

RIPCORD REPORT

A NEWSLETTER

No. 21, September 1988

For Friends and Survivors of FSB RIPCORD, RVN



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= FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTORS =

- * Charles Devlin
- * Vince Kenyon
- * Rick Kellogg
- * Gary Steele
- * Bob Seitz
- * Martin Glennon

= FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS =
(To Treasurer)

- * Ripcord Assoc.
c/o John Mihalko

= CO-EDITORS =

- * Chip Collins

- * Ray Blackman



NEWSLETTER INTENTIONS

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

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



INCOMING

August 1, 1988

John,

Great issue of RIPCORN REPORT! The retrospective articles by you and Blackie were excellent. They really capture a grunt's life in the mountains of I Corps. The letters from the High School students show a lot for their generation and their interest in Vietnam Vets.

Blackie's answer to what keeps one from falling out of a Huey was right on. The only thing to add is the technique for getting on one in a LZ - Run rapid toward it, about 2-3 feet away, leap up and forward, do a 180 turn in the air, and let the weight and forward movement of the ruck pull you in as you slide in backwards on the floor of the bird.

Looking forward to the Reunion. I'll be in Germany - Military TDY till 6 Oct., and will drive up on the morning of 8 Oct.

Enclosed is a donation to help you with the mailings.

Take Care,
Bob Seitz



Dear Mr. Mihalko,

I thought I'd drop you a line to see how it's going and to ask a question or two.

Could you give me some names and addresses of some other guys that served on or around Ripcord? I'm trying to contact as many as I can.

Have you read the book, "Shrapnel in the Heart?" It's a book of letters and poems and things left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., and interviews with the people that wrote the letters.

It's a pretty good book. It's got a chapter in it about a guy named James Robert Kalsu. He was on Ripcord and was killed there on 21 July.

I almost set my museum up this month at the 4-H fair near here, but didn't. If I can get a Vietnam fatigue uniform, it'll be there next year. I might even have an AR-15 by that time. I've got a start on the uniform, but not enough for a display.

I enjoyed your retrospective in the recent newsletter. You make it very interesting. The day I got it I got off at work and then had to go work at an ice cream booth the band set up, so I took it with me and read it there. I couldn't put it down.

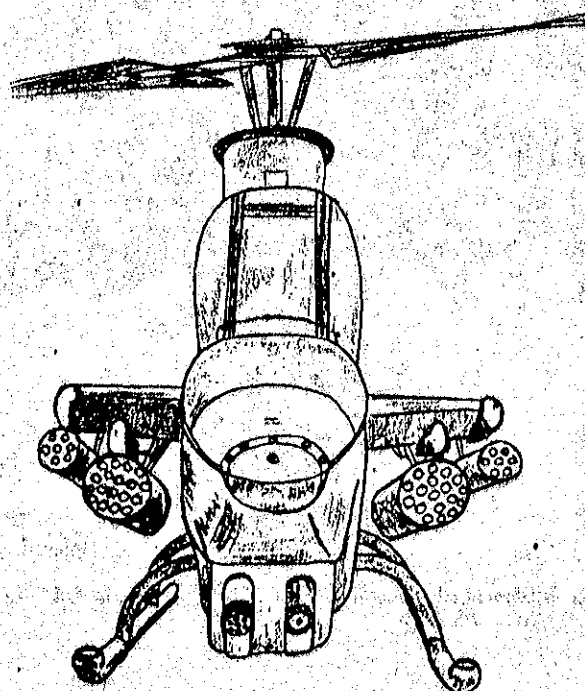
Thanks for your time and I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,
Wm. T. Ripley



How about it readers? Wm. T. Ripley is a high school student who is very interested in the Vietnam war and Ripcord in particular. Speaking from firsthand experience, it's a great feeling to know that the youth of our country is interested in us and the Vietnam war. How about dropping him a line or two, maybe with a picture from way back when. He would love to hear from you. You can write to him at RR #6, Decatur, IN 46733.

John Mihalko



NOTES

John Schuelke recently sent us an article that he found in the Army Times locator file:

ANYONE serving in Vietnam in either Company A, 2d Battalion, 327th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division in 1970-71, or with Company D, 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, 101st Airborne during Tet, contact Leigh Fulwood, 2348 West Plymouth, Seattle, Wash. 98199, phone (collect) 206-285-4065 or 258-5004.

I contacted Leigh Fulwood and discovered that she is writing a book about Sgt. Joe Hooper and would very much like to hear from anyone that served with him during his two tours of duty in Vietnam.

Joe Hooper was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions at the battle for Hue during Tet of 1968 while serving with D, 2/501.

Blackie



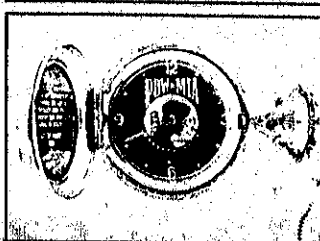
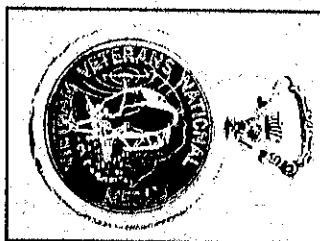
-LTG Sutherland presents CPT Rich with his DSC at Camp. (U.S. Army Photo)

★ ★ ★ VIETNAM VETERAN ★ ★ ★

With special tooling the cover of our finest quality quartz pocket watch has been exclusively designed to hold the Vietnam Veterans National Medal. All moving parts are Swiss made.

This spectacular medal is not a reproduction but the authentic medal as issued by the U.S. MINT. Appearing on the reverse side is the phrase, "In honor of those men and women who gave of themselves in an effort to insure democracy and peace throughout the world this medal is struck by act of congress 1984."

The uniqueness and limited quantity produced will insure its success as a collectors item. Hand painted to the dial is a POW*MIA emblem with the words, FORGET NEVER. All phases of design and marketing done by Vietnam veterans. A portion of all proceeds will be donated to PROJECT HOME FREE.



