

RIPCORD REPORT

A Newsletter

No. 26, June 1990

For Friends and Survivors of FSB RIPCORD, RVN



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(Send Newsletter Items to,)

(Send Donations to,)

Editor: Chuck Hawkins

Treasurer: John Mihalko

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 who 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 other appropriate material regarding the Newsletter or about Ripcord in general. We wish to improve as we grow and your input is necessary.

However, there may be those Veterans (or others) who are still troubled by their experiences. We regret this situation, but can not share responsibility for reactions regarding the Newsletter contents. Ideally, this Newsletter will help all of us to better cope with a difficult past and move us toward a rewarding future.

CONTACTS/NEW FACES

Mr. Jack Wilhite

Mr. Gib Rossetter

Mr. Bob Smoker

Mr. Al Werth

Ms. Beverly McClure

Mr. Rick Freeman

Mr. Richard Daniels (HHQ & D, 1-506th)

INCOMING

Dear Chuck,

I don't know if you remember who I am, it really doesn't matter. I often recall our first encounter.

I was a cobra pilot for the ARA battery at Camp Evans. I was called out to shoot for a company in contact (A/2-506 if I recall). You were southeast of Ripcord. It was July 1970.

I came toward you from the northeast. Because of cloud cover, I couldn't get over a ridge line. I could hear the firefight over the radio as you spoke, and the urgency and desperation in your voice.

Apparently you had called for gunships earlier in the morning and no one had been able to get to you.

I knew how to get to you. I told you to sit tight and give me ten minutes. As I look back -- where were you going to go? That's why I was coming to you, because you couldn't move. I had to fly east in the flatlands past Helen to the Song Bo River, fly up the river past Rakkasan to the Crowsfoot, pick the correct tributary, and continue west.

When we reestablished radio contact I asked you to give me directions from the sound of my rotor blades. We had to shoot close to your position. We ordered more cobras and finally brought you relief.

I called you almost everyday after that. One day, not too long afterward, you didn't answer. Your RTO said you had been hit with shrapnel in the throat. You stayed with your men.

Several days later, you could whisper some on the radio. Another company was inserted to join you. If memory serves, it was D Co. and Rollison was the CO. I'm sure I don't have all the facts in order -- just a memory.

After you returned to Evans, you, the other Co. CO, and one of your men paid me a surprise visit. I don't recall the visit being very joyous. I feel very humbled by those of you who were fighting the war to come see me -- just a helicopter pilot.

I have met John Fox who was General Sid Berry's pilot during Ripcord. They are still friends. I have been able to read General Berry's after action report on Ripcord. With that in mind, your story has even more meaning to me. You are an inspiration.

Merry Christmas,
Rick Freeman
Griffin 93C
C Btry, 4th Bn, 77th ARA, 101 Abn
Div, 68-71
Argyle, Texas

ATTENTION: 101st Airborne
Division, RVN
2-501st Geronimo, All Companies

We are putting together a reunion to be held in conjunction with the All Airborne Reunion in Washington, DC, July 5 - 8, 1990. Please contact: Al Werth, 603 E. Church

Melvin Brown, Bravo Company. Where are you?

Good Morning, Chuck,

My wife stumbled on to the Ripcord Association through Gary Jestes. He gave me past issues of the Ripcord Report which alerted me to the fact that I am not the only one with strong memories of those months 20 years ago. At that time I was with C/2-506 and was with the CP in the field in charge of supply. Some events are vivid, but dates and sequences are not so clear. If my input can help piece it all together, count on it.

The October 1989 Ripcord Report is the most recent one that I've seen. In it you wrote of the intentions of the newsletter. I think they are worthy. Surely there are many who are still at war to one degree or another. If I may, I would like to offer what has been the solution for me. As a pastor I learned that if a person has peace with God, he has the resource for making peace in all other areas of life, even the guilt he feels due to his past. After I returned to civilian life, the woman who is now my wife insisted that I go to church with her. I went reluctantly but for the first time the Bible was opened up for me, and I was shown what real Christianity is all about. Just as Chuck Coleson and many others, I found peace with God through Jesus Christ. It would be a great privilege for me to go into detail for anyone who is longing for peace.

Thanks for this vehicle for reaching out to old friends. Please let me know if I can help fill in gaps (I haven't seen much from the perspective of C/2-506), or if I can help in any other way.

Bob Smoker
Red Lion, PA

Dear Ray (Blackman)

My name is Jack Wilhite and I served with the 101st in Vietnam in 70-71. I was with the 2-506 at Camp Evans and in 71 at Camp Carroll for a short time. I'm writing you in hopes of maybe finding a buddy I served with. I know you probably have men write all the time looking for someone, but its been 19 years and every year that goes by is just making it harder for me to find him. When I left I didn't even have time to say goodbye, and I think of that often. Its like not finding the last page of a book. My buddy's name is Donald Smith and he also served with the 2-506. If you could help, please let me know as soon as possible. I'll be in Washington, DC for Memorial Day looking like I have been since 82. Also, I heard from Art Witnik in CT that you have a paper about firebases and other things about 101st in Nam. If you have a spare, please send me one.

Sincerely,
Jack Wilhite
"Currahee"
Springfield, MO

Ripcord Assoc.

Just a quick note to let you know we still enjoy reading your newsletter.

We are finally settled in our new home, the climate here is a little like Vietnam, hot and humid in the Summer but much appreciated in the Winter.

Thank you again for remembering us.

Sincerely,
Gene & Pam Brown
West Palm Beach, FL

Dear Mr. Blackman,

Hello. I'm not much on words or telling people how I feel but I'm going to try.

