

RIPCORD REPORT

A NEWSLETTER

No. 1 JULY 1985

For Friends and Survivors of FSB RIPCORD, RVN

NO:6 APRIL 1986

EDITOR: Chip Collins

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REGULAR CORRESPONDENTS/CONTRIBUTORS

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FRANK GONZALES
MIKE RENNER
FRANK (MARSHALL) RIZZO



REUNION UPDATE:

Following the February issue in which we provided some initial information on Fort Campbell as well as sought information on who planned to go I received positive responses from some 8 or so people. I did feel that as the deadline approached we were going to get many more.

However as I and others began contacting Ft. Campbell and making plans to attend I began to seriously question whether or not the event planned there would meet our needs. Part of the problem we began to see was that there was no one on site to help shape the event to our needs. I had received no takers on my request for help in coordinating the reunion, but this became a secondary issue.

The clincher came when I began to try to get answers to several questions I had regarding Ft. Campbell. It became obvious that it would be impossible to house the majority of our group in a central location. In fact it looked as if we might wind up in 2 or 3 different towns. Ft. Campbell's accommodations were already fully booked.

When I contacted former ASSN secretary/treasurer George Rosie regarding my concerns he confirmed that the event had grown to gargantuan proportions over the years. He noted that a common complaint of those ~~not~~ already well instructed in the ASSN Reunion process that although they had a good time as the result of the planned association event they did not often get up with buddies from their former units.

Following that information I contacted a majority of those of you who had indicated a serious intent to attend and expressed my concerns. I have since made a decision not to formally commit the group to a reunion as part of the Ft. Campbell event.

I would note that some of those I contacted still plan to attend Ft. Campbell due to a genuine interest in the Associations. As you let me know who you are I will inform others of the group who might have an interest in attending where you will be staying thru the news-

REUNION UPDATE: (Con't)

letter. There's the possibility that a good sized group of Ripcord people might still be able to get together there.

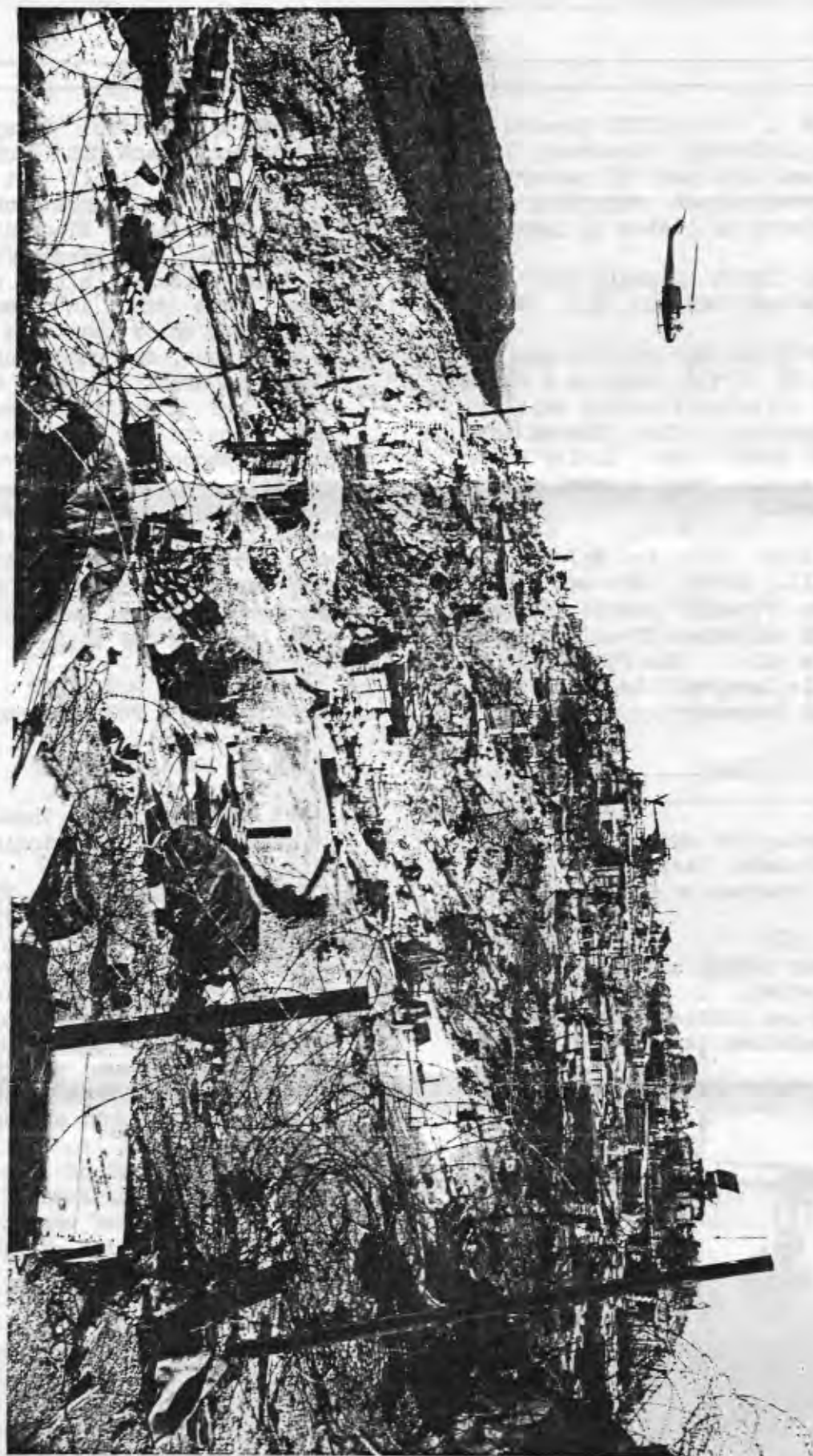
It would be my hope that those of you who attend will make an effort to contact other Ripcord survivors and let them know what we're all about. For those of you who had planned to attend Ft. Campbell or still do and would be unable to attend another please accept my sincere apologies for the inconvenience that this major shift in plans has caused. I just could not commit to Ft. Campbell given the handicaps I foresaw.

Just what are we going to do? As I discussed this change in plans with a number of you two alternatives immediately surfaced. I'm sure that with some thought others will too. The importance of having someone as an on-site coordinator affected the initial suggestions. The first would be to have it near my home in what is called the Tri-Cities area of Bristol VA, TN, Johnson City and Kingsport TN. This area has a medium sized airport and lodging and places of interest are in abundance. Only an hour from my home, I could do a lot of leg work beforehand.

