

A NEWSLETTER

ON RIPCORDER



The A Shau Valley

INSIDE

NEWS AND UPDATES

INCOMING

RETRO'S GALORE

THE WHIPPANY MISSION



NO: 9 RIPCORDER 16th
ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

PART II AUGUST 1986

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For Friends and Survivors of FSB RIPCORDER, RVN

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Ben Harrison, M. Bodnar, Hanover Township(Whippany)
Veterans Alliance, VFW Post 5351, John and Debra
Sherba, F. Marshall

***** UPDATES

The planning and pre-reunion get together in Whippany NJ from 7-18-86 thru 7-20-86 was a great success. For further information refer to THE WHIPPANY MISSION further along in the newsletter. Many thanks to J. Mihalko, Don Davidson, Bill Gross, Bruce Oliver and Bud Fitzsimmons for making it that way.

A recent change in Editors employment has seen the loss of a number of resources that premitted the newsletter being put together and distributed without overwhelming expense. Discussed briefly at our Whippany session we decided to note to the group via the newsletter the need for a typewriter, copier (the most expensive and essential need), and other basic office supplies.

Although this on the surface seems a large order many corporations, businesses, are willing to donate to a non-profit cause such as ours. Also our group is very diverse and we were hopeful that someone among you might be able to help or point us in the right direction. For a brief time Chuck Hawkins (A 2/506) has graciously assumed responsibility for the copying, distribution of the newsletter.

Regarding the reunion, I cannot stress enough the need to register with John and begin planning early to attend. For one thing AAA and others offer almost 50% discount on flights if you register 30 days in advance. Advance registration of any kind usually nets some discount. John can plan more effectively and put together a better reunion overall, the more information he has. If \$\$ is an issue call him at 201-386-9862.

Hope you enjoy the perspective offered by Part II of this Special Anniversary Edition of the newsletter.

***** NEW CONTACTS

- *****
- Mike Bodnar (E 2/506 Sniper) [REDACTED]
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 - Major General Ben L. Harrison (C.O. 3rd
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***** NEW CONTACTS CONT:

- *****
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***** INCOMING

TORONTO, OH

7-17-86

I had a funny feeling when I got your letter out of the mailbox. I opened the letter while I was still in my truck in the drive way. I never do that! I was very excited as I read it. I think its great. I was on Ripcord two times. I was there when we first opened it up and back again the last week. I got hit on the last day when we pulled out. I was a Sniper in E 2/506. I was attached to many different outfits. Some of the names sound real familiar in the newsletter. I'd like to join the association. It was great to hear from you.

Mike Bodnar

BELTON, TX

7-14-86

Thanks so much for your efforts in getting in touch with me. Both your letters and copies of the newsletter reached me after being forwarded by D.A. They arrived 12 July.

Ripcord looms large in my memory for several reasons. The main reason is obviously the too many men that were killed or wounded on and around Ripcord. I remember ordering in the middle of the night that A 2/506 was to be extracted as quickly as possible -- of spending the nights on Ripcord the last 3 days before evacuation to coordinate Air Force and Corps artillery support--of waiting for the inevitable nightly attack on Hill 805, of Cpt. Straub getting wounded while waiting for extraction on the PZ when his Kit Carson Scout blew himself away with a

 INCOMING CON'T:

grenade -- of the tremendous support of the Air Force and Marine and Navy air -- of how the evacuation was going unbelievably well when LTC Lucas and his S3 made one last visit to Ripcord and were killed running to their helicopter. Yes, the 23d of July, 1970 is one birthday I'll never forget!

On 10 Oct. I will have just returned from a month's visit to the Far East and will not be able to get to the reunion. I'll do my damndest to get to the next one!

Thanks for letting one know about the Association. Count me in!

Most Warmly,
 Ben
 (Maj.Gen. Ben L. Harrison)

 WORKING ON
 RETROSPECTIVES



RIPCORD: A CHARLIE OSCAR'S VIEW

By: Charles F. Hawkins
Commander, A/2-506
30 May - 17 November, 1970

A prayer, dear Chaplin,
Is all we need
To go out and fight,
And die and bleed.
And when the war
Is won - or lost;
What prayer then,
Is heavenward tossed
By we poor souls
In our man-made hell?
I think we'd best
Say that prayer well.

INTRODUCTION

I grew up in Alaska where I learned to use a gun, read a map and roam the forests in search of game. I knew how to fish, set snares and bait traps. Reading sign and following trails were second nature to me. I should have been a point man but they made me a company commander instead.

I ended up in Nam by way of West Point, a quick tour in Germany and a succession of aircraft that seemed to get progressively older and uglier at every stop. So did the stewardesses.

Cam Rahn Bay, Phu Bai, Camp Evans and the inevitable SERTS training, the 2-506th, Currahee Pad and (finally) into the bush as a platoon leader with Charlie Company. It was early March and the monsoons were just starting to let up a bit.

I busted jungle with Charlie Company as a platoon leader for three months. I busted my cherry in the first 48 hours. That was the way it was in our battalion, you didn't stay cherry long; the NVA saw to that.

On 30 May the Battalion Commander, LTC Lucas decided I'd been a lieutenant and a platoon leader long enough. Six days before I expected it, captain bars were pinned on my collar and I was sent to command Alpha Company.

Since everyone went by nicknames in Nam, Alpha Company chose one for me - Charlie Oscar for Commanding Officer. It stuck.

PROLOGUE

It didn't have a name until we gave it one. Later, when the name Ripcord encompassed more than the fire base itself, we simply called it

The Hill. Now Ripcord has passed into the history books as one of the most costly battles of the Vietnam War. It was also one of the most significant.

Ripcord rose 970 meters out of the thick, mountain rain forests just a few kilometers east of the A Shau Valley. It was a jumble of rocks, dirt and leftovers from its occupation the year prior when it supported operations in the northern end of the A Shau Valley. Two dominant rock shapes dotted the loops of its figure-eight shape. As a hill it wasn't bad.

What was bad was the surrounding hills. There were three that were high enough and big enough to provide good observation and fields of fire against Ripcord: Hill 805, 2000 meters east; Hill 902, 2200 meters south; and hill mass 1000, just a kilometer west. These key terrain features provided the enemy with a significant tactical advantage. We tried to control each one but we were never successful for very long.

The battalion's interest in Ripcord actually began in mid-March when Alpha combat assaulted onto Ripcord, took casualties, and was pulled off.

On April 1st we tried again by putting Bravo on the hill. That wasn't much good either. Bravo took some serious casualties before they were extracted.

On the 11th Charlie Company conducted a ground assault from the south and secured Ripcord. Except for the artillery prep, not a shot was fired.

The original plan of operation called for Ripcord to perform the same stepping-stone-into-the-A Shau role that it had played the year prior. FSB Bradley, in the northern end of the Valley, was the next planned fire base for the battalion to occupy.

The plan changed, however, after the Battalion Commander made a visual recon of Bradley from his C&C huey. He, his S-3 and Fire Support Officer observed NVA artillery rounds impacting on top of the hill. The NVA, from across the Laotian border, were registering their guns in preparation for our anticipated move into the A Shau. The plan to seize Bradley was scrubbed; we would now concentrate on interdicting the enemy around Ripcord.

The 2-506th picked up responsibility for FSB O'Reilly, nine or ten clicks north of Ripcord, late in June. This really spread the Battalion thin; only two companies plus Recon to cover the thick jungle between and around Ripcord and O'Reilly, and a company on each fire base.