FREE GIFT INCLUDED WITH EVERY ORDER. To order your CUSTOM POCKET WATCH COMPLETE WITH CHAIN AND GIFT BOX. Send \$39.95 check or money order plus \$3.00 postage and handling to:

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CPT Rich Wins DSC For Valor At Ripcord

CAMP EAGLE - The enemy rocket struck the firebase with an explosive confusion of debris and noise. A second round followed--the impact sending mud and stones high into the air. The sharp reports of recoilless rifle fire echoed across the hilltop.

Oblivious to the destruction and danger around him, CPT David Rich, the artillery base commander, hurried from one shell crater to the next carefully examining each in an effort to locate the enemy guns. Suddenly, a shattering blast from an enemy mortar round knocked him to the ground.

Refusing to be stopped and disregarding his own safety, the artillery captain continued to direct his men as they laid down a barrage of artillery fire on the enemy positions.

"All I could think of at the time," CPT Rich recalled, "was that we had to stop the enemy. We had to destroy his guns."

Because of his heroism and devotion to duty while in conflict with the enemy in the Republic of Vietnam, the Lawton, Okla., native and commander of Btry. B, 2nd Bn. (Ambl.), 319th Arty., was awarded his nation's second highest medal for valor--the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC).

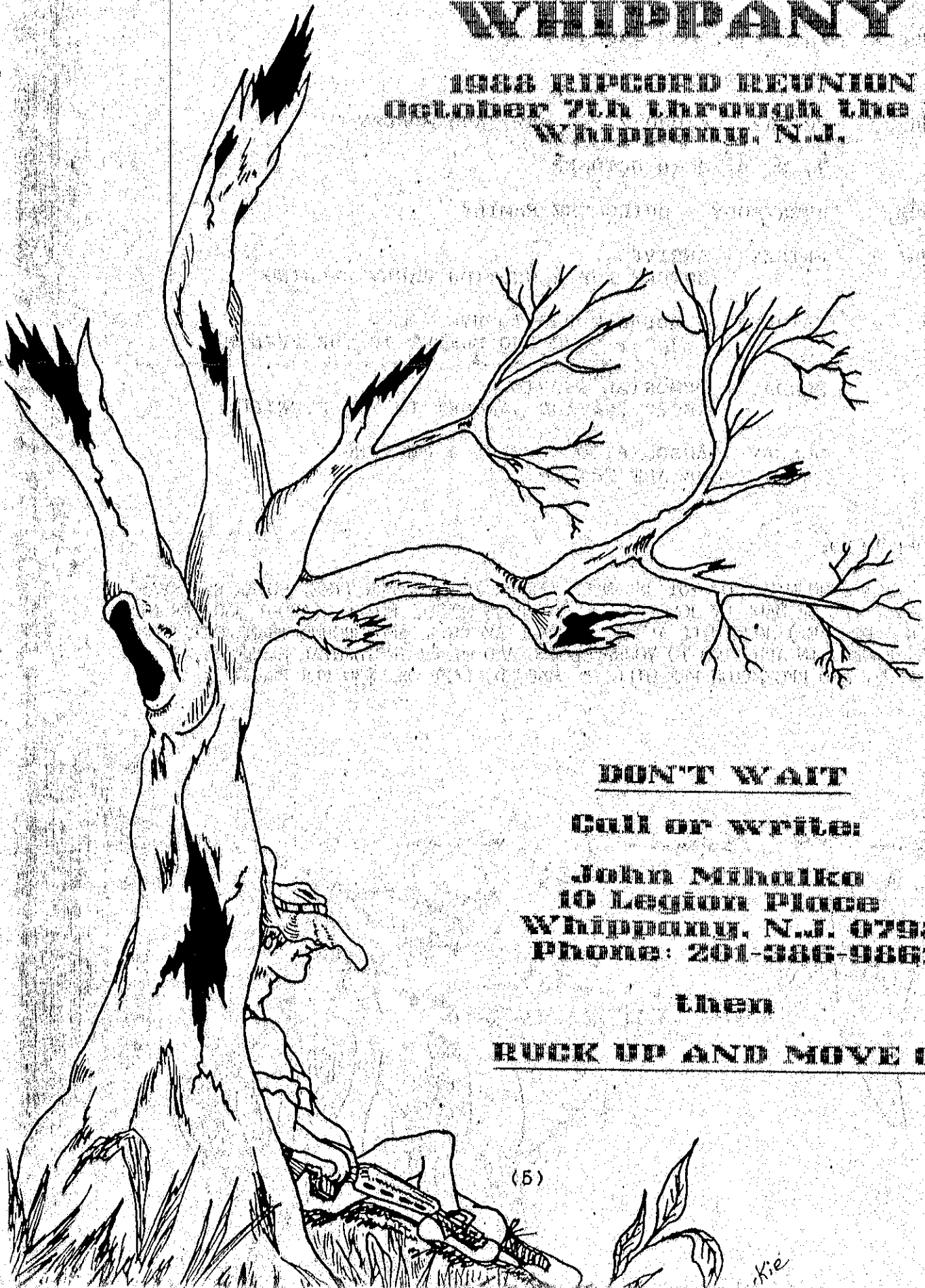
In a recent ceremony at the division headquarters, LTG James W. Sutherland, XXIV Corps commander, presented the DSC to CPT Rich for his courageous actions while on FS/OB Ripcord, 34 miles northwest of Hue, during the period of July 5 through July 17, 1970.

MG John J. Hennessey, Chicago, looked on as LTG Sutherland commended CPT Rich, calling him one of the nation's "finest fighting men."

(taken from the Jan. 4, 1971 issue of THE SCREAMING EAGLE)

OPERATION WHIPPANY

1988 RIPOCORD REUNION
October 7th through the 10th
Whippany, N.J.



DON'T WAIT

Call or write:

John Miholka
10 Legion Place
Whippany, N.J. 07981
Phone: 201-886-9862

then

HUCK UP AND MOVE OUT

RIPCORN REUNION '88

WHERE: WHIPPANY, NEW JERSEY

VFW POST 5351

WHEN: FRIDAY, SATURDAY, SUNDAY, AND MONDAY

7, 8, 9, & 10 OCTOBER

WHO: EVERYBODY - BRING THE FAMILY

WHAT: FRIDAY - ARRIVE

BUFFET AND RECEPTION EARLY EVENING

SATURDAY - LOCAL TOURS TO NYC

HAPPY HOUR AND BUFFET IN THE EVENING

SUNDAY - MEMORIAL SERVICE

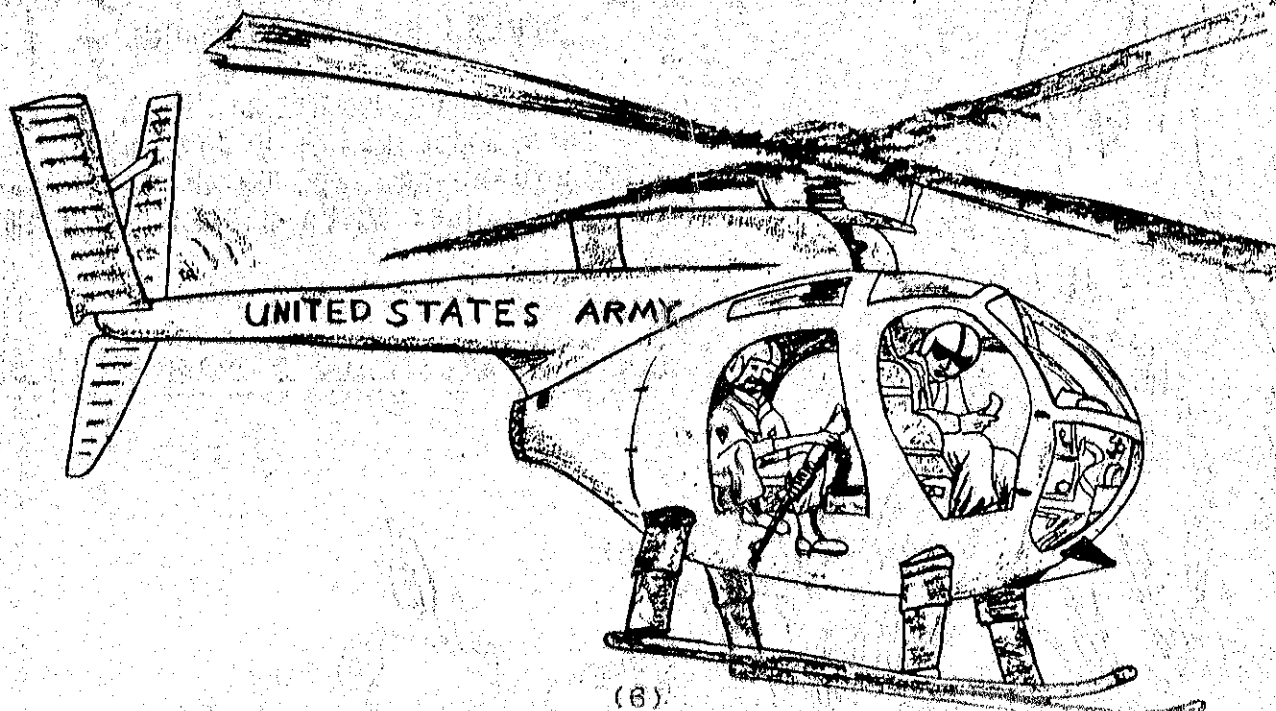
RECEPTION AND BANQUET IN THE EVENING

MONDAY - ASSOCIATION BUSINESS MEETING

DEPART THE AO

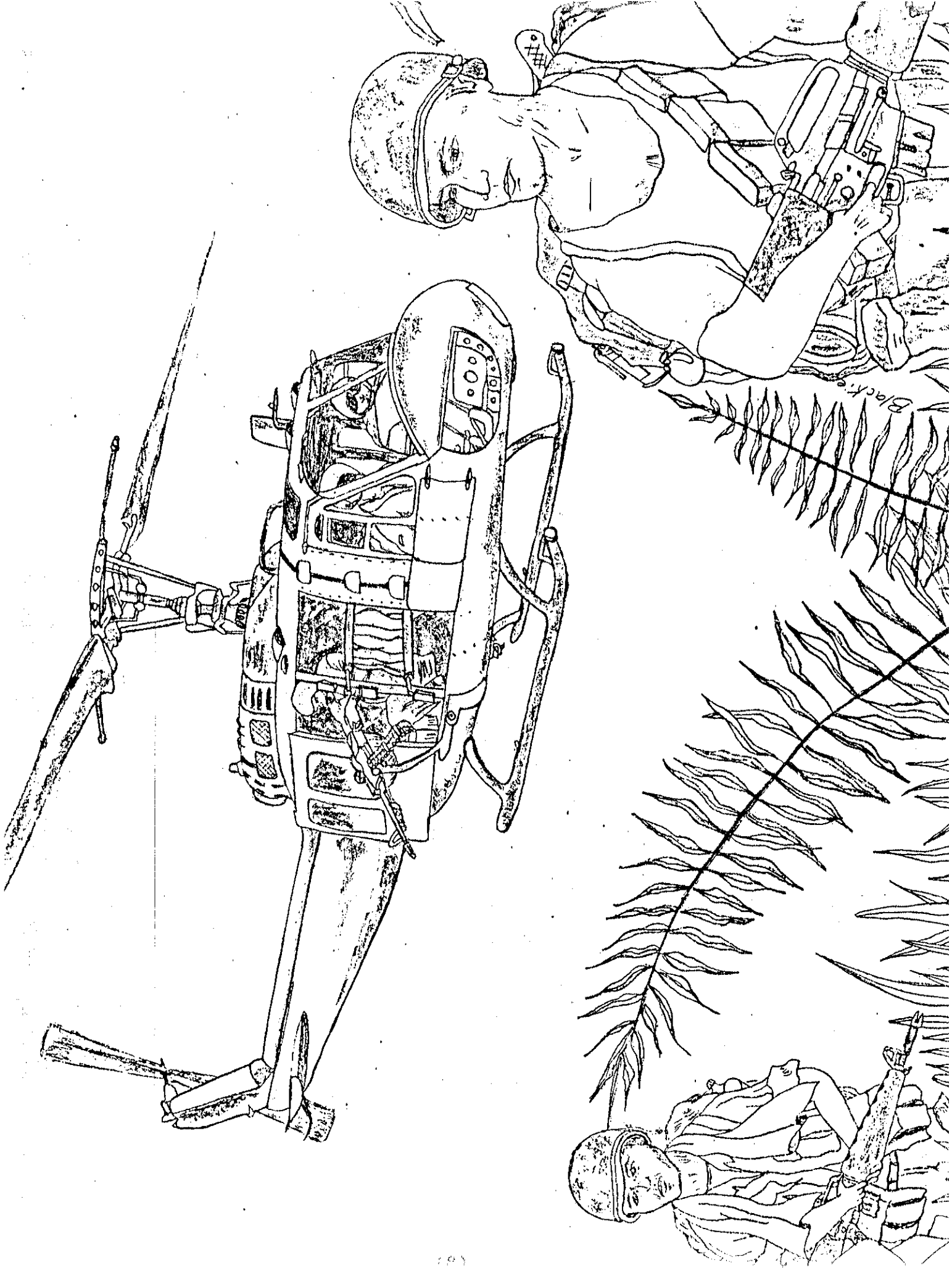
WHAT TO DO:

CONTACT JOHN MIHALKO: 201-386-9862, AFTER 7PM EASTERN TIME. HOTEL RESERVATIONS WILL BE MADE BY JOHN AT THE GOVERNOR MORRIS HOTEL, (ABOUT \$60 PER NIGHT FOR A DOUBLE.) JOHN WILL ALSO PROVIDE DIRECTIONS AND GROUND TRANSPORTATION AS NEEDED. IN ADDITION TO YOUR LODGING AND OTHER INCIDENTAL EXPENSES, A BANQUET AND RECEPTION FEE WILL BE CHARGED, (APPROX. \$30 PER PERSON).



YOU HAVE BEEN IN THE NAM TOO LONG IF:

1. C-RATIONS TASTE LIKE MOMS HOME COOKING
2. YOU ARE AS COMFORTABLE IN A SQUATTING POSITION AS IN A CHAIR
3. YOU FIND YOURSELF TALKING TO OTHER GIs IN BROKEN ENGLISH
4. MPC LOOKS LIKE GREENBACKS
5. YOU ENJOY HOT KOOL-AID
6. NUCK MALM SMELLS AND TASTES LIKE STEAK SAUCE
7. ANY COLOR LOOKS LIKE GREEN
8. YOU STILL WANT TO GO CAMPING
9. BEETLE NUT TASTES LIKE OR BETTER THAN BEECH-NUT
10. MALARIA PILLS NO LONGER GIVE YOU HO CHI MINH'S REVENGE
11. YOU TAKE A PICTURE OF MAMASAN AND SHE IS YOUR PIN-UP GIRL FOR THE MONTH
12. IN YOUR LETTER HOME YOU DESCRIBE EVERYTHING AS "NUMBER ONE" OR "NUMBER TEN"
13. TRIPPING THROUGH THE RICE PADDIES IS AS MUCH FUN AS TIPTOEING THROUGH THE TULIPS
14. THE GROUND FEELS AS GOOD AS THE BED BACK HOME
15. YOU PREFER WHITEWALLS TO LONG HAIR
16. YOU PREFER A JEEP TO A CORVETTE
17. YOU PREFER FATIGUES TO CIVIES
18. YOU PREFER PERCEY MARVELOUS TO CHICKEN MAN
19. YOU PREFER HANOI HANNA TO RAQUEL WELCH
20. YOU BEGIN TO CONSIDER HO CHI MINH AS YOUR REAL UNCLE HO
21. YOU WOULD RATHER WALK THROUGH MUD BAREFOOT THAN THROUGH GRASS
22. YOU KISS YOUR 1ST SGT. GOOD-NIGHT
23. YOU WOULD RATHER HAVE FISH-HEADS AND RICE THAN SIRLOIN
24. IN YOUR LAST LETTER HOME YOU SAID, "I WILL FINI MY TOUR AND DIDI MAO FOR THE WORLD"
25. YOU FORGOT WHAT CHANEL #5 SMELLS LIKE



EAGLE DUSTOFF REMEMBERED

A joint retrospective

By: LTC. Jerry Rodgers and John Mihalko

Eagle Dustoff had already seen lots of action on and around Ripcord by the time I got there in early May of 1970. Several Dustoff Hueys had been hit and brought down by NVA fire. Most often, Ripcord missions were handled by one of two Dustoff aircraft that were on standby at Camp Evans.

Air crews would rotate duties at Evans, usually for a week to 10 days at a time. Missions were called into "Charlie Medic" (C-Company, 326 Medical Battalion) and were relayed to the Aircraft Commander. A sprint from the hooch to the chopper would take about 10 seconds, and with a quick start, the Huey could be airborne in about a minute, sometimes longer if the crew had to be awakened. When Ripcord or vicinity was the destination, the crews instinctively knew that it would be dangerous, especially if it was at night or if a hoist extraction was involved.

Hoist missions were often a nightmare, especially if the ground unit were in contact with the enemy. Each Huey was equipped with a hoist which was capable of lifting two (sometimes three) ambulatory wounded on a jungle penetrator or one (sometimes two) non ambulatory patient in a Stokes litter from beneath the jungle canopy to the chopper. The cable was about 150 feet long as I recall, and had an explosive cutter that could be activated to blow the cable in the event the chopper came under heavy fire or if the cable became inextricably hung in the trees.

Most Dustoff crews would have considered it a personal shame if they ever had to resort to cutting a cable. The results would be obvious if the patient had already been loaded onto the jungle penetrator or into the Stokes litter. Needless to say, we didn't blow many cables. If there had been enemy fire in the area in the past 24 hours, gunship coverage was SOP, but sometimes not available.

When colored smoke was popped on the ground and the location was confirmed by radio contact with the ground unit, the pilot would skillfully approach low level and hover the aircraft over the wounded patient. Then he would carefully work the airframe down into the jungle canopy, leaving, if possible, no more than the rotor blades of the unarmed chopper exposed as a target.

This required of the crew total concentration on the aircraft and the trees immediately below. It also required close coordination over a live intercom between the pilot (usually the aircraft commander if the mission was "hot") the crew chief, who would operate the hoist from the right skid, and the medic who would occupy the left skid. The other pilot would operate the radios, coordinate gun coverage if it were available, and keep the other crew members informed as to what was going on around them, while keeping an eye on the instrument panel and his hands and feet near the controls.

Main rotor blade strikes with trees were not unusual to our Dustoff operations because we would sink the airframe so far into the canopy trying to obscure ourselves from NVA gunners or at least make it difficult for them to get a clear shot. These blade strikes would usually not result in much damage because the leafy tree tops were fairly soft.

Once after a mission, my operations officer questioned me suspiciously about a bunch of wood splinters protruding from one of my blades. I told him we had been hit by a "wooden RPG." He wasn't very amused with my story or with the incident, which in some units would have gotten you into trouble with the "Old Man," but he closed the incident without further ado.

No matter how hard you tried, however, it was hard to conceal a Huey that has been deliberately marked with red crosses on a white panel. The result was often the presentation of a lucrative target for an NVA gunner using AK-47, 50 cal., or the most dreaded RPG. Such was the case one day in late May of 1970, when one of our aircraft was responding to a hot mission in the vicinity of Firebase-Ripcord.....

The month of May, 1970, wasn't much different than the month of April. The weather was hot and our missions were just as hot. It seemed like every time out we were either making contact or turning something up. Ripcord may have been "secure," but the surrounding mountains were anything but secure.

Junior used to kid me by saying that I had an uncanny knack for finding Gooks. There was nothing uncanny about my talents; the NVA just happened to be everywhere our team dared to tread. Our missions seemed endless, which didn't make us too happy either. During one stretch from late April till June, Bravo team was out in the mountains for 44 days, an unheard of occurrence for a Recon team.

I was now ATL of our team as well as point man. It was now late May, we were still out in the field in another hot area near Ripcord, and when we would get in to Evans for a one day stand down, was anybody's guess. Ox, our former point man had taken over Charlie team and was in the area as well as Delta team. For Ox, this was his first time out as team leader and we knew he could do the job.

I never did find out how Ox got his name, but I assume it had something to do with his size. Ox was one of the biggest guys in Recon. I had learned much under his tutelage as former point man over the months. He would be missed. For a man of his size, he could move through the thickest jungle effortlessly and silently. When he used to walk point, he literally blazed a trail for us to follow. Nothing could stop or slow Ox down for any length of time.

On this mission I also remember that we had an extra radio with us. Why, I can't recall; maybe our other one was going bad. I do remember that we had a lot of fun with the extra radio. I would go out on a rif and call Junior on the horn using call signs known only to us. The people on Ripcord must have gone nuts trying to figure out just who the hell this phantom outfit was.

The AO may have been hot, but so far "Custer's Luck" was still working its magic. There were high speed trails all over the place and many fresh signs of the elusive NVA, but no contact was made. We found an ideal place to set up. It was near a tiny little stream, if you could call it that. It couldn't have been more than a foot wide or deep, but it represented cool, fresh water in abundance, only a stone's throw away.

We were taking it easy when Ox's voice came over the horn to Ripcord saying that he had movement all around him. Now Ox wasn't one to scare very easily. He was one of the coolest and efficient persons in combat, but his voice showed a lot of concern. Junior checked his position on the map. We could get to him for assistance if needed, but it would take time to reach his location.

Delta team was also monitoring Ox's radio transmissions and it was decided to get ready to move towards Ox's position. We weren't on the move very long when Ox came on the horn again; this time stating that he was in heavy contact with wounded men, courtesy of an RPG blast. He was also receiving AK fire as well. Junior was on the horn to Ox telling him that we were already en-route and would link up with Delta team on the way.

I was scared humping those high speed trails knowing that we would soon be in contact, but I was more afraid for Ox and his beleaguered team. I wondered who his wounded were and if we could reach them in time. We heard that a Medevac was on the way out to Ox's location. "Thank God for Medevacs," I thought to myself. Ox was trying to break contact, but it was no use. His team was pinned down, surrounded by an NVA force that could sense the kill.

Junior kept reassuring Ox that we were on the way and getting closer all the time. Delta team was moving also. We paused for a quick break to check our positions and link up with Delta team. It didn't take us long to make the link up and continue our journey. It was reassuring to have Delta team with us. I liked working with Ralph Motta, their point man. Anytime our teams linked up, Ralph and me would split the time on point and slack.

We heard over the horn that Eagle Dustoff was on station, but the Cobras had not yet arrived. I believe Ox was warning the pilot to wait for the gunships since he was still in contact. The pilot decided to go in anyway, and the jungle penetrator was lowered. One of the wounded was just starting his ascent to aid and safety when the RPG round hit the hovering and defenseless bird. We heard the explosion.

We didn't have to wait for the next radio transmission from Ox. We all knew what had just taken place as we quickened our pace. Ox and his team were living the worst nightmare possible. His voice ran the gamut of emotions as he came on the horn again saying: "My God, they've hit the Medevac. It's on fire, out of control, and going down!" We were to find out later that when the RPG hit, a brave crewman blew the cable of the jungle penetrator, which saved the lives of the wounded, who would have shared the same fate as the crew of the ship.....

I had talked to the ill-fated crew--O'Brien, Graham, John--

son and Hawkins when they had stopped at Camp Eagle to pick up their mail. Hawkins took a liking to my Buck survival knife and jokingly asked if he could have it if I got "kilo'd," (killed in action.) Maybe I was a little superstitious, but I didn't like talking about that possibility, given the reality of being in such a highly dangerous occupation. I shrugged off his comment and hoped it was not an omen of things to come.

Late in the morning, they responded to a call from the Ripcord area. A ground troop was wounded and in grave danger, and the nearest LZ was too far away to move him to it. The crew had just settled into their hovering position for a hoist extraction, like a giant jungle bird nesting in the tree tops. An NVA gunner opened up with an RPG which found its way home into the side or belly of the Huey which would have had close to 1400 lbs. of JP-4 in its freshly topped tanks. The fireball that resulted left little chance for anyone to survive.

I was out in the shower around noon washing my clothes in a tub and rinsing them in the shower. Suddenly, Gary Mercer, a friend and fellow pilot, approached me with the news that one of our ships had gone down and that the crew was assumed dead. News didn't get any better. By afternoon we had confirmed our worst fears. The crew was dead. We spent the rest of the day grieving in our own special ways--some thinking, some drinking, and one performing an unauthorized but spectacular flyby that would result in temporary loss of his flight status.....

Judging by the sound and ferocity of the explosion, we knew we were very close and in for a firefight. I think we were all numbed by the reality of what had just happened. An unarmed Medevac had just been blown out of the sky. We continued our trek with a renewed vigor and sense of urgency. Saving Ox and his team was of the utmost importance, but we also wanted to exact a measure of revenge.

The downing and loss of the Medevac set the wheels in motion of a lot of angry and determined "Screaming Eagles." Radio traffic was hot and heavy. A line unit was being prepared for insertion into the fray along with the much needed and welcome support of Cobra gunships. All hell was breaking loose and we were going to be in the thick of it.

To Ralph and me it was like "Deja Vu." We were making our way up another hill on a high speed trail. There was a huge boulder just off the side of the trail. Just as we reached it, we both saw the NVA gunner with an RPG pointed right at us. Ralph sounded the alarm as we dove for the safety of the giant rock.

WHAM! The RPG hit the boulder dead center. In a matter of seconds, another round found its mark on the giant rock. We considered ourselves very lucky. That gunner could fire at that rock all day long for all we cared. The rounds were barely making a dent in our fortress. Why he didn't hold his fire until we cleared the safety of that rock, I'll never know. He would have had us dead to rights. Maybe he was still flushed with excitement of downing a Medevac and had R & R on his mind.

It didn't take long for Doc Speed to reach our position. "Anybody hurt?" he asked. We replied that we were okay as another round hit the rock. Speed asked where the pesty NVA gunner was. We told him that he was about 40 feet up the trail nestled behind some rocks.

Speed took a very quick peak, judged the distance, and that familiar gleam was in his eyes as he reached for a frag. Speed pulled the pin, threw it, and we waited for the inevitable explosion. He then threw another and another. Speed decided to throw one more for good measure. It got hung up in some overhead branches and started coming back our way. Luckily it exploded in mid air before it could do us any harm. I asked Speed to ease up on the frags. Everything was silent. No more RPG rounds came in, but we didn't know if Speed's frags had done the job.

I could hear the sound of the helicopters to our rear inserting the line unit. I wasn't in much of a hurry to venture from the safety of that rock. RPG's at close range have a way of keeping your head down. While we were awaiting the line unit, with its much needed troops and additional firepower, another member of Delta team made his way to our position. His name was Hoss and it fit him perfectly. He was built like Stallone and his sleeves were cut off exposing arms that looked like tree trunks. His 16 looked small in his hands.

Hoss was a former 60 gunner in a line unit before he came to Recon. I guess he didn't feel like waiting for a 60 to show up. He quickly surveyed the terrain ahead, put his 16 on automatic, and started firing in short, quick bursts. He seemed to be having a grand old time firing his weapon like a 60. All was still quiet. There had been no return fire at any time after Doc Speed wreaked havoc with the frags.

Elements of the line unit were making their way up the hill to our position. We were sure glad to see them. I vaguely remember a lieutenant leading the charge. Very calmly and efficiently he got his troops on line and started his assault. That was fine with me. I figured Recon had done its job.

We followed them up to the top of the hill. On the way, I cautiously approached the rocks where the RPG gunner had been. He was there, dead as a doornail. The RPG pouch he was wearing was empty, and his launcher was lying next to his body. I guess that Speed's frags had found their mark. I took a very long look at the face of the man who had calmly and deliberately destroyed an unarmed Medevac. I broke out my Instamatic and took his picture. I wanted to remember that face forever.

I finally made my way to the top of the hill and saw another dead NVA riddled with bullet holes. We found out later that one of Ox's men had sent him on his way to meet "Uncle Ho." There were a lot of blood trails leading away from the scene of the battle. Some of our men were also guarding a very terrified NVA prisoner. He looked almost pitiful, standing there stripped down to his underwear, pondering his fate. There was talk of blowing him away for what had happened to the Medevac, but cooler heads prevailed. A bird flew in with an interpreter. He was questioned for awhile and then whisked away, much to his relief.

A couple of us followed one of the blood trails for awhile, but it was

getting very late in the afternoon and we decided to turn back. We spent the night not very far from the battle site linked up with the line unit. I was glad they were there, but it was still too noisy for my liking. At some point during the night, we took some rather close incoming. Whether it was NVA or fire from Ripcord that was close, it kept us on edge.

The next morning the line unit moved out to follow the blood trails and Junior gave us the word that it was to be our job to retrieve the bodies from the wreckage. None of us were looking forward to that duty; not because we felt it demeaning, but because we knew what we would find. I had seen the face of death many times, but on the faces of dead NVA, not Americans.

Off we went with the body bags. I was deep in thought, wondering, but knowing the condition of the corpses. I was thinking about one crewman in particular, the one who had the presence of mind to blow the cable of the jungle penetrator, even though he was moments away from a fiery death. His dedication to duty saved the life of a member of Recon who would have shared his fate. How do you define the word courage? I think I just did.

As we made our way to the wreckage, a sickly scent permeated the air. I had never smelled that aroma before or since, but I can never forget it. The smell hung in the air like a thick fog, confirming our worst fears. My heart was beating faster. I kept thinking about these brave men, who not more than 24 hours earlier, were full of life with family and friends. Now they were lifeless, burned beyond recognition.

I guess I felt everything all at once; sadness, fear, grief, anger and hate. Junior asked for volunteers for the unpleasant task of removing the bodies from the wreckage and placing them in the body bags. Normally, I would do anything Junior asked, but this, I could not bring myself to do. I did not want to see the faces of the men I felt very close to, even though they were total strangers whose names we didn't even know. I felt a strong personal loss that I just can't describe.

While the bodies were removed and placed in the body bags, the rest of us pulled security. The area was still hot, but we felt relatively safe knowing that a line unit was still in the area. With the grisly task completed, we then started the long and somber journey to the nearest LZ.

We made our way up and down a countless number of hills. Our progress was very slow. We had to take many rest breaks. Dead weight is just that; dead and very heavy. We were as gentle and respectful as we could possibly be, but the jungle was not as kind. Branches kept ripping at the bags and holding on, like they wanted to keep these men forever as a silent testimony to the tragedy that had taken place.

It was finally decided to tie the body bags onto long poles and carry them safari style. It seemed undignified, but we had little choice. The jungle was just too relentless in its assault on the body bags, exposing their contents. America's finest were coming out of the jungle and going home even though they were coming out lashed to poles, like an African safari.

Our progress was now going much faster and they were much easier to carry. The jungle seemed to be cooperating also, resigned to the fact that it

was fighting a losing battle and would have to give up its dead. It still seemed to take forever to reach the LZ.

Finally, we arrived at our destination, exhausted and covered with sweat. I remember sitting there almost too tired to move. I was physically and mentally drained. My eyes were fixed on one body bag in particular as we awaited the helicopter that was coming to pick them up. It was the one I had helped to carry. It was ripped very badly and a flight helmet had fallen out. The helmet wasn't in much better shape than the body it contained. What a tragic waste of human life.

I believe it was Junior who broke the silence by bringing us some new body bags. We placed the corpses, old bags and all into the new bags. No one said much, if anything at all.....

The next day I began my first operational flying in Vietnam. I was flying "peter pilot", with Captain Jerry "Coach Collins as the Aircraft Commander. We were flying "second-up" out of Eagle, which meant that we were the backup crew and would routinely backhaul patients being further evacuated from Camp Evans to Phu-Bai or to Danang.

We were in the air near Evans when we got word that the ground unit had recovered the bodies of our crew and were humping them to an LZ. Although the Dustoff mission did not call for routine evacuation of the dead, we volunteered to go in and perform the somber duty of claiming our own.....

I heard the familiar sound of an approaching slick, and we got ready to carry the bodies for the final time. The slick landed and we loaded the bodies on board. As usual, I watched the slick until it dissappeared from view, the memory of its cargo and that flight helmet burned into my memory forever.....

It was a gruesome sight. All that was left of this heroic crew of America's best was loaded in body bags onto the floor of our Huey. No one spoke as we flew back to the base, except to request clearance to land.....

The slick was long gone, but we were told to hang loose for a re-supply. It was so damned hot. Our bird finally made it in and there was something extra with our normal re-supply. When I first saw the rubber bag covered with sweat, I thought it was soda. To our utter amazement, when we opened the bag, there packed in ice, was a case of beer. I thought I was staring at a mirage. This was too good to be true. Eager hands grabbed for the liquid gold.

I made my way to a far corner of the LZ, took another quick glance at the label to make sure my eyes weren't deceiving me, lit up a Lucky, and proceeded to chug it down. I thought I was in heaven. A cold beer never tasted so good, especially since we had never gotten any in the field before.

Where it came from or who sent it, I'll never know. Maybe it was a mistake, but under the circumstances, we didn't care. I got myself one more beer and this time I savored every drop. It was warm before I finished consuming it, but it didn't matter. I dwelled on the events of this sad and fateful

mission and said a silent prayer for the crew of Eagle Dustoff. I wondered if I would ever find out their names.....

The ground unit later told us that they had killed the NVA gunner who had killed our unarmed crew and presented us with the RPG launcher that he had used. The launcher hung as a memorial to our crew in our club at Camp Eagle.

Eagle Dustoff continued to participate in the Ripcord campaign, and in fact made one of the last lifts to be made from the Firebase on the final day of the operation. The unit lost other aircraft on or around Ripcord and sustained several additional deaths and injuries in that area throughout the summer, but the loss of that brave crew in the Spring made an unforgettable impression on all of those who served with them and reinforced the value the unit put on saving a life.....

EPILOGUE:

Many years later as a result of the RIPCORD ASSOCIATION, I was to meet John Mihalko, who upon hearing my story, related that he was one of the Recon troops who recovered the bodies and loaded them onto our aircraft. At the reunion last October, John and I, along with Rande Hall, who had seen action at Ripcord and later wounded as a Dustoff Medic, sadly focused on their names on "The Wall," the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. We honored them by touching their names, telling their story, and acknowledging their heroic duty which had cost them their lives. Their families, their country, and all of those who served with them can be proud!.....

Jerry D. Rodgers

When I first read Jerry's letter to Chip in the Incoming Section of the Newsletter describing his part in the events of that fateful day, I was intrigued to say the least. A Pandora's box opened in my brain, and the memories of that mission came back like it was yesterday. I knew we had a retrospective that needed to be told and shared with you readers.

In correspondence with Jerry, I asked him if he would put down his thoughts and memories from that mission down on paper and send them to me for future publication. What you have just read is the culmination of a joint effort on our part to tell the story of Eagle Dustoff from two points of view as it happened: From the air, by Jerry who knew the crew, and by me, who didn't know the crew personally, but who got to know them in death. I wish the circumstances could have been different.

I was especially pleased and honored to meet Jerry Rodgers and Rande Hall face to face at our last reunion. Jerry filled me in with the final details of that mission: I now know the names of the crew of the Medevac, and one of them fits the flight helmet and charred corpse that was once a man, that I stared at for so long, 18 years ago. Vietnam is history, but for the likes of men named O'Brien, Graham, Johnson and Hawkins, they will never be forgotten. Till next time.....John Mihalko

June 2, 1988

Dear John Mihalko,

As you know we had a speaker in a week before who was a Vietnam Vet. Both his story and yours made me think more about our society in which we live and myself. Your presentation was realistic and brought the war home to me; not just in movies or in books, but in an individuals portrayal of the war.

If your aim was to make us informed, it worked. I know it is very difficult for you to talk about your experiences, but I thank you because without you, an honest portrayal of the war would not be available. My generation are the next fighters and this knowledge you brought to us will hopefully aid us in the future.

An informed student,
Seth Levy

June 2, 1988

John Mihalko,

I cannot even begin to imagine what you went through - living the way you did, fighting & killing in chemical laden jungles 10,000 miles from home, and yet you bear no resentment toward our country. I guess it is for that, that I respect you most; whether I agree or not with the cause, I still have tremendous respect for you.

I thank you for coming to speak to the class, for you give life and being to the empty words and phrases of textbooks. You were there and the books weren't - you serve as our closest link to, and best educator of what went on in Vietnam.

I understand that we were the first class you spoke to, and for the students' sake, I hope we won't be the last.

Thank you,
Erik Blaser

June 2, 1988

Dear Mr. Mihalko,

I would really like to thank you for taking out some time to come and speak to our class. At first I didn't know what to expect when our teacher told us you were for the war. I had really pictured you as some sort of war-monger or something, but after you spoke, I found that I had so much respect for you, not only for what you endured, but also for the spirit you have to maintain since Vietnam.

All I can say is you really taught me a lot and I listened to a side of war I never knew existed. Thanks again for your stories. Keep it up!

Caron Bratt

June 2, 1988

Dear John Mihalko,

I'm glad we're getting a chance to write to you in class because I wanted to anyway. I was very impressed by what you said and especially the way that you said it! Your gentle attitude and manner was very different than the gung-ho warrior I expected. You also seemed to possess most of my views about the war.

For your first time speaking (one would never know that), you were better than the Senator and other speakers we listened to. Your style was superb because you just told us what happened and how you felt - you didn't try to win us over or throw off our questions.

I admire your continuing pride in America - I don't know if I could feel the same way you did after all the horrible experiences you went through. It takes a remarkable man to do that!

I am very pleased to hear that your baby girl is doing so well, and is not affected by Agent Orange - I feel you must be a beautiful father to her. I can only say that you should/must keep speaking because our generation and others are finally ready and eager to hear your story. Then and only then can we prevent such atrocities from recurring.

Thank you for the time
you spent with us.
God Bless,
Andi Bataille

June 2, 1988

John Mihalko,

I have never been exposed to such truth and firsthand knowledge concerning Vietnam, than Wednesday afternoon. Although my ideals were different than yours, Mr. Mihalko, you gave me an understanding of the war that was not yet fluid within my thoughts. I was touched by passion, horror, survival, and reality; something that rarely comes together in such a package.

I enjoyed the way you applied the knowledge that you learned from the experience in Vietnam to other world problems. You were not a one-sided individual who could not see the problems with the Vietnam war.

I think it is safe to say that we would both agree that the war was wrong, either politically or militarilily, the only difference between our thoughts: you believe that it was necessary for political reasons, no matter what the strategy; I believe it was politically and militarilily too unstable. No matter what the beliefs, I now recognize a totally different angle of the Vietnam war; extreme human compassion between allies, human compassion to uphold ones almighty survival.

Thank you,
Darron Collins
Political Institute Class
of '88

Dear John Mihalko,

I am sincerely glad that you chose to come speak to our class. As you stated, if there is a "next" war, we will be the ones fighting in it. You also asked us to "keep track" of what our politicians are doing. In this class you don't have too much to worry about in that area, but I believe that it is an important message to convey to our nation's high school students.

I appreciate your candidness in telling the stories of what happened to you in Vietnam. I think that it is important that we not only know what our politicians are doing, but in the case of war, to know the consequences of our politicians actions.

To tell you the truth, I am really not sure as to whether we should have been in Vietnam, but I think this country owes the brave men who fought there a great amount of appreciation. You said that it was important that you talk about your experiences in Vietnam, I know that it is just as important to listen to your portrayal of those experiences. It helped me a lot. I owe you my sincere thanks.

Sincerely,
Nick Hathaway

Dear Mr. Mihalko,

I believe I can speak for the class in saying that it was great having you here. I enjoyed listening to your experiences in Vietnam. Unlike other speakers we have listened to, you presented the facts, on how it was for you. It is important to present the facts and not a biased opinion. For it is your mission to educate others of the misery of war with facts, not try to turn us against the war effort, and not to support it.

It is important to remember that we are the future of this Great Nation and shall we advance with our father's mistakes on mind or with fresh ideas for the future.

Sincerely,
Al Kraus

Dear Mr. Mihalko,

Yesterday was a real honor for us. Your thoughts, ideas and experiences in Vietnam were of great interest to us all. I'm glad we were your first guests. Everything you said was very intense and a lot of unanswered questions were revealed to us.

Your photo albums were also very touching. It was so different looking at the pictures and seeing you in front of us. It made Vietnam a little closer and more real to me. I'm also happy to see that through that experience you are able to speak out and express your feelings.

You are a lucky man to see life so wonderful. It is too bad we all don't enjoy it as much. Many of us do take it for granted. Somebody also must have been looking out for you, (and your strong will to live) through some of those misadventures.

I'm glad everything has worked out and thanks again for coming. When we first heard you were for this war, I expected someone so much different, but I wanted to say I was wrong and you really were great and also a warm and wonderful person. I'm also glad your daughter is healthy and happy.