John Mihalko had by far a better suggestion except possibly for those traveling great distances. His home town of Whippany NJ is only 20 minutes from Newark Airport. Quality lodging is in abundance near his home. He would be able to gain the use of his local Legion Hall for any meetings which is only a block or two away. He'd be glad to have us at his home for an outdoor barbeque or similar event. Whippany I understand is part of the New York Metro area.

When can whatever alternative we plan be held? One of my concerns as we neared Ft. Campbell was that contacts have been picking up in recent months. I would suggest we plan for sometime in September, October, or early November to permit a greater number to attend.

Well thats about it on Reunion Information for now. Please let me know if you have further ideas regarding our initial get together and how and where it might be held.



NEW CONTACTS

- MIKE RENNER (2 / 11 A BTRY Ripcord 155's) [REDACTED] 52591. Mike was with the 155 Battery on Ripcord. Correspondence regarding his Ripcord experience is listed in Incoming

- KEN IACULLO (501st Signal) 4541 No. [REDACTED] 60656

- JOHN TOBIN (B 326 Eng Bn) [REDACTED] John is a close friend of J. Milhalko's having gone to high school together. They bumped into each other at Camp Evans during their tour. Tobin's unit for a time was on Firebase Ripcord.

- BOB HOWE (C Co. 158th Avn Bn) 74 Ash [REDACTED] Bob was a crew chief with the "Phoenix" outfit an honor he shares with our other Phoenix contact Bruce Updyke a pilot. The Phoenix group was extensively involved in Ripcord Operations. (See Incoming)

INCOMING:

(The following are excerpts from letters received since last issue that should be of interest to the group.)

FEBRUARY 15, 1986

Received your letter and the newspaper articles yesterday. I didn't realize that so much was written about Ripcord. Also, the newsletter is a great idea, it

INCOMING: (Con't)

is very informative. If my memory serves me correctly each EOD Technician at Ripcord was wounded. If not by incoming, then by our own rounds cooking-off from the Chinook fire. Ripcord was definitely a hazardous experience for us also. We all did quite - a bit of growing up in that short span. I remember that helicopter pad below the mess hall, waiting to get out, and wondering if the next 82 mm was meant for you. We also spent a lot of time in the bush and making many trips to all the Fire Bases. So we always thought of ourselves as honorary grunts.

It was good reading about something you actually took part in. I thought Ripcord was just an insignificant hill nobody ever heard about or would care about. I now feel honored to have participated, even if for a few days.

BOB LYNCH
287th Exp Ord Disp.(EOD)

MARCH 9, 1986

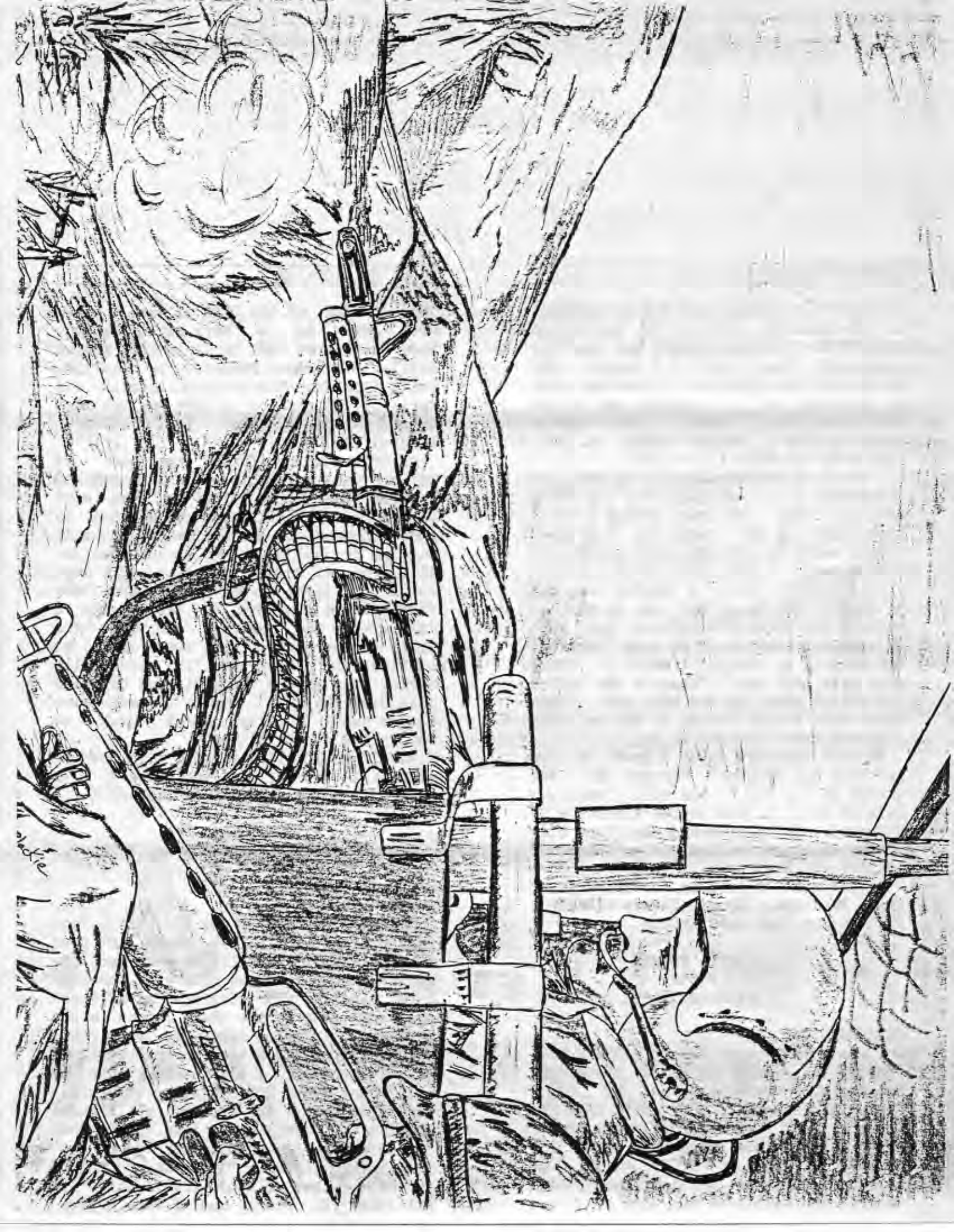
Got your material. Thank you very much it sure got me to thinking about that hill again.

