

A NEWSLETTER

ON RIPCORD



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NO: 7 MAY 1986

RETROSPECTIVE:

"THE APRIL FOOLS"

C. COLLINS

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For Friends and Survivors of FSB RIPCORD, RVN

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KEN IACULLO, RAY BLACKMAN

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NEW CONTACTS:

- Billy Roberts (E 2/506 Recon&Mortars)

Billy served for awhile with Delta Team Recon, under Team Leader "Samson". Later he served with the mortar platoon on Firebases Rakkasan and Jack as well as O.P. Phantom. He returned in 1972 with the 1st Aviation Brigade and stayed until the end of major U.S. Troop involvement in 1973.

- John W. Palm

Lutz, FL 33549. Mr. Palm is the father of Lt. Terry Palm D 2/501 who was killed on Hill 805 during Ripcord. He maintains a strong interest in events surrounding the Ripcord action.

INCOMING:

APRIL 1986:

I realize that I'm part of a select group and proud of it! Little did anyone know that years later we would be coming together from all over the country.

My local library has a few books about some famous or should I say infamous places, and Firebase Ripcord is one of them.

One thing I always remembered was that I didn't like the looks of Ripcord from day one. The antenna system for commo was an invitation and a great target.

My CO told me that I would be there for a few days. He didn't say a damn thing about the NVA out there. He was in the rear at Eagle.

Enclosed is a little info about Chicago's VVA Parade to be held June 13, 14 15. Chapter 209 is the lead in the Parade with the DAV in front of us. I'm one of the officers of VVA 209 and have been on a high for months thinking about it.

Ken Iacullo

APRIL 17, 1986

I've been busy getting 3rd Plt (D 2/501) lined up for our reunion in July.

INCOMING CON'T:

When I called one of the guys from my squad in Chicago, he told me about a big parade that will be going on there in June. Sounds like a big one. You might want to mention it in the Newsletter for the ones interested in attending. I might go. There are two Delta members in Chicago and 4 or 5 others from my squad planning on being there. A small squad reunion.

The April Newsletter you put together was great (as usual).

Am sending a "Blast from the Past". Remember the funny money? When we changed to the new stuff I kept these samples of the old. I also have some new MPC, put out in late 70 or early 71. Remember the SHORT TIMERS calendars? Wish I'd have kept mine. Also might be able to get copies of the old propaganda leaflets the gooks used to leave laying around our old NDP's. That would make a good "Blast from the Past".

The Retrospective brought back loads of memories. Sounded real familiar. I think most all of us felt exactly the same way. The only thing different was the famous "Greetings" letter, and of course the EGGS. Actually, and don't tell anyone, they weren't too bad if you could smother them in Ketchup and heat them up (almost fry them). That is, if you were completely out of everything else and didn't want to eat leeches.

DRIVE ON,
Ray Blackman

MAY 14, 1986

Received last month your latest Ripcord articles and saw that someone referred to a Lt. Pihassa. He was my platoon leader when he was killed. I don't recall much but I do remember how he was killed. I was 10 feet from him. He was relatively new in the Company and being a cherry we weren't able to access him at the time. On the morning of 7-22-70 around 8:00 a.m. we were moving out of our night position when mortars started to fill the air. We were the trail platoon of the Company and as we heard the

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INCOMING CON'T:

thump, thump we all dashed for cover. The mortars lasted for about 5 minutes then we re-grouped. The problem was that we didn't have a chance. One guy named Brown was hit by a mortar and was hurt pretty bad. The lieutenant and a few others were clustered together and I was to their right about 10 feet when the gooks opened up with a machine gun. I remember looking at the lieutenant and the next thing I saw was blood coming out of his head from a round he took. Needless to say it wasn't a great day. We had 12 killed, a shit load wounded. Delta CO came to our rescue the next morning which we never thought anyone of us would see again. The gooks could have wiped us out but I believe the misplaced bomb saved our asses. (See Stars&Stripes Story)

It's amazing how your articles are bringing us close and reaching so many. After 16 years I still remember so clearly that year of hell and especially 7-22-70. The day before Ripcord fell!!