On 1 July Ripcord received sporadic mortar fire. On 2 July it got worse. The fire base received over 300 incoming mortar, rocket and other weapons fire; and it continued the next day and the next ... for 21 more days. The battle for Ripcord had begun.

Waiting for Our Turn

When the battle starts we're on FSB O'Reilly. We're there when Charlie Company gets waxed on Hill 902. We're still there listening on the command net when Delta is out-muscled on Hill 1000; and the next day when what's left of Charlie and Delta try again. We know our turn is coming. It's just a question of when.

10 June. A hot, dry wind is blowing - 45 knot gusts. Bravo Company's on Ripcord catching living hell and has been for four days. Delta and Charlie are back at Camp Evans waiting for replacements and preparing for reaction type missions. And Alpha is beginning its air assault into a small LZ just east of Ripcord.

The lift birds bounce around the windy sky like popcorn in a skillet. We pitch and yaw so bad I worry more about falling out than what's happening on the ground. We're told that it's a hot LZ but the AK fire isn't even close - two, three hundred meters away, maybe. Except for Bravo, we're alone in the AO. Our mission? Simple; take Hill 805.

The waiting is over.

Hill 805

12 June. D/2-501 gets OPCONed to the battalion and together we assault and secure 805. 3d Platoon leads the way and makes contact with an NVA machine gun team. The enemy flees but LT Jim Noll gets hit in the leg. I lose my most experienced lieutenant.

D/2-501, under CPT Straub, gets the higher part of 805 and the mission to defend it. We secure a lower hill 200 meters west that has a small LZ on it. Our mission is to leave in the morning and head down into the valley southeast of Ripcord. We're to look for enemy graves.

At 2245 the attack comes; sappers first, NVA riflemen second. RPGs and 60mm mortar rounds slam into the hill. They hit Delta from three sides but they don't know we're on the other hill. Surprise. Alpha's 2d and 3d Platoons' supporting fire rips into the attacking enemy. The 1st Platoon fights off a penetration attempt on our backside.

We take no casualties. D/2-501 has 16 wounded. The NVA pay dearly. It is one of the few times I've ever seen them attack without conducting adequate reconnaissance.

Delta would stay on Hill 805 four more nights. Each night the NVA would launch a fresh assault and each time they would be beaten back. And CPT Straub would watch his company die a little with each of the ensuing attacks.

13 June. Alpha begins penetrating the valley. The days and nights run together. There are bunkers, caches, and fresh sign everywhere as we continue working our way deeper and deeper. We don't find any graveyards, though.

Our good luck holds. We move out of an NDP before dawn; an hour later the NVA are hitting it with mortars. 2d Platoon gets caught in a friendly 155mm howitzer barrage. No casualties. Neither myself or the FO has called for it, the bastards just fired. And we go deeper.

We are alone again on the 17th when D/2-501 is evacuated. On the 18th a Chinook gets shot down on Ripcord and causes the ammo dump to blow. It takes out CPT Dave Rich's B/2-319 Arty; no more 105 howitzer support.

On the 19th we have more contact. I kill two NVA who walk up on our CP. One's a recon sergeant. D/1-506 becomes OPCONed to the battalion. LTC Lucas tells me to move to a link-up with them about two kilometers east of Hill 805. But they never make it off the LZ. Delta and Charlie have to go get them out. The D/1-506 commander, CPT Don Workman, a classmate of mine, is killed. Alone again. No one tells me about Workman.

On the 20th we make our deepest penetration into the valley, about a click south of Hill 805 and two clicks east of Hill 902. Things start to get real interesting.

The Wire Tap

1st Platoon's up front when they discover a high speed trail with WD-1 telephone wire running parallel to it. LT Bill Pahissa taps into it with the ear plug from a Sony radio and has his Kit Carson scout listening and writing by the time I get there. We make a second tap with the handset from a PRC/25 and our interpreter begins eavesdropping.

Pahissa gets some ambushes out along the trail for security and I tell 3d Platoon to secure the high ground to our rear. 2d Platoon sets up in a far ambush overlooking a small stream. Then I go back to the wire tappers.

For over five hours ARVN SFC Long, the interpreter, and the Kit Carson listen, take notes, and relay the hottest, first-hand intelligence of the battle directly to Division. For the first time during the Ripcord operation we learn who and what we are up against. We don't believe it at first, but it's true. I've managed to get me and my men between an NVA Division Headquarters and one of its' four Regiments.

And, as we're learning the names of the division, the commander, the political officer, and the locations of each regiment, several

battalions, and some of the companies, all bloody hell breaks loose. 2d Platoon springs their ambush on a water party.

Still, we listen. They're bitching about Hill 805 and are excited about the ammo dump explosion. They wonder who we are, who's messing around in their valley. (GIs aren't supposed to get too far from hill tops and ridge lines.)

And the information keeps coming and we keep passing it on. Sometimes we talk directly to BG Sid Berry, the acting Division Commander. Then 2d Platoon springs their ambush a second time and SP/4 Miller kills one of the enemy.

By late afternoon the enemy wises up. We hear them order a squad to investigate why they've lost impedance on the line. Pahissa holds his position and SSG Ross' ambush fires up the NVA linemen. We use captured AKs to add to the confusion. A second party comes through the brush an hour later and 1st Platoon rips out as much phone line as they can and break contact.

We set up in our old NDP and are real quiet that night. Looking for those gravesites isn't important anymore.

'The Maw of the Beast'

I'm caught between a rock and a hard place. I don't know Workman and D/1-506 have been nailed on their LZ. I think about linking up with them. But finding the NVA division changes things. My training tells me to attack the enemy headquarters, defeat them. But they'll be well defended; we'll need a fresh brigade to do it. I don't think the 101st has a fresh brigade. And my grunt-tactical common sense tells me to get the Hell-out-of-Dodge. But where?

The only guidance I receive from battalion is that division wants a prisoner to confirm our wire tap findings. Shift!

We talk it over that night and I decide to try for a link-up with Workman and D/1-506. That means going back through the wire tap area. It might work. The NVA might not expect it. But, I think, if we have any contact at all, we'll head west toward Hill 902 and an LZ I know. If there are any prisoners hanging around, well, we'll keep them.

We work slowly and carefully the next day and, sure enough, we make contact. 1st Platoon blows away a couple of NVA and, honest-to-god, one of them is still breathing. But Doc Draper says he isn't going to make it, so that's that. Bang!

Then I get the word from battalion to prepare to get to an LZ. Good idea; at least I'd been planning ahead.

Later that day as the company comes back together, SP/4 Journell, out on OP, kills a

courier for the NVA Division Commander. Bingo! There's a detailed map outlining the NVA plan of attack for Ripcord. We don't need a prisoner anymore.

That evening LTC Lucas tells me that Ripcord is to be evacuated, thanks to our intelligence information. We stay quiet throughout the night but our mood is one of confidence and relief. We aren't out of the bush yet, but it looks like we might make it. I wish to God it had been that simple.

0700 Hours, Wednesday, 22 July, 1970. We're up all night in anticipation of our coming extraction. I send 1st Platoon on a patrol to the west to find and secure a crossing site on the stream we have to traverse to get to the LZ I've picked. Everyone else is packed and ready.

