RIPCORD REPORT

A NEWSLETTER

No. 1 JULY 1985 For Friends and Survivors of FSB RIPCORD, RVN

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ПРАВДА

ОЖЕСТОЧЕННЫЕ БОИ В ЮЖНОМ ВЬЕТНАМЕ И КАМБОДЖЕ

Тысячи американских солдат и офицеров выведены из строя ◆ Захвачены большие трофеи ◆ Сбиты и уничтожены 66 самолетов и вертолетов интервентов ◆ Воздушные и артиллерийские налеты на территорию ДРВ

ХАНОЙ. Агентство печати Освобождение передает из Южного Вьетнама, что Народные вооруженные силы освобождения (НВСО) ведут успешные боевые действия против американо-сайгонских войск. Под ударами южновьетнамских патриотов противник несет большие потери в живой силе и технике.

Ожесточенные бои между подразделениями НВСО и американскими интервентами продолжаются на высоте 935 в провинции Тхыатхиен. За период боевых действий с 16 по 18 июля патриоты вывели из строя около 200 американцев, сбили в воздухе или уничтожили на земле 11 вертолетов и самолетов.

18 июля отряды НВСО подвергли внезапной атаке позиции 101-й аэромобильной дивизии в той же провинции. Было уничтожено около 100 американских солдат и сбито 5 самолетов.

Как сообщает агентство, по неполным данным, за 18 дней боев в июле подразделения Народных вооруженных сил освобождения, действующие в провинции Тхыатхиен, вывели из строя 1.400 американских солдат и офицеров, сбили в воздухе или уничтожили на земле 66 самолетов и вертолетов, уничтожили большое количество военной техники и снаряжения.

На стратегической дороге № 19 в провинции Зялай бойцы НВСО 12 июля внезапно атаковали две вражеские автоколонны. В результате было убито 50 американских военнослужащих, уничтожено более 20 автомашин. Два дня спустя в том же районе в засаду патриотов попал крупный конвой противника. Было выведено из строя 20 человек, уничтожено 8 военных машин.

ЛОНДОН. Объявлено, что американские войска оставили сегодня стратегическую базу в Рипкорде, расположенную в 75 милях к северо-западу от Дананга, передает из Сайгона корреспондент агентства Рейтер.

Это — крупный успех Народных вооруженных сил освобождения Южного Вьетнама, продолжающих наносить чувствительные удары по американским агрессорам.

Американские военные власти были вынуждены эвакуировать базу в Рипкорде после ожесточенных боев, в результате которых патриотические силы Южного Вьетнама нанесли 101-й аэромобильной дивизии США ощутимые потери в живой силе и технике.

ХАНОЙ. Более 1.500 солдат сайгонской марионеточной армии выведены из строя отрядами патриотических сил Камбоджи в ходе боев с 11 по 15 июля в различных районах страны. Патриоты захватили значительное количество оружия, включая тяжелые минометы, безоткатные орудия и пулеметы. Об этом сообщает агентство ВИА, ссылаясь на информационное бюро Национального единого фронта Камбоджи.

ХАНОЙ. 19 июля американские самолеты подвергли бомбардировке ряд пунктов в районе Тьенхуа провинции Куангбинь, а 21 июля — некоторые пункты в пригороде Донгхоя, административного центра провинции Куангбинь. 20 июля американская артиллерия обстреляла селения Виньтан и Виньтхань в северной части демилитаризованной зоны.

По этому поводу здесь распространено заявление МИД ДРВ. Правительство ДРВ, говорится в заявлении, сурово осуждает указанные действия американских агрессоров и требует немедленного прекращения любых нарушений суверенитета и безопасности ДРВ.

ДЕЛИ. «Соединенные Штаты по-прежнему не желают начать серьезные переговоры с целью мирного урегулирования вьетнамской проблемы», — заявила находящаяся здесь с визитом министр иностранных дел Временного революционного правительства Республики Южный Вьетнам Нгуен Тхи Винь.

Нгуен Тхи Винь резко осудила распространение американской агрессии на территорию Камбоджи. Подчеркнув провал программы «вьетнамизации», Винь заявила о твердой решимости стран Индокитая продолжать борьбу до полного разгрома американских интервентов.

(По сообщениям ТАСС за 23 июля).

FOREWARD

First I guess most of you guys are going to need some explanation regarding the second page. Compliments of Rick Blythe this happens to be our honorable mention in the Russian Newspaper Pravda, dated 24 July 1970. Rick was also kind enough to include a translation compliments of Prof. Ed Rudkowski which reads as follows; Main Title: "FIERCE BATTLES IN SOUTH VIETNAM AND CAMBODIA." Relevant sub-title:"GREAT TROPHIES CAPTURED." Date Line London; "According to the Reuters correspondent in Saigon it has been revealed that American Troops today abandoned the strategic base at Ripcord, situated 75 miles northwest of Danang."

This is a great success for the South Vietnamese National Liberation Forces who continue to deliver telling blows on the American agressor.

The American Military powers were forced to evacuate the base at Ripcord after fierce battles in which the patriotic forces of South Vietnam delivered significant losses of life and equipment on the 101st Aeromobile Division.

Somehow I'm not surprised at the tone of the Russian medias coverage of Ripcord but its interesting to read anyway. Both Rick and I continue to be amazed at the amount of newsprint that was devoted to the Ripcord action (no matter how short-lived). He continues his search at larger libraries for additional material. He has also been in contact with Richard Nixon"s New York Office requesting any un-classified White House briefing papers related to Ripcord. After some initial response that has apparently ground down to working his request thru the necessary channels for such a search. Rich tells me if we get a response he is ballsy enough to ask the former Commander in Chief to do a guest spot for the newsletter or at least ask for his recollections of Ripcord. Many thanks to Rick for his success. It goes without saying that good number of our Ripcord group make significant and regular contributions to the newsletter and efforts at a reunion. Jim Fairhall's contact which he so generously shares have been invaluable. The contact with Chris Jensen outlined in the CONTACTS section is a real breakthrough. Contributions to the RETROSPECTIVE section have improved since last month and are becoming a key feature of the Ripcord Report. Attached to this newsletter is a copy of the article done by the overseas weekly on Ripcord compliments of Steve Hawk, A 2/501. Steve included other information to be shared in later newsletters.

Following earlier phone contacts with a number of you as well as given the fact that there has been no newsletter now for some 3 months, I feel I owe the group an apology. A newsletter was prepared for mailing in early October. At that time I got with Bill Heath, A 2/506, who is a professional printer. We were trying to collaborate on the newsletter with my preparing copy and Bill printing a more professional product. However, since that time due to Bill's involvement in a business expansion we have simply been unable to follow thru. What I've done at this point is make some changes and copied much of the one for October to be sent to you. I will continue to work on producing a better quality newsletter especially so that photos that do become available can be shared with the group at large. Someways down the road, hopefully, by the time of the reunion I'd like to get with a printer so that much of the material I have collected can be packaged, ie stories, photos, etc. and sold at cost to members of the group. I'll also do my best to have our next edition of the newsletter out to you by late December.

Several people want to know what has been decided on a reunion. Thus far the people I've heard from have voted for an initial get together as part of the 101st ABN Division Association Reunion in June 1986 at Fort Campbell. In the next couple of months I will add a tear-off to a newsletter requesting who will or will not be able to attend so we can have some idea of numbers. Speaking of

numbers I now have some 34 names of people who recieve the newsletter. Only about 5 of those represent collateral contacts or resources. Many new names represent RECON people whose names and addresses John Mihalko graciously shared with me. Those new names are not listed in this months CONTACTS section but will be in the next newsletter.

A final note: By the time you all recieve this you will have survived Turkey Day and become a prime target of the commercial blitz that is known as the Christmas Season. I do want to take time to wish you all a safe and happy holiday season. Expect to hear back from me soon.

UPDATES:

The following comments and situational updates are excerpted from correspondence from four of our group this month.

BILL AESCHLIMAN 2/320 ARTY:

Got my copy of the RIPCORD REPORT and let me tell you it looks Great. The cover and format is very impressive and I found it very enjoyable reading. I loved the mail bag story. When Ripcord came to an end, I was on Firebase Gladiator firing support for Ripcord. We were nearly overrun ourselves. Shortly before that we were on O'Riley when the Arvns were there. We were the only Americans on that tiny Firebase (seven) and there were North Vietnamese on the outside of the wire and South Vietnamese on the inside. I was just appointed by the governor of Indiana to sit on an advisory panel for Agent Orange and its effects on men. We are to make a full report to him next July 1 and recommend any action the state of Indiana should take on the matter. It's one hell of a step forward for Vietnam veterans.

WALT SMITH E 2/501:

I received your letter the other day and was very pleased to see there are other guys who are interested in getting together and communicating with each other. The memories of Ripcord are hazy in some areas, but are very clear in others. For instance, I can't remember the day we arrived, but I can definitely remember 18, July, 1970, the day we were lifted out.

I served with E Company 2/501st in a mortar (81 mm) squad. We were located on one side of the mountain, I can't remember which direction! But it was my first time as a squad leader. I can remember arriving at Ripcord, digging in into the side of the hill and the heavy winds that blew up the side of the mountain. We might have been on the same side of the mountain as Hill 805, because one night we watched as the enemy made an assault on the Hill. For some reason our mortar squad was to be extracted on 18 July. Our squad was near the chopper pad when the Chinook went down, so we took shelter in the heavy bunkers near the pad. It didn't take long for the smell of the gas to reach inside the bunkers. Naturally, we didn't carry gas masks, so we ran from the bunkers to one side of the hill to escape the gas. I can remember seeing live artillery shells lying around on the ground that had apparently been blown off the top of the hill where the Chinook had crashed. The smell of the gas had started getting to me and about that time a lieutenant came along and gave me his gas mask. I don't know who he was, but I was extremely happy, for once, to put on one of those masks.

We began to regroup after that. Our mortars had been left on the chopper pad and probably destroyed. We were still scheduled to be extracted that afternoon, but we helped unload choppers loaded with new weapons and ammo that came in and they left with the dead and wounded. Late that afternoon we were taken off the mountain and back to Phu Bai, I believe.

Some of the people in my platoon were SSGT. Pompey, SGT. Joe Andrunas, SP4 Tim Holt. I haven't had any communication with these people since Vietnam. It would

JOHN MIHALKO, E 2/506 RECON.:

I do vividly remember my last night with Echo Company. Lt. Seitz came to my hooch and presented me with a Zippo lighter with my nickname on it. He asked me to make a speech. I remember looking at all the faces and not knowing any of them. Recon had changed. All of the old timers were gone; there were only a few of us left. Maybe you were in that crowd of new faces, unless you were out in the field. The date was probably November 30. As far as I'm concerned, Bravo was the best Recon team in the Batallion. The facts speak for themselves. Not only did we lead recon, but we led the whole battalion in body count till April 1st. Our team set off more ambushes, captured more weapons and documents, found more bunker complexes, etc., than anybody else. We also got the worst missions cause we were so good. Ours was a very close knit team indeed. Over the months some of the faces would change, but all of our personalities seemed to blend together which made us very effective.