Take Care,
Ron Janezic



-3-

UPDATES

---By now you'll want to know what's going on with the face of your newsletter. For the last few months Ray Blackman and I have been discussing how to keep from using the exact same face sheet every time but being able to keep the newsletter identifiable as our own.

The result you see today is the culmination of a lot of work, some hard thinking and out of pocket expense by Ray. As you can see the newsletter face will be able to retain a certain month to month recognizability but permit some background changes allowing for what we hope will be an eye-catching look each month.

The previous face sheet printed by Bill Heath served us well. The truth is back then I had no idea that we would ever print the number of issues we have. Hope you enjoy the new look as much as we do.

---As Ray and Ken have already noted in Incoming Chicago is planning a WELCOME HOME PARADE AND REUNION which will take place June 12-15 1986. I regret the late notice but for those of you who are interested Ken passed along some info and you can get what I have by calling or writing Ken Iacullo direct at 4541 North Newcastle, Harwood Heights, IL 60656.

---The editor is now working hard on producing a bang-up newsletter for July which will be the 16th anniversary of Ripcord's evacuation. I am in the process of contacting commanders at various levels in hopes of gaining brief retrospectives or memoirs of Ripcord. Of particular importance is trying to gain insight into commands thinking as the Ripcord action progressed.

I would note an appeal at this time for all contacts to reflect on the Ripcord action between now and early July and consider doing a brief written piece. There is considerable latitude in what you might choose to write about. It can be about your feelings in hindsight, a particular event or the difficult circumstances you might have been faced with at the time. There are a hundred thousand stories in you as a group and the newsletter as yet has only touched the surface.

 UPDATES CON'T:

---Jim Fairhall has committed to doing the foreword for that issue. As part of that he will put Ripcord in a proper historical perspective.

---Haven't yet heard a strong response one way or another on feelings about where the group should eventually meet for a reunion. John Mihalko is looking forward to having us in Whippany. Lodging is not a problem nor is proximity to major airports. He has already gained approval of the use of a local Legion Hall for group meetings. All we need to do is nail down a date and time sometime this fall.

Another possibility was graciously passed on by Rod Soubers (D 2/501 and editor of the Delta Company Newsletter) Rods company was involved on Hill 805 during Ripcord. They have had a number of successful reunions. Theirs this year will be at Table Rock Lake, Missouri. The beautiful Ozark Mountain location has a number of choices regarding lodging. Camping sites are available and there are any number of points of interest for reunion-goers. For more information what the area has to offer simply write Branson Lake Area Chamber of Commerce P.O. Box 220, Branson, MO. 65611. (417-334-4136) Rod emphasizes that his get togethers have been much like "family reunions".

I would note that Rods group is composed of a number of Ripcord era vets and would be "family".

We would need to gain some consenses soon that this is where we will meet due to the fact that this is essentially one month away.

Let me hear your feelings soon.

 ART/PHOTOS

Three of the large photos this month come courtesy of Chris Jensen. They are in order (1) an artilleryman relaxing on Ripcord (2) Medevac approaching main pad, TOC at Ripcord (3) Artillery personnel at ammo point. The fourth large photograph comes compliments of the "69" 101st ABN Division Yearbook.

 ART/PHOTOS CON'T:

Large drawings this month by Ray "Blackie" Blackman. See Blackies letter in Incoming. What about some of the items he mentioned (Short timers: calendars, Chieu Hoi leaflets, etc.). If you have them why not share them? Blackie provided this months funny money (MPC and Vietnamese). Other art and photos courtesy of "69" 101st Yearbook.

 BOOK REVIEWS

Probably the good reviewer maintains an interest only in those books published in hardback by the major companies. However, Ray Blackman commented once that he always liked to do things a little different. That pretty much describes this writer and I hope the nature of this organization.

I wanted to share a couple of Paperback gems that I came across entirely by accident. Most of you have seen the glut of paperbacks purporting to relate the true experience of Vietnam that more often than not have very little to say. These were different.

...AND A HARD RAIN FELL. By John Ketwig Packet Books, Simon & Schuster Inc. 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10020 Johns is a personal story of his tour in Vietnam. He is not a grunt but his area of assignment is hotly contested real estate giving ample opportunity for action.