0900 Hours. LTC Lucas calls me on the secure set and tells me to go to the LZ just east of Ripcord for extraction. Huh? I've always picked my own LZs. I don't want to back-track all the way to Ripcord. He says no. We argue. And the damned secure set goes out. By the time I get a message shackled-up and sent to the TOC, Lucas is gone - out on the fire base or up in the air. I say the hell with it and, figuring that maybe he needs me at his LZ as part of a plan, I call 1st Platoon back and give 2d Platoon the mission to lead the company back toward Ripcord.

1245 Hours. 2d Platoon under LT Lee Widjeskog moves out. I'll be with 3d in the middle and 1st Platoon will follow last. We uncoil from the perimeter. 2d disappears into the brush - 50 meters, 100, 150. Men in 3d Platoon start to get up with their rucks. Some of the guys in 1st are leaning up against trees. Pahissa and his platoon sergeant are hanging around the CP getting ready to watch us leave. Helmets on. The 2d Platoon point team hits the 200 meter mark. Can't see fifty feet. Eeeassy.

The silence shatters. I hear the pop-snap of M-16s. Contact! Everyone crouches down. Damn it! What's happening?

For the first few seconds it seems like another successful engagement by the 2d Platoon. The point team drops two NVA in their tracks, an M-60 crew runs forward to provide a base of fire and a couple of guys start maneuvering. But then the AK fire comes crackling back. It's a fuckin' fire fight and getting worse. The high pitched rip-chatter of the M-60 merges with the wump of satchel charges and the thrumming beat of RPD machine guns. The FO begins to call for fire. I'm trying to get the situation clear from Widjeskog.

Damn! Damn! Damn! My mind screams - I've really got us in the shit now. Why did I decide to back-track? Why?

Then there's the ringing tung! tung! tung! of 60mm mortars firing close to our east flank. There's movement in the brush. We see them. NVA. It's a massed attack. Firing erupts

everywhere and men on both sides fall. Widjeskog tells me he has a platoon to his front, maybe a company. Then his radio goes dead. Something hits me in the leg. Pahlissa heads for his men and begins directing fire toward the enemy. Mortar rounds are landing everywhere - bursting in trees and spewing fountains of earth out of the ground. Men drop rocks and roll behind them or find trees for cover. 3d Platoon begins dropping back. The CP is exposed and, for the moment, the only thing that stands between us and the enemy is an enormous hardwood.

Fuck it! I'll get us out of this shit.

I see a small knoll some 60 meters west, grab my RTOs, Wit and Vic, and head for it. My only thought now is to secure the radios and get help: cobras, fast-movers, mortars, anything. A mortar round bursts overhead and sends shrapnel into my back. The three of us make it, but I can't locate the rest of the CP.

My stomach is churning bile. The sounds of battle rage around us and I force myself to be calm and talk on the radio. Gunships first; they are closest out of Camp Evans and Phu Bai. They can be on station in eight minutes. Then fast-movers, F4s with 250 pounders and napalm. The FO usually handles the artillery and mortars but I tell the TOC I needed it anyway. I don't realize until later that the FO is dead. We don't get mortars and artillery right away.

Either the NVA see us or our long pole antennas. Whatever. RPGs and mortar rounds begin ripping through our little knoll. We slide down the backside of the hill as far as we can and still maintain radio communications. The fire gets too intense and we scramble over to where we think 3d Platoon is. There we find Jody Smith from 3d and SSG Ross from 1st. I still don't have commo with 2d Platoon. I try 1st and 3d; nothing. Myself, and what is left of the CP, have the only two functional radios in the whole company.

In three minutes the cobras to get to us. They're already airborne for another mission when they hear our call and divert. Their rockets and mini-guns are desperately needed. The problem is that I don't know how the company is deployed. I can't talk to, or see, any of the platoons. 2d Platoon is the only one I have a good idea about and from the sounds of their fire fight it seems as if they are holding, for the moment. I try shouting, it works. Some guys from 1st Platoon holler back.

Twenty minutes into the battle the situation starts sorting itself out. 1st and 3d Platoons are mixed together a hundred meters or so down the southwest side of our NDP hill. 2d Platoon is two hundred meters northwest on level ground and I'm in the center down on the west side. The NVA have us surrounded on three sides: east, north and south. We figure its about a battalion, but who's counting. Then our TOC on Ripcord tells me there's another NVA battalion on the way. Thanks, they can wait in line.

The first F4 Phantoms arrive carrying 1000 pound bombs - too big. Air Force MAJ Skip Little is up in the FAC bird and I tell him to find the nearest clearing to our position and drop the bombs. He finds the one I mean a click away and unloads, with secondary explosions as a result. I sort of hope it might be the NVA Division HQ.

Enemy fire against our position intensifies and we move back to our little knoll. By this time I've got about six other guys from 1st and 3d. We form a tight, little perimeter as I work the gunships.

I finally get the artillery and mortars to come down on the company net and they start shooting. Skip Little gets F4s out with the right ordinance. We are getting good support. The gunships are superb. I'm able to bring their fire in as close as 25 meters. It comes in too close one time and myself and some others catch a few pieces of rocket fragments. But it forces the NVA to keep their heads down.

Several times Jody Smith catches my attention and says, "Charlie Oscar, we got to do something!" I know he's right.

We make a quick plan and start crawling forward. We don't get twenty feet before the world opens up on us. I take shrapnel in the face and several guys get knocked over by the concussion. We try again and don't get half as far. An RPD fires us up and nearly gets Ross. One NVA aims an RPG at us - my M-16 is just a bit faster. Still, we're pinned down.

I'm not sure when I realize that we're going to win (winning means surviving with what is left of the company), but I know we won't unless we get the NDP hill back in our control and rejoin the platoons. 2d Platoon is effectively surrounded. That leaves the CP group and what can be put together from 1st and 3d. I figure that, if the guys in 1st and 3d can move back up their side of the hill, we can provide supporting fire. I've still got to direct the cobras and fast-movers. It might work. The problem is that there's no leadership left in 1st and 3d.

As we shout back and forth I learn that Pahlissa and his platoon sergeant, the FO, and a lot of others are KIA; and even more men are badly wounded. I end up shouting to a fellow from Alabama named Webster. I had found a leader.

Webster has maybe a dozen men who can move up the hill. I've got nine. So, a score of men have to take the hill back from the NVA battalion. We'd need some help.

We get it from the U.S. Air Force.

Skip Little controls fast-movers for me all afternoon. I send him the adjustments and he tries to show the F4s where to put the 250 pound high-draws and napalm. We work Phantoms up and down the length of the enemy lines. Trouble is that Skip isn't authorized to drop the ordinance any closer than 500 meters to friendly troops. I know this; and he knows

we're in deep trouble. So he fudges the danger close margin down to 300 meters or so. Still not good enough. Most of the NVA are 50 to 150 meters away and sometimes closer. (2d Platoon had enemy throw satchel charges completely over their perimeter.)

I need the high-drags to drop even closer. A 60mm mortar is still throwing rounds at us. Just on the far side of our old NDP hill, maybe 100 meters away. Its also well defended. I recognize that, if this position can be destroyed, Webster and his men might have a chance to take the hill. I begin telling Skip to bring the air strikes closer; "Drop five-zero.", I radio.

Skip won't go for it at first - too close. I tell him about the mortar position and our need to regain the hill. The bombs fall a little closer. I keep giving 'drop five-zeros'. The bombs inch closer. Skip! We're dying down here! Webster and his men begin to move. We're shooting. I don't want the bombs on top of us, just next to us. Is that such a hard thing to do? Drop five-zero, drop five-zero. And then it happens.

The dive of the Phantom is different from previous dives. It's closer, louder, lower - filled with deadly intent. Looking back on it one can almost imagine hearing the bomb's release mechanism go 'pop'. And two hundred fifty pounds of high explosive fall out of the sky. And it goes whoooooomp-boom!, right where I want it, right on top of the NVA mortar.

Later, Skip would say the bomb had malfunctioned - that it was just a fluke - a lucky accident of fate. I guess he had to say that and I guess I believed it then. But hindsight is sometimes more revealing. Today, I honestly believe Skip and that unknown F4 pilot planned and executed that life saving 'malfunction'. Guys, wherever you are today, thanks and God bless.

The blast picks us up and throws us around. Some of the guys get hit. But it destroys the enemy position and a lot more. Webster and his men move up the hill.

Its still a hell of a fire fight. But this is our chance. Men from 1st and 3d assault the hill. The men around me are firing.

"Charlie Oscar. We've got it back!" Its Webster.

The NVA begin breaking contact. We shoot some in the back as they run through the jungle. They leave their dead scattered over the torn earth, along with a lot of equipment.

As I join Webster one of the last rounds of the day is fired at us - an RPG which, luck again, hits a tree limb instead of us. The blast and shrapnel bowl us over and we all take fragments somewhere. I get hit in the neck and end up on my ass. Vic gets it in the leg. But we're okay.

2d Platoon begins fighting their way back and

the NVA break contact with them too. Sometime during the battle they get a radio working. The gunships are still on station, circling the air like sharks looking for prey. They provide cover throughout the night, taking turns as their fuel runs low.

About dusk CPT Rollison and Delta Company try to come into a nearby LZ but napalm is still burning on it. They'll try again at first light. We're alone.

My first worry is security - a perimeter. But I've only got twenty guys who can move and fight. I then make what I think is the toughest decision in my life. I put the wounded outside the perimeter. Somehow my CP medic is alive. Doc is everywhere at once doing his best to put pieces together. We place the wounded men in small groups of twos and threes, between tree roots and anywhere else they'll have some cover, and a chance of surviving another attack. The dead we try to collect at a central point.

The men impress me with their hard-core attitude. Those who aren't in shock or agony are grim and determined. "Let 'em come back, Charlie Oscar," one guy says, "we'll whip the shit out of 'em again." And I hear other tough, positive comments from each man I speak with.

Overhead, flares fall through the night sky and artillery strikes seek targets on the sides of Hill 805 and elsewhere. Alpha watches and waits.

The two MIAs come in around 2100 hours. Alexander (Big Al), the FO's RTO, had taken care of my secure radio set operator who had been blinded in the first minutes of the battle.

Sometime during the wee hours of the morning I succumb to shock and exhaustion. Wit sees me become incoherent and tells me to lay down and get some rest. I pass out and sleep the remaining hours until first light. When I open my eyes I'm staring into the dead face of an NVA soldier.

Rollison is back into the LZ before sunrise and fights his way to us by 0900. We're not alone any more.

A lift of 21 choppers is due at 1230. That leaves three and a half hours to make a hole in the jungle. At 1225 we hear the birds in the distance and, as the lead ship comes into view, the last tree goes down. Our postage-stamp-sized LZ with its raised platform is just barely large enough.

The dead and wounded go first. We keep waiting for the NVA to open up on us. As we rise into the clear, mid-day sky the last few birds begin taking 51 cal fire from the surrounding ridges. Its too little and too late. We head for Camp Evans and away from the 'maw of the beast'.

Postscript

Ripcord marked the begining of the end of the Vietnam War. Neither side could be said to have won the Battle for Ripcord but because we didn't, it signaled our lack of resolve to the NVA.

The battalion suffered terribly - 60 KIA and 360 wounded. LTC Lucas and his S-3, MAJ Tanner, were killed on 23 July, the final day of the battle. The Charlie Company Commander, CPT Hewitt, was killed on Hill 902. The list is a long one - too long, and too painful, to remember clearly.

There were heroics also. 2d Platoon's Miller had an M-16 and then a thump gun shot out of his hands. He picked up an AK and proceeded to kill seven NVA. Doc Draper died trying to save the life of a wounded comrade. A guy in 1st Platoon stepped in front of an RPD machine gun burst to save the life of his buddy. And others: Alexander, Galindo, Pahissa, Webster ... and the names blurr with the passing of time. And, God help me, sometimes I wish I could remember, and sometimes I'm too afraid.

Alpha went back to the field a week after Ripcord, as did the rest of the battalion. There were thirty-nine of us: myself, nine veterans of Ripcord, and twenty-nine cherries. The platoons were barely squad sized. I had Smith and Baldy now carrying radios in the CP and Booty carried the secure set. The FO and his RTO were new, and I had a new medic. It would be a month before we got back to anywhere near full strength.

There was one man who got killed that everyone overlooked because he wasn't American. SFC Long, the ARVN interpreter who provided the valuable translation service during the wire tap, was Alpha's thirteenth KIA. Out of 75 men who started that long Wednesday afternoon on 22 July there would be 13 KIA, 56 WIA and only six unscathed.

LET IT BE

By: J. Mihalko

There was a time when I was young
So many songs had yet to be sung
I was so happy, carefree and content
Along came a war, to Viet Nam I was sent.

They taught me to maim, they taught me to kill
Just one more mountain, just one more hill
Darkness brings peace, so you think while you rest
Then the incoming rounds shake you out of your nest.

The morning comes quickly, you awake with a yawn
Like men on a chessboard, too bad you're the pawn
Another day, another mile
You'll only survive by your cunning and guile.

A well deserved break, the heat is intense
You think to yourself, does this war make any sense
The months go by slowly, you count every day
You hope you are lucky, and you break down and pray.

At last it's over, as you sigh in relief
You board that freedom bird, very much in disbelief
Your mind is now speeding, your thoughts race ahead
It's great to be alive, but you remember the dead.

You finally arrive home as you stand there and stare
You gaze at the faces, and wonder did they care
On the outside you're happy, but inside you plea,
A song comes to mind, Let It Be, Let It Be.



1945 to 1970 to 1986: A Father looks

Back on Ripcord -- and Beyond

One of you Ripcord survivors, Frank-Gonzalez, told me recently of the nest of snakes many of you carry in your heads as a legacy of Vietnam, and how you have to figure out how to deal with them. Here is a Ripcord father who has his own bundle of snakes to torment him. It may help me, I hope it may help you, if I wrestle with them a bit here out in the open.

The essence of my own turmoil is this: I helped put Terry on a path that led him to Vietnam and to his death, even though meanwhile I myself had left that path.

I write this with deep respect and in honor of all of you, living and dead, who struggled and suffered so intensely in those first 23 days of July 1970, only to have Ripcord end up just another hill we then abandoned. You -- including my son, who fell on Hill 805 on 14 July -- deserved better from your country and your government. Regardless, I salute you.

14 Steps to the 14th of July, 1970

Step 1: occurred the day Terry was born, Jan. 27, 1945, a birth as violent as his death would prove to be. His mother and I were imprudently staying in a hotel too far from the hospital, to enjoy my last days in port before my ship sailed to join the last stages of the Pacific War. Result: a critical breeches birth, a broken leg, and an infant trussed up for a month, first one leg, then both, as he resisted violently, instead of being cuddled in his mother's arms.

We always wondered how much this traumatic birth had to do with Terry's unique independence and unsocial nature, complete disregard for his peers' opinions and attitudes. His attachments were rare and not lightly given, but, oh, so deep when they were.

Step 2: Sep. 1946, Age 1½

On a vacation trip to Ohio from S.C., we toured King's Mountain, a Revolutionary War battlefield, and the first of 3 hills that would mark Terry's passing. For no reason we could fathom, Terry got terribly angry, cried and screamed without letup the whole climb along the mountain battlefield, refusing to join us, staying 100 yards behind. For many years we referred to his "King's Mountain Tantrum" as the ultimate in passionate, uncontrolled anger. Now I wonder, tho I don't

really believe: Did he have a premonition about his 3rd hill, still 24 years away? A hill where screams and cries would attend his battle to the death?

Step 3: 1948, age 3

Outside our apartment building in Anacostia, D.C., a too well thrown stone of Terry's scratched the side of a neighbor's brand new car. While his brother and the other kids fled, Terry stood his ground while the driver parked, collared Terry and hauled him to our front door. The man was livid with anger, Terry white-faced, quivering, but silent. Only slowly, then and later, did we learn to appreciate and marvel at Terry's baffling, almost unworldly honesty and courage. He stood his ground. He never retreated.

Step 4: 1950, age 5

We were stationed in Hawaii and on one eventful day Terry probably saved his brother's life and perhaps mine as well.

We were fishing off an abandoned pier on an unused airfield on the wild, windward side of Oahu. I was surf-casting and didn't notice when Larry, 3½, flying a tiny kite, dropped through a ragged hole into the wild surf below, without a sound. Terry let out a gasp, which alerted me. Without thinking, glimpsing Larry bouncing face down, I dropped through the same hole and, with a joy I can still feel, grabbed him and pulled his head out of the water.

But now what? The surf was tremendous, the pilings too rough to climb. We were hundreds of yards out from shore and I wasn't strong enough to swim through that surf with Larry. No one else was on the pier.

Terry's white face leaned over and peered down the hole. (Again I am struck by the eerie symbolic comparison to how he was to die 20 years later, saving one of his men in the act of dying.) I yelled for him to go get help and, without a word, off he went, somehow communicating with some fishermen who didn't know any English, but who got his message! They came and quickly crawled down and pulled up first Larry, then me.

Step 5: 1955-59, ages 10-14

In Washington, D.C. in 1955 we had a 3rd son, Kirby, and we became aware of another unusual quality of Terry's. With peers, adults, even his own family, he often seemed disturbingly lacking in human warmth. But with babies and animals he was extraordinarily gentle and sensitive and caring. He "adopted" Kirby as soon as we'd let him, kept him in his room, played with him constantly.

In 1959 in Little Creek, Va., when we were ordered to duty in Japan, a small crisis developed. We were not permitted to transport to Japan Terry's 5 white mice, to which he was closely attached. My Exec thoughtfully agreed to take them over and care for them. Terry was mollified, giving detailed instructions to my Exec, a priceless scene to observe.

Step 6: 1959, age 14½

Enroute Japan, in Jackson, Wyoming, awed by the majestic Tetons hovering over us, I casually, thoughtlessly offered Terry, 14½, and Larry, 13, a silver dollar each if they'd climb the mountain opposite us, while we were gassing up and getting a motel. Before I could reconsider they were off in a flash. I soon regretted my offer, as it became apparent the mountain top was much higher and farther off than I'd estimated. We began to worry lots as darkness set in. A kind man set out with a flashlight to help find them and steer them down. This 2nd of Terry's 3 hills was all triumph though. They came down exhausted but wildly excited at their success, to claim their dollars.

Step 7: 1960, age 15½

In Japan, one day we had a striking example of the combination of impetuosity and fearlessness that Terry was capable of, qualities that later in Vietnam would produce I'm sure reactions ranging from admiration to dismay.

We lived off-base as the only Americans in a picturesque setting in the midst of a Japanese fishing village. On other occasions our neighbors had reason to be vexed by our boys' pranks, slingshots and the like. But on this one day we happened on a fire in the village -- that primary dread of the Japanese in their wood and straw houses -- just after it broke out. While Larry and the villagers helped some too, Terry leaped into the scene with wild abandon, attacking the fire as if it were his

personal enemy. Eventually, the local fire dept. finished the job. Several nights later, to our surprise, 2 village policemen came as a delegation and with much bowing and appropriate ceremony tendered us the village's thanks for Terry's performance.

Step 8: 1961, age 16

The two years in Japan, my last pre-retirement ones, were full of stress, with much alienation from my 2 teenage boys who were trying to cope with an unnatural environment; ending career and marriage stress didn't help. But, in trying to reach out to Terry (I had been fully alienated from my own father) I bought him a motorcycle which proved a great source of joy for him, both in Japan and after return Stateside.

How this hobby persisted I learned best after Ripcord from Denny Belt, the most seriously, permanently disabled survivor of 1st Platoon's Hill 805 struggle. In Denny's own words:

"Do you know what Lt. Palm was always talking about? A 750 Honda. He was going to get one when he got back. We talked about it all the time.

You know, when I got back, one of the first things I did was buy one! Couldn't ride it, really, and only kept it a little while. But I had to buy one."

Step 9: 1968, age 23

This was the year of Terry's graduation from VPI in Blacksburg, Va., a strongly militarily-oriented college both he and Larry graduated from. I saw him only twice these 7 years, after our return from Japan in 1961 and my divorce and remarriage. His loyalties were good, simple ones and he chose to stay entirely with his mother. I respected that choice.

There is considerable irony and pathos in the etching of Terry's name on an impressive arch at VPI, commemorating those killed in Vietnam.

The first irony is how few names there are on the list. Despite the concentration of VPI on producing ROTC Army officers, somehow most of them managed to avoid the war or at least any combat danger. Both before and since 1970 this fact, America's hypocrisy, made me most bitter about the war, how our political, sport and other leaders could make all the pious patriotic speeches about winning the war, while making sure their own sons safely avoided getting involved!

The second irony is that Terry was not a product of VPI's ROTC program at all. As is apparent from all the above, he lasted only a short while in ROTC, couldn't stand the spit-and-polish life, the Army bullshit, to be blunt.

Step 10: Oct., 1969, age 24

Fate was now rushing down on Terry, and on me.

I was teaching political science in Kalamazoo, Mich., when Terry and his wife came to visit us briefly as part of his pre-Vietnam leave. We were scared by his appearance, so intense and driven did he seem to be, to do what was required of him, get it over with, and then get to things he really wanted to do. Thus, in his direct way -- but hardly a conventional patriotic one -- he was a double volunteer, for the Army and for Vietnam. The Army promised him electronics school -- he liked that. It would be after Nam; the "if" was unspoken.

Terry's service, with Larry soon to follow, galvanized me into a new awareness of my own unsatisfying ambivalence. I had turned against the war very early, I suppose because I knew too much about it, from 14 years in Naval Intelligence. How we'd been sucked into bailing out the French in an ugly colonial war, stayed on to be seen as their successor. All the authorities I recognized, including such military men as General Ridgway and Marine General Shoup, opposed the war as a colossal blunder. We could not win. Simply put, we were on the wrong side! But, as a retired officer, lifetime habits of quiet, if pained, obedience were hard to break.

I spoke out in my classes, to college and community groups, wrote anguished letters to Congressmen and the President. Here is an extract from an Oct. 8, 1969 letter, which I distributed widely:

"For a long time now I have been in total opposition to the Vietnam War, unable to justify its continuation on any grounds other than a need to save face, and to avoid a sense of defeat....

I am a father agonizing over a situation in which I, a career Navy officer retired after 25 years' service, do not want him [Terry] to go, and am suffering a badly shaken faith in a government and system that continues to send him and others like him to fight and die in a lost cause."

Step 11: Early 1970, age 25

Terry's first experiences in Vietnam, with what unit I do not know, were not propitious ones. In fact, he came near to losing his commission for insubordination. I have the letter, but not the date, nor any other details. But, whatever the facts, and however blunt, "un-Army-like" his behavior, his best qualities shine out for me over these intervening 16 years, in this letter. Extracts:

"I was just relieved of my command after a rumble with my CO after he ran two of my men into a sure death without even telling me about it. It must be obvious that I'm just not cut out for the arbitrary military life....

I really did my very best, and if that isn't good enough for the Army, then I guess they'll have to get rid of me....

It's hard picking up the bloody bodies of people who died for nothing, due to a tactical blunder, especially when you knew them."

Step 12: April to June 1970; With 101st Abn., 2/501, Co. D, 1st Platoon leader

The 3 months preceding Ripcord saw activity with Terry in Vietnam, and increasing anxiety by us at home.

Terry saw action and was slightly wounded in an assault on Hill 902 on 7 April, one of 3 hills surrounding Ripcord that were to prove so critical in the July campaign. He ended his letter account with obvious pride: "Don't worry, there's not a gook alive I wouldn't tangle with after I've seen what this platoon can do."

In response to this action, I wrote a letter to the editor, which ended: "I respect his [Terry's] choice, but feel America has let him down badly, that he's now only "cannon fodder," that the "cause" he serves is now merely this nation's wounded vanity.

Please, you of my generation, help end this tragic war so that our youth may again believe in the America you and I were raised to believe in."

Sickness, fatigue, shortage of platoon leaders, Nixon's ill-begotten Cambodian invasion, and other events all are reflected in melancholy, laconic, resigned comments in Terry's last letters home:

May 12: I should be out of the field by now, but A Co. and Recon platoon were wiped out, so my replacement had to go there....

May 23: ...right now the sun is going down and the jungle is like a wall, it's so thick around me

June 8: I'll soon have a rear job, and I'll take R & R later, and a 7-day leave.

June 16: Just another day in sunny Vietnam fighting the bugs and trees. I can't even remember what a car or building or round-eye woman looks like....

I have 150 days and a wake-up. I leave on the 14th of November, unless I get a drop and get out earlier..."

Step 13: Early July, 1970. Ripcord underway.

How Terry got from convalescence at 326th Medical Bn. at Camp Evans to join his Company's assault on Hill 805 on July 12 is a somewhat confusing -- but typically Terry -- tale. Only recently I talked with Trooper Frank Gonzalez -- Thanks, Frank -- who still resented a general visiting Terry and seemingly inciting him into discharging himself and -- still sick -- getting back to join his platoon. 1st SGT. Schuelke intercepted him and persuaded him to stay at Phu Bai overnite at least, meanwhile soliciting the Chaplain's help to get obviously sick Terry to spend a few more days in the rear. But in vain. Here's what he told me 10 years ago:

"Needless to say, we didn't get much sleep that night. Terry was just too worried about his platoon, so he was up reading and walking in the orderly room most of the night. The next day we went back to Camp Evans and he returned to his platoon. That was the only time he'd ever been in the rear on his own, without his platoon, during his whole stay with Co. D."

I then added this comment: "And so Terry Palm hurried back to the first Platoon and its men, his comrades-in-arms, who meant so much to him -- and to his rendezvous with Death."

Step 14: July 14, 1970

Of the grueling 5 nights' siege of Co. D on Hill 805, July 12-16, the second night, 13-14, was by far the worst, most intense, bloodiest, with the perimeter penetrated and nearly overrun. The NVA attackers were very skillful and got in very close. Accounts of survivors I've contacted over the years varied and conflicted; each position in effect fought its own battle. It wasn't until 1984, just before our 2nd Co. D Reunion, that I located an eyewitness to Terry's death. Over the phone, and in person at the reunion, SGT. Jack Godwin was refreshingly upbeat about his life and heartwarming-ly thankful to Terry for twice saving his life in the act of losing his own. He explained: A satchel charge had landed in his forward position and blown off his foot

and lower leg. Two other troopers with him, either from panic or the concussion, fled up the hill, leaving him alone. (Need I add he had some choice epithets for them!) He claims to have remained conscious the whole time throughout his ordeal. He was aware too of the NVA being very, very close, so he kept quiet. After awhile he heard Terry approaching alone and calling. He tried to warn him of the danger as Terry peered down into his hole -- such a flashback for me to the 1950 close call in Hawaii -- but an AK-47 opened up at close range and Terry fell dead on top of SGT. Godwin in the hole. Jack says before Medic Grubidt eventually came and found them both, an NVA came and stood looking down into the hole. Hence he credits Terry twice, once voluntarily in coming to look for him, next involuntarily in that his dead body shielded the live survivor.

C.O., CPT, now LTC, Straub, commented, "Your son led his platoon by example, particularly under fire. No infantryman can do more than that...."

1st PLT SGT., Mike Cooksley, much respected by the men, himself wounded in a bizarre 17 July incident in the abandonment of Hill 805, spoke with emotional difficulty over the phone to me 10 years ago: "Your son was not lacking in intestinal fortitude." Little did I anticipate that, after a 7-year settling down in a small town, good family, normalcy, in Bisbee, AZ., Mike would soon commit suicide in bizarre fashion, hard for those who knew him to comprehend. He apparently couldn't handle his own nest of snakes from Nam. I just hope my contact didn't aggravate his problems.

There they are, then, 14 steps, covering a father's 25-year memories, with snakes aplenty to torment me if I let them. But you and I -- we -- have to move from guilt and anger and bitterness to acceptance and healing and compassion, for both ourselves and others. In this sense, I close with a letter-to-the-editor I wrote only 6 days after Terry's death, while Ripcord still raged, on July 20, 1970:

"In an overwhelmingly, inexpressibly tragic event, on July 14, 1970, my eldest son's unit in Vietnam was attacked and overrun in the night, and he was killed. May I tell all of you how much I grieve, and how much I loved him and wanted him to live."

Terry was a double volunteer, first for the Army and then for Vietnam. But he was neither a "killer" nor a "hero", just doing his job as best he knew how, and counting the days till his return. He wanted so to live.

I feel America let Terry down badly, snuffing out his life in such a poor cause as Vietnam.

Will you help to make his death, along with 43,000 others, of some value by somehow turning this nation away from its obsession with power and wealth?...

It seems important to add, in a hate-filled America, that I do not hate anyone, even the North Vietnamese who killed my son. I forgive them, even as I would like them to forgive me.

But it hurts -- very much."

John W. Palm
John W. Palm



Clutching pencil stubs, using packing cases as desks and foxholes as offices, they put the Viet Nam experience into words—millions of them. Now the New York Vietnam Veterans Memorial Commission, searching for an appropriate inscription, has collected 3,000 letters, poems and other materials written from the field. Under the group's auspices, 208 of the pieces, by 125 individuals, are being published in the forthcoming book *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam* (Norton; \$13.95). A sampling:

*Only the crickets
Are bold enough to speak
Suddenly they stop
The rapid respiration
Of frightened men's remains.
You think of home and wait
Mostly you just wait.
The mortar lands nearby
Ringing in your ears
Leaves you deaf
For the rest of your life
But just how long
Will that be?*

—SP4 GEORGE T. COLEMAN
Assistant hotel manager, Princeton, N.J.

I killed my first "gooks" last night—about 20 of them. I spotted them about 800 meters in front of our position by using a starlight scope, and called in artillery on them. I only had to make one adjustment, and then they were blown away... It didn't bother me at all, because self-preservation is the name of the game over here.

—MARINE LIEUT. DESMOND T. BARRY JR.
Attorney, New York City.

I am now filled with both respect and hate for the V.C. and the Vietnamese. Respect because the enemy knows that he can't stand up to us in a fire fight due to our superior training, equipment and our vast arsenal of weapons. Yet he is able. Via his mines and booby traps, he can whittle our ranks down piecemeal until we cannot muster an effective fighting force. In the month that I have been with the company, we have lost four killed and about 30 wounded. We have not seen a single verified dink the whole time.

—LIEUT. ROBERT C. RANSOM JR.
Died of peritonitis and pneumonia after being wounded by a mine.

[My platoon leader died] fighting for a people who have no concern for the war, people he did not understand. [who] knew where the enemy were, where the booby traps were hidden, yet gave no support. People that he would give portions of his food to yet would try to sell him a Coke for \$1. People who cared not who the winner was—yet they will say he died for his country, keeping it free. Negative. This country is no gain that I can see, Dad. We're fighting, dying, for a people who resent our being over here. The only firm reason I can find is paying with Commie lives for U.S. lives.

—SGT. PHILLIP L. WOODALL
Insurance firm manager, Pineville, N.C.

*Take what they have left
and what they have taught you
with their dying
and keep it with your own.
And in that time
when men decide and feel safe
to call the war insane,
take one moment to embrace
those gentle heroes
you left behind.*

—MAJ. MICHAEL O'DONNELL



RETROSPECTIVE

A FIRST SERGEANT REMEMBERS

The first inkling that I had Delta 2/501 was going up to Camp Evans I was at Firebase Brick where we had been scheduled to begin providing security. I had waited a couple of hours for Delta when the Sergeant Major came up to me and told me I needed to go back to Phu Bai because Delta wasn't coming. They were being attached to the 2nd 506 at Camp Evans and would be operating around the Evans A.O..

I packed up my ruck and took off back to Phu Bai. A couple of days later LTC Lucas, Commander 2nd 506 called and requested I come up to Ripcord. In a series of hops and jumps, that was how one traveled in Vietnam, I finally landed at Ripcord.

Lucas explained on my arrival that he was trying to get one platoon each day in from the field on the firebase so they might enjoy a good meal. One day it might be steak, another barbecued chicken. In either case he said "The reason I wanted you as a representative from D 2/501 up here was so that others would know your unit was out there. Your company commanders and platoon leaders necessarily will need to remain in the field."

Just before dusk a Chinook came in. It was really blowing a lot of stuff around. You may recall we called them "Shithooks" for that reason. I was down behind the steps of a shelter they had built for us in case we were mortared.

Apparently static electricity detonated a round and one of the Arty people working with the sling apparatus was wounded. Although there was a lot of blood the wound was minor. At about the same time Paul Guimond who was briefly attached to one of the units pulling security around Ripcord almost got wiped out by one of those 55 gallon drum halves we used for crappers. It had went flying down the hill in flames and barely missed him. Paul came up at that point and said "I sure would hate to see that telegram. Telling my folks I got hit by half a drum of shit".

RETROSPECTIVE

We had some good chicken barbecue that evening. Later we sat on top our sleeping area watching the Quad .50 work over Hill 805 and later the Arc Light strikes come in. You'll remember that you never heard them approach. No noise from a jet engine whatsoever, but all of a sudden the whole earth would erupt. It was an impressive sight.

The following day I went back to Phu Bai and one of our platoons went back to the field. The date would have been sometime in very early July. Early in the A.M. on the 13th of July the phone rang back at Phu Bai. The R.T.O. at Camp Evans TOC was calling and said "First Sergeant I wanted to let you know you had 4 KIA'S last night and numerous WIA'S. There are too many to give you the line numbers over the phone".

The line numbers and a portion of the Social Security number were used instead of names to identify those lost or wounded. That was our first night of casualties and I believe they were Sgt. Hambree, Sgt. Jones, Paul Guimond and Lt. Palm.

That afternoon we were to get 13 replacements in. I had already went up to Evans to identify our dead and wounded and begin to write letters home. Mail needed distributing and other logistics dealt with.

On the night of the 13th we had some 26 WIA's about 12 of whom required medvac and of those only 5 had serious injuries. Before I had departed for Evans I had went to our battalion and requested a truck so that we could get our group out to the field on the 14th without delay. I had also told them I would need all the gear the men would need to join their company in the field. I reminded battalion again on the morning of the 14th as I went back to Evans to deal with needs related to the previous nights casualties.

When I returned around noon I inquired as to whether the men were ready and Sp4 Fusia informed me "Battalion says they have no ruck sacks".

RETROSPECTIVE

I went down then and as I entered one person was writing a letter. Another had his feet up reading a paperback. I said "What is this? I need my people ready to go out to my company. The company only has about 40 people out on that hill. They might get wiped out if I don't get those replacements out there"...."Well we don't have any gear"...."Could you borrow some gear?"..."Well that means we have to pay them back?"

At that point I blew my stack. One was an officer. The other an enlisted man. I called them everything I could think of. Nobody appeared to give a damn about the man in the field. They were sitting plush and didn't care.

I then got Fusia, Lusk and possibly Stegman and scoured the battalion. Finally we came up with 13 ruck sacks and the other items needed to get them ready to go. Now that we were ready we went back to battalion for the truck. The response "Well, we didn't have any gear for you so we didn't figure you'd have any need for a truck". Battalion got another dose of a first sergeants rage.

An artillery unit was just across the road. A deuce and-a-half was sitting in front of the mess hall. I inquired of the young driver who the truck was assigned to and he named an Arty Colonel. I explained I had a combat emergency. "We've got a call that a Chinook is coming in the field here at Phu Bai shortly and these men are needed in the field tonight". I repeated that it was a combat emergency. Then I told him, "I want you to go right on over to that air field. My orderly room is right across the street. Anybody jumps you, you send them right over to me. I don't care who it is. I need transportation". He complied and we got the guys out.

On the evening of the 14th we had two more KIA's which I believe were Keister and Utter. Also there were some minor WIA's. It was remarkable that none of the charries were injured that night. What a thing to earn your combat badge immediately upon arriving in the field.