I was the gunner on a 155 on Ripcord. We were the 2/11 A Btry. 155's. We were on Granite when the shit hit the fan, either in April or early May. (I can't remember the dates very clearly anymore.)

I remember May 18 we had a cease fire but for what I don't know, anyway some fooks came up close enough and fired 3 RPG's on us. I took a peice of shrapnel in the arm. I got a week down at Cam Rahn Bay and some good times. I later took some shrapnel on Ripcord but stayed until we were extracted off July 23.

My section chief was hit in the leg so we put him on a bird. I was a corporal so I got the gun crew. When it was all over out of six of us only Bill Mace and I were left out of gun No. 6. The others took shrapnel and a bird out of there.





INCOMING: (Con't)

We lost our Captain one day to shrapnel in the shoulder. Our 1st Lt. was killed. Our SFC was wounded pretty bad and was taken off. That left (I think) SFC Hollers in charge of us. I remember when we got word to leave we all met in the ASP (Ammo Supply Point). While we were there it took 3 rounds right on top. Damn good sandbags I thought!

I remember down by the pad we were in old mortar holes waiting until the birds came in. When one was coming I told these guys to get ready but the door gunner waved us off. The bird landed and of stepped a Light Colonel with a couple of Majors. Hell I wanted on but he wanted off. He walked over to me, I noticed how clean his uniform was, spit shined boots and all. He said "Where's the mortars at son?" I said, "I think they have left sir." "Where's the grunt TOC at?" I said, up the hill sir. Shit there were rounds coming in and he was standing there talking to me!

He said "You are doing a good job son Airborne All the Way", Saluted me and walked to the top of the hill. (What was left of it). I just couldn't believe it happened. I later heard the grunt king of the hill got killed. I've wondered if that was him.

By the way I'm looking for these guys, Randy Burdette, Lonnie Sevore (Doc), William Ray "Pee Wee" Greene.

MICHAEL RENNER
2/11 A Btry
(Ripcord 155's)

FEBRUARY 1986

I was a crew-chief aboard a UH-1H helicopter. Our unit was C. Co. 158th Avn, Bn, Asslt. we were based out of Camp Evans in I Corps. Our call sign was Phoenix. We flew many different companys but our main units were the 2/506, 3/187 and 1/506.

I had made a few sorties to Ripcord before the battle on the 23rd of July.

INCOMING: (Con't)

The morning of the 23rd we were told we were going to --a very hot operation. When we first got to Ripcord it was a battle I'll never forget. The antiaircraft fire from the surrounding hills and mortars and small arms fire was the most intense I had ever seen. (Not counting Lam Son 719)

After we had reinforced the base of Ripcord (the unit that we reinforced was getting heavy casualties) we then went back up to the firebase and started to remove personnel and equipment. The main landing pad had a CH-47 broken down on it and we had to use a smaller pad down the hill. After we had evacuated the fire base we then had to extract the 2 companys we had inserted earlier. The smell of gun powder and sweat could be smelled all over the fire base. While moving the troops from Ripcord to Fire base O'Reilly, the mortar concentration was so heavy I really didn't think we would make it out alive.

Yes I would like to come to a reunion with all the fellas from Ripcord. We have alot to share with one another.

BOB HOWE
C Co 158 AVN Bn

February 19, 1986

The last newsletter was absolutely fantastic. Expecially the story of your friend "Shag". I really do very much appreciate what you have done with the Ripcord saga and your continuation of newsletters. Some of the stuff I read in the newsletter articles makes my skin crawl. Ripcord still has a very powerful grip on me. I doubt if I will ever be able to even think about Ripcord with out a grimace. The battle for Ripcord still rages with in me from time to time. You mentioned in the last newsletter your acquaintance with Benny Hill. Benny and I served together in Recon from January '70 til June '70. Benny and I were pretty



INCOMING: (Con't)

tight in Recon. I attended Benny when he was knocked unconscious by an RPG blast on an L.Z. about a click from Ripcord. If my memory serves me correctly, Benny and three other guys were chosen by Lt. Doyle to await and bring in a resupply chopper for us. These guys were supposed to provide ground cover for the "slick" on top of the L.Z. Two other guys and myself stayed on the side of the L.Z. Well, it wasn't long before we all heard the whump whump of the chopper blades in the distance - Letters from Home! Fresh Clothes! New L.R.P. Rations! - Blam-Rat-A-Tat-Tat! We saw the chopper just about to land, take off like a scalded cat to parts unknown. Shieeeeeet! Then I heard "Get Doc up here Benny's been waxed". I found Benny out like a light - I examined him for blood stains- entrance & exit wounds, burns, fractures, he was breathing like a sleeping bear. Benny had been k-o'ed by the blast of the RPG warhead. I thanked God profusely for sparing the kid from Flag Pond, Tennessee. I also served with "The Nose" John Schnarr. Our Team N.C.O. I.C. at the time was a Buck Sergeant by the name of Chuck Raskey from California followed by SPC/4 Juan Laredo from Texas, R.T.O. was manned by Scott Roberts, myself as team medic and Benny Hill as rear man and grenade launcher.

I remember one horrid mission that lasted twenty days - eleven days with food and nine days without a slice of anything to eat. Ask Benny about that doozy. I'm telling you everything went wrong on that damned mission in May of 1970. We were sent out by battalion to Recon the area Southwest of F.S.B Ripcord for a seven day mission. Well the seven days came and went. No extraction because of socked in weather conditions. The days turned into more days and nothing, the weather would clear long enough for "Charlie to snip our resupply chopper and scare the bird off.

INCOMING: (Con't)

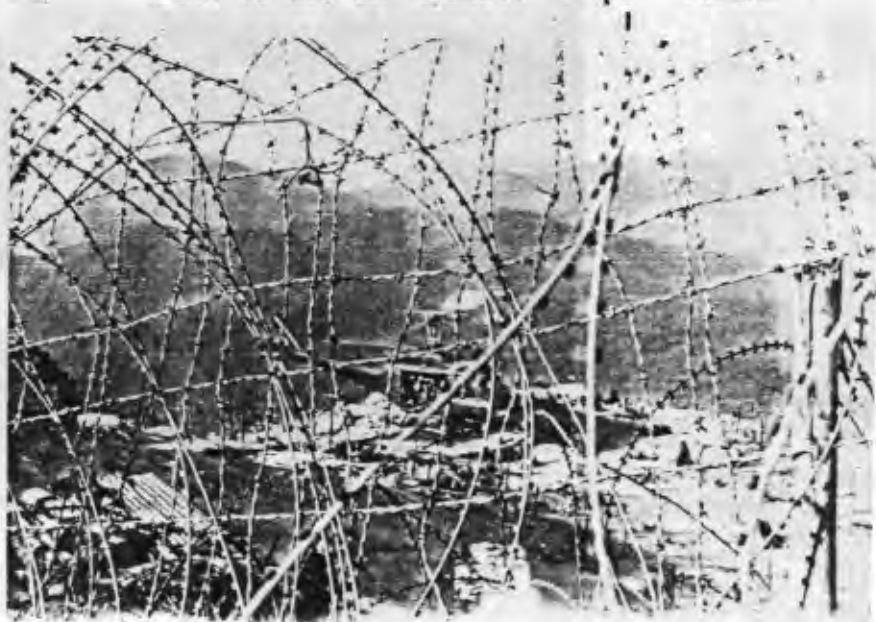
We were told by the brass to stay exactly where we were (on top of a ridge line) and not to move because the place was crawling with gooks. Well we did as we were told and we stayed. It rained day and night and night and day and no food. We held a steady guard 24 hrs/day. We finally decided we'd better get off that hill while we still had strength to fight or we would starve to death. We all left the hill and humped about six hours till we linked up with a line company. "The Rear" had sent us hot food to eat delivered to the line company especially for us.

The surprise came to us when we tried to eat all that glorious food, we could not, it was unbearably painful to swallow, our esophagus had been practically swollen shut by starvation.

FRANK A. GONZALES
E 2/506 INF-RECON
MEDIC

March 20, 1986

In response to your notice in the January 13, 1986, ARMY TIMES, I want to ask that you and your comrades at Ft. Campbell in June pause to honor the memory of my friend, rugby teammate, and West Point classmate, William Pahissa. Bill Died at Firebase Ripcord on July 22 1970, while serving as an infantry lieutenant. He was the first member of our Class to die in combat. I was further





INCOMING: (Con't)

south with the 173rd Airborne Brigade at that time was greatly saddened to learn of Bill's death. He was a fine man, soldier, and friend and we miss him to this day.

AIRBORNE, ALL THE WAY.

ROBERT M. KIMMITT
The General Counsel
of the Treasury
Washington, D.C. 20220

*Does anyone recall Lt. Pahissa?
We will honor this request as well
as the memories of others fallen
during Ripcord at our Reunion..Editor*



ROLL CALL:

JIM "TINY" AANONSEN (A 2/506)
[REDACTED]

BILL AESCHLIMAN (2/320 Arty)
[REDACTED] 901

LIN BASHFORD (D 2/506)
[REDACTED] 16

RAY "BLACKIE" BLACKMAN (D 2/501)
[REDACTED]

RICK BLYTHE (HHC 2/506)
[REDACTED]

AL S. BOOTY (A 2/506)
[REDACTED] A92262

LARRY C. BUTTON (B 2/506)
[REDACTED] 71

DICK CABLE (E 2/506 Recon)
[REDACTED]

JERRY CARMICHAEL (2/320 Arty)
[REDACTED] 935

TOM CHASE (163rd Avn Co)
[REDACTED] 212

CARL DYKASTRA (A 2/506)
[REDACTED] 451

ROLL CALL: (Con't)

JOE EVANS (A 2/506)
[REDACTED] 5301

LOYD FULMER (E 2/506)
[REDACTED] 55

COL. CHARLES GARWOOD (Pathfinders)
[REDACTED] 30236

FRANK GONZALES (E 2/506 Recon)
[REDACTED] 85749

ROBERT GRANBERRY (E 2/506 Recon)
[REDACTED] 82505

STEVE HAWK (A 2/501)
[REDACTED] 7905

BILL HEATH (A 2/506)
[REDACTED] 3

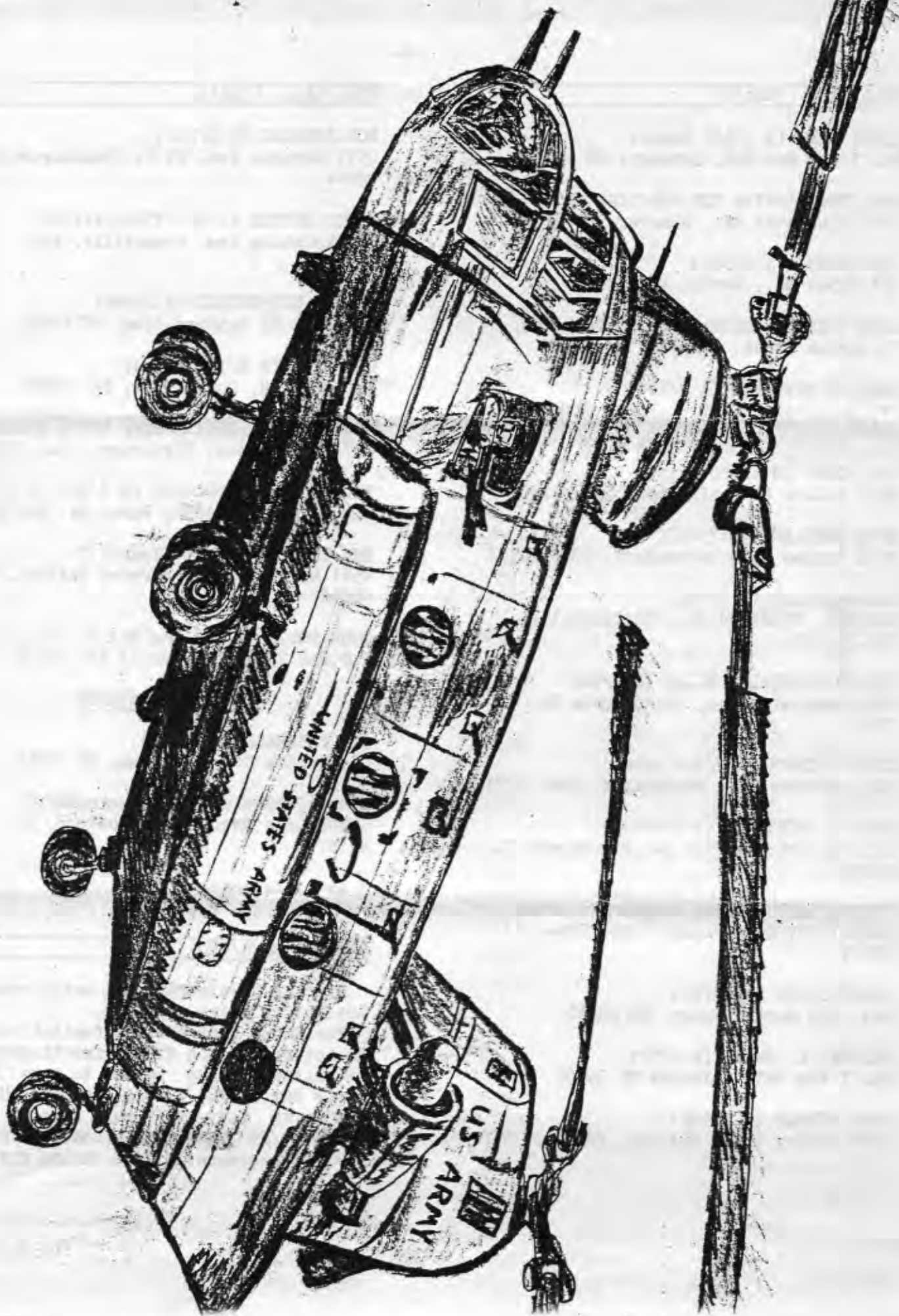
MARK HEINTZ (E2/506 Recon)
[REDACTED]

ARTHUR HICKMAN (75th Rangers)
[REDACTED]

BENNY HILL (E 2/506 Recon)
[REDACTED]

BOB HOWE (C Co. 158th Avn Bn) *
[REDACTED]

RON JANEZIC (A 2/506)
[REDACTED] 94598



Blackie

ROLL CALL: (Con't)

LENNY LONG (E 2/506 Recon)

813

BOB LYNCH (287th EXP.ORD.DISP. EOD)

1076

GARY McCOY (A 2/506)

JOHN "CUSTER" MIHALKO (E 2/506 Recon)

1

GREGORY MITCHEAK (A 2/506)

,OK

74604

MAL MOORE (B 2/320 Arty)

7905

PAUL MUELLER (D 1/506)

52722

ALLAN RIDDLE (B 2/506)

is,

Ind. 46231

FRANK (MARSHALL) RIZZO (A 2/506)

A

19115

JOHN SCHNARR (E 2/506 Recon)

47712

JOHN T. SCHUELKE (D 2/501)

rs FL

33907

JOHN S. (DOC SPEED) SHERBA (E 2/506-Recon)

08219

LARRY SMITH (3/187th)

WALTER L. SMITH (E 2/501)

GARY STEELE (C 2/506)

0735

ROLL CALL: (Con't)

ROD SOUBERS (D 2/501)

on MD
20744

BRUCE UPDYKE (C Co. 158th AVN BN)

47711

GEORGE WESTERVELT (A 2/506)

1

RON WILL (E 2/506 Recon)

7

MIKE RENNER (2/11 A Btry 155's Ripcord)

52591

RODGER "CHIP" COLLINS (B 2/506, E 2/506 Recon)

KEN IACULLO (501st Signal) *

s, IL
60656

JOHN TOBIN (B 326 Eng Bn) *

RESOURCE CONTACTS

JIM FAIRHALL (A 1/502)

0

CHRIS JENSEN (221st Signal SEAPC)

H

44107

* New this month

GENERAL NEWS/UPDATES:

As this newsletter is being prepared April 1 is being observed.

For those that are not familiar with or do not recall the first time Ripcord was evacuated please pause to give April Fools Day 1970 a brief thought. Within the first hour there were some 25 casualties. It was this writers first intensive exposure to fire during his tour.

GENERAL NEWS/UPDATES: (Con't)

April Fools Day was really when Ripcord began (at least for 1970)

Quote of the Month (taken From VVA VETERAN) In any disgraced and defeated army, fighting a scandalous war, the warriors were the first to go, always. They were the despised witnesses, their memories fresh and unedited - Ward Just
IN THE CITY OF FEAR

Art/Photos

Many thanks continue to go to Ray "Blackie" Blackman for his continued contribution to the art section. Blackie recently passed along several offerings for inclusion into the newsletter. This is especially appreciated given his significant involment with other groups, issues.

From Chris Jensens collection of Ripcord photos came this months three larger selections. They include a view of the far side of the hill (below the 155's) with Huey approaching. The editor would note that the small pad at the middle right was where the last group on Ripcord was extracted. And Yes, Bill Aeschliman, thats your radar setting up on top that hill (or its sister) The second photo is the pad in front of the TOC on Ripcord. The third, a shot of a 105 "in extremis".

Two smaller photos sent in by Mike Renner are of the lower pad on the base and extended 105's after the fire swept thru the pits on July 18.

WANTED:

Photos, News, Clippings, Ideas, Retrospectives, comments, advice. As I've noted before this is a group project. Any items or ideas you might have thought of passing along please take time to do so. It helps me put out a more informative and interesting newsletter. This can include photos (which will be returned along with other items you designate to be returned) newsclippings we have not yet

GENERAL NEWS/UPDATES: (Con't)

published, recent clippings on events in Southeast Asia of interest, ideas regarding the reunion or direction of the group, general comments, and finally we are always in need of retrospectives. There has yet to be an issue of the newsletter that I don't sweat waiting for one to come in.

ON RIPCORN:

Please see page 8

RESOURCES:

-SOLDIER OF FORTUNE MAGAZINE: P.O.Box 348 Mt. Morris, Ill. 61504-9984. Yearly subscription rate of \$21.95.

-MAP of the Ripcord Area which includes the firebase and Hill 805, possibly other significant land marks. Available from Library of Congress, Photo Duplication Service, Washington, D. C. 20540. Total purchase price including shipping currently \$12.50. On the 1:50,000 scale. Note it is from Map Series L 7014 Vietnam Sheet No: 6441 IV.

-May have mentioned before that Chris Jensen also captured some movie footage of Ripcord on 16mm. He has converted that to Beta and VHS. There are a number of different locations and units on this tape including Arvn Rangers. Khe Sanh, A Shau Valley etc., but the brief piece on Ripcord while not particularly exciting is a step above having only a still photo. Those interested in obtaining a copy might contact Chris at 12700 Lake Ave., 2203 Lakewood OH 44107 to see if he would entertain that notion.

Until next time folks. Luck!

Hello fellow survivors of Ripcord and the surrounding A.O. I thought I'd do something a little different this time around. I'd like to take you back through the portals of time through my eyes, and let you know me a little better. I come from a quiet little town in New Jersey called Whippany. Our town got its name from the Indians, who are long since gone. According to our town's history, they ended up in and around Green Bay, Wisconsin.

My childhood years were spent playing Army. Back in those days there was always a good war movie on TV. I probably saw every WWII and Korean War movie ever made at least ten times. John Wayne was a national hero to me. Remember the guns that Mattel made? I had every one of them. There was nothing like a Mattel gun. War was patriotic. My father and uncles and cousins had all fought in WWII. President Eisenhower was a war hero. It was a calm and peaceful time; a good time to grow up.

They say that the older you get, the smarter you get. By the time I reached high school, President Kennedy took office. He was also a war hero. He was very young, with new ideas. He wanted to go to the moon. At that point in time, I and probably the rest of America couldn't find Viet Nam on a map. My thoughts were now turned to girls and not guns. The Cuban missile crisis shook me up a little. In a few more years I would be of draft age.

I started to pay more attention to the television news. As Bob Dylan said in his song, "The times they are a changing." Nam was starting to make the news more frequently, but it still wasn't anything serious. Who cared if Diem's regime was shaky and the Buddhist monks were torching themselves in protest? I sure as hell didn't care, but weren't these the same people who beat the French in 1954? I didn't know that while I was playing Army as a kid. My counterparts were playing Army for real.

Another year passed by and Diem and Kennedy were now dead. The world seemed to be in turmoil. We didn't trust the Russians and Chinese, and they didn't trust us. They didn't even trust each other. Things were heating up in Viet Nam, and the Gulf of Tonkin resolution was passed with only two dissenting votes. The TV news was pro-war in those days and my childhood dreams of fighting a war were resurfacing. I remember telling my sister that I couldn't wait to go over there and kill a few of those bastards.

How dare those V.C. slaughter civilians and ambush American soldiers. I still wasn't 18 yet, so I was full of fight. I still believed that it would all be over before I ever got my chance. What chance did that backward little country have against us? But wasn't that the country who defeated France in 1954? A few more years went by. I got my draft card and watched the war escalate on the TV news. The body count was going up on both sides with no end in sight. The news was still pro-war, but there were murmurings of dissent.

The news in 1968 really hit home. The little town of Whippany received a flag-draped coffin bearing the body of a high school friend of mine. Bob Slattery was a good friend of mine. It was only a few short months ago that were were toodling around town in his new GTO. I had heard that he had joined the Marines. He got blown away at Khe Sanh. I couldn't go to the wake. I was in shock. The 1968 Tet Offensive came and went. If you believed the weekly body counts, you knew that something was wrong.

We now had 550,000 GI's in Nam with no end in sight. At this point in time I wasn't against the war, only in the way it was being fought. My feelings were kick ass and get it over with. That was easy for me to say because I had a deferment. Since my father was dead, I claimed sole support of my mother. By this time I also had a very good job and didn't really feel like giving it up to go 10,000 miles away to get blown away. Bob Slattery's death had touched me more than I cared to realize.

By 1969 there was rioting in the States. Watts had burned and I watched Newark burn on TV. It wasn't just the blacks protesting. GI's were coming home against the war. What the hell was going on? I was getting tired of the war. We should have had it won by now. I still wasn't against it; my patriotism runs deep, but I didn't want to die either.

Finally, one night, my mother and I sat down and had a talk. My brother had come of age and one of us would have to serve in the armed forces. Since I was older, I should give up my deferment to my brother. She said that the decision would be mine and she would abide by it. There really was no choice. I gave up my deferment so my brother could stay home. My brother and I are as different as night and day. He was never into guns and war while we were growing up and I figured I stood the better chance of surviving.

From the time I was reclassified 1-A it took the draft board about two months to nail me. I toyed with the idea of enlisting, but I didn't want to give the Army an extra year out of my life. I remembered the movie, "The D.I.", with Jack Webb. I thought that basic training would be tough. Boy, was I in for a surprise. It seemed like the only thing the Army was interested in doing was getting me out of there in 9 weeks to my next duty station. I still remember one guy in particular in our company. We called him "Mousie" 'cause he looked like one. He stood about 6'5" but probably only weighed about 100 pounds. He couldn't even do one pushup.

He graduated with the rest of us, and he still couldn't do one pushup. I was really having my doubts about the Army. We didn't get any leave after basic training. We sat around Fort Dix for two days waiting for our chartered jet to Fort Lewis, Washington. I was really pissed off. That was the weekend of my sister's wedding. I only live about two hours away from Fort Dix but still the Army said no. I guess they figured that I wouldn't come back. I wondered why they didn't have A.I.T. at Fort Dix anymore. The rumor was that the Army abandoned it 'cause the guys that took A.I.T. at Dix had an unusually high casualty rate in Nam.

Fort Lewis, Washington, didn't raise my opinion of the Army a whole hell of a lot. Our D.I. was in the process of getting out of the Army, so he was never there. Our cadre were shake and bakes who were almost as green as us. I took comfort in the fact that a lot of the instructors were Nam vets. They did seem to care even if the training stunk. True, we did get to train with the M-16 the whole time instead of two weeks in basic. We got to work out with the 60, 50 cal., M-79, and the L.A.W. more than we did in basic. We even got to throw two grenades instead of one that they allowed us in basic.

We did a few more night exercises that had no rhyme or reason that I could figure out. They did give us a demonstration on how to cordon off a Vietnamese village. That seems kind of funny now since I never got to cordon off any villages while humping the bush around Ripcord. I will say one thing for Fort Lewis. The hills and mountains did resemble the ones in I Corps, but it's pretty hard to get your mind into jungle fighting at Fort Lewis, Washington, in November and December. I froze my ass off. Little did I know that I would freeze my ass off on more than one occasion in the Nam.

I can still remember our last company formation after graduation. The first sergeant called out two names. The first guy was told that he was going to Germany. The next guy was told that he was going to Hawaii. A cheer went up from the crowd. The first sergeant didn't call out any more names. He just looked at us and smiled. Then he said, "The rest of you guys had better learn to like rice." He then dismissed us and walked back to the orderly room. Those words said it all. I was going to Viet Nam.

My emotions were really mixed at that time. According to the Army, I was a full-fledged fighting machine. Funny, I didn't feel like one. I still felt like a civilian in a green uniform. Four months of training does not a soldier make. A few short months ago I was cruising Whippany looking for pussy; now I was headed for Nam to look for Gooks. There must be a moral there somewhere, but I haven't figured it out yet.

My two weeks at home were sort of bittersweet. There were lots of parties and family get-togethers, but nobody wanted to talk about Viet Nam. It seemed like everybody was giving me that look; like maybe they were seeing me for the last time. My seven year old nephew finally broke the ice. It was the day before I was to fly back to Fort Lewis to process for Nam. I was saying goodbye to him when he hugged me and wouldn't let go. He started crying and said, "Please don't die, Johnny, please don't die." Those words shook all of us up. I put on my bravest front and assured him that I would come home safe and sound.

My mother and cousin took me to the airport the next day and hardly a word was spoken. It was like we were communicating via E.S.P. As I was boarding the plane, I turned to give her one last look. My mother was a very strong woman. I had watched her bury my father when I was only 11 years old. She had been through some tough times raising five kids all by herself. There were no tears, but I saw a look on her face that I had never seen before. It was then and there that I knew I was coming back to Whippany in one piece, and not in a body bag.

I guess that all you remember your flight to Nam. Mine was no different; it sucked. You could almost hear a pin drop. The stewardesses were very polite, but their smiles looked painted on. They gave you that look like you were a condemned man on your way to execution, with no chance of a pardon from the governor. Our plane refueled in Hawaii, and we were allowed to roam the airport, with strict orders not to mess with the civilians. We must have looked like quite a sight. Tourists in their Hawaiian shirts, and us in our jungle fatigues. We got many a stare and the people gave us a wide berth.

Our next refueling stop was in Guam. Summer in New Jersey can get pretty hot and muggy. When I stepped off of the plane in Guam, I was hit with a tremendous blast of heat. It was almost like walking into an oven. It was even hard to breathe. My spirits sunk to a new low. If Nam was this hot, I won't have to worry about Gooks; I'll melt away.

Finally we landed at Cam Ranh Bay. I stared at the tree line in the distance. I almost believed that as soon as we got off of the plane, we would be handed a 16 and off we would go. I should have known the Army way of doing things; hurry up and wait, with a ton of paperwork in between. If it wasn't for the wire mesh on the windows and buses, I would never have known I was in a war zone. I couldn't believe the size of the base and how clean it was. Also, the beach looked so inviting.

After our indoctrination speech and the tons of forms, my two buddies from basic and A.I.T. made our way to the E.M. Club. It was like the rest of the base, clean and beautiful. I think it was even air conditioned. My fears were starting to dissipate. The Vietnamese waitresses in their mini-skirts were gorgeous. If this was war, I'll take it. I even started to feel a little guilty. I knew that my family and friends were worrying about me; and here I was getting sloshed my first day in the country. It was too good to be true.

After the alcohol had taken effect, my two buddies and I got brave and started talking to some of the guys who were on their way home. I guess we wanted to know what we were in for. They told us that it all depended on where we were sent. After a few more hours in the Club, we were called to a formation to get our orders. The last thing I remember is standing in the formation waiting to hear my name called. I never did hear it called. I passed out stone cold in the formation. When I came to, one of my buddies said, "You and me are going to the 101st Airborne." Our other buddy got a different division.

The next thing we did was to make our way to this giant map of Viet Nam that was in the compound. It showed where every outfit was stationed. Maybe the 101st. was stationed near Cam Ranh Bay. No such luck. My eyes kept drifting northward. The further north I went, the more depressed I got. Finally, I found the screaming eagle. "Christ," I said to myself, "we're almost in North Viet Nam." I then knew for sure that I wasn't in for an easy tour.

Just before we left Cam Ranh Bay, we were issued a steel pot and a poncho. Still no 16. I guess we're in for a lot more paperwork. The flight to Phu Bai was a real trip. I had my doubts that the old C-130 was ever going to get off the ground. Every nut and bolt rattled. The engines didn't sound too good either. When we landed in Phu Bai it was like entering another world. Gone were the nice sandy beaches and sunshine. It was now damp, cold and raining. We chowed down in a dingy little mess hall that could seat maybe 20 people uncomfortably. Our menu consisted of C-rations that had been warmed up in boiling water.

From Phu Bai we then spent a day at Camp Eagle for more processing. I was sure getting tired of all the red tape. From Camp Eagle we boarded the cattle trucks to Camp Evans. The ride was a scenic one. Highway 1 seemed so peaceful as we passed the many villages on our trip. As we neared Evans I noticed the foothills and mountains in the distance. Little did I know that those mountains would be home for the next year. As we drove through the gates at Evans, I said to myself, "What a dump." Cam Ranh Bay was just a fleeting memory.

Our next stop was P training, three days of boredom. It was there that I donned a ruck for the first time. It really wasn't so heavy since we only had one C-ration meal in it. We humped out to the range and watched a mortar and artillery demonstration. Our nights were spent at the E.M. Club or bunker guard. Boy, was I scared on bunker guard. There I was sitting in a bunker with all this firepower. We had a 60, frags, and I think there was even a l.a.w. Claymore wires were everywhere. I sure as hell hoped we didn't see anything.

After P training, we were broken down into smaller groups and sent to the various Brigade Headquarters. My buddy, Roy, was still with me, so I thought we'd end up in the same unit. At Hq., Rot got assigned to the 1/506, I got the 2/506. We said our goodbyes and promised to visit each other once we got settled in. I never saw him again. We were both always out in the field. We exchanged a few letters, but that was it. Finally, my new group was picked up by a sergeant from Echo company. From A.I.T. I knew that an Echo company of a Battalion was a mortar platoon. "Christ, they can't make a mortar man out of me. I don't know the first thing about mortars."

The company area was practically deserted except for us cherries. The sergeant pointed us towards a hooch and then he was gone. We went inside and started to get acquainted. A little while later, that same sergeant came in and said, "You guys are lucky. You get a choice on what you're going to be." We all looked at each other with puzzled looks on our faces. He then said, "You can either go into Recon, or be an L.Z. cutter." One of our group spoke up and asked, "What's Recon?" "Recon is a good deal," the sergeant said. "You go out to the field for a couple of weeks with everything you own on your backs. You operate in six to eight man teams, and your job is to find Gooks. You're not supposed to engage them, just find them."

"Recon even has a few status symbols. You don't wear a steel pot, and you get to wear camouflage fatigues. We're all out of cammies, though." That didn't sound too good to me. The teams sounded kind of small to my liking. Besides, how was I supposed to find Gooks and not engage them? I guess everyone else was thinking the same thing. Another guy asked, "What's an L.Z. cutter?" "L.Z. cutters really have it made," the sergeant said. "He only goes out for one day." We all looked at each other and smiled. This sounds too good to be true. His next words brought us back to reality. "You fly out on a slick, rappel out with a chain saw and a couple hundred pounds of C-4, and blow the top of a mountain off." There was a stunned silence for a few seconds and then we all said in unison, "I'll take Recon."

Our next few days were spent on company details, bunker guard, etc. All of the Recon teams were out in the field, so we waited in nervous anticipation. One morning the word spread through the company area that Recon was coming in from the field. Sure enough, as we stepped outside of the hooch, we could see a group of grubby but happy faces coming our way. There was a lot of laughter and they seemed awfully glad to be back at Evans. It was a feeling that I would be soon experiencing, although I didn't know it at the time.

Finally, one of them caught sight of us and shouted out, "Hey, guys, look, our replacements are here." It wasn't exactly what I'd call a welcome into Recon, but they did seem genuinely glad to see us. Hasty introductions were made but they were more interested in mail call and a trip to the showers. I really couldn't blame them. They needed both.

A short time later a very young looking second lieutenant came into our hooch and introduced himself. He still had his web gear on and looked as dirty and grubby as the rest of Recon. "My name is Lieutenant Wautrus, but everybody calls me Teenager." It didn't take a mental giant to figure out how he got his name. He couldn't have been more than 18 years old! "Welcome to Recon, I will be your platoon leader." I was beginning to have grave doubts about Recon. Here I was, almost 23 years old, and I was going to be led into battle by someone who didn't look like he knew how to use a razor.

I don't remember the rest of his little speech, but his words did have a settling effect, which I greatly needed. It was obvious that he was proud of Recon and he assured us that we would be proud to be part of Recon, too. Teenager then assigned us to our teams and told us that he would introduce us to our team leaders after he got cleaned up. I was assigned to Bravo team. The "oldtimers" started filtering back in and I could feel their camaraderie. Maybe recon wouldn't be so bad after all.

Between beers the usual small talk took place between us cherries and the oldtimers. They wanted to know where we were from, etc., and we wanted to know what it was like out in the field. I immediately took a liking to Guv and Ox, who were the point and slack man of Bravo team. Guv was a stocky redhead from North Carolina. He got his name 'cause his last name was the same as Governor Wallace, hence the name Guv. Ox was a big dude from the state of Washington. He seemed to be the perfect foil for Guv. They were constantly teasing each other.

The general consensus was that we had come into Recon at a pretty good time. There hadn't been much activity for the past few months. We were all relieved to hear that bit of news. Teenager, they said, was a little gung-ho, but don't let his looks fool you. He had his shit together, and was good in a firefight. Those were reassuring words indeed.

True to his word, Teenager came back and introduced us to our team leaders. I was introduced to Sgt. Robert Granberry, better known as Junior. I breathed a sigh of relief. At least he looked older than Teenager. I don't remember what we talked about, but Junior had a way about him, like he was looking right through you. It seemed like he had a lot on his mind and that he took his job very seriously. That was fine with me. I happen to be a very serious person myself. Teenager then left us to make his rounds. A party was starting up in full swing.

Junior and me continued to make small talk. He was from Florida, I was from New Jersey. He told me that he was stationed at Ft. Monmouth, N.J. for a while and had had a good time there. He especially liked New Jersey girls. I don't think either of us realized it then, but as Humphrey Bogart said to Claude Rains in Casablanca, "It looked like the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

Since Recon was going back to the field the next morning, the remaining time was spent writing letters and partying. I kind of laid back and watched the goings on. I had too much on my mind to get loaded. What was it going to be like out in the field? Would we make contact? How would I handle myself in a firefight? Would I panic? Would I get wounded or killed? I had a lot of questions, but no answers. I didn't get a whole lot of sleep that night. Recon partied till the wee hours of the night. Our hooch looked like the aftermath of a B-52 strike. Beer cans and care packages everywhere.

I awoke early the next morning. Everyone else was snoring peacefully. If these guys had death on their minds, they sure didn't show it. Recon sure knew how to party. Before long, the hooch started coming to life. Our first task was to put the hooch back in one piece. I thought it impossible, but the job was completed amidst all the grumbling. We then got cleaned up, chowed down, and broke down into our respective teams. The joviality of the day before was gone. Everyone looked very serious.

We grabbed our weapons, web gear and rucks and headed for the pad. It was at the pad that we drew our rations. Being cherry, I had no clue on how much to take. Cases of C's were being opened and passed around. Everyone was fighting for the meals with the fruit. There was also a lot of dickering and trading going on. I asked Guv how much food I should take. "As much as you can carry," was his reply. Being very greedy, I loaded my ruck to the max, not realizing that I would have to carry it all on my back. I think I even had cans of fruit stuffed into the pockets of my pants. I noticed that there were a lot of ham and egg C's laying around that nobody wanted. I did my best to make room for them also.

My packing completed, I reached down to pick up my ruck. Gravity took over. I couldn't lift it. I cautiously looked around to see if anyone was watching me make a fool out of myself. To my relief, nobody seemed to notice. They were too busy checking their own gear, immersed in their own thoughts and problems. I then decided to jettison some food. It broke my heart, but I lightened my ruck considerably. I still couldn't lift it to put it on. I then decided to sit down, put it on, and then stand up. I was still having my problems when Guv noticed my predicament. He held out his hand and pulled me to my feet. "You'll get used to it," he replied.

I certainly had my doubts. The ruck seemed to weigh a ton. I couldn't stand up straight. We were standing on flat ground and I felt like a baby taking his first steps. How in the hell was I going to manage all of this weight out in the bush? I didn't get the chance to answer my own question. Our slicks were warming up and Junior was motioning to us to climb aboard. I didn't like the sound of those slicks then, and to this day I don't like the sound of helicopter engines warming up.

Till next time.