In the John Wilkes' eagle family unit
we really want to be in the 50's and what
we were thinking as well as what we in-
volved our children. There are times
we feel you're right about the fact
and the one is usually wrong.

There's a feeling you're into the world
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and how the right people of choice are
in, in that kind of a way, really, really.

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BOOK REVIEWS CON'T:

In the John Miahako style Ketwig puts you right smack dab in the 60's and what we were thinking as well as what was influencing our thinking. There are times you feel you've slid right into the book and the era it strongly evokes.

Apart from getting you into the mood of the setting by getting you into the times John is able to describe acutely what he sees, hears, smells and feels and how his mind reacts or chooses not to, to such rich but often heart stopping images.

One interesting difference in John's tour was his intra-theatre transfer to Thailand following Vietnam. That move is a story in and of itself but adds a richness to the story beyond the typical combat tour.

John has an ability to get you into his characters head and you will be near tears many times before you finally put the book down at its end. Much of his being able to successfully write such a story is his ability to accurately por-

tray himself and events but his reflections create a mirror effect that is so strong you can't help but see yourself, which evokes the strong responses we often felt over there.

Ketwig tells you that the book was written as a personal catharsis. Although traumatic events speak for themselves it takes an exceptional talent for writing to have the reader react to the book as he does. I hope its not his last and if not, that future ones don't exact the same price of personal sacrifice for the telling.

..THE DYING PLACE: By David A. Maurer
Dell Publishing Co. Inc. 1 Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza, New York, NY 10017. Is the fictional story of the CIA directed Special Operations Group (SOG) and one of its Recon Teams operating in the mountains of Laos not too far folks from where we were at.

Although a lot of our Ripcord contacts have expressed total disinterest in fiction this book got my attention because of its similarity to so many things we knew in Vietnam.

It is obviously based on the authors two combat tours as the leader of such a team. He does have a knack for describing detail and an ability to write ex-



BOOK REVIEWS CON'T:

cellent narrative of fast action events.

Apart from that those of you who were in Recon or at any time became familiar with operating in small groups (tiger teams etc.) will enjoy the feel he has for describing those kinds of operations. You will say to yourself "It was exactly like that". You will feel the rage and frustration we often felt as we tried to do our jobs the best we could given a backdrop and system of support that was often less than optimum.

The books ending is on target. It has the feel that many of ours did.

ENJOY

RESOURCES

- Army Times: Springfield VA 22159-0230
Subscriptions \$39.00 yearly
- Army: The Magazine of Landpower
2425 Wilson Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22201-3385
\$16.00 yearly





RETROSPECTIVE CON'T:

became somber and reflective. No longer the youthful warriors setting out on their first real adventure.

Stewardesses who had encouraged our antics in the beginning eventually reached the stage where they avoided look-

RETROSPECTIVE

EDITORS NOTE:

I realize that in some ways this piece of retrospective will seem similar to last months by John Mihalko. However without benefit of another author for the moment I chose to tell a story that was on my mind. I hope you enjoy.

"THE APRIL FOOLS"

They had told us about the heat. It had come off the tarmac in relentless waves during the brief stop in Guam. But still the impact on arrival at Tan Son Nhut was breathtaking. In Guam there had been simply heat. Here it was worse heat mixed with sweat, urine, shit and diesel oil. Throw in that along with some of the other aromatic exotica that was Southeast Asia and you have a fair sense of the sensory overload we were faced with.

You've read accounts of the flights over and the airport approach and landings. Mine was no different than the rest. We had started out as a bolsterous lot but as the hours rushed by we

ing at anyone directly. They didn't want to remember our faces, knowing what we were in for and that many of us would not be returning the same. We eventually avoided looking at each other as the final approach left us struggling with the wonder of what we would be doing, and how the hell we would cope. Being able to see ground-fire put the final lid on any thought of conversation.

Two things happened almost immediately that I should have recognized as omens for the entire tour. My duffel was ripped off at the airport before I could collect it. The ride in the large green and screened Army bus to Bien Hoa saw us taking fire from an SKS.

The duffel presented the most difficult of the two problems. It had contained clothing, records, everything. The SKS never scored but was symbolic of the fact that everywhere in Vietnam was Injun Country. Why the fuck could we never seem to secure a single piece of real estate?