RETROSPECTIVE

The next day Cpt. Straub called. "Have you got anybody back there? Anybody at all. Anybody with questionable sick call send them out."The only person I had at all was Sgt. Schnieder so he was sent. It was expected he would return with the rest the following day. Instead his name must have been on someone higher's list. He was KIA that night. The next day the company moved off 805. Shortly after there were some 4 or 5 WIA's including Captain Straub. On the 15th D 2/501 came back to Evans. Cpt. Straub asked me to take him up to 85th EVAC, and then come back after him. He said "I got this little piece of shrapnel in my arm". I told him "You ain't coming back to the company. You're on your way home. That little piece of shrapnel is more serious than you think." He replied "No, you be back around 6:00p.m. and pick me up". I went back and Lt. Selvaggi and Lt. Kirmse were along. We went on into Post OP and the first thing Cpt. Straub said was "Hey their shipping me out"! And I said "Well good-bye C.O." and I turned to Lt. Selvaggi and said "Hello C.O." Selvaggi says "Not again". It seemed like anytime anything hit the fan Lt. Selvaggi was the one who had to take over.

Delta came back. We were a little battered but morale was still there. I believe the experience made Delta a family. The sense of family is what makes our reunions so great. My wife and I, not having any children, they are like sons to me. I enjoy seeing their families and children, and how well they get along. It was a wonderful outfit and it will stay that way in my memory.

John Schuelke
July 1986

I know that at one point, my feet about to crack open, my stomach knotted by hunger and diarrhea, my back feeling like a mirror made of nerves shattered in a million pieces by my flak jacket, pack, and extra mortars and machine-gun ammo, my hands a mass of hamburger from thorn cuts and my face a mass of welts from mosquitoes, I desired greatly to throw down everything, slump into the water of the paddy and sob.

—MARINE LIEUT. VICTOR DAVID
WESTPHALL III

Killed during an ambush.

THE WHIPPANY MISSION

July 18-20, 1986

The flight into Camp Newark found me restless and apprehensive. It had been sixteen years, almost to the day. The legs weren't as strong, the paunch more pronounced, and my shoulders hadn't ached from being in harness with a ruck weighing a hundred pounds in a long time.

"Custer" Mihalko and his friend Pogeey met me on the pad. The winding drive to Firebase Whippany did little to ease my unrest. It was obvious this was going to be a difficult A. O.. The images of that drive still haunt my dreams. It was the same old high speed 4 lane trails we had seen around Ripcord.

And God the Commo wire! I begged Mihalko to stop and let me tap into the lines that ran everywhere but, he demurred muttering something about federal offense. I suppose he figured the risk too great and that the installations would be well defended.

From Whippany we drove on to L.Z. Mihalko which was to serve as part NDP and part operations base thruout the mission. There we were able to team up with Capt. Chuck Hawkins and Frank Marshall of A 2/506. The following day our team medic John S. "Doc Speed" Sherba of E 2/506 Recon arrived. He was as spooked by the terrain and signs of enemy activity as we were.

It was a diverse group for which there was a reason. We each represented elements that had worked in the Ripcord A.O.. We were to take back first hand to our individual units knowledge gained during the weekend reconnaissance.

Hawkins had been briefed by higher and succinctly did the same for us. We were to gain as much information as was possible in preparation for a major operation to begin on October 10 code named Reunited Eagles. Part of the plan called for us to link up with a unit of locals who would help us pinpoint major targets and set an agenda for the offensive.

All of us were aware of the risks. We knew that it would be difficult for this group, small as it was to remain under

THE WHIPPANY MISSION

cover. A single DWI, resisting arrest, or assault on an officer charge could ruin everything.

We were wondering best how to deal with this when Hawkins finished up his briefing by stating "Gentlemen, I don't need to tell you that Command sees the October operation as a mission of primary importance. Every available resource we need to do our job will be placed at our disposal. They've told me to let you know that the mission doesn't end until its over. We stay until we find and fix the enemy. Command thought you would appreciate that." We did.

By early afternoon on 7-19-86 we had linked up with our local experts call sign Victor Foxtrot Whiskey on Hill 5351. Bruce Oliver, Don Davidson, Bill Gross, and Bud Fitzsimmons represented a wealth of experience. They were as eager as we that October be successful. Bruce Oliver had even been in the Ripcord A.O. as a Marine in '69.

I'll give them this much, they knew what we needed to do our job. They plied us with beer and chow and proceeded to map out areas of support we could depend on and supplied detail needed to plan for October. I left them feeling that come October their help would be invaluable.

We were concerned about L. Z. Mihalko which would be an operations base in October. To "Custers" neighbors horror we were just barely able to string adequate wire around the perimeter. We dug in a deep and reinforced bunker-line.

With Custer at L.Z. Mihalko was his wife Kathy and daughter Sarah. Somehow they managed to tolerate our 5-man Recon team, laughing at our jokes, and listening intently to our stories. Our mission in great part was a success due to Kathy's efforts that weekend. Another friend on the distaff side was Chuck Hawkin's lady Glenda. If Glenda and Kathy's enthusiasm over the weekend was any indication spouses and friends of Ripcord Vets should be as valuable a part of the mission as our own.

Finally, reluctantly we went our different ways back to bush we were more

THE WHIPPANY MISSION CON'T:

familiar with. I got on a flight to my A.O. feeling our part, the reconnaissance was a huge success. My only concern was that the October operation to be successful requires all our involvement - not that of a few.

Folks, an excellent recons been done. Intelligence will continue to pour in from Victor Foxtrot Whiskey 5351 and L. Z. Milhalko. A wire perimeters been strung and bunkers are waiting on us. Command let us know this mission, the reunion, is not over till we do it right. The rest is up to you.

Chip Collins
August 1986



I'm sick both physically and mentally. I smoke too much, am constantly coughing, never eat, always sit around in a daze. All of us are in this general condition. We are all afraid to die, and all we can do is count the days till we go home. We're all in desperate need of love. When we go to Saigon, we spend all our money on women and beer. Some nights I don't sleep. I can't stand being alone at night. The guns don't bother me—I can't hear them anymore. I want to hold my head between my hands and run screaming away from here. I cry too, not much, just when I touch the sore spots. I'm hollow, Mrs. Perko. I'm a shell, and when I'm scared I rattle. I'm no one to tell you about your son. I can't. I'm sorry.

—MARINE CPL. JOHN HOUGHTON
Writing to the mother of a slain comrade. Tugboat deckhand living in Camden, N.J.

Really, the physical and human damage done over the last few years is much greater than I realized—especially the human damage . . . Not just the dead, but the G.I.s who can't talk in coherent sentences anymore, or the ones who have found they love to kill, or the Vietnamese, who must have been a very gentle, graceful people before the war turned them into thieves, black marketeers and prostitutes . . . I feel like I'm at the bottom of a great sewer.

—SP5 THOMAS P. PELLATON
Singer and maître d' in a New York City hotel.

[Vietnam] is a country of thorns and cuts, of guns and marauding, of little hope and of great failure. Yet in the midst of it all, a beautiful thought, gesture and even person can arise among it waving bravely at the death that pours down upon it.

—MARINE LIEUT. MARION LEE KEMPNER
Killed in a mine explosion.

I can envision a small cottage someplace, with a lot of writing paper, and a dog, and a fireplace and maybe enough money to give myself some Irish coffee now and then and entertain my two friends . . . I don't think it will be too terribly long before we are together again. I wish you peace, and I have a great deal of faith that the future has to be ours. Adios, my friend.

—AIR FORCE LIEUT. RICHARD VAN DE GEER
Died when his helicopter was shot down May 15, 1975, while ferrying Marines during the Mayaguez incident. Officially the last American to die in the war.

Letters compliments of Time April 15, 1985 issue.