Enclosed is a copy of the newspaper article that was done on us. Maybe you'll recognize Junior, Doc Speed and yours truly. That weekend was a dream come true for me. Seeing Junior again brought back a flood of memories and the years just melted away. It was almost like we were back at Evans. Junior had haunted me for so many years; we never got to say goodbye to each other in Nam. One day I came in from the field, and he was gone. I suppose that's happened to everybody that served there, but Junior is a very special person to me. He was the team leader before me, and it was he who molded Bravo team and made it the team that it was. No matter how bad things got, we always knew that Junior would get us out of it. We shared food and water, set up together at night, and I had my family write to him. In that one year together, I got to know him better than anybody I've ever known. It was Junior who led the first charge up hill 1000 on July 6 minus me. Luckily I was at C.L.C. He definitely did not want to go up that hill. He had already reported the mortar tubes and the amount of activity that was going on. Word came over the horn to "assault the hill". The rest is history. The whole team got the purple heart for that fiasco. Hill 1000 was never taken. Why would a seven man recon team be ordered to assault a well fortified, dug in enemy force? ...That newspaper article also did a lot for my self esteem. Strangers were stopping me in the supermarket, shaking my hand, and asking me questions. Relatives that I hadn't heard from in years were calling me up. I guess that I've seen everything come full cycle. Ten years ago we were unwanted; now we're the good guys.

...When I got back to the states I got assigned to Fort Carson, Colo., and while there I was the Brigade rep to the Racial Harmony Council. I really got to understand the problems and frustrations of the blacks, chicano's, etc. I also ran into a lot of friends from the 2/506, especially the mortar platoon. It was like old home week at Fort Carson. Working for a fullbird colonel didn't hurt either. He opened a lot of doors for me that would have been otherwise closed. Fort Carson was the trial post for the "New Army" and the rumor was that my Colonel was hand picked by General Westmoreland to go to Fort Carson. My colonel had come up from the ranks as an enlisted man, so he knew the problems of the ordinary solider. If Ididn't have a good civilian job waiting for me, I might have stayed in the Army. The Colonel promised that if I stayed in I would go with him wherever he went. The offer was tempting, but I opted for civilian life.

There's really not too much for me to say about the last fifteen years. I went back to my job and stayed for another seven years. I got married in between, but it didn't last. I then moved out to Fort Collins, Colo., and there I met the woman that I'm now married to. I wish that I had met her first. We stayed in Colo. for about a year, moved back to Jersey, got married and last year we had our first child. Fifteen years ago I never dreamed that I wold be married with a child, but here I am and loving every minute of it.

RAY "BLACKIE" BLACKMAN, D 2/501:

...After being drafted I was sent to Fort Polk for basic and AIT. Then sent to Fort Benning for NCOC. Then to Fort Ord for OJT. After that to the Tropics. In my squad I did everything. Carried a 16, M-79, M60, was squad leader for awhile and was even sent to Evans for training on the new M-16, M-79 over and under though we were never issued them in the field while I was still out there. I was never wounded physically. After getting out of the Army, things were kind of cloudy for awhile. I went from job to job for a couple of years before going to school on the GI Bill. I am now a Tool and Die Maker and live on a one acre place north of Lincoln, NE, with my wife and two sons. I enjoy re-building old cars, latest one is a 1939 two door Chevy.) I like to fish, drink beer, and work in my garden.

CONTACTS:

New people contacted this month include:

-Al S. Booty, A 2/506, [redacted] (name and address given by Rick Blythe).
-Lin Bashford, D 2/506, [redacted] Lin served as company clerk for D company after being on and around Ripcord during July. A former deputy sheriff, he is now one of eight special game wardens for the state of Wyoming.
-Jerry Carmichael 2/320 Army, [redacted] Jerry served with our contact Bill Aeschlaman and we hope that the two of them will continue efforts in the next month or so for a piece on the counter mortar radar crews.(Name and address by Bill Aeschlaman).

-(New address) Walter Smith E 2/501 has recently moved back to his home town. New address is [redacted]

-Chris Jensen, [redacted] Chris was not a grunt. He was a photographer with Southeast Asia Pictorial Associates, part of whose job was taking photos for the Army Archives. He and a team of two others apparently heard about Ripcord and went to Camp Evans requesting permission to go to Ripcord. When it was not given, they found themselves a friendly chopper pilot on his way to the base. Col. Lucas,once they were out, there let them stay with the 105 battery crew. While there, they took some 16 mm movie footage of Ripcord as well as several photographs. Chris has these to this day. He is currently making some available to Jim Fairhall but we should be receiving a package soon. Chris is doing this free of charge. Apparently many of the photos of fighting positions, aerial shots of the base, etc., are of excellent quality. It would be nice if Chris could attend our reunion and we could view the movie. He would certainly be welcome. Chris tells me that when the 122 mm mortars began landing on Ripcord, preparations were made for them to leave. They apparently got orr just before the Chinook crashed near the 105's on July 18 but not before one of his group was injured.

RESTROSPECTIVE:

This month's lengthier pieces regarding Ripcord come from John "Custer" Mihalko and Frank Gonzales both of E 2/506 Recon. Custer eventually was team leader of Bravo team Recon. and Frank was a medic with Alpha team (who eventually wound at at Charlie MED.) Custer's presentation begins with excerpts from a letter to his sister dated June 28, 1970 in which he pulls no punches on what his feelings and frustrations were:

Dear Marge,

Well, here I am back out in the jungle, so I thought I'd drop you a few lines. The Army managed to sock it to us again. I finished my last mission on the 26th. of June. When we got back to Evans we were told that we wouldn't go back to the field until the 29th. Well, Yesterday, they managed to get us some birds and they immediately flew us out to Firebase Ripcord.

We spent the night there and this morning we boarded the birds again, so here I am back out in the mountains. Needless to say I was very nervous riding out to the l.z. because I've gotten a little superstitious since I've been here. This is my 13th. mission. I feel much better now that I'm on the ground. I hope to get this mission over with quickly

I was very scared coming into the l.z. cause there was no l.z. The helicopter came in, hovered about ten feet off the ground, and we jumped off. I'm not particularly crazy about jumping off a hovering chopper. That's the second time in three weeks that I've had to do it. I wouldn't mind it if I could manage to break a leg; but no luck.

Oh well, this mission is supposed to be over between four and six days from now. Recon is finally getting a break. They're starting to give us five day missions, plus two days at Evans at the completion of a mission. It's supposed to go into effect the first of July.

Junior goes on R & R in 22 days, so in about 2 weeks from now I'll be the team-leader for awhile. Junior let me run the team a few times before, so I know I can handle it. Yes, Doc Speed is our medic. He's not out with us on this mission because he's going on R. & R. in about 2 days. As a matter of fact, Speed will no longer be coming out to the field with us. After R. & R. he gets his rear job. I'm very happy for him; but I miss him already. Speed and me are very close and since he's also from Jersey, we plan to get together after we get home from the war.

Our last mission went off without a hitch except for the day they brought us in. Usually when they take us out or bring us in from the field, we have two Cobra gunships along for protection and support. Before we go into an l.z., artillery and mortars prep the l.z. and surrounding area. On our way out, just before the birds take us in, the Cobras prep the l.z. with rockets, mini gun, and 40 m.m. cannon.

Since we've been losing a lot of birds lately, the Cobras also fire their rockets below the l.z. that we're standing on as the birds come in to pick us up. Well on the last mission the gunner on the Cobra screwed up. He came in with his rockets real fine. They landed below and all around our l.z. As he was coming out of his dive, he must have forgot to stop shooting the 40 m.m. Anyway, we took a bunch of rounds on the l.z. and two of our guys got hurt, but not seriously. One round went off just a few feet away from me and covered me with dirt.

For a second I thought that we were under attack. Needless to say, when our birds got in to pick us up, I was on it before it ever landed. I grabbed hold of the skid at about 5 feet and pulled myself in. Once again another close call. I wonder how long my luck will last. The Army makes a lot of mistakes over here. When I first got here I wasn't scared of anything but Gooks. Now I'm scared of our own artillery, which almost got me once, our mortars and jets likewise, and now our own Cobras.

Well Marge, I guess I'll close for now. Thanks again for the care package. It even got here all in one piece. Take care.

When I first re-read that letter a few months ago, it really stimulated the old brain. That letter was written just before the old proverbial shit hit the fan on that mission. I can remember just about every detail. Here is what took place on my 13th. mission in the jungles around Ripcord.

Junior (Robert Granberry) and I got our briefing at Evans on June 27th., and it didn't look good for Bravo team. The Captain giving the briefing pointed at a mountain on the map on the wall and said: "Here we suspect is the 803rd. N.V.A.-Regiment. He then pointed at another mountain and said: "Here we suspect is the K-4 Sapper Batallion." He then pointed to a valley in between and said: "Here is where we are going to insert you." He then said very jovially: "This looks like a good mission, eh boys." "All we want you to do is see if they are really there.

We then flew out to Ripcord and spent a very restless night. Being in Recon, I never liked to spend a night on a firebase, especially Ripcord. There was just too much activity and noise to suit me. Besides, it was such a tempting target. I take my hat off to you guys that manned the firebases. I also had something else on my mind that night. On our previous mission I had complained to Doc Speed that the bandoliers I was wearing were tearing up my shoulders.

Being slight of build, the bandoliers hurt my shoulders beneath my ruck. Doc looked at my shoulders and said: "If it was anybody else but you, I would say discard the bandoliers; but since you're the point man, they just might stop something some day." I looked at him and said: "Doc, these bandoliers will never stop anything." He just smiled and said: "you never know." In a couple of days those words rang true.

The next morning I decided to keep the bandoliers at least for one more mission. As our birds flew off of Ripcord I wondered how Speed was doing on R & R. I also knew that this time out was not going to be a picnic. Our briefing was ominous enough; the area was just too quiet. The first couple of days were uneventful, but there was a tenseness in the air. Even our Kit Carson Scout (Hai) was scared.

On about our third day out we made our first big discovery. While walking through a valley, Hai discovered an N.V.A. commo wire. The look on his face as he held up the wire was sheer terror. "Beau coup N.V.A., didi mau, didi mau" was all he could say. He didn't want to go any further and for good reason. We had evidently stumbled onto something very big. The date was probably June 30th.

Junior reported our findings and we thought that we would be extracted and a line company sent in. Much to our surprise they sent in a slick which lowered down some equipment to tap the line. If the Gooks didn't know we were there, they sure must know by now. Our new orders were to sit on the line and tap it for a few days. We did just that and I don't think any of us slept at night.

Finally we ran out of tapes and we thought that now a line company would be inserted and we could get the hell out of there. No such luck. Another slick was sent out, hovered over our position, and retrieved the tapes. By now our nerves were really frayed. Still no line company and our orders were to hump through the valley and up a mountain to a p.z.

Going through that valley on the jungle floor was very tense, but luckily we made it without incident. The canopy was so thick that it was almost like walking through a tunnel. It took us a good portion of the day but we finally got to the top of the mountain. Lo and behold there was an old l.z. staring us in the face. Junior called in the coordinates and was told that it was not the l.z. they wanted for the extraction. Personally, we all liked the old l.z. It was pretty much overgrown and besides, there was no signs of anything in the area. I didn't particularly care to go looking for more trouble.

Higher up was adamant so off we went in search of the other l.z. No sooner did we leave the old l.z. when we picked up a "high speed trail." Junior and me looked at each other and we knew that we were heading into trouble. We stayed on the trail for what seemed like an eternity. The sun was starting to go down, and still no l.z. According to the maps we should be pretty close. We finally decided to set up for the night. While the rest of the team was setting up, Junior and I decided to rif the area a little further ahead.

We did not have to travel too far. We found the l.z. maybe a hundred yards from our n.d.p. As we approached it, there was a freshly built bunker staring at us. Luckily for us, it was uninhabited, but it looked like it had been built within the last 36 hours, maybe sooner. I pulled off some of the camoflauge from the roof, and the sap was still coming out of the stems. Junior and I didn't have to say a word. We knew we were in the middle of something big.

We then proceeded very cautiously onto the l.z. Everything was very calm and peaceful. There we were standing in the middle of an unsecured l.z. just checking out the view and listening to the sounds. We really weren't that far from Ripcord and could hear the slicks coming and going to Ripcord. We then went back to our n.d.p. and called in our position. Extraction was set for tomorrow morning.

The next morning arrived bright and sunny and everyone was in a hurry to get to the l.z. and secure it for extraction. Everyone but me. I was not going to move until I had breakfast. (I was the only member of our team who liked C ration ham and eggs) The verbal abuse was murder, but I stuck to my guns. After chowing down, we finally moved out, taking great caution as we approached the bunker. To our relief, the bunker was still empty.

Luckily for us the l.z. sat on a little plateau at the foot of the mountain we had just climbed down. We had to climb up about ten feet to reach the l.z. Just as my head cleared the top of the bunker, I saw an N.V.A. soldier standing in the tree line on the other side of the l.z. He was just standing there, A.K. slung over his shoulder, looking up at the sky, listening to a slick passing nearby. My first reaction was to drill him, but since he hadn't seen me, I hit the dirt instead.

Since there was a bunker on our side of the l.z., I knew there had to be at least one more on their side. I also figured that he had to be a trail watcher and

that very shortly he would be coming over to our side of the l.z. to man the bunker. Junior and I then backed off a little and held a little conference. He asked me why I didn't shoot the Gook right on the spot. I told him my feelings. We could pick him off anytime. They didn't know that we were there. If he came over to our side of the l.z., maybe we could even take him alive. Since the bunker was below the top of the l.z., they couldn't see what was going on.

While we were still discussing our alternatives, three shots rang out. Just as I had thought, the Gook came over to our side and Grove, our sniper, shot him. The jig was definitely up. Fear and adrenalin took over. We all knew from past experience, where there's one Gook, there has to be more. Taking into account all that we had seen on this mission, we had to be near a large enemy force or base-camp. Why else would batallion insist on this particular l.z.?

Junior immediately got on the horn and said that we had made contact. Could we go back to the first l.z. for extraction? Our answer was not very encouraging. Our birds were already en route and we must secure the l.z. for extraction. We decided to do a recon by fire. I had my slack man lob some thump rounds onto the other side of the l.z. We got no return fire. We kept moving across firing thump rounds as we went. Still no return fire. We were now about two thirds of the way across and still dead silence. I was beginning to think that we had made it. Maybe that N.V.A. soldier was just an isolated trail watcher.

Just then a sharp rat-tat-tat cut through the air. I thought the shots were coming from behind me. All in one motion I looked back and chewed dirt at the same time. At first I thought that it was one of our guys firing on rock and roll. It certainly wasn't an A.K. doing the firing. We all knew the distinctive sound of an A.K. 47. As I layed there trying to figure out what had happened, I heard a clink, clink, clink sound beneath me.

As I looked at the ground I saw that my 16 ammunition was falling out of my bandoliers. It was then that I looked at my chest and saw a gaping hole with just the spring from a shattered magazine protruding from it, swaying in the breeze. It then dawned on me that I had been hit by an R.P.D. Funny, I didn't feel any pain. I didn't feel a thing when I was hit. I then lifted up the first bandolier and looked at the one beneath it. Sure enough there was another hole, not as large as the first one, but a hole nonetheless.

Now I was really getting scared. I was still searching for blood, but there wasn't any. I know that I'm skinny, but there has to be a wound somewhere. Cautiously, I lifted up the second bandolier. Much to my relief there was no exit hole and no blood. I could see the indentations that the bullets made in the back of the magazine, but they didn't come through. I shook the magazine and sure enough, the bullets were rattling around inside. Doc Speed's prophecy had come true. The bandoliers had indeed stopped something.

A great feeling of relief passed through me followed by a feeling of despair. Here I was lying on a bald l.z. with no cover, approximately 40 feet from an enemy machine gun. My chances for survival didn't look good. I took a quick glance behind me. The rest of the team had gotten back to the safety of our side of the l.z. It was just me and Jake, my slack man, lying there in no man's land.

My brain was moving in overdrive. The rest of the team must have seen me get hit and probably think that I'm dead. Well, if my guys think that I'm dead, then the enemy machine gunner must think so too. He must have seen the bullets hit me dead center in the chest and shatter the bandoliers. Why else is he not shooting at two sitting ducks? The longer we layed there, the more I thought that we had to do something. The Gooks weren't going to hold their fire forever; especially if they see us moving around.

I finally decided to throw a couple of frags. Just as I pulled the pin and threw

it, I knew that I had made a mistake. He has to be sitting in a bunker or else I would have seen him as we crossed the l.z. A frag is not going to do any good unless I score a direct hit. Since I could only guess where the bunker was located, my chances were very slim that I would get him. The only thing that frag would do is piss him off a little more. After all, we had already wasted one of his buddies.

I dared not move for fear that he would surely finish me off. Why in the hell doesn't he finish us off? Maybe he was just toying with us! We layed there for what seemed like an eternity. The sun was now directly overhead, and our sweat was just pouring off of us. The damned flies didn't help matters either. Just then I heard the friendly sounds of choppers overhead. I looked up at the sky and saw a pink team circling the l.z. I was feeling pretty good when I noticed the lead Cobra starting to make a run at the l.z.

My feelings now turned to terror. Junior must think that we're dead and he's given the orders to fire up the l.z.! Sure enough, the Cobra is into his dive and the rocket pods are pointed right at us. I can even see the gunner's face and he's not smiling. Finally, I can take it no longer. I scream at the top of my lungs: "Junior, don't let him shoot. I'm alive."

Junior shouted back to me: "Don't worry, he's not going to shoot. He's going to keep making passes at the l.z. so that maybe the Gooks will keep their heads down and you can get out of there." The Cobras made a few more passes and then I heard a sound in front of us. The machine gunner was re-loading. That must have been the reason why he didn't shoot at us or the Cobras. Now was our chance. We crawled back to the safety of our side of the l.z. at great speed. I was never so happy in my life.

Junior informed the pilot that we were back safely and to fire up the l.z. The pilot asked us to pop smoke to mark our position. When he saw our smoke, he informed us that he couldn't fire for fear of hitting us. Junior told him to fire anyway. We were caught between a rock and a hard place with nothing to lose. The pilot finally agreed to fire, and came in with everything smoking.

The shrapnel was flying around all over the place. The noise was deafening. The ground was shaking. Trees were coming down around us, but we didn't care. We now knew what the Gooks must be going through, but with every explosion, we cheered for more. Finally, it was all over. The smoke hadn't even cleared when we got the word that our slicks were coming in. That sinking feeling started up in my stomach again. What if the Gooks were still there. They had to be dug in pretty good and we had seen them survive Cobra strikes before.

Before we could even collect our wits, we saw the lead slick making his approach. Junior shouted out: "Who wants to go first?" Since I was the point man, I thought that I may as well lead the charge. Besides, if that machine gunner was still alive, he might think that I was a ghost. I timed my run just as the lead slick was coming in. I reached out for the skid as it was hovering about five feet off the ground. Just as I grabbed the skid, the door gunner waved me off, and the slick started climbing again. I stared up in disbelief.

There I was right back where I had started from; in the middle of an l.z. with a machine gun burst in my chest as a souvenior. This time I just ran like hell back to the rest of the team. I shouted to Junior: "What happened?" He told me that the Gook machine gunner had opened up on the slick and had shot the pilot. By this time we had all had about enough. Batallion came over the horn and told us to go back to the first l.z. for extraction.

Finally, the Army had seen fit to see things our way for a change. We made it back to the first l.z. in record time. The birds arrived shortly later, and we got out of there without further incident. The flight back to Evans was a happy one indeed. When we touched down we were greeted by a lot of people. Most of them were from Recon, but there were a lot of officers, medics, grunts, and Kit Carson Scouts.

As I jumped off the slick, I held up our captured A.K. in a victory salute. It was then that I noticed that a lot of people were staring at the holes in my bandoliers. I guess that the news had traveled fast. Everyone wanted to know how and why I was still alive. The scouts were the most interested of all. They kept sticking their fingers in the holes as Hai was recounting the events of the mission in Vietnamese.

Some of them were laughing and one said to me in broken English: "N.V.A. almost crocodile you. You super G.I., but maybe next time they get you." I just smiled back at him and said: "They already had two chances, and I'm still here." As we were walking back to the company area, I noticed that Hai and the other scouts were following. Hai was still rattling on in Vietnamese and they were hanging on his every word.

When he had finished his story, he grabbed me by the arm and said: "John, you number one G.I.; N.V.A. no can crocodile you. With those words, we parted company. Hai went with the other scouts and I continued on; right on the E.M. club on very shaky legs.

Well, that's the story of my 13th. mission. There are a few foonotes though. Another recon team was sent to that same l.z. and was hit with R.P.G.'s. I don't know if a line company was ever sent there or not. We did hear that the whole area was saturated with jet strikes after the second recon team was fired up.

Junior went on R.&R. on schedule, but he went with shrapnel wounds that got on the first assault on hill 1000 on July 6. My luck continued as always. I was supposed to lead Bravo team in Junior's abscence, but I had no team to lead. Bravo team took 100% casualties on the assault on hill 1000. I happened to be at C.L.C. at the time and missed that mission. When Doc Speed got back from R.&R. he did get his rear job; He was assigned to the aid station on Ripcord during the final siege.

If any of you readers are Cobra pilots, I would be interested in hearing from you. I would sure like to thank that pilot who fired for us on July 3rd. It took a lot of guts to make dry runs almost at treetop level to draw fire away from me. Until next time.

RETROSPECTIVE - FRANK GONZALES

Chip, I would like to share with you and fellow readers a somewhat comical incident that happened to Alpha Team Recon while doing work on the Ashau Valley side of F.S.B. Ripcord around the middle of May, 1970. Alpha team at that time was led by SP/4 Juan Caredo from San Antonio, Texas. I remember that the team kept on the move constantly, because of the great danger we were in, of being pursued by the N.V.A. We set up ambushes on a regular basis attempting to take some P.O.W.'s for interogation which would prove very valuable to the battalion and Ripcord. We also were hunting enemy food and arms caches. Well, "Glory Be!" One day while humping through the bush, our point man discovered three N.V.A. having their supper totally unaware that we were about to ruin their meal. The firefight that ensued lasted long enough for the three N.V.A. to make a very quick and determined exit. There were no body counts after the noise ceased, but we discovered one huge ammunition and rice supply. There must have been at least 3000 rounds of A.K., 47 bullets, 15 R.P.G. rounds, RPG launcher, 500 lbs. of rice, cooking and medical supplies, and a "real prize", a drumfed R.P.D. machine gun, complete with tri-pod. We knew it was just a matter of minutes before the word spread among the N.V.A. troops that their stash had been ripped off. Members of the Recon team then quickly placed all of the booty, minus the machine gun, in a clump, and blew the whole damn cache up with a clay more mine. All the booty went up in smoke with a big bang. We then got the hell out of there as quick as our legs could carry us. We took the machinegun with us and felt very secure with it because we felt that the N.V.A. was going to pursue us for what we had just done to their supplies. The only arms we carried were the M-16 rifles. We felt that the stolen machine gun would give us an advantage if the N.V.A. decided to engage us in combat. So off we went into the jungles, deeper than before, to hopefully throw any N.V.A. off of our trail and hopefully not encounter a battalion size force while we tried to find a safe, high place to camp for the night. After about two hours at breakneck humping we found the ideal spot to spend the night. One of the guys placed the stolen R.P.D. on top of a five foot rock so as to get an excellent field of fire if we received unwelcomed guest during the night. All of us looked at the machine gun and tried to figure out how to remove the bullet drum so we could satisfy our curiosity about the gun. All of us failed to separate the drum from the gun. All in all we felt very secure with the machine gun watching over us as some of us slept at night while the other stood guard. The team stayed on that hill for two days with out any incident. We sure felt good with that Commie gun. The following day we humped to an L.Z. and split to the rear (Camp Evans) with our captured gun. We landed on the battalion pad and handed the machine gun to our battalion S-2 officer. We all came to find out the following day that S-2 had removed the drum from the gun and found it "empty"!

REVIEWS

Just read Thomas D. Boettcher's VIETNAM: THE VALOR AND THE SORROW (copywright 1984, Little, Brown and Company). As many of you know there is very little good literature in existence regarding our particular period in Vietnam. Del Vecchios' fictional account of a 101st unit in action just following the fall of Ripcord in THE THIRTEENTH VALLEY is a notable exception. What grabbed me about this well documented book was how the author was able to assemble the events leading up to the war and on through to America's final involvement. Sitting down to read historical, rather documentary literature has been a thing that over the years people generally have had to force themselves to do. Even as in this case when it is of a very personal interest. Boettcher begins by describing the brutal French colonization of Vietnam in the 1800's. One note from that period was that eighty per cent of the Vietnamese were literate prior to the arrival of the French and only twenty per cent on their departure. Apart from the French helping themselves to the country's natural resources, the French were responsible for teaching the Vietnamese the very atrocities we were to later witness during our tours. Beheadings, for instance, were common. By the time Roosevelt became president, the situation was desperate enough that he worked behind the scenes during World War II in an effort to get France to agree to establish Vietnamese self rule following the war. That was not an easy matter. The intermediary Roosevelt chose to impress upon the French was Britain. They had more than their share of bloodied handsfrom colonialist policies in other parts of the world. The British secretly feared that if France could be forced out of Indochina, their own empire such as it was at the time was not far behind. Boettcher carefully sketches Ho's initial involvement with Americans, noting his rescue and return of many American pilots shot down in Vietnam during World War II, which was then occupied by Japan. Following the war, Ho continued to curry favor with the Americans, particularly through American intelligence officer, Archimedes Patti, who felt strongly that Ho was more nationalist than communist. All this effort went for naught when China, to the north, fell to the communists. Given the building anti-communist mood in the U.S. and the fact that most if not all seasoned Asian intelligence experts were under suspicion, it became impossible to promote Ho's value to the U.S. as an ally. As a result, whether or not his leanings were then strongly communist or not, he was forced to turn to them for assistance. Eisenhower was caught up in Indochina during Dienbienphu. Our reluctance to provide massive air support to the French was in part based on the knowledge that if the French won they would continue their grim treatment of the Vietnamese. The Kennedy years found us well entrenched in the policies of Cold War. Politicians were making decisions regarding more troops at a time when military experts strongly recommended caution on any kind of commitment and, in fact, early on troop commitments were almost unanimously opposed by the Joint Chiefs. Later when the military was permitted more leeway in the direction of the war, they had by that time become obsessed with the feeling the war could be militarily won. In truth as a result of earlier decisions it was politically impossible. Like a fat, balding man with a beautiful but wayward mistress, they felt they could woo things eventually their way. Needless to say, the book is hard to put down until finished. Adding more at this point could spoil it for those who are interested. One of the interesting things about most literature on Vietnam are the conclusions we undoubtedly draw regarding our own involvement at that late period in the war. If there was no national consensus in support of the war and if the early political and military decisions that committed us to the war for that long in error, in what way do we achieve closure with the war?

Newsletter Financial Contributors: Rick Blythe - August; Jim-Ellen Fairhall-December

The Battle of Ripcord

It was a time when bravery was commonplace and sheer terror the normal state of mind . . .

By DON HIRST

FSB RIPCORD, South Vietnam —The perimeter was being slowly sucked in as giant Chinook and smaller Huey helicopters swooped in to evacuate troopers from this battered base. Suddenly one bird came under heavy fire from a .51-cal machine gun.

"I engaged the machine gun with my M60 but he spotted me and fired," recalled Sgt Christopher Hinman, 21. "One round hit my ammo can and it went up. I was hit in the arm and leg and it blew my flak jacket, helmet and gun all to hell. I left the area. Every man felt they were closing in . . ."

That was how the final hours of FSB Ripcord looked to one of its defenders from Bravo Company, 2d Bd, 506th Inf, 101st Abn Div.

It was a time when bravery was commonplace and sheer terror the normal state of mind. It wasn't the first time in the Vietnam War that a base had been abandoned under heavy fire, but to the men who fought the enemy, the memories of their private hell will still be vivid when Vietnam is a page in a history book.

THERE IT IS

When the battalion carved out the oblong-shaped base atop a 3,300-foot hill in early April, many of the grunts were looking forward to their turn at the relatively cushy duty of perimeter security even if the base was just nine klicks from the NVA-infested A Shau Valley. When the infantrymen sweated and strained to make Ripcord another in the endless series of firebases, none of them had any idea that their turf and the surrounding area would soon be one of the most hotly contested pieces of real estate in I Corps, and would ultimately cost 61 lives.

Their defenses were formidable enough — a company of infantry for perimeter security, miles of concertina wire, Claymore mines and two batteries of artillery, both 105s and 155s. Outside the wire, the remainder of the battalion roamed the rugged hill country in search of the enemy. They found several small caches of mortar rounds and other ammunition, but in the words of one high-ranking officer, things were "pretty quiet." Then came July.

The NVA began to make their presence felt with occasional mortar or recoilless rifle attacks. First just a few shells, then progressively more and more until, said one platoon leader, at least 50 rounds a day came crashing inside the pocket-sized perimeter.

The gutsy cannon cockers of Bravo Battery, 2/319th, 101st Abn Div, and B Btry, 2d Bn, 11th Arty, XXIV Corps, manned their guns round the clock in an attempt to silence the incoming. They averaged only an hour or two of sleep each night and racked up almost a Purple Heart apiece.

"What was it like? Did you ever crap in your pants?" said a 105 gunner from 2/319. "The incoming just didn't land outside (the sandbagged gun emplacements)—it was hitting right inside the pits. Our six guns fired 1,500 rounds the first day."

But on July 18, a series of events denied Ripcord half of its artillery and started the brass thinking about pulling out. A Chinook with a slingload of 105mm ammunition was hovering over Bravo Battery when enemy fire knocked it from the sky. Minutes later the helicopter burst into flame, and soon the high-explosive shells began cooking off, first one or two at a time, then bigger and bigger explosions. The men had little choice but to abandon their guns. Many hours later when the last shell had spent its explosive force, they returned to their gunpits. The once-lethal cannons were just so much scrap.

Before everything started going bang, recalled Hinman, he and a Pathfinder ran over to the downed Chinook with fire extinguishers.

"The ship was on fire," said Hinman, "and there was a guy trapped underneath. He was badly burned and several guys with shovels were trying to dig him out. We tried to bank the fire with sandbags, then the M60 ammo in the chopper started going off."

The rounds for the big guns were ready to blow too, recalled Hinman, so there was little that the battalion commander could do but order them to run for their lives. Their frantic efforts to save the trapped crewman from burning to death were in vain.

"Some rounds came in while we were trying to get him out," said Hinman emotionally. "God damn those ---- gooks!"

CS gas from some of the exploding shells began to spread over the firebase and made life miserable for the next several hours. But more than the discomfort, the loss of the quick-firing, pinpoint-accurate 105 howitzers worried troopers.

"I feel the 105 is a better defensive weapon than the 155," said one veteran squad leader. "It must have been a great morale boost for the gooks."

For the next four days the incoming increased in volume. Still, said one NCO, morale was good. "We just dug a little deeper," he said matter-of-factly.

"You didn't know where they'd land," retorted Sp4 Steve Hanson. "I'm not afraid of a dink I can see, but that . . ."

As the hours passed, brass back at division headquarters decided the base was more of a liability than an asset. Conclusion: get the hell out.

"We knew we were leaving the night before," said S Sgt Tom Rubesam, a 23-year-old acting platoon leader. "They told us we weren't being beaten off and that Ripcord had performed its function. Tactically it was a good move. When I heard about it, I thought, 'Let's go!'"

While the weary GIs on Ripcord began the task of getting ready for the extraction slated to begin before dawn, Sp4 Floyd Alexander was sitting several miles away, still trying to get used to the fact that he was alive. Early that morning the young recon forward observer was with Alfa Company when it was hard hit by the NVA.

"We were getting ready to leave our NDP (night defensive position) when mortars started popping. Then there were satchel charges and AK fire. We were overrun."

A burst of fire killed the artillery FO and blinded another GI near Alexander. They were separated from the rest of the company, so Alexander covered the wounded GI with his own body and played dead for more than three hours. The worst moment came when an NVA soldier padded silently over to where the two GIs lay and stared at them for several minutes.

"He was carrying an AK and wearing sandals," said a still-shaken Alexander. "He stared at me and then he just walked off. I was scared and praying the whole time, believe me."

That night Alexander and his wounded buddy rejoined their company. "I didn't find out about Ripcord until we got back from the field," he concluded.

Back at Ripcord, the grunts sweated through what they hoped would be their last night of purgatory. Dawn was still an hour away when the first whup-whup of approaching helicopters announced the start of the extraction. One Chinook was shot down during the withdrawal, but the crew escaped intact. Ironically, the downed bird landed atop the already destroyed artillery pieces.

Fate still had its toll to collect from the battle-weary soldiers. Three men, including the battalion commander, Lt Col Andy Lucas, were killed during the extraction. Another 20 were wounded.

"He was a damned good CO," said one peon. "He was definitely for the troops. When the chopper crashed on the 18th, he was right there with us trying to get out the guy who was trapped."

The perimeter was steadily shrinking as helicopters ferried out load after load of GIs. Sporadic incoming as well as antiaircraft fire didn't help, but chopper jocks still made textbook approaches.

"They did a helluva fine job," said one trooper. "Another hour and I think the dinks would have been in the wire."

The remaining Screaming Eagles were clustered around the TOC, almost everyone toting a machine gun. Suddenly, recalled Hinman, "I noticed that my wallet was missing."

So under the covering fire of his buddies, the youthful sergeant raced back down the hill to look for his missing billfold. He found it and made a mad zigzag dash back to the TOC.

"There was 35 cents and a picture of my girl inside," said Hinman.

Finally the base was deserted. As the last choppers headed for safer territory, fighter-bombers rained death on the enemy below. The battle for Ripcord was over.

"We could have given them a good fight anytime they hit the wire," said one grunt, "and we could have defended the base indefinitely but what for? We're going to Eagle Beach for a party tomorrow. We'll take more casualties there than we did at Ripcord."

Sgt Christopher Hinman

S Sgt Tom Rubesam

Sp4 Floyd Alexander

Blackie