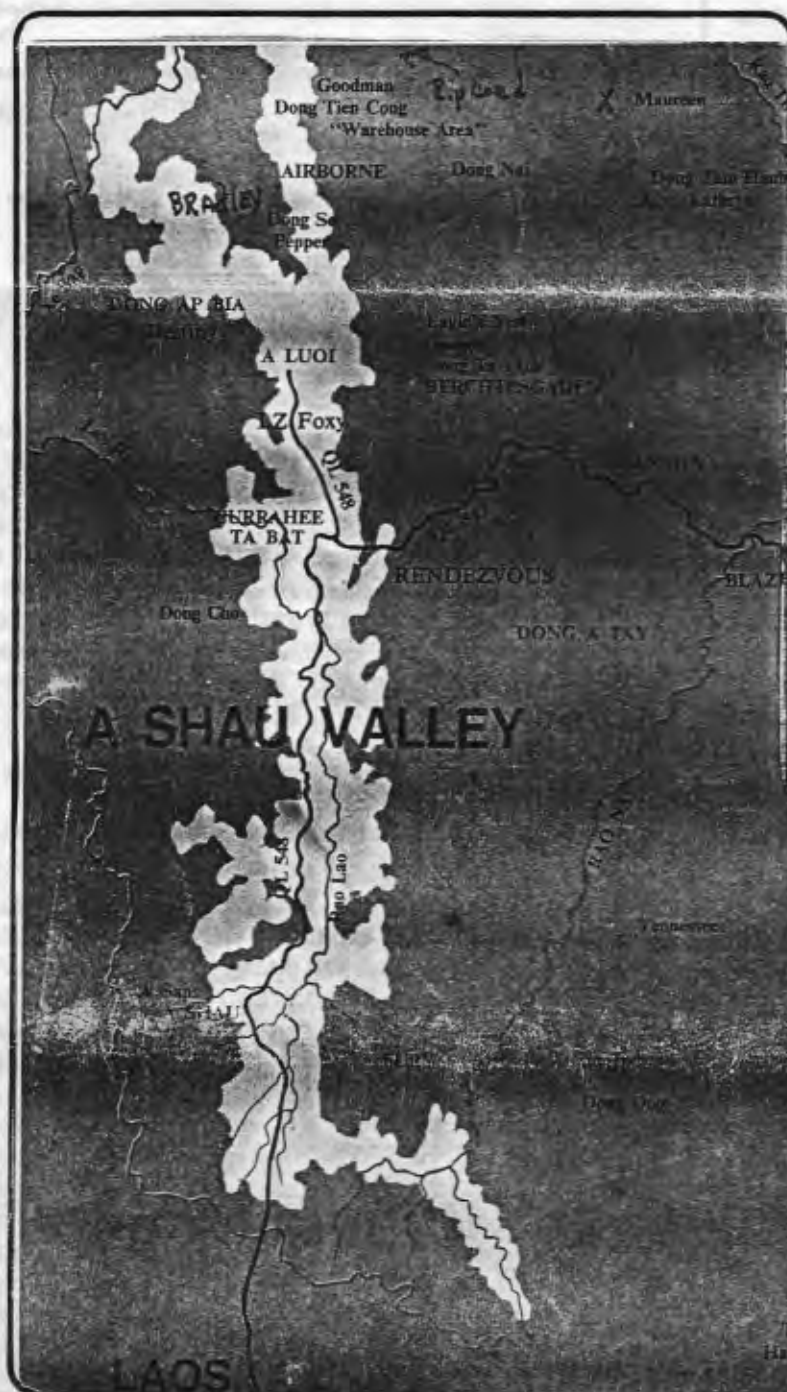


A NEWSLETTER

ON RIPCORDER



INSIDE



BRIEF UPDATES

FAIRHALL FOREWORD

RIPCORDER:

A GENERAL REMEMBERS

NO: 9 Ripcords 16th

Anniversary Issue

Part I July 1986

VIETNAM
THUA THIEN PROVINCE
Nam Hoa District

EDITOR: Chip Collins

For Friends and Survivors of FSB RIPCORDER, RVN

July Newsletter Financial Contributors:

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INTRODUCTION AND UPDATES

A few months ago I promised a July issue that would feature to some extent the memoirs of those in command during Ripcord. At the time it seemed a bold statement given our groups composition. However, in the past few months, new contacts, and our growth overall have been surprising. Letters to those who could offer some insight have been answered with an enthusiasm that has been heartwarming.

Almost all who were contacted have replied leaving us with a wealth of material to weave into the newsletter. Many retrospectives were submitted with apologies for their length. None were needed. Ripcord was a long, complex action deserving of lengthy reflection and dialogue.

As a result we have decided to divide this issue into two parts. Part I that you have today features author Jim Fairhall's foreword "Ripcord: Setting the Stage" which gives us a sense of Ripcord's significance and history as we entered 1970. Also featured today are Gen. Sidney B. Berry's official and personal perspectives of the Ripcord action. Gen. Berry was acting division commander for most of July 1970.

The next issue, Part II will arrive in August and feature Chuck Hawkins, A 2/506, John T. Schuelke, First Sergeant of D 2/501, and John Palm, Father of Lt. Terry Palm killed on Hill 805. Mr. Palm's piece is a different sort of reflection requested by the editor from someone who had lost a loved one during Ripcord. My deepest thanks to Mr. Palm for taking time to write an excellent piece that exacted what had to have been a certain price in pain. My thanks and congratulations to the authors of today's pieces. My apologies to Messrs. Hawkins, Schuelke, and Palm that their pieces could not be printed earlier.

The length and focus of these two issues will prohibit much of the art and photos seen in recent issues. As a result the newsletter may not be as pretty as what you're used to. But I think you'll agree after reading that they are somewhat beautiful. We'll get back on track with art/photos and other offerings soon.

INTRODUCTION AND UPDATES CON'T.

Want to briefly thank all those who have contributed financially to the effort recently. It really helps and is appreciated.

NEW CONTACTS

- Gen. Sidney B. Berry. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

- Fred Behrans (101 AHB "Eagle Dustoff")
[REDACTED]

Bill Aeschliman (2/320 ARTY) informs me that the 4th Vietnam Veterans Reunion will be held in Kokomo, Indiana on Sept. 19, 20, 21. 6000 veterans attended last year. 10,000 or more expected this year. Theme is "Getting to the Heart of the Issues", ie. PTSD, Agent Orange, POW/MIA. There will be a band, lots of beer, lots of hog. Admission Free. Hog meal around \$4.00. Have heard a lot about this reunion. Is a good event. Bill has sent some flyers for distribution or contact him at [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

REUNION NOTES

Editor will be making an advance trip (Reconnaissance) to Whippany the weekend of July 18-20. There we will meet with John Mihalko, The Whippany VFW, Ripcord Reunion Planning Committee, Chuck Hawkins and others to plan for our reunion now scheduled for October 10-12. Anyone wishing to take part in this early session should contact John at 201-386-9862 or editor at 703-328-2006. The date of the reunion will probably be firmed up at this session. Please let us know if you want to attend but have a conflict, and your suggested alternative date. Feel free to call us during that weekend with any suggestions, comments you might have. Will look forward to hearing from you.

ON TO WHIPPANY!



RIPCORD: SETTING THE STAGE

Picture a long, mist-shrouded valley enclosed on either side by jungled mountains rising 5,000 feet into the clouds. A river, the Rau Loa, flows the length of the valley. Dark green rain forest and lighter green elephant grass cover the bottomland on either side of the river. So long and deep and unusual is the valley that it generates its own weather--unpredictable weather, capable of bringing thunder showers or low, dense cloud cover any day of the year.

The story of Firebase Ripcord begins in this valley. It is related to changing North Vietnamese and American strategies which turned this valley--the once-quiet A Shau--into a center of attention in northern I Corps during the last few years of U.S. ground combat offensives in Vietnam.

Far away from the A Shau, during late 1965, large American and North Vietnamese units tangled for the first time in what became known as the battle for the Ia Drang Valley. The NVA's bruising introduction to airmobility in the form of the 1st Cav's helicopters led it to look for safer sanctuaries and staging areas. And its search soon brought it north, to the westernmost reaches of Thua Thien Province near the Laotian border, where the A Shau Valley's mists and clouds promised to neutralize American air power.

The peaceful, isolated A Shau once had been considered good duty by Green Berets stationed there. But then, in December, 1965, the South Vietnamese abandoned their two camps in the valley under pressure. And in March of the following year, the Special Forces camp

at the valley's southern tip came under a ferocious three-day attack, resulting in 100% dead, wounded or missing out of 434 defenders. The A Shau belonged to the NVA.

The Marine Corps at that time was preoccupied with securing the populous lowlands and coastal areas in I Corps: the fall of a distant valley near the Laotian border did not elicit a response from it. But after Tet '68 and the battle for Hue, the Commander-in-Chief of American forces in Vietnam, Gen. William Westmoreland, realized that the A Shau had served as a vital staging area for the North Vietnamese. He initiated a series of American incursions into the valley designed to throw the NVA off balance and prevent it from amassing men and materiel there for another major assault on the lowlands.

The 1st Cavalry Division made the initial thrust in April, 1968, just after its relief of the besieged marines at Khe Sanh. The Cav stayed a month, roaming the valley at will and capturing large amounts of supplies, yet failing to engage the North Vietnamese on the ground and suffering severe helicopter losses.

That August, the 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division followed up with another raid intended to catch enemy troops reentering the valley after the Cav's departure. Again, though, the Americans took intense antiaircraft fire and failed to pin the NVA down on the ground.

In The Rise and Fall of an American Army, Shelby Stanton tells us that both of these operations "were feats of airmanship and logistics conducted over some of the world's most difficult tropical terrain. They were entirely air-supported and stand as milestones in evolving

airmobile tactics. However, neither neutralized the targeted area, since North Vietnamese forces in neighboring Laos moved back into the valley upon allied departure."

In spite of the short-lived success of these operations, MACV airlifted the 9th Marines into the northern A Shau on January 22, 1969. This raid was unusual in several respects: the Marines moved in while the monsoon still kept the valley socked in most days; they avoided antiaircraft fire by hacking their way on foot into the deepest recesses of the valley; and they crossed the Laotian frontier several times in carrying out search-and-destroy missions. These atypical American tactics bore fruit in the form of enormous captured caches, including the first 122mm cannons discovered inside South Vietnam. The Marines also drove the North Vietnamese out of a valley bunker complex and ambushed a truck convoy on Route 922 in Laos.

The Marines were replaced in the A Shau in March by the 2d Brigade of the 101st. The 1st Battalion, 502d Infantry repeated the success of the Marines, capturing thirteen trucks, a field hospital and a heavy-machine repair shop, among other prizes.

After the Screaming Eagles' Operation Massachusetts Striker ended, the division commander, Maj. Gen. Melvin Zais, sent his 3d Brigade back into the northern A Shau on May 10 as part of Operation Apache Snow. On May 11 Company B, 3/187th Infantry, slogged toward an objective marked on its maps as Hill 937 and called by the Vietnamese Dong Ap Bia. Perhaps the North Vietnamese had been stung by the Americans' earlier achievements that year in the A Shau. In any

case, they were dug in along the uppermost slopes of Dong Ap Bia and determined to fight. They opened up with interlocking machine gun fire on the advancing grunts and the ten-day battle for Hamburger Hill had begun.

Eventually, the Rakkasans, two other 101st units--1st Battalion, 506th Infantry and 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry--and an ARVN battalion took the top of the hill. The earlier repeated assaults made by the Americans had resulted in 56 KIA, however, and many more WIA. The abandonment of Hamburger Hill a week after it was taken prompted a journalistic and political controversy in the United States and a morale problem within the 101st Airborne Division.

Gen. Zais justified the Screaming Eagles' departure from Dong Ap Bia, saying, "This is not a war of hills. That hill had no military value whatsoever." His orders directed him to find and destroy the enemy, he said, and he had found the enemy on Hill 937. But a cardboard sign placed by one of the grunts at the top of Dong Ap Bia after it was taken--"Hamburger Hill. Was it worth it?"--asked a question echoed on Capitol Hill and, privately, in MACV.

The underlying problem was that Vietnamization, though not yet implemented as official policy, was in the air, and that the concept of victory by body count had been discredited. American senators didn't care that the ratio of NVA to American dead on Hamburger Hill was better than ten to one, as Gen. Zais claimed. Moreover, even the new MACV commander in chief, Gen. Creighton Abrams, had proposed a different strategy dependent not on killing large numbers of the enemy but on disrupting his logistical system. Abrams told reporters: "Since last fall, all our operations have been designed to get into

the enemy's system. Once you start working in the system that he required to prepare his offensive operations, you can cause him to postpone his operations."

The volume Fighting for Time in The Vietnam Experience summarizes the situation after Hamburger Hill as follows: "The American military now had two concepts of offensive operations before it. The one, emphasizing search and destroy operations designed to lead to the attrition of enemy fighting forces, was typified by the assault on Hamburger Hill. The other...took a more indirect approach and attempted to disrupt enemy logistics and lines of communications, thus preempting offensive operations. Which concept of operations would achieve prominence under the new administration of Richard Nixon?"

By the early spring of 1970, of course, the answer to this question had emerged. Vietnamization was well underway and body count was no longer a means of measuring victory in a war out of which the United States no longer expected a straightforward victory. But defeat was not acceptable any more than it had been years earlier. Thus, at the outset of 1970, the politically risky invasion of Cambodia--an operation which exemplified the new military strategy of disrupting enemy logistics and lines of communication.

While Cambodia snatched the headlines, the northernmost provinces of South Vietnam still contained the largest numbers of American troops and offered the greatest potential for trouble. The chief concern of the 101st Airborne Division was spelled out in its operation plan for 1970: "From areas such as the A Chau Valley, Delta Junction and Ruong Ruong the enemy retains the ability to consolidate,

support and reinforce a large scale attack on Allied positions in the piedmont and coastal plains." Also a source of anxiety was a possible Tet-style attack on Hue, described by the operation plan as "the most valuable real estate in the northern provinces of SVN."

The beginning of the dry season in 1970 was marked by considerable activity in the 101st Airborne Division AO. Engineers reopened over a dozen firebases. The symbolic three millionth round was fired in support of the division on 28 April. The NVA carried the war to the Americans in the piedmont areas, notably with ground and mortar attacks on Firebases Granite and Henderson at the end of April and the start of May. In these attacks the Screaming Eagles--chiefly A Company, 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry--suffered 39 KIA, 78 WIA and two MIA.

Clearly, the division couldn't assume a passive role in the face of growing North Vietnamese aggressiveness. Bringing the war to the NVA's backyard in the A Shau Valley, though, involved both political and military risks. Any clear-cut offensive operation resulting in heavy American casualties--such as Hamburger Hill--would result in an immediate outcry on Capitol Hill. Yet the NVA undoubtedly would not sit idly as Screaming Eagles entered the A Shau one more time, nor would they be caught by surprise as they had been in Cambodia. The U.S. strategy of disrupting enemy staging areas and supply and communication lines would obviously be difficult to implement in this case.

This was the situation the 101st Airborne Division faced in early 1970. Would the Screaming Eagles in Conjunction with ARVN forces try to root the NVA out of the Ashau Valley one last time?

Most grunts thought they knew the answer to that question. And the reopening of firebases farther and farther west - in particular the reopening under fire of Ripcord, which would have provided a shield of artillery for the allies - seemed to promise that the last battle for the Ashau Valley was shaping up.

Jim Fairhall

July 1986



2407 North Kenmore Street
Arlington, Virginia 22207
29 June 1986

Dear Chip,

You asked for a retrospective on RIPCORDER.

I give you instead two perspectives of RIPCORDER written in July 1970, one official and the other personal. Together, they should provide some insight into thinking concerning RIPCORDER at division command level. Attached are:

(1) A copy of the message about the extraction from RIPCORDER written on 23 July 1970 and dispatched to the XXIV Corps Commander late that day. Some specific statistics were modified later when complete data became available, but this is the way the division command viewed RIPCORDER immediately following the 23 July extraction.

(2) Excerpts from my personal letters to my wife during 2-25 July 1970. These provide insight into my perspective of RIPCORDER as Assistant Division Commander, Operations, 2-15 July and then as Acting Division Commander who made the decision to withdraw from RIPCORDER and was responsible for the extraction. Like all personal letters, mine are selective in content, impressionistic, and sometimes inaccurate in fact. They are personal letters, not official documents.

Having thought about RIPCORDER a great deal during the past few days, I'd like to share with you some observations and reflections.

..The larger setting for RIPCORDER was this.

- US national policy was to "Vietnamize" the war, withdraw US military forces, and negotiate a "settlement" with the North Vietnamese. For reasons both humane and political, the Administration wanted minimum casualties among both US and SVN military.
- COMUSMACV had a tough job. Simultaneously, he had to strengthen the combat effectiveness of SVN military, withdraw US troops without jeopardizing the safety of those remaining, keep remaining US troops combat effective and in sound morale, and prevent the enemy from seizing the military initiative and launching offensives.
- The 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) was slated to be the last full-strength US division in SVN. Its AO, which comprised the two northern provinces of RVN, was of critical importance to the continued existence of non-communist Vietnam. During the spring and summer of 1970, the enemy operated in greater force and more aggressively in the Screaming Eagle AO than anywhere else in RVN. This meant that the Screaming Eagles fought longer and harder and took more casualties than other US units in Vietnam. Conversely, there existed in the Screaming Eagle AO the greatest opportunity during the late spring and summer of 1970 for a combined US-ARVN offensive to inflict heavy damage on the NVA before the final withdrawal of US forces. It was the hope and expectation of the senior US and Vietnamese commands that the 101st Airborne Division and 1st Infantry Division (ARVN) would

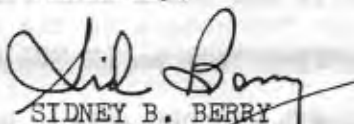
mount a major offensive operation against NVA base areas in the A SHAU VALLEY and the high ground overlooking it. This operation was to be called CHICAGO PEAK.

- FSB RIPCORD was established as a necessary preliminary step towards launching of the planned US-ARVN spring-summer offensive CHICAGO PEAK. Artillery fire support bases had to be established farther and farther westward to provide fire support for infantry troops who were to operate in the planned CHICAGO PEAK AO. RIPCORD, then, can be understood only in the context of its relationship to CHICAGO PEAK. Without RIPCORD as a secure and usable FSB/OB, it was imprudent to launch Operation CHICAGO PEAK. After the monsoons began in mid or late September, inclement weather would preclude an offensive into the CHICAGO PEAK area. In 1971, still fewer US troops would be in SVN, and the opportunity for an offensive would likely have passed.

. About the battle for RIPCORD itself.

- The extended battle lasted from March through 23 July. It was violent, merciless, deadly, brutal. It was cataclysmic in the lives of the participants. It is seared into the memories of the survivors.
- The battle involved virtually the entire Screaming Eagle division, at least indirectly. Yet, as in every war, a handful of men in a few small units bore the brunt of the fighting and suffered the bulk of the casualties. The fighters were mostly infantrymen and artillerymen and-- in this airmobile division,-- the aviators. The fighters belonged to squads and patrols, platoons, companies and batteries, and to battalions - witness the battle deaths of the commander and operations officer of 2-506 Infantry on RIPCORD on 23 July.
- In view of the circumstances of the time and the information available to the responsible commanders, their decision was sound and reasonable to enter the RIPCORD area as a preliminary and necessary step towards the launching of the offensive operation CHICAGO PEAK. Similarly, the decision to withdraw from RIPCORD was correct and reasonable.
- The soldiers who fought that nasty, dirty, brutal battle of RIPCORD at the doing and dying level were magnificent. Thank God that our country has men like these. I pray to God that this will always be so.

Sincerely,



SIDNEY B. BERRY
Lieutenant General,
United States Army, Retired
Assistant Division Commander, Operations
and Acting Division Commander
101st Airborne Division (Airmobile)
Republic of Vietnam, 1970-71

HEADQUARTERS
101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION (AIRMOBILE)
APO SAN FRANCISCO 96383

AVDG-CS

23 July 1970

SUBJECT: Firebase Ripcord

TO: Commanding General
XXIV Corps
APO 96 349

1. BACKGROUND. Fire Support/Operational Base RIPCORDER was to be opened on or about 1 April 1970 as a key forward fire support/operational base in the division's summer offensive plans against the 803d and 29th NVA Regiments in the A SHAU VALLEY area. Mutually supporting firebases would be opened at FSB BRADLEY (105mm how) and AIRBORNE (105mm how). AIRBORNE, in turn, was within mutually supporting range of FSB KATHRYN (155mm how).
2. OCCUPATION. Assaults into the FSB RIPCORDER area by elements of the 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division and 1st Regiment, 1st Infantry Division (ARVN) on 5 March 1970 were delayed due to inclement weather in the AO. On 13 March, A/2-506 Infantry was to combat assault into an LZ on Hill 902, 2 kilometers south of FSB RIPCORDER. Just prior to insertion, this LZ was determined unsatisfactory and insertion was made into the alternate LZ. The alternate LZ was FSB RIPCORDER. A/2-506 began to receive intense mortar, recoilless rifle and small arms fire on the LZ. This fire continued until the company was ordered off the hill to the east. On 14 March, elements of the 1st Regiment (ARVN) captured documents indicating the location of units of the 6th NVA Regiment in the RIPCORDER area. ARVN and US units were extracted on 15 March. Extensive air and artillery strikes were conducted until 1 April, when US and ARVN units again assaulted into the RIPCORDER area. This assault had been delayed since 17 March due to unsatisfactory weather conditions. B/2-506 Infantry assaulted onto the firebase on 1 April, and again the enemy employed intense mortar, recoilless rifle and small arms fire. At approximately 1830 hours, the company moved about 700 meters to the east and joined A/2-506 Infantry which had combat assaulted into an LZ 700 meters east of RIPCORDER.
3. OPERATIONS IN THE FSB RIPCORDER AREA. During the period 2-10 April, 2/506 Infantry and 2 battalions of the 1st ARVN Regiment conducted ground combat operations around FSB RIPCORDER to locate and destroy enemy mortar and recoilless rifle positions. These operations were conducted within 3000 meters of and all around the firebase. On 11 April, c/2-506 Infantry assaulted RIPCORDER and secured the firebase by 0800 hours. The battalion light CP and engineer support elements were lifted into the firebase on 11 April. Inclement weather precluded insertions of artillery into the firebase until 16 April. During the period 16 April to 1 July, the battalion continued construction and conducted security operations around the firebase

AVDG-CS
SUBJECT: Firebase Ripcord

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without significant stand-off (indirect fire) attack on the firebase. During the period 1-22 July, FSB RIPCORDER was subjected to daily attacks by mortar, recoilless rifle, RPG, and sporadic machinegun and small arms fire from enemy locations all around the firebase. On 18 July, a CH47 aircraft was shot down on the firebase. The aircraft crashed in a 105mm ammunition storage area and burst into flames. The resulting fire and exploding artillery ammunition destroyed 5 105mm howitzers, 2 106mm recoilless rifles, one mechanical mule, and several other items of equipment. The remaining 105mm howitzer on the firebase was damaged.

4. EXTRACTION FROM FSB RIPCORDER. At 230545 July 70, the 3d Brigade began operations for the extraction of the 2-506 Infantry from FSB RIPCORDER and field locations south of the firebase. During the night of 22-23 July, massive artillery and air fires were employed throughout the area against known and suspected enemy locations. More than 2232 mixed caliber artillery rounds were fired in support of the extraction. The US Air Force, Marines, and Navy flew 35 preplanned and immediate air strikes, for a total of 74 sorties. Fourteen CH47 aircraft were employed commencing at 0545 hours to extract 22 sorties, which included 1 155mm howitzer battery (6 tubes), 2 M-405 dozers, communications equipment, 1 M55 multiple machinegun (Quad-50), and 1 damaged 105mm howitzer. The CH47 extraction operations proceeded smoothly until 0740 hours when 1 CH47 was shot down on the firebase by enemy 12.7mm machinegun fire. The aircraft was forced to land amidst the 105mm howitzers which had been destroyed on 18 July and thus prevented the landing of additional aircraft to extract the remaining artillery pieces and two 106mm recoilless rifles. The CH47 received a direct hit by an unknown type enemy mortar round, causing the aircraft to burn and explode. The aircraft was destroyed. Eight additional CH47 aircraft received hits during the extractions; 4 are nonflyable. B/2-506 Infantry began extracting at 0745 hours by UH1H aircraft but was delayed until 0935 hours by heavy enemy 60mm and 82mm mortar fires. The extractions was conducted by infiltrating one UH1H aircraft at a time into the firebase. The extraction from FSB RIPCORDER was complete at 1214 hours. Companies A and D/2-506 Infantry extracted from a pickup zone 1 1/2 kilometers south of FSB RIPCORDER commencing at 1301 hours. Sporadic small arms fire was received during the extraction. There were no casualties or damage. The extraction of 2-506 Infantry units from the RIPCORDER area was complete at 1407 hours. During the extraction, FSB RIPCORDER was under constant fire from numerous enemy mortars of 60mm and 82mm caliber. Several hundred rounds impacted throughout the firebase during the operation. Heavy 12.7mm anti-aircraft fire was directed against the aircraft flying into the firebase. Air, artillery, and ARA destroyed several enemy mortars and 12.7mm machineguns. In addition, numerous enemy driven into the open by CS were killed by air, artillery, and ARA.

5. RATIONALE FOR CLOSING FSB RIPCORDER. In early July, it became obvious that NVA forces were massing in an attempt to control the RIPCORDER area. The enemy buildup of forces and the tempo of mortar, RPG, and anti-aircraft fire steadily increased during the first half of the month. By the third week of July, it was apparent that the cost and effort required for the self-defense of RIPCORDER placed the accomplishment of the primary mission, i.e. operations in the BRADLEY-AIRBORNE area, in grave jeopardy. The closing of

23 July 1970

RIPCORDER would make troops available for offensive use against the enemy supply caches and logistic installations to the rear of the NVA forces massed around RIPCORDER. The cache sites in the AIRBORNE-BRADLEY area are believed to be part of the base areas of the 803d and 29th NVA Regiments. The concentration of NVA forces around RIPCORDER would further facilitate operations in areas to the south and southeast. Therefore, the decision to extract from RIPCORDER was made, and operations into the AIRBORNE-BRADLEY areas will be undertaken as a part of operations CHICAGO PEAK. Additional factors of critical importance in the decision to close FSB RIPCORDER were the domestic and foreign political implications of another US firebase undergoing a KHE SANH or DIEN BIEN PHU siege. RIPCORDER, in given an inordinate amount of adverse publicity, might well have jeopardized the program of Vietnamization. RIPCORDER operations caused heavy NVA casualties and drew the enemy from his cache sites, causing him to mass and thus to present numerous targets vulnerable to heavy air attack and artillery fire.

6. ENEMY LOSSES. From 13 March through 23 July, the enemy suffered 422 NVA KIA, 6 NVA PW, and 93 individual and 24 crew-served weapons captured.

7. FRIENDLY LOSSES.

a. During the same period, US losses were 68 KIA and 443 WIA. Casualties during the extraction on 23 July were 3 KIA and 20 WIA.

b. Aircraft losses on or near the firebase include:

(1) UH1H
Minor damage 13
Major damage 10
Destroyed 3

(2) OH6A
Minor damage 1
Major damage 4
Destroyed 1

(3) CH47
Minor damage 5
Major damage 3
Destroyed 2

(4) In addition, 60 aircraft received combat damage which required limited repair.

8. PLANNED OPERATIONS. Planned offensive operations will be initiated on or about 25 July with the combat assault of one infantry battalion to open a fire support/operational base which will provide support for the insertion of 2 ARVN infantry battalions on or about 28-30 July 1970. A detailed plan will follow.

FOR THE COMMANDER:

HUGH A. MACDONALD
Colonel, GS

From Letters Home:

0600 Thursday 2 July 1970 (Saigon Time)
Aboard plane en route Japan to Saigon

We will arrive Saigon in 2½ hours...As I approached Vietnam in July 1965, I was excited, looking forward eagerly to the experience, and somewhat nervous with anticipation. Today, in contrast, I feel like a workman reporting to still another job. I know what is ahead of me. I know I can do whatever is required and do it well. I am interested in discovering what changes have occurred since I left Vietnam in 1967. And I am impatient to get the preliminaries over with quickly, join the Screaming Eagles, and get on with the job. I suppose that today's feeling of routineness is the reaction of a professional - perhaps a wearied professional.

Camp Eagle, 0600 Friday 3 July 1970

I've arrived in the Screaming Eagles. Spent only one hour in Saigon. Thence a two hour flight to the division. I like General Hennessey. He's obviously a superb soldier and effective leader. On 15 July I will take command of the division while General Hennessey goes on leave to move his family from Fayetteville, NC to the Philippines.

Camp Eagle, 0600 Wednesday 8 July 1970

Visiting the firebases and troop units has rapidly brought back my tactical sense and sense of urgency. Also my affection, admiration, respect, and compassion for these soldiers. And my indignation, rage, and intolerance for sloppy, incompetent, or even mediocre leadership and practices that provide these soldiers anything less than the highest of standards and best of leadership.

This is a tough area. The mountainous terrain covered with triple canopy jungle is the most difficult terrain I've seen American soldiers operate in. And those hills are full of tough, skilled battalions and regiments of the North Vietnamese Army - NVA for short. The NVA use Laos as their supply base and line of communications.

By the time thee receives this letter, we will have launched a new operation that will last for some time. It will be tough, and we'll have some difficult going. But we'll do what is necessary to meet the threat.

Camp Eagle, 0545 Friday 10 July 1970

Two days ago, in a classic cavalry action, our 2nd Squadron, 17th Cavalry discovered an entire NVA regiment moving from NVN via Laos into SVN. The NVA regiment was already in SVN just south of the Khe Sanh when the cavalrymen found them in the open.

Our air cavalry attacked, principally with helicopter gunships, but also by putting three rifle platoons on the ground. They inflicted much damage on the enemy. Most importantly, the cav captured an enemy map that gave the locations of several enemy units. We will quickly exploit our advantage by attacking the NVA regiment.

Yesterday we established fire support bases with Screaming Eagle soldiers from which our artillery will provide fire support to 1st ARVN Division combat assaults which will be made later this morning. Having located the approaching NVA regiment near the Laotian border with US resources, we are now supporting ARVN ground operations

against the NVA. This is part of "Vietnamization," that is transferring more and more responsibility for major military operations from American units, which are being phased out of Vietnam, into the hands of ARVN units.

This new operation, known as CLINCH VALLEY, can develop into an operation of major importance to SVN. The NVA regiment was en route to attack objectives in the populated coastal lowlands where the bulk of the people live and probably intended to attack a city such as DONG HA or QUANG TRI. They won't do that now. Our cav chewed them badly two days ago. With luck, the 1st ARVN Division will inflict more damage on the NVA and perhaps send them back north.

As a result of this new operation, we have postponed the planned operation near the ASHAU VALLEY which was scheduled to begin today. I am glad. I had an uneasy feeling about our planned operation and matters in the RIPCORDER area.

Camp Eagle, 0630 Sunday 12 July 1970

As Assistant Division Commander for Operations -ADC(O)- I am responsible to the Division Commander for supervising the planning and conduct of the division's tactical operations. I work with the brigade commanders and division staff officers in developing operational plans. Whenever a fight develops, I go there learn as much as possible about the situation and represent the division commander in expediting assistance to commanders and soldiers actually doing the fighting. This involves making available additional firepower, logistical support, and reinforcements when appropriate. This help is given through the brigade and battalion commanders who actually command the troops in contact. This means that I travel and fly all over the division AO; visit all firebases; talk with commanders; listen to as many soldiers as possible to sense their morale, spirit, and needs; and do all within my resources to find out what the realities are inside the platoons and companies which fight the division's battles. It's a demanding job, and I like it.

Camp Eagle, 2200 Sunday 12 July 1970

Visited FIRE BASE RIPCORDER and talked with soldiers today. RIPCORDER is our firebase on top of a peak in the mountains that houses a defensive position with about 200 soldiers on it. Infantrymen defending artillery firing positions from which artillerymen provide fire support for infantry ground operations in the surrounding AO. RIPCORDER is like a medieval fortress castle, a bastion on a peak. Right in the middle of mountains covered with jungle and right in the middle of enemy-infested territory. Its value to us is that it is a base for our artillery which provides supporting fires for other firebases and for infantry operations in the surrounding circle of about 12 kilometers, artillery range. RIPCORDER is essential to planned future operations of the 101st Airborne and 1st ARVN Divisions in concert.

RIPCORDER is under intermittent enemy small arms, machine gun, mortar, and recoilless rocket fire from surrounding mountains and jungle. Winds of 50-60 miles an hour whip across the peak. This makes it hazardous to land helicopters on the small landing pads leveled off here and there on the peak. To further complicate helicopter landings, the enemy usually fires mortars and machine guns onto RIPCORDER whenever helicopters approach.

I spent a couple of hours just walking from one fighting position to another and just talking with soldiers. I found the soldiers' attitudes sound and healthy and their spirits up-beat and admirable.

Camp Eagle, 2230 Tuesday 14 July 1970

We expect an attack on FIREBASE RIPCORN tonight or in the early morning tomorrow and have been planning unusually heavy defensive and offensive fires that we hope will catch the enemy in their preparations and during their advance to attack. We must be lavish in our use of supporting fires of the infantrymen in direct contact with the enemy. We Americans believe it far better to expend dollars and explosives than lives to get the job done. Believing that RIPCORN will undergo a major attack during the night - including attacks on the four rifle companies on the hills and in the jungle nearby - the brigade commander is spending tonight on RIPCORN with the 2/506th Infantry battalion commander in order to be of maximum assistance when the expected attack comes.

This afternoon we presented General Hennessey plans for the offensive we'll begin during his absence. Our aim is to use the time remaining before the monsoon begins in mid or late September to inflict as much damage as possible on the NVA and leave ARVN in the best possible position to defend their people in the coastal regions. This is the last summer a full-strength US division will be in this area of crucial importance to RVN.

General Hennessey leaves at 1800 tomorrow. I expect an active time during his absence. A big fight at RIPCORN and a tough offensive operation in an area in which we have not operated and which the enemy holds in strength.

Camp Eagle, 0600 Wednesday 15 July 1970

No attack on RIPCORN itself last night. But tough, close-in fighting on the part of several of the rifle companies operating in the area around RIPCORN. Two hills in particular are important to defense of RIPCORN: Hill 1000, about 1 KM west, and Hill 805, about 2 KM east. Enemy control of these hills permit them to place direct and observed fires on RIPCORN and to fire on every helicopter flying into RIPCORN. We need to control those hills ourselves in order to secure RIPCORN itself. Company D, 2/501st Infantry is fighting like hell to hang onto HILL 805. Captain Chris Straub, whom we knew at Fort Benning, commands the company. He and his soldiers are doing a superb job under damned tough conditions.

Since 0445 I've been reading recommendations for awards for valor, another part of my duties as ADC-O. Platoon medics stand out as men who bravely and selflessly risk their own lives to care for other men. As a group, the combat medics are outstanding.

Camp Eagle, 0600 Thursday 16 July 1970

General Hennessey left at 1830 yesterday. He will return about 5 August. I'm privileged to be acting commander of the Screaming Eagles.

The attack on RIPCORN which I have expected for the past two nights did not materialize, but the rifle companies in the surrounding AO have been hard-pressed.

From letter to daughter

Camp Eagle, 0530 Saturday 18 July 1970

This morning I go to visit the 85th Surgical Hospital where most of our wounded from the division are evacuated. I will visit our wounded, talk with them, hear about the action in which they were wounded, sense their morale, and award them Purple Hearts. These hospital visits are moving, saddening, and often inspiring. Necessary, too. Both to show the commander's concern for his soldiers and to keep the commander in touch with the human realities and cost of war.

This afternoon I will spend a couple of hours on Firebase RIPCORN. This is the lopped-off mountain peak on which we have about 200 men who have been taking the heaviest enemy attacks continuously for the past two months. Their position is located in the heart of enemy territory. They are there to provide a firing position for our artillery and a base for infantry operations to disrupt enemy plans to move in against the populated coastal areas. RIPCORN is essential for artillery support of the operation which we will begin in a few days. That next OPERATION CHICAGO PEAK will take us right into the heart of enemy-held territory where we will operate against his supply and logistical bases.

But back to RIPCORN. I go there periodically because that is the place in the division under heaviest enemy pressure. That is where we are taking our heaviest casualties. I go there because I think it important for commanders to share the dangers of the soldiers they command, both symbolically and factually. I want to talk with soldiers at RIPCORN and personally sense and evaluate their mood, morale, and spirit. I want them to know that their generals and commanders are human beings who hunker down in foxholes just as they do and not merely remote, unknowing, uncaring persons way back in a headquarters.

Yet, I realize that my spending a hour or two at RIPCORN or elsewhere in the field with troop units is tokenism. I fly in, land, spend a relatively short time, and then fly away. Those soldiers remain in the field and on the firebases for days, weeks, months. They are immersed in the harsh, tough, demanding, unrelenting reality of war and fatigue and fear and mountain and jungle and enemy and struggle for survival that I have not experienced directly since I was a rifle platoon leader and rifle company commander in the Korean War in 1950-51. But one never forgets....

Camp Eagle, 2130 Saturday 18 July 1970

This has been a memorable day. A day of strong emotions, anxiety, and necessity for quick decisions. A day with potential for disaster. But a day which ended somewhat better than one might have expected in mid-afternoon.

This morning I visited the 85th Evacuation Hospital at Phu Bai, just a 10 minute flight from Camp Eagle. I spent two hours there visiting and talking with all the wounded from the 101st Airborne Division. Most of them were wounded in actions on and around RIPCORN. It was a moving, humbling, inspiring experience. What wonderful, brave men these are. No matter how badly hurt and beaten up - and some were quite bad - every soldier I talked with was grateful to be alive, obviously proud of his outfit, cheerful, concerned about his buddies, and eager to pay the enemy back in kind.

I found one young Pathfinder who had been wounded at RIPCORN five minutes after arriving there who had made a parachute jump with me at Fort Benning in May 1970. When I walked up to his bed, he grinned, said that he was glad to see me again, and reminded me that he and I had jumped together at Lee Drop Zone.

We have two artillery batteries on RIPCORN, one 105mm guns, the other 155mm guns. Both battery commanders were wounded yesterday and in the hospital. I presented the 105mm battery commander his 6th Purple Heart. He is in his 49th month in Vietnam. This is his 3rd tour of duty. He has extended each tour beyond the normal 12 months.

I asked him why he spent so much time in Vietnam. He answered that he is one of the Army's best artillerymen and that he feels that his place is here in combat where he can best use his knowledge of artillery. He was an artillery sergeant who was given a direct commission during his 2d tour in Vietnam. He has been blown out of his gun position three times by incoming mortar rounds. He is chomping at the bit to return to his battery. I hope he stays away for several weeks, for it appears to me that he has had enough for awhile. When I visited his battery on RIPCORN several days ago, his nerves were obviously tightly drawn.

But what a spirit and attitude! Thank God for men like these.

One wounded sergeant from D Company, 2/501st Infantry was concerned about his platoon leader. The sergeant became unconscious when he was wounded by an explosion and thinks that he saw his lieutenant killed by the same explosion. But he is not certain and wants to know if his lieutenant is alive or dead. He prays that his lieutenant is alive.

The same sergeant told me that his company commander, Captain Stroud, is the bravest, best officer he has ever known. That is Captain Chris Stroud who served with us at the Infantry School. I've monitored Chris's actions during the past week as his company has fought to hold a key hill near RIPCORDER. Chris and his soldiers have done a magnificent job.

The human aspects of war are clear to be seen in a military hospital ward. The results of the tragic way in which men treat men. The human price of war and battle and combat. The waste of life and limb. And the nobility and courage and selflessness of men. Surely someday men will become aware of the awful waste and horror of war and find other and better ways of seeking solutions to conflict. But that's wishful thinking. I fear that as long as man is imperfect man war and battle will be part of his life. Until the millenium, we'd better be capable as a nation of coping with war and dealing with nations who seek to expand and enslave and degrade other men through violence. We will always need men like those I was with today. Thank God for them and their kind!

And then there was this afternoon.

At 1340 a Chinook (the large two-rotored cargo helicopter that hauls 40 soldiers or several tons of cargo) was hovering over the artillery positions on the top of RIPCORDER seeking to lower a sling-load of 105mm ammunition into place beside the 105mm artillery battery. Enemy 12.7mm machine gun fire struck the Chinook and shot it down right on top of the artillery ammunition storage area. The helicopter immediately burst into flames and set the artillery ammunition on fire. Ammunition began exploding. There was a real potential that the entire hilltop would burn, explode, and create casualties in large number. Then, too, the enemy could launch an assault while the defenders' attention was distracted by the fire and explosions.

I immediately took to the air, flew the 30 minutes out to RIPCORDER, and spent 1½ hours circling RIPCORDER, monitoring the radio net of the 2/506th Infantry on the hill, and giving orders, as appropriate.

Knowing that we had probably lost the 6-gun 105mm battery on RIPCORDER and possibly some of the six 155mm guns, our immediate problem was how to provide adequate artillery coverage of RIPCORDER and the infantry companies operating around RIPCORDER in view of the disaster that had just occurred. At 1515 hours we ordered the 1/501st Infantry to combat assault onto a hilltop and former firebase called GLADIATOR on which we could position artillery to provide fire support for RIPCORDER and the nearby rifle companies. By 1800 hours the 1/501st Infantry had completed seizure of GLADIATOR. By 1900 hours a 105mm artillery battery established on GLADIATOR and firing registration rounds in support of RIPCORDER. All of this in response to an unexpected situation and quick decisions. An excellent demonstration of the rapidity of action and flexibility of the airmobile division.

As things turned out, we lost six 105mm guns and virtually all the 2000 rounds of 105mm artillery ammunition on RIPCORDER. Fortunately, the 155mm guns and our mortars were undamaged. Even more fortunately, human casualties were light in comparison to what they may have been. About 1830 hours, we helicopter-lifted to RIPCORDER a small bulldozer to push the destroyed guns, unexploded ammunition, and debris out of the way so we can airlift replacement guns into position tomorrow.

I observed and monitored the RIPCORDER battalion radio during the whole burning, smoking, exploding mess and heard calm, cool, collected professionals doing their job in a business-like manner. As always, the men in the thick of the action are calmer and cooler than people several command echelons removed. No one is as realistic and calmly business-like as the veteran combat infantryman who has become accustomed to the realities of infantry combat. Thank God for these men!

The XXIV Corps Commander, General Sutherland, arrived at Camp Eagle at 1615 to be briefed on our coming operation CHICAGO PEAK. I am glad he was here, for I was able to come directly from RIPCORDER and tell him exactly what the situation was.

So ends a notable day. People and units responded magnificently and professionally. What could have been a real disaster ended as well as could have been reasonably expected.

I am confident that our planning for the coming operation CHICAGO PEAK is sound. Since 16 July we have been reconnoitering the area of operations and putting in air and artillery strikes. This is going to be a difficult operation. The enemy seems to be there in real strength and with many anti-aircraft weapons. We are going into his vitals, his supply bases that he has established via Laos.

Camp Eagle, 0600 Monday 20 July 1970

As our casualties continue on and around RIPCORDER and as the start date of our operation CHICAGO PEAK draws near, I am increasingly aware of the responsibility of command. I think the load feels heavier because I am an interim commander in the absence of the regularly assigned commander.

I visited RIPCORDER for an hour plus yesterday. It was good for me to talk with the soldiers there. Their calmness and matter-of-factness reassured me and built my confidence. Only a few mortar rounds came in while I was there. None caused any casualties.

I saw several young sergeants and officers that had passed through Fort Benning while I was Assistant Commandant of the Infantry School and with whom I had talked at Fort Benning. It's heart-warming to find that they greet me as an old friend.

I squatted down beside one young soldier who was sitting on the ground in the middle of the six 155mm howitzers cleaning the breechblock of one of the weapons. As he looked up, I stuck out my hand and said, "I'm General Berry. What's your name?" He looked up disbelievingly, stuck out his oily hand, shook hands, and exclaimed, "Jesus, what's a general doing here? I thought you'd be back at a headquarters or some shit like that!"

Yesterday I ate lunch with the battalion commander and company commanders of the 2/501st Infantry. They had come out of operations around RIPCORDER the previous day, had cleaned up, gotten some sleep, and are now beginning the week's refresher training that we rotate our battalions through, particularly after long, tough actions.

That battalion has experienced continuous, tough fighting in the mountains around RIPCORDER and has taken heavy casualties. I wanted to just sit and talk small unit tactics with the commanders just after they had come out of the operation and learn from them all that I could. Also wanted to sense their attitudes and morale.

I learned much and found very sound attitudes and morale. Enjoyed the couple of hours I spent with them.

LTC Otis Livingston, the battalion commander, when a 1st Lt was tactical officer of the Ranger Class in which I was a Ranger candidate. He's a good battalion commander. Several days ago when Livingston was on HILL 1000, I tried to land in the one-ship LZ near his CP. Tried twice to land but drew so much and such heavy enemy fire that I gave it up as a poor idea. I jestingly accused Livingston by radio of giving me an unfriendly reception just so I couldn't land and harass him.

Dropped by the hospital to see Captain Chris Straub, the commander D/2/501st Inf I mentioned in my last letter. I learned that he spent the last day on the ground with his company without reporting that he had been wounded in the left arm by a grenade fragment. He wanted personally to get his company out of the bush before leaving it, even temporarily. His wound is infected now, and Chris will be evacuated at least as far back as Cam Ranh Bay. He has done a fine job, as has his entire company and its soldiers.

Please pray hard for me to make the right decisions and to handle well my responsibilities. I'm praying harder than I've ever prayed before in my life for God's help and guidance in handling the job that is mine.

Camp Eagle, 0600 Tuesday 21 July 1970

I'm earning my pay for decision-making this month.

After reviewing the results of our reconnaissance efforts in the CHICAGO PEAK operational area, I have decided to postpone the start of CHICAGO PEAK and change its concept significantly. Reason: the enemy is in strength and has many AA weapons; our artillery support is unlikely to be adequate to the need especially in view of the action on-going around RIPCORDER; and at this stage of the war, all US offensive efforts must have an extremely high assurance of success and of low casualties.

From the beginning, my professional instincts have suggested that our plan has called for us to take unacceptable risks without a high assurance of success. I have refrained from expressing those instincts because this operation has been on the books for several months and because of my being a newcomer to the division and to the operational area. Now that I personally must decide to launch the operation, I cannot, in good conscience, undertake the operation in light of the new information our intensive reconnaissance is bringing us and the RIPCORDER situation. My judgment is that we'd lose too many aircraft and too many men.

Now that I have made that decision, I am relieved. Now I've got to develop a concept for an alternate operative and inform the corps commander of my decision.

James D. ...

Camp Eagle, 0515 Wednesday 22 July 1970

We've now reached a point when we must question the continued use of RIPCORDER. Is it worth the casualties for the purpose it is serving? If we decide "no," how do we get out of RIPCORDER? If we vacate RIPCORDER, then what do we do? Where will we place our artillery to support the attack we want to make into the NVA base camp and cache area?

Today we must decide on a course of action that differs from what we are now doing. Now we are taking constant casualties on RIPCORDER from incoming mortar rounds, particularly among our artillerymen on top of the hill. We are taking constant casualties among the rifle companies operating in the mountains and jungles around RIPCORDER trying to locate and destroy the enemy mortars and AA machine guns that attack our helicopters and people. Daily our artillery fire from RIPCORDER grows less effective as enemy mortar rounds make it more difficult for the artillerymen to fire their howitzers.

Now what? That's what I'm paid to decide. This morning the Division Chief of Staff, G-2, G-3, 3rd Brigade Commander (responsible for operations in the RIPCORDER AO), and I will meet to discuss and determine the best course of action to follow. The staff will make its recommendations following an all-night planning session.

There are plenty of NVA in those hills. More of them are moving in from NVN via Laos. They are well equipped and supplied. The mountains seem loaded with 12.7mm AA machine guns. Yesterday, we had two more helicopters shot down in the same area where a rifle company was in a tough fight. The NVA want very badly to inflict a major defeat on US forces.

The MACV J-3 visited yesterday afternoon. He stated that our division area in the most active in Vietnam and has been for some time. We have the most and the toughest enemy in country, have been involved in the heaviest fighting, and have been taking the most casualties. Which concerns people up the chain of command.

The MACV J-3 stated that within the prevailing political atmosphere accompanying Vietnamization of the war and US troop withdrawals it simply doesn't make sense to accept heavy casualties. Yet, he said, the Screaming Eagles' planned offensive operation, CHICAGO PEAK, is the only operation on the books for this summer that has any hope for hitting the enemy where it will hurt him and where we can destroy the enemy's supplies and disrupt his plans for a monsoon season attack into the coastal areas.

In summary, MACV's hopes for some kind of successful summer 1970 offensive depend on the Screaming Eagles, but we cannot afford to take heavy casualties. There's a dilemma here, isn't there?

In the meantime, our continued reconnaissance in the CHICAGO PEAK operational area uncovers more and more enemy; and the continued usefulness of RIPCORDER as an effective firebase and operating base becomes highly questionable.

It all comes down to one commander's decision. Mine.

Camp Eagle, 2130 Wednesday 22 July 1970

I'll be brief tonight. Must get some rest, get up at 0400, and be in the air by 0500 tomorrow to oversee tomorrow's operation - extraction from RIPCORDER.

This morning I made the most difficult professional decision of my life: to get out of RIPCORD as quickly as possible. Easier said than done.

It will be an interesting professional task to get out of RIPCORD with elements of three NVA regiments encircling it, mortar fire falling on the base, 12.7mm AA machines guns shooting at the helicopters as they land and take off, and with so many men and so much equipment and materiel to come off the hill and out of the operational area. In other words, it can be damned difficult. We'll have to be competent and professional in carrying this off in good order.

God grant that I made the right decision and may God guide us all in our strength, judgment, courage, and decision-making. Especially may God sustain those 300 or so soldiers we must extract from and around RIPCORD under hazardous conditions.

From the beginning until the end, I'll be over the operation in my command and control helicopter monitoring, assisting, and making decisions as appropriate.

Now that the decision has been made and the various staffs and subordinate commanders are working out plans and details, I'll get some rest. I'll review the final plans at 0430 tomorrow and then go airborne.

The outcome will be history by the time thee receives this letter.

Camp Eagle, 1830 Thursday 23 July 1970

Today we extracted from RIPCORD. Successfully. It was damned tough. We got out with far fewer casualties than we might have had, and we did considerable damage to the enemy. Tomorrow we begin our own offensive into the enemy's rear.

The division performed magnificently. Our soldiers outdid themselves. The entire division came together with a unity of effort and spirit that is fulfilling and inspiring.

I am confident I made the right decision in withdrawing from RIPCORD. It was made barely in time for the enemy had massed an impressive amount of mortars and machine guns and AA weapons around RIPCORD. He had massed his troops to attack and seek to wipe out RIPCORD and its defending troops.

I feel that I did a good job of commanding the division during the past 24 hours. I gave it all I had. Now I am exhausted and drained emotionally and physically. I am relieved it is all over and that it went well.

But the operation had its human price. Minutes before the extraction from RIPCORD was complete, mortar fire killed the battalion commander and battalion operations officer of 2/506th Infantry. The battalion commander, LTC Andre Lucas, USMA '54, was a magnificent soldier and commander. His operations officer, Major Ken Tanner, was at Fort Benning with us and had just joined the battalion. He was a good man. Andre Lucas had provided exceptionally effective, even inspired, leadership since April to the units operating on and around RIPCORD. What a loss!

A separate but related drama was unfolding during the night of 22 July and well into the 23rd. Company A, 2/506th Infantry was fighting for its life in the bush near RIPCORD. All of us who followed that action during the night did all we could to assist with firepower, but the fate of the soldiers of Company A lay largely in their own guts and fighting ability - and in God's hands.

Beginning at 0623 this morning, even as the extraction of men and equipment from RIPCORN began, Company D, 2/506th Infantry was combat assaulted into the bush near RIPCORN to go to the assistance of Company A. A Company had 12 men KIA and considerably more wounded. Out of about 85-90 men in the field. Company D counted 61 NVA KIA littering the ridge along which Company A had fought and around its night defensive position. The main reason Company D went to Company A's relief is that Company A had too few men without wounds to both fight and carry the company's dead and wounded.

We landed 22 Chinook sorties and almost 100 HUL-H sorties on RIPCORN to remove the artillery pieces, two bull-dozers and other equipment, and our soldiers. The aircraft landed singly beginning at 0545 this morning and completed the extraction from RIPCORN at 1207. They landed amidst heavy mortar and heavy machine gun fire. Only one aircraft was shot down - a Chinook that landed on top of RIPCORN without injury to any crew members. Eventually enemy mortar fire hit the aircraft and it caught fire, burned, and was totally destroyed. Cost new was \$2million. Many other aircraft took many hits from machine gun rounds and mortar fragments and some crew members were wounded. Miraculously, no crew members were killed and no other aircraft were destroyed.

Extraction from RIPCORN was complete at 1207. We lost 3 KIA and 20 WIA in that operation. We could have lost many more but for God's grace.

Not until 1332 did we complete extraction from the bush of the bloody, weary Company A, 2/506th Infantry. At 1335 Company D, 2/506th Infantry, which had protected and assisted Company A's extraction, came under enemy close-range fire. At 1407 Company D's extraction was complete.

Thus officially ended the extraction from FIRE SUPPORT/OPERATING BASE RIPCORN.

Fire teams from the 2d Squadron/17th Cavalry flew low and slow over the peak and slopes of RIPCORN to make certain that every single soldier had been extracted.

John Fox, my friend and instructor pilot, and I circled RIPCORN and then flew back to Camp Evans and then to Camp Eagle.

After I talked with the division's chief of staff and reviewed with him messages and battle reports that were being written about the RIPCORN extraction, I went into the division commander's office. I closed the door. And I wept.

I wept tears of sorrow for those we lost. I wept tears of thankfulness for the courage and determination and endurance of those who survived. I wept tears of relief that it was over - at least for that day.

I thank God we came out as well as we did. I have prayed more fervently to God during the past 24 hours than during any other similar period of my life. Not for victory nor for damage to the enemy. But for strength and wisdom in making sound decisions affecting the lives of these men whose lives have been entrusted into my hands. Dear God, this is a heavy responsibility. I need your help in making the right decisions.

Tomorrow the 1st Brigade will combat assault to seize ground behind the enemy massed in the RIPCORN area. This will begin our offensive operation CHICAGO PEAK. We'll gain surprise and advantage by attacking the NVA the day after our withdrawal from the RIPCORN area.

Camp Eagle, 0545 Saturday 25 July 1970

Last night I went to bed exhausted at 2100 and slept without waking until 0500.

This morning I'll be in the air over the combat assault of the 2/502nd Infantry into the FIREBASE MAUREEN area.

After the combat assault and when it is evident we are firmly lodged and have no trouble, I'll attend a memorial service the 2/506th Infantry is having for its members killed in the RIPCORDER action to include its battalion commander and operations officer.

Then at 1500 I'll talk to the soldiers who were on RIPCORDER itself and explain to them the full significance of the RIPCORDER operation and seek to put into perspective their contributions. I will also present awards for valor to a representative group of soldiers from each unit on and around RIPCORDER.

Yesterday, I spent two hours talking informally with the officers of the 2/506th Infantry, the unit that secured RIPCORDER and conducted many of the operations around the firebase. Had lunch with them and mostly listened to their stories. First, however, I took a few minutes to recount to them the history of RIPCORDER for the past 3½ months. Then we talked about the small unit actions in which they were involved, and I listened and learned.

Since for the past several days I have spent much time flying over the RIPCORDER area and visiting units on the ground and since I monitor both active battalion and company radio nets as I fly, I was familiar with specific company actions and with the sound of commanders' voices. It was quite interesting, then, to talk with those same company commanders whose actions I had monitored and to hear their full reports.

When we had finished our free-wheeling discussion, the company commanders asked me to talk with their soldiers at today's awards ceremony and give them full perspective of the meaning of RIPCORDER. I will do so of course. These soldiers must come to understand what they have accomplished during the entire history of RIPCORDER, which is much. I fear that the newspapers will report the last day of RIPCORDER as a "bugout" and classify it as a defeat. To do so would be a grave injustice to these magnificent soldiers who fought, bled, and died where their country sent them.

Camp Eagle, 0600 Sunday 26 July 1970

Yesterday I spent 1½ hours in the hospital talking with about 25 of our wounded troopers. As always, I was moved and inspired. Not a single complaint from a single soldier. And I'm talking about soldiers who were only 24-36 hours away from battle, who had confronted death, and most of whom were badly wounded and in pain. Each one had a spirit and pride and healthiness of attitude that humbles me and reminds me of my responsibility for them and duty to them. Underlying all their thoughts and feelings is relief for being in the hospital and thankfulness for being alive.

Camp Eagle, 2130 Sunday 26 July 1970

I realize that I have concentrated on the ground troopers as I have reported on RIPCORDER. In doing so, I have inadvertently neglected the aviators and the Pathfinders. Theirs were crucially important roles.

The aviators are of central importance to this airmobile division. Every aspect of RIPCORDER demonstrates that. Aviators and their helicopters fly infantrymen into and out of combat, move artillerymen and their weapons about the battlefield, evacuate wounded, resupply men and weapons, and provide command and control vehicles for commanders. Air cavalry aviators and helicopters perform reconnaissance. Armed helicopters - gunships and aerial artillery - attack enemy positions and support troopers on the ground. Aviators and their flying machines provide the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) its unique mobility and flexibility.

Pathfinders are parachute-qualified soldiers who are trained to guide aircraft into field locations to pick up or drop off soldiers and loads of supplies and equipment. They are air traffic controllers located on the ground and in communication with ground commanders and the aircraft who serve commanders and soldiers.

Aviators and Pathfinders performed magnificently during the RIPCORDER operations, especially during the July actions which I observed and of which I was personally aware.

DUSTOFFS - the medical evacuation helicopters - saved the lives of many of our soldiers on and around RIPCORDER. Brave, selfless aviators and crewmen flew in dark, windy nights and hovered over raging battles and extracted wounded infantrymen amidst short-range enemy fire.

Aviators and Pathfinders played a deadly game of Russian roulette with NVA mortar and machine gunners during the extraction from RIPCORDER. Pathfinders on RIPCORDER waited until the last possible second to decide to which of two or three one-ship landing pads to direct single helicopters as they were on final approach to RIPCORDER to pick up a load of soldiers. Enemy gunners tried to outguess the Pathfinders and aviators in order to place their mortar and machine gun fires where to deliver the most damage to men and flying machines. A large percentage of the aircraft which extracted men and materiel from RIPCORDER were hit. Only one was lost. That miracle was largely the result of brave, competent, astute aviators and Pathfinders.

Four Pathfinders were on RIPCORDER. Each was wounded. Each was awarded the Silver Star for valor. For six plus hours they guided helicopters in and out of RIPCORDER, about 27 Chinook and 100 HU-1H sorties. Much of the time they stood up in the open while an estimated 6 or 700 rounds of enemy mortar fire fell on the hill. The last man off RIPCORDER was 1st Lt Caballero, the Pathfinder platoon leader.

These men - Pathfinders and Aviators - were magnificent, as were so many Screaming Eagles involved in the RIPCORDER operations. They were worthy in every respect of the traditions established by the Screaming Eagle troopers of World War II.