When a lot of you guys were in Vietnam, I was just a little girl; born in 1955. I didn't have anyone of my own to write to who was there in the Nam. Not even in high school.

Anyway, I'm proud of you guys, all of you who were in Vietnam. I care about you and I think America should give you every good thing in life that is yours. I have a lot of respect for you and I love you guys with all my heart just as much as if you were my family.

In books I read, some of them tell how bad our Vietnam vets were treated. I think it is very sad and you shouldn't have been treated so ugly, mean, and dirty.

I saw the movie Hamburger Hill. Parts of the movie were so heart-breaking it made me want to cry.

You guys should get the biggest hug in the world.

Well, I guess I better go. I just wanted you to know how I feel.

Thanks for my freedom and welcome home. I hope you have a wonderful Christmas and a great New Year.

Very truly yours,
Beverly McClure

P.S. Hope you don't mind my writing you.

Dear Chuck,

I enjoyed the last newsletter. I ran into another Ripcord veteran. The Carroll County Historical Society wanted my Vietnam War fatigues and jungle boots for their museum. I was talking to the curator of the museum about the 101st when a woman suddenly introduced herself. She told me her husband had been in the 101st also. I gave her my phone number and told her I would enjoy talking to her husband.

Her husband later called me and it turned out he had been on Ripcord. He drove over to my house and we had a great visit. He showed me slides of firebases and a few of Ripcord. I gave him some information on the Ripcord Association. His name is Bob Smoker. Here is his address and phone number.

Enclosed is a copy of a roster of C Company that might be of use to someone. Also some other material that might be of interest to the newsletter.

If you ever feel like driving up to this area, feel free to drop by my house. I am always interested in hearing officer's talk about things from their point of view -- NOW, that is, ha ha.

Take care,
Gary Jostes
Hampstead, MD

Dear Ripcord Assoc.

I am the proud wife of a Vietnam Veteran, writing to let you know our address has changed. Your newsletter means so much to my husband.

He especially enjoyed the article about Hamburger Hill, that being the first major offensive he was involved in.

Loyd spent almost two years in Vietnam, in 69 and 70, as a Sgt. with the 101st Airborne Div.

I also enjoy reading your newsletter and feel it has given me a better understanding of my husband.

You're doing a great job. Please keep up the good work.

Thanks again,
Mrs. Loyd Fulmer
Baileysboro, AL

Hi Ya John.

I just received a copy of Ripcord from a friend in Indianapolis, IN, Steve Hawk. I was with the Eagles in '67, (27502) and fortunately made it home okay.

If possible, I'd like to join the Ripcord Assoc. so I can get on your mailing list. If any fees are required, I would be more than happy to contribute.

Thank you much, and "keep your powder dry!"

Fraternally,
Bill Payne
San Dimas, CA



VIETNAM QUIZ

Here is a list of questions -- a quiz -- so that you can determine whether or not someone is: (a) a Vietnam Veteran; (b) a real-live Vietnam 101st Airborne Veteran; (c) a great story-teller; or (d) someone who pretends they were there, but was somewhere else. (There can be more than one correct answer.)

1. A "ditty box" is:

- a. A small accordian; carried in the field by soldiers of German descent;
- b. (Usually) an M-60 ammo can, in which you kept your personal items -- shaving gear, cigarettes, letters, etc.;
- c. A Nickname for a laundry bag; or
- d. A miniture arena in which illegal cockroach fights were held.

2. "C" Rations are:

- a. Combat Meals;
- b. Things that came in cans inside of boxes that you sometimes ate, but mostly just carried around because you needed the weight in your rucksack;
- c. With a little C-4 and det cord, a replacement for the claymore antipersonnel mine; or
- d. Food served on-board a ship.

3. "Snake 'n Nape" are:

- a. A generic name for South Vietnamese vaudeville shows;
- b. 250 lb., high-drag bombs and napalm dropped by the Air Force in support of ground troops;
- c. The nicknames of two legendary 101st troopers who, armed only with slingshots, confronted and killed a 10 foot tall NVA sapper; or
- d. The essential ingredients in the recipe for "crispy critters".

4. Ripcord is:

- a. A Firebase on the northern rim of the A Shau Valley;
- b. Something you pull to open a parachute;
- c. The entire Area of Operations (AO) around a Firebase on the northern rim of the A Shau Valley; or
- d. A Military Lick.

5. "Slicks" are:

- a. Pieces of tape or cord used to tie down fatigue trousers so leaches wouldn't crawl up your leg;
- b. Another name for choppers, hueys, birds, and utility helicopters;
- c. US Army recruiters; or
- d. Muddy jungle trails that have been heavily used by NVA.

6. "80 knots" is:

- a. An artilleryman's motto meaning, "as fast as resupply choppers can bring ammo (80 knots/hour), we can shoot it";
- b. The number of turns your large intestine must do to release the sphincter muscle after a firefight;
- c. The list of things your drill instructor told you not to do or you would die in Vietnam; or
- d. The point-man's pace count after moving 8 kilometers through the jungle.

7. A "standdown" is:

- a. Something that always got cancelled at the last minute and was replaced by a combat assault to a hot AO;
- b. Short periods in the rear that allowed grunts to appreciate the sacrifices being made by the REMFs;
- c. A flat piece of metal welded to the skids of choppers that you stepped on during loading and unloading; or
- d. The GI name for the underground shower facilities that were built in to every firebase.

8. A LRRP is:

- a. The sound a king crocodile makes when it swallows a point team whole;
- b. A Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol;
- c. GI food you save until you're really hungry; or
- d. Loatian Rest and Relaxation Program (for the NVA).

9. The "Fuck You" Lizzard:

- a. Really exists;
- b. Is really a frog;
- c. A mythical creature, invented by grunts, to scare RIMFs into staying in the rear; or
- d. Is twelve feet long and belches swamp gas.

ANSWERS:

1. (b) 2. (a, b, c) 3. (b, d) 4. (a, b, c, d) 5. (b) 6. (a) 7. (a, b) 8. (b, c) 9. (a)

SCORE: 1 point for each correct answer; -1 for each incorrect answer.

RATING:

17 - 12 Points: Airborne All the Way

11 - 8 Points: Welcome to Saigon, troop.

7 - 2 Points: Who you think believes yo' bull-shait?

1 & below: How was Canada?

FROM RIPCORD TO RECON

July 1, 1989

With short push-kicks he topped the next rise of the dead end service road paralleling the interstate, which meandered slowly on to the next sizable Virginia locale of Roanoke.

Dog spotted another briefly frozen-with-fear rabbit and strained at the leash almost in time for an early breakfast.

His companion, eyeing the scenic Clinch Mountain chain had his mind on other things. Of a nearly forgotten mountain fortress reported to be strewn with rusting Arty shells spent nineteen years ago, now reclaimed by the Jungle.

He'd been wanting to write another story of that place and time. About a unit he'd ended his tour with that he credited with shoring up his belief in himself and with giving him a focus that saved his sanity, much on the wane after Ripcord.

His thoughts began to track on where to begin the story, which would evoke strong memories. Also how to avoid another "Ripcord" story. But Ripcord had had everything and nothing to do with that year.

The bi-daily ritual with dog and the sight of the Vietnam-like ridgelines usually allowed him freedom to sort his thoughts, but the significance of July 1, in relation to Ripcord and the beginning of that siege-like onslaught kept intruding.

As he ended the run, his face registered a brief smile. He still had the machine-gunner legs that had carried him up many a reach-for-the-sky ridge-line that year.

April-May, 1970

His first glimpse of Recon in action had been during Ripcord's April Fools Day assault. He had been in-country approximately a month with only a few days of that in the bush. His sight of the troopers in their camouflaged fatigues and boonie hats found them confident and willing to pitch in and help.

Collins' regular line company, Bravo 2/506 (101st Abn. Division) began patrols around the firebase after they were kicked off that day by the NVA. Often they ran into the diminutive but stealthy teams. Sometimes they were C.A.'d to an area a team had just checked and pronounced as hot, and on some occasions the 6-8 man teams, small in comparison to company strength patrols of anywhere from 60-80 men, could be seen silently entering the bush from Ripcord, Gladiator and other firebases.

Watching them, he marvelled at the poise and noise discipline they displayed even when by line company standards, the situation didn't appear to require it.

Looking hard for good bush habits after April 1, he couldn't help but admire their competent, smooth, near silent grace in the Jungle.

By comparison he felt slow, loud, and vulnerable with the platoon to company-size patrols of B 2/506. When contact came point-man and slack-man, almost always were gone home. The unit then reeled from the lack of maneuverability, allowing the NVA to get away and most of them hunkered down in terror until the fire-fight could be confirmed over.

One of the few blessings that year arrived in the form of a new platoon leader, Lieutenant Steve Wallace. He came to "third herd" of B 2/506 about a month before hell broke loose the second and final time on Ripcord during July.

"Call Me Son of a Bitch But Don't Call Me L.T." Wallace, broke the third herd down into tiger (squad size) teams and used them as Recon for the rest of the company.

He was the first to follow through on the error of galloping around the boonies in company formation. He brought the point home personally for Collins during a brief two man rif that turned up the rest of the company setting up an NDP, sounding like a herd of elephants.

Seeing the company as vulnerable as an old dog without teeth, Collins pondered how the NVA would take advantage of just such a moment and his thoughts frightened him.

Wallace ran third herd into the ground for about a month and got them stirred up. The effort it took to keep from stumbling over all the other teams sharpened dead-reckoning and noise discipline skills to the point that when he went to Recon much later there was little adjusting to do.

August-October, 1970

It was shortly after Ripcord that he first considered a move in the direction of Recon. The idea surprised him. Ripcord had blooded Bravo Company, and it had begun to think and act like an old Veteran.

It was comfortable for a time being in the field with them. In a country that seemed to unfold one little shop of horrors after another being comfortable and able to rely on those around you was second best to being heaven bound. For Collins, it raised strong issues of loyalty to Bravo.

The problem for Bravo was that many of the old-timers (who had headed into the Ashau Valley the year before) rotated out as Ripcord began or ended. The second and most obvious came from battle related Ripcord attrition. Given the two, Bravo, was essentially a new company. So new that the normal rotation in of handfuls of cherries became much more than that.

Another deadlier, more insidious problem was a repeat of what had happened one year earlier following Hamburger Hill. Too many grunts old and new couldn't sort through the whys of the terrible price paid for Ripcord and then just "bugging out." In the end, their answers were different than the ones given officially by command.

With this knowledge, a new majority of cherries refused the lessons offered by Ripcord's grizzled but wizened survivors. Unfortunately, that refusal included the most basic knowledge needed to stay alive in the field.

The survivors reaction in turn was startling. At that point, they refused to be upset by anything to the point that they ever took action to get the cherries in line. They saw themselves as already

having paid their dues and they were damned well not going to prove themselves to the cherries.

Field practice and morale suffered major setbacks. The Company became riddled from the loss of those who took advantage of rear jobs and any reassignment elsewhere.

Sometime in August he had been on Firebase Rakkasan when his check of nearby positions late one night found five consecutive bunkers with guards asleep or zonked out. The incident scared him into a decision he had already made in his heart.

Collins normally avoided the rear. There was too much going on there that he disliked having to deal with. He had an early searing memory of having come in for stand-down only to have someone open up with a "16" into the hooch he and others were trying to get rest in.

It had occurred following one of Bravo's longer hauls in the bush. Their fatigues had had to be peeled from their bodies. They all had gotten new haircuts at one of the few times most looked like they belonged in a rock group. The beer they drank with abandon only knocked away the edge of adrenalin strung nerves from some two months of near silent gliding through the Jungle.

One of the few exceptions to his avoidance of the rear began to occur by late August. He was pulled in to go through Evans' Combat Leadership Course. He returned to the field only to go to the rear again after Cellulitis flared in his left foot.

John Manbeck, a former Bravo Medic, took pains to insure Collins stayed at Charlie Med until near time for R & R in early October. Bravo's First Sergeant Reeves had given him light duty the few free days he'd had.

He had gotten comfortable in a routine of late wake-ups and binges lasting well into the morning hours when he got a summons from Top. His first reaction was that Top was going to tell him what a worthless R.E.M.F. he was, and Reeve's nervous manner didn't make him feel better.

"Collins, you've been out in the field a long time now." "Yes, sir" he replied. "A lot longer than

most," Top went on. "You've earned yourself a job back here."

Top's direction didn't make him feel better. He'd been trying to think of a way to ask Top what he thought of his going to Recon. He expected Top to be concerned at losing one more experienced pack.

Top's next words forced him to make a decision. "What this is all about Collins, is I've found you a good job with Supply. So you'll know it's legit and you don't end up in some shit-burning detail instead, I'm calling Supply now and let you talk with them."

Top reached for the phone and he was finally forced to act. "Top, I owe this Company and you a lot. I can't say how much just getting unwound the last month or so has meant. I was hoping instead that you'd help me get assigned to Recon."

The silence that followed was palpable and as Top looked back at him he saw a number of things cross the old trooper's face, surprise, evaluation, concern and briefly even disgust.

Collins couldn't explain his complicated reasoning but he pleaded with his eyes for Reeves to understand. Top don't think I'm crazy or gung-ho . . . the only peace I've seen here has been out there in the mountains . . . there's something about leaving the guys who are going to need help . . .

Finally, Top slowly nodded his head and said "Alright, does going there after your R & R suit you?" "Yes, sir, that'd be fine." Reeves held out his hand and Collins was out the door elated. Top never brought the topic up again and sometime late in October he was told to get ready for the move.

October-February, 1970

Getting ready, he had a sense of irony. Of all he'd been through, he was nervous about the idea of starting over again with a new unit. All the qualities he'd admired now seemed formidable. Would they accept him? How much would he be tested? He knew he could perform but would he do well enough for them?

In point of fact, his arrival was heartwarming. He'd forgotten how many folks from Bravo were already there . . . Shannon, Cote, Shaq, Doc Toole . . . it was more like a reunion, too it had been a former L.T. (Bob Seitz) in Bravo who'd convinced him to come to Recon.

And it was they that smoothed the way. Getting to know the various team leaders and members found them saying . . . "Hell, you were on Ripcord too."

He'd come to Recon because he thought they were better. His first action with them didn't change how he felt. He'd been assigned to Bravo team and he considered that good luck, moving from Bravo Company to a like-named team.

The team had been out loafing somewhere on Evans one day and as they came back through the hooch door they were met by a blur of movement. Coming out in short explosive bursts of explanation they quickly learned that a team was pinned down . . . the rest of Recon was going after them.

There was no discussion. Everyone moved . . . quickly and there was a tide of camouflage soon running to Currahee pad. There was no slow-down there. Only time for quick thumbs-up and throwing themselves backward into the Hueys.

There was the familiar gut-tightening sense of exhilaration as they landed. Not knowing the exact circumstances everyone expected a hot L.Z.

Once there, the pinned team had soon extricated itself and the rest of the group fought a sense of anti-climax. Nerves got adrenalin-strung again when the group moved through an old NDP and a Sergeant (an MP recently turned Recon) tripped a booby trap and lost a foot.

The Sergeant was medevaced and the rest of the group began to Recon an area on the way to a P.Z. The P.Z. got questionable when booby traps were spotted around it. But the group got out okay.

The quick, efficient, no questions response that had gotten his first mission on the way removed any doubt he might have had about operating in a small unit. He knew that if it were his team, they'd be just as quick.

Almost overnight, he ended up as Bravo's team leader. "Shorty" Steve Ferguson of Albany, Kentucky, was alternate point and assistant team leader. Tim Connors of Roxbury, Massachusetts, was RTO. Rusty Hyde was a blond-headed Indian, black-belt, beret trained medic from the wilds of Minnesota who could throw a knife better than Davey Crockett. He delighted in pulling the knife from his over-the-shoulder rig and burying it between the crossed cannon signs of Arty units. He also walked point any time they let him get away with it.

Chops Jarrett briefly had served as RTO. On Collins' first mission as team leader he had left the radio on the chopper whose crew fortunately brought it back in.

Chops by then was not the same man "Custer" Mihalko fought valiantly to make part of the team just before Ripcord. Apparent drug problems and his fight with Lieutenant Seitz during a crucial point in launching a boat mission found him unfortunately and regretfully reassigned to the rear.

Buford Howard was a brother from somewhere in the industrial Midwest. Skip Bartelmay was thought to be from California.

Skip lost a foot when a new lieutenant for Recon reported to be a Czech defector reacted to a call from command that a VC/NVA unit had been spotted somewhere in the lowlands.

The lieutenant grabbed a handful of men from hooches, took them out to the area in question and told them to walk down a trail. The soon to happen result was obvious and for the men of Recon unforgivable.

By then, Recon had many new faces. Apart from the normal stresses and strains going on with its teams, its missions were drastically different from those of a few months earlier.

The battalion had pulled back from the ring of mountains near the lip of the Ashau following Ripcord and the onset of monsoon prevented any discussing in that vein.

As a result, Recon worked more in the first few fringes of the mountains that eventually led to Laos and Bravo team in particular around Firebase Rakkasan.

What Collins and his men were faced with more often were the elements. Staying dry was a luxury when the only part of you dry on wake-up was a small area around your crotch.

Nighttime in the mountains in monsoon season could be harsh. There was one night in particular in which the team had drawn closer to one another during the night and dawn found them collectively huddled up against one another with only memories of the individual groans and cries they'd made as the team had tried to find sleep and warmth the night before.

It didn't take an expert to figure out why grunts had a tremendous sense of brotherhood and responsibility for one another. Incidents like that forged forever bonds that were broken only very reluctantly.

For the most part, the new A.O. was not hot and he was able to do what he had always wanted to, take his men out one more time and bring them all back alive.

Another difference he enjoyed in Recon was that size prevented formal setting up of NDP. The team hid successfully in the pockets and folds of the Jungle at night.

The team developed good habits and he enjoyed watching them grow. The change of A.O. had found dead-reckoning harder to achieve since the smaller mountains often had no high points (as had the Ripcord A.O.) consistently identifiable as major landmarks.

It meant point or slack had to get some direction from Compass. That hadn't been hard to get around to after his first mission as team leader found them circling slowly back to the original L.Z.

There was one wet, miserable mission around Rakkasan that saw terrain and fog combined to find the team almost totally and completely lost. Hyde, with his stronger training background regularly challenged

the cautious Collins, and the mission brought their differences to a head and saw the team uncomfortable with the possibility of a choice should Collins decide one route out and Hyde another.

But Collins had been in the A.O. months earlier with Bravo Company and only that kept him oriented enough to eventually find a way into the Firebase.

Following cannon-fire had had to be discarded once it became obvious that weather had an effect of throwing the sounds that came from the base.

The team also began to find itself in low lying areas where vegetation grew to the point of impasse and sapped the team's strength. One morning they passed through thick stands of elephant grass that required the point to literally lay it down in front of him so the rest of the team could pass.

Collins alternated point with Ferguson, Howard, and even Hyde to keep from total exhaustion. About lunch time, he broke through the last stand and found them at the bank of a stream with high ground all around.

After what they'd just been through, it was extremely exposed and Collins' sphincter started making moves like it wanted to do a war dance but instead he just collapsed and said "fuck it!"

Ferguson spotted the rest of the team well defensively and came over to take care of him. All the beer in Milwaukee couldn't have made Collins more proud of the team than he was at that point.

They had all been exhausted and would have had the same inclination. Instead, they acted like professionals and showed they could take care of themselves.

Recon was operating five days out at a time with one day/night in the rear. Though not much, it was better than the 30-90 day stretch in the boonies afforded line companies.

It permitted replenishing of the ruok, clean cammies, good food, often steaks, and lots of beer.

There were a number of parties held in the Recon area but a hot spot a short distance away was the underground bar of the medics on the base proper.

There, more often than not, he could cavort with his team, Shag, Cote, Flash, Sundance, Doc Will, and others, as the empty cans were stacked ceiling high in front of each trooper.

Recon made daring midnight to dawn raids on the 2/506 Mess Hall that burned their name into legend but left the Mess Sergeant more steamed than the units food.

Within the individual teams it almost never came up but race was a constant issue in the rear. There had been a dramatic moment in the Mess Hall one day when black line jumpers pushed the issue harder than usual and Sundance, a leader of another team had said "Recon stand up and be counted." The situation turned into a standoff and kept the mood in the rear tense and hostile.

Collins came back from the Medics bar one evening, a trip which at times came close to perimeter wire. Not drunk enough to be incautious, he heard a low lying, scuffling, crawling sound. He eventually turned up a polluted, Doc Will, fellow Virginian and medic of another team.

Will was taking the scenic route on his hands and knees back to the hooch. He only needed to know if he was pointed in the right direction.

Recon's Czech lieutenant made for much discussion. Although he eventually disappeared from the unit, his stay was a constant source of mirth and concern.

It didn't take much for the troopers to figure out the value of a Czech defector who had ended up in an Army outfit and they ended up valuing him less than the Intelligence types who must have found him.

He only went out with Charlie team and they came back with stories of his standing on an L.Z. shooting his .45 at a machine gun 300 yards away.

All the teams hated him and made it obvious that he wasn't welcome to go out with them. Why he picked on Charlie no one knew because they hated him worse than anyone. Charlie had even begun to set out

mechanical ambushes for him that he somehow was able to avoid.

By then, Collins time was almost over. With his days left in-country numbering in the twenties, he went on what was to be his last mission with Bravo team.

Ironically, it was a mission along the Song Bo (which flows on into Hue) where in May he and third herd having found an NVA-less haven cavorted naked in the sun and the river. Danny Stanga had alligator-wrestled a huge lizard that plopped in the water a few feet away from frantic swimmers.

This time was different. The river was a monsoon-swollen dirty brown and raged through what had been slow shallows earlier. There were signs too of the river being used for NVA transport.

The team went through the area silent and white-faced. A river crossing they badly needed to make had to be aborted which found them scaling cliffs along part of the river.

Although Collins was relatively comfortable in the area, the going was rough. At one point, he scrambled across a portion of cliff that ended abruptly as he slid towards the river some 100 feet below.

Only Shorty and Connors and a small branch sticking from the rock face kept him from going on in.

As the team got nearer a P.Z., there were things about the terrain that bothered them but nothing they were able to pinpoint.

The night before they were to be picked up, Collins went off to himself ostensibly to clean up. He pondered on the image in the small metal mirror for a long time. The person looking back at him was an older person, wiser maybe, but older, much more than he knew himself to be.

The team hid itself well that evening. On both sides of the nearby river, massive hills rose up on either side. The kind of hills that Collins remembered from Ripcord with dark little recesses that could hide RPD or .75 recoilless.

The P.Z. wasn't far away. When the birds came the next day, the mountains looming above still bothered him and he attempted to have just one of the two birds do the pickup. The pilots wanting the quicker lift of two ascents than one slower one wisely overrode him.

It was still a slow ride out and Collins was overcome with relief and sadness once the birds lifted and headed toward Evans.

By then he had 17 days left. He still felt a duty to go out but after battling with Recon's first Sergeant was almost relieved when it was indicated he could go no more.

A final mission with two teams going on an ambush was tempting and they had needed his experience as a machine gunner. Top stopped that one too. He would have enjoyed a final spree with Sundance, Flash, and Shag.

A few days before leaving, he had confronted the Czech lieutenant over the stupidity of Skip having lost a foot. The lieutenant in his deep, and Collins thought fake, Czech accent took immediate offense.

Flash and Sundance had kept Collins from pounding the lieutenant and made subtle threats that kept the lieutenant from court martialling him.

He left Evans a few days later watching the intense transport activity he would learn on T.V. a month later had been the prelude to Lam Son 719.

July 16, 1989 Epilogue

It is probably fitting that I took the last several days to write this piece. During the past several years when July rolled around, I've always been a little different. I tend to go off on tangents I normally wouldn't and I'm just plain not myself. It's as if each day from July 1, through 23, I mentally tick off events that happened those days in 1970.

Sometimes when I think of that year, I do a very human thing by attaching to it little "what-fors?" I'm not so sure that's appropriate.

We've had time to ponder the rights and wrongs of the war. I don't see the NVA as having been in the right with the blood on their hands not only from Vietnam but Cambodia and Laos as well.

And maybe it isn't so much that we were somehow in the wrong as it is that we were fighting a tide of events and history that went well beyond our country's ability to master and resolve it and importantly for us, make it better.

But the decisions right or wrong for being there were made well above and beyond the small parts we played. When I think of Vietnam, I try to remember the beauty of the mountains at dusk, or of the South China Sea on the first morning of a stand-down, or a normally peaceful river strewn with 19-20 year olds who months ago were hanning it up at the "VR" pool.

And, when I think of the people I knew, I think of a group of serious, earnest young men who always came damn-near doing the impossible in an environment and part of the world that was.

For most of us that year our war was a pure one (as wars go), just us, the elements, and the NVA. No smiling children with grenades. No dudes on motor-bikes throwing satchel charges into a bar.

That we survived the NVA and the beautiful but deadly Jungle at all, is a miracle. That we survived and learned to care about ourselves and each other is astounding. That's something no one can ever take away. And that's the way I will remember Vietnam.

C. Collins

Chip Collins is the founder and original editor of the Ripcord Report.

Editor



War Movies

Richard Eilert

'Born on the Fourth': It's a Lie

"Born on the Fourth of July," Oliver Stone's latest offering, is another box office bonanza and may win several Oscars. Stone has shown again that, like the divas of yesteryear, if you play to the critics in the "Golden Horseshoe" instead of the people in the cheap seats, success is just around the corner. Stone has talent as a director, particularly in his ability to bring to the screen the subtle sights and sounds that inflame the memory of those who were there and stir the imagination of those who were not.

"Born on the Fourth" and "Platoon" share common characteristics. Both are laced with enough fact to make the stories difficult to refute, while at the same time they are saturated with so much hateful negativism that in the end the proper term to describe them is probably "propaganda" or "disinformation." In the end, both films seem to work most effectively on the guilt of those who did not serve in Vietnam, while at their kindest they disappoint the honest expectations of those who did.

I, like many who were seriously wounded in Vietnam, have a bone to pick with both Stone and Ron Kovic, the paraplegic Marine Corps veteran whose "true story of innocence lost and courage found" comprises "Born on the Fourth." There is an inherent dishonesty in Stone's depiction of those who served. And there is an overwhelming self-pity in Kovic that seems even to have shaped his politics.

It was not easy for any of us. During the time I was hospitalized at the Great Lakes Naval Hospital, I was surrounded by some of the most hideously wounded people the war produced: single and double amputees, the blind, the paralyzed, some without testicles—America's finest, now broken-hearted from the loss of friends in Vietnam and sweethearts at home. A visitor once commented that it was a miracle many of us survived. I replied that the real miracle was that so many even wanted to survive. Up to my crotch and armpits in plaster, trying desperately to prevent doctors from amputating my legs, shot also through the face, I kept a cynical sign over my bed: "All The Way With LBJ/Made Me What I Am Today."

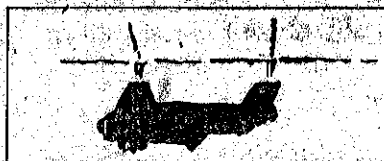
But there was a camaraderie and acceptance of responsibility in that hospital—and even today among those who have known heavy combat—that curiously seem to have evaded both Stone and Kovic. Men fight wars for each other. Most commendations for heroism I observed were to men who came to the aid of wounded friends. In Vietnam simple decisions, such as which trail intersection to follow or who had the "watch," had enormous consequences. We walked point when it was our turn because if we did not, our friend would have to do it for us. And so we learned about interdependence and accountability for our actions.

These concepts are not a part of either Stone's or Kovic's

makeup. In all of Stone's films, his characters are unlikeable. They are humorless, friendless. They make acquaintances but never confide in or rely on others. And they are patronizing and arrogant about those around them.

Near the opening of "Platoon," as Stone takes us on an ambush, the main character is voicing over a letter to his grandmother. The character describes his fellow soldiers by saying, "They come from the end of the line. They're the bottom of the barrel and they know it." He then reassures

Grandma, who no doubt is sitting on the veranda back in the Hamptons, that they're the best he's seen. Come on—if this was true, why did



he trash them in the film?

There may be an even deeper hatred here. In "Platoon" Americans killed each other and innocent civilians. In "Born on the Fourth" this theme intensifies. At the same time Kovic emerges holding himself blameless for the actions he has taken, because he has purged himself of these sins by denouncing his parents, his God, his country and the Marine Corps for having created his original circumstances.

What is hard to swallow for those who know the Marine Corps well is that Kovic was on his second tour when he was wounded. He seems to be telling us that the killing and maiming of others—including fellow Marines—was acceptable during his first tour, and became reprehensible only when he himself was disabled. In the film, Kovic remains the quintessential Marine, until after his release from the VA hospital, when he finds himself alone. No one is around to reaffirm his sacrifice, to show him love or compassion. He searches for acceptance and finds it among those who want to use him for their own ends.

Over the past 22 years, I have journeyed through many hospital wards in the process of undergoing 47 operations (and counting) as a result of my Vietnam wounds. I have met hundreds of veterans whose lives were changed with a terrible finality by their service in our nation's wars. When I think about all the dignified, courageous people I have met in those hospital stays, sometimes I feel so proud of them that I honestly could cry. And after seeing the disservice that this lauded Hollywood lie does to them, I wanted to.

The writer, author of "For Self and Country," was wounded while serving as a rifleman with the 26th Marine Regiment in Vietnam.

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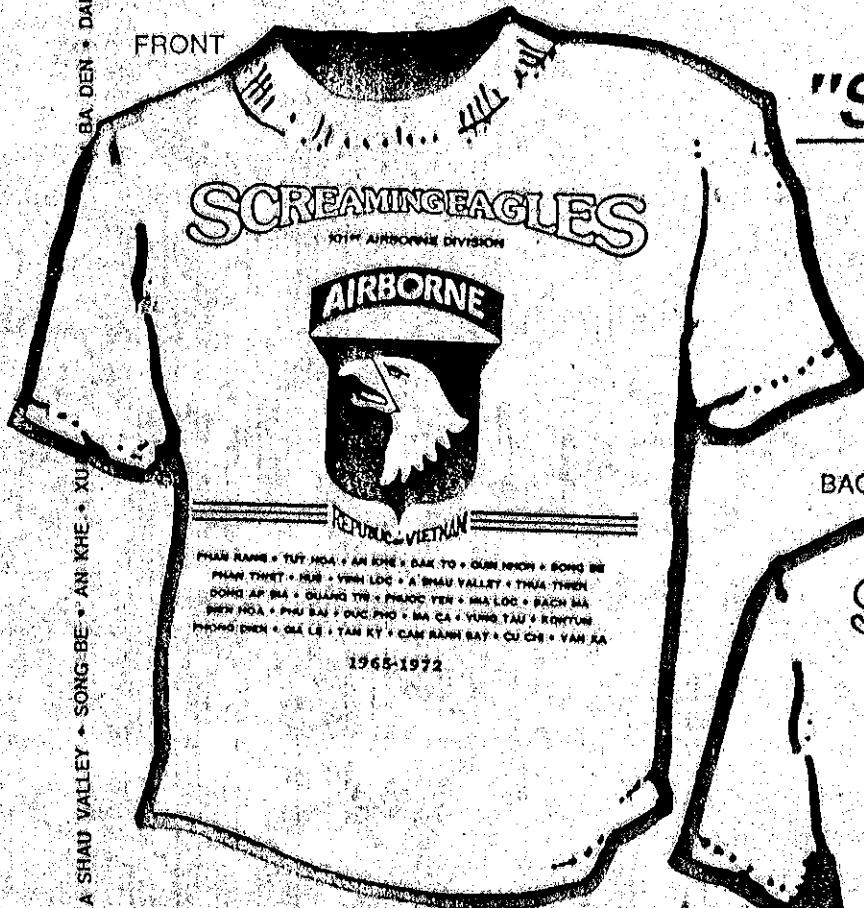


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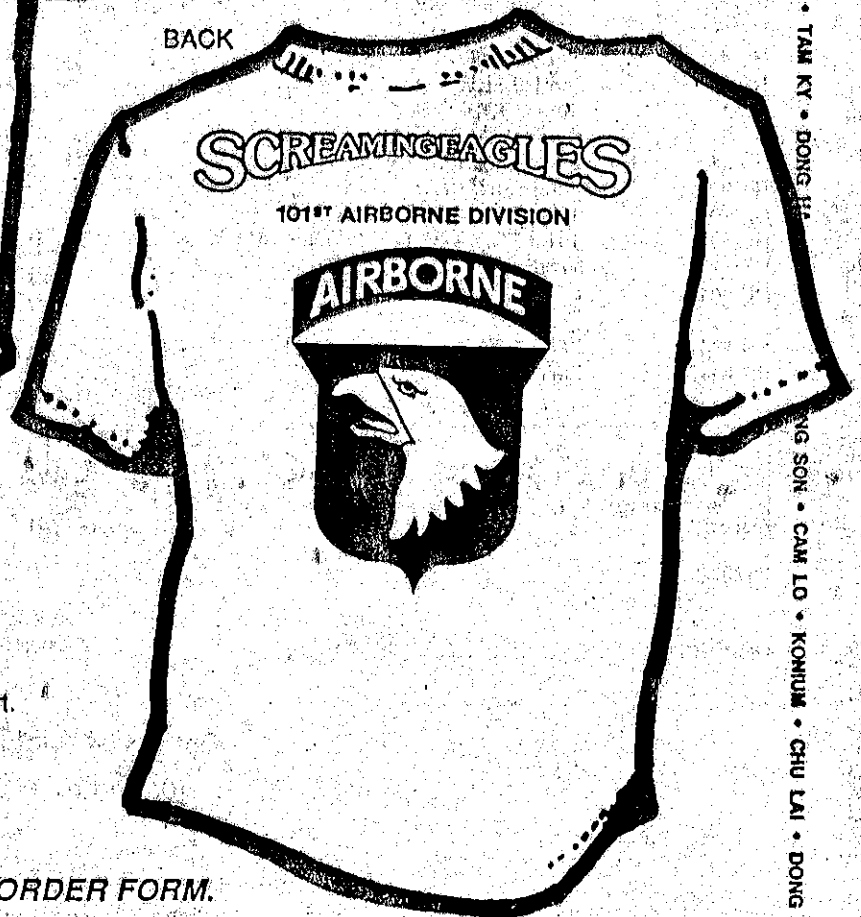
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John Mihalko: Somewhere on Hill 805, April, 1970

Believe it or not, even with the absence of a Newsletter for the past six months, our membership has actually grown! Our membership now totals approximately 190. Sincere thanks to all of you for passing on the Newsletter to friends and fellow survivors. As long as you show interest and support, we will continue to publish.

I would be remiss if I didn't publish the names of the members who support the Association with their generous financial contributions. They are: Vince Kenyon, Ken Hamilton, Gene Brown, Dan Esposito, Robert Lorbeer, Vince Kenyon (again), Robert Smoker, Sonny Caughlin, Martin-Glennon, and Art Wiknik.

Please keep your letters coming. Perspectives are also needed. Each one of you is a piece of what happened during Ripcord. If we could put all the pieces together, we would have the "definitive account."

A long, overdue greetings and "Currahee" from "Firebase Whippany". On behalf of Chuck and myself, we apologize for the delay in getting this issue out to you. We offer no excuses. It's been a hectic year for us. Hopefully, things will settle down a bit, and we'll be able to devote more time to the Newsletter. We thank the membership for its patience.

From the home front here in Whippany, our new son, Jamie, is doing just fine. He just turned seven months old, and he sure is a bundle of energy and curiosity. He keeps me more alert and "combat-ready" than the NVA ever did. Sometimes, after a "tour" with him, he really makes me feel my age; but when the dust settles and I hold him close, and we look into each other's eyes, there is something there that transcends all age barriers. I love the hell out of my little guy.



Sarah Lynn & James Edward-Mihalko, February, 1990

This has been a very special year for me in more ways than one. The birth of my son was beyond my wildest dreams, but what also makes my life special are the students that I lecture at Parsippany Hills High School. Twenty years ago, I wasn't sure I'd survive, let alone tell about my experiences in Vietnam. Life is really strange. My mother always wanted me to be a history teacher; now 20 years later, I am. I have no college degree, but what I do have is what the students are interested in; an honest presentation of a piece of history that we unknowingly wrote 20 years ago at Ripcord. What follows are some of the letters I've received from "my students."

I think that Veterans don't get enough recognition for what they did. They fought for this country. They deserve a lot. I think there should have been a parade for them when they came home; instead they got resentment. They have seen so much killing, blood and nightmares. I feel so bad for them.

When I was little I used to go to the VFW with my dad in Nutley, and I really never understood; but now that I am older and a bit wiser, I understand. The men in the VFW were the sweetest, kindest men. Some of them were very special to me. I think they should be special to everyone for what they did for us.

I know they had a parade years later, because my dad went, but that's not enough; it should have been when they got back. There are so many specials on T.V. about the veterans, and my dad would just sit and cry, and I never understood the pain he felt, but now that I am educated about the subject, I can cry with him.

Kristen White

Before me stood a man who had lived and experienced the killing and emotional atrocities of a war. A man, whom before hearing his story, I wouldn't have had any kind of special respect for, despite the fact that he was a Vietnam veteran.

However, upon the knowledge of his tales, my opinions and emotions began to change. They had evolved into an intense interest in his experiences and somewhat of a regret that I had been ignorant to the trauma and emotional hell that over 500,000 men had to experience in the mountains and jungles of a war torn Vietnam.

Now I feel a greater appreciation for the veteran I see either marching in uniform in a parade or proudly wearing the insignia of his former unit. I would like to thank Mr. John Mihalko both for fighting for our country as well as for educating me and other students about the war and your own feelings that reflect those of other veterans all over the country.

Martina Zweifel

Well troops, I guess that's about it for this issue. I'd love to share more of the letters with you, but I'm just about out of space. If any of you ever get the chance to speak to students, go for it. It's something that you'll never regret. Better yet, seek out your local high schools, and ask them if they're interested in a piece of history that you can provide. The time I've spent with students who are interested in Vietnam have re-inforced everything I believe in and have made that whole year in the jungles around Ripcord worthwhile. Till next time.

John Mihalko