Many things went through my mind that night. I don't know who brought us the news of our casualties which included one fatality, Lt. Wilson who was blown away at close range by an r.p.g.

We also got word that Recon was linked up with Alpha Company. That was good news to hear. There was safety in numbers, so I hoped. April 2nd. is just a blur in my memory. The battle was still raging and the casualties were mounting. Something had to give.

On April 3rd. we got the news that Ripcord was going to be evacuated. I hoped it would be a success and wondered how our guys were doing. Finally, word came down that Recon was coming in. My spirits soared as we went out to meet our teammates.

Sure enough, they were making their way to our company area. I noticed Doc-Speed right away. He looked like death warmed over, but he was a sight for sore eyes. He didn't have to tell me what he had been through. His eyes and fatigues told the story before a word was spoken between us.

He looked like he had been through a meat grinder. His fatigues were in tatters covered with blood; some of it his, a lot of it from others. His legs were exposed from his thighs to his knees which were still dripping blood that he didn't seem to notice.

I told Speed that I was sure glad to see him and he told me that he was

glad to see anybody besides Gooks. As he tended to his knees and changed into some clean fatigues, he told of the battle. Ripcord was a bitch and the Gooks seemed to be everywhere. It was a rough three days. He was glad to be alive as were all the survivors.

The events of the April Fool's Day Assault shook me up as it probably did the rest of the Battalion. The re-enlistment sergeant was doing a brisk business for awhile. I couldn't blame anybody for re-upping to get out of the field, but it seemed like a steep price to pay. A lot of guys were "short timers" and I guess April Fool's Day was the bitterest joke of their whole tour.

I was now certain the Ripcord a.o. was going to be our home for a long time to come. I also learned that there were a hell of a lot of "bad Guys" out in those mountains and they could mount a damned good attack when they chose to do so.

The events also left me with a bitter taste in my mouth. For the first time I questioned decisions in my mind, made by others, that I had no control over. I couldn't figure out why Recon was sent in in the first place. The battle was raging for hours before we got the word to saddle up. I definitely didn't like the idea of being used like a line platoon without the firepower.

Only about half of our platoon got in and with only partial teams, there was a lot of confusion on the ground. Recon fought as well as it could under the circumstances, but as far as we were concerned it was a mismatch. We were very fortunate to have only one k.i.a.

I also came to realize that being good was not enough to survive. Luck and fate had a big say in the matter. Like everyone else, I was just a pawn on the chessboard and our chessboard was Ripcord. Till next time.

EPILOGUE:

I am blessed with a very good memory. April Fool's Day, like most of my tour is entrenched in my memory banks forever. I am also very fortunate in having most of the letters I wrote home while serving my tour. What follows are excerpts from a letter to my sister dated 14 April, 1970.

Dear Marge,

Hi. I just thought I'd let you know that I'm still hanging in there. I really enjoyed my little vacation in the rear. I wish I could have hurt my head more, then I'd still be in the rear. Oh well, what can I say?

I wish I could report that things are okay out here, but it's not. Our Battalion is trying to establish a firebase near the Ashau Valley. The firebase is called Ripcord and it's cost us many lives already. Maybe it made the news back home.

Anyway, our Alpha Company was out there and they lost 11 men killed and about 30 wounded. The Gooks did us a job with mortars. We even lost two choppers trying to get the dead and wounded out.

Our Recon platoon was scheduled to go out there and the day we tried to get in, the Gooks started pounding the firebase with mortars, rockets, and small arms fire.

I was never so scared in my life. There I was sitting in a chopper circling around the firebase, watching mortar rounds tear the place up. Our chopper never did make it in. It was suicide trying to land there. About one half of Recon did get in though, but I wish they hadn't.

We took eight casualties. Our brand new platoon leader got killed and seven of my buddies took shrapnel. All of them are going to be okay, thank God.

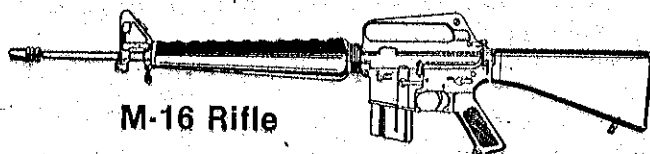
Right now my team is about a mile away from Ripcord. I can honestly say that this is my worst mission so far. We've been out here for seven days and we've made contact four times already.

In one of our firefights we captured a machine gun and five r.p.g. rounds which we blew in place. I'll send you a picture of the machine gun. So far my luck has held out pretty good but I wish I wasn't out in these mountains.

We were supposed to go back to Evans today but there's been a change in plans and we'll be out here for another week. Oh well, another week won't kill me, I hope.

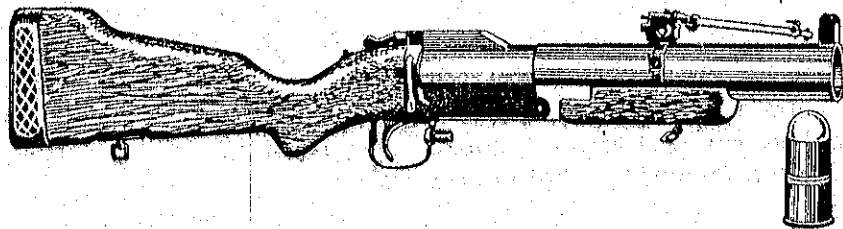
The weather out here is sure crazy. Two days ago we almost had three cases of heat stroke. Last night it got real windy and started to rain. I froze my ass off last night.

Well, I guess I'll close for now. Take care and don't worry. I'm still hanging in there.

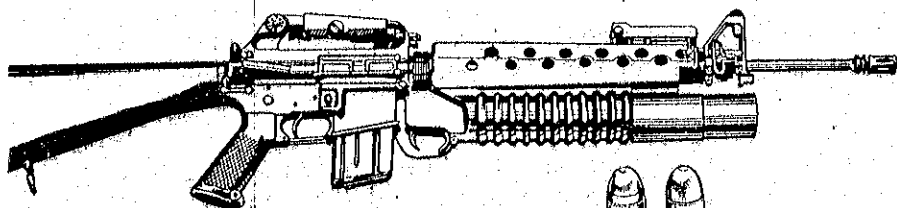


M-16 Rifle

Johnny



M-79 Grenade Launcher



M-148
(M-16/M-79)