I had a copy of orders in my fatigues. I began the series of hops and jumps up-country receiving new sets of orders at each stop but no one was prepared or so they said to replace my clothing. So

began my first experience of making do in the Nam. Between help from brief friends and my own scarfing I made do until I reached my company. Many months later when I arrived at Recon and was apologetically informed the Camo's we wore were not issued and that we were left to our own devices I smiled. Yeah, I can handle that. It's





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the part of Nam I know like an old friend. At the end of my tour I would be incensed when I learned that no effort at all had been made while there to retrieve needed records from the States. I was asked to sign an affidavit as to when I came in country to be able to Deros. It was like someone had felt it unimportant. I was supposed to have died anyway. Coming in-country I had been worried about what outfit I would eventually be assigned to. I had been told that the more strack the unit the better your chances of survival. Charlie was not kind to anyone but less so to the rag-tag outfits. Some stories inferred that Charlie might even avoid the bad-boys.

When I finally learned that I would be with the 101st I breathed a sigh of relief. 1st Air Cav and the 101st had been my two top choices. To this day I am grateful that it was the 101. Sure it caused me to go to Ripcord not once but twice and it seemed like we always had the worst A.O.'s but I would not want to have gone to some of the other units I heard about.

The short hops in the C-130's after the accommodations coming over were noisy and down-right primitive. If this is flying I'll have Scotty beam me up-country. At one of the stops another precursor of the tour. A guy who had been in-country several months shot in the back of the head with a .45 while watching an outdoor movie. It had been dark, hot and crowded. No immediate suspects. Drug deal gone bad? Racial related? Jealousy? What? They hadn't found out by the time I left but if the rear is like this what is the fucking bush like

All those outposts coming up. Finally Camp Eagle and at last Evans. Serts training was a boring repetition of what we had had in AIT and to some extent Basic. The only difference was the authentic locale. Guard duty while there saw us poorly oriented to the task. Hell it was confusing with all that was going on, Red tracers, green tracers, Cobras unleashing their beautiful but deadly light shows. Everybody but everybody

RETROSPECTIVE CON'T:

wanting a body count. No wonder the base camps were regularly infiltrated.

Finally I learned I would be going to Bravo of the 2nd 506th. I arrived after dark one rainy evening. The damp seeped into your bones and the first people I met were mostly shadows. I was eventually introduced to Top. God I wish I could remember his name now. I knew immediately I had found a friend.

He gave myself and another cherry a short spiel that I'm sure in retrospect he gave to every green asshole coming in that if we would look after "Tiger" Bravo, it would look after us. Still he made us believe every word of it.

I was right about having found a friend. Later when Ripcord related ill will boiled over in the rear it was he who kept me from being court martialled only because he had learned that I had looked after my men in Bravo while on Ripcord. He also had zealously seen that while on Ripcord everything that could be done in the rear in terms of support was done.

After the brief meeting with Top the other cherry and I settled down in one of the cold and damp hooches. I found out he was from a town named Williston, North Dakota that I had passed thru on a drive from Ft. Lewis to Ft. Meade just before going to NCO school. I had remembered the town for its rustic appearance and the fact that a huge W was on a hillside above the school.

His name was D-Dave C-Cote and Dave was an obvious stutterer. He was a likeable sort with his pot-belly, sandy-brown hair, and Rodney Dangerfield eyes. He got my respect. It ended up that Daves tour ran parallel to mine with his even ending up in Recon and my team months later. He was one of those people that made the tour more bearable.

His stuttering was an interesting thing. I'm sure researchers on the subject could have learned a lot about the social impact on stutterers by following Dave thru his tour. At first he was a veritable machine gun of D-Damns and of Sh-Shits. But later in the warmth, closeness, and camaraderie of the squad it virtually disappeared. The only ex-



RETROSPECTIVE CON'T:

ception was when we came in contact and he d-damned th-those f-fucking g-gooks in short order. Wherever you are now Dave Cote as far as I'm concerned you're a damned g-good dude.

The monsoons were beginning to break up. The company after months in the lowlands was now in the mountains. Our orientation had made us aware that a spring offensive into the mountains was in progress. The weather was still such that our getting to the field was delayed several days. Word came back the company was deep in Injun Country with constant signs of enemy presence and activity. They were in the Coc A Bo.

Then bodies began to come back to Currahee pad. Handled roughly out of the choppers they looked like they'd been thru meat grinders. The results of brief skirmishes and trail watchers firing from spider holes. One had been shot in the back of the head as he turned around to alert his slackman that things didn't look good ahead.

We began to meet some of the guys coming out of the field for various rear related tasks. They looked bad. They stank. Their fatigues were all to hell. They were beardy. They looked like mankind gone two steps back toward ape. They were quiet, speaking little, signing a lot. The had fear written on their faces. They ate with their hands, hunched over, wolfing down food.

We were beginning to be needed in the field. By now several cherries had arrived. Finally a bird for us was announced. There ensued a terrifying first chopper ride in which they left the fucking doors open.

The chopper finally approached a narrow L.Z. and began to land. There were apes in dirty and ragged jungle fatigues securing the L.Z. and dealing with the usual log bird logistics. We were on the ground. We were in the field with a combat infantry unit in fucking Vietnam.

John Wayne would have said it was about time he told these pilgrims how lucky they were to have him as a replacement. Funny they didn't seem to

RETROSPECTIVE CON'T:

care and I was not a replacement I was a "cherry". They put us all quickly out of the way as "security" preferably next to the spot where most of the platoon had been taking a shit.

I was briefly with first platoon. My first night was spent with two of the most field-scared people I ever met over there. One was a guy named Shakey for obvious reasons. Another was a guy who was plotting a way to get to the rear so he could re-up to get out of the field. That night I heard every Vietnam horror story there was about troops getting their throat slit while asleep and their cock stuck in their mouths. No, they weren't trying to scare me. They were justifying the extent of their own fear.

A few evenings later on O.P. with two others an NVA in pith helmet and khakis almost walked on top of us. The two others were digging in as the O.P. would soon become L.P. I was so cherry that I had not even locked and loaded. The delay in my response and their inevitable one permitted one NVA to fight another day. All that night we were probed close at hand. The rain beat down unmerciful and we were repeatedly told not to fire unless engaged first. I learned that night that should we have been "engaged" and attempted to come in with them close at our heels we would likely have been killed from fire along our own perimeter. In close bush being on L.P. really meant you were an expendable first alert for the main force.

With the exception of the handful of cherries I wasn't treated with anything but trepidation by the old-timers. However one guy named Terry Radcliffe, the platoon leader eased some of the problems I might have had.

Terry was from California and looked like he just stepped off a movie set or the beach. His soft spoken, encouraging ways made a point of making me feel at home and that I could at least do something. He was **extremely** bush savvy. He looked like a survivor, someone you could depend on. He was the one friend I would have for many days.



RPG

RETROSPECTIVE CON'T:

All hell broke loose only days after I arrived when my cherry acquaintance Richard Tapp walked most of first platoon into an open area and an ambush. The wounded and dead had to be carried for several hundred yards. My first experience with carnage found I could block it out if I stayed busy enough. Air strikes went on all around us and we kept expecting the huge shards of shrapnel from the bombs slashing thru nearby to take off our heads.

The first platoon ambush was only the beginning result of the fact there was a strong enemy force nearby that had probed and observed our company for several days. The trails we had been walking on were practically four-lane highways and we kept going back over the same ones every day. Was someone stupid? You be the judge.

The next day saw word coming around the platoon we were getting the hell out of there. People were joyous. Questioning found me told that we were going to a firebase. There we would provide security for mortars, artillery etc. Supposedly this was a pie job. One grunt pointed out it was a lot like the rear. Never was I told that the L. Z. would be hot or that someone didn't want us to take on this job.

By then I had been appointed VanHout's assistant gunner. We didn't really get along well. I didn't know a lot about what an A.G. did except pack part of the ammo and keep it clean and help him keep it fed during contact. Mostly I seemed to keep in his way.

As we prepared for the C.A. I began to sense an uneasiness from some of the guys. Old-timers could be extremely superstitious. It was April Fools Day and they didn't like that a bit. Not in the Nam. Van Hout and I finally boarded a bird. From the air the huge mound of dirt that was Ripcord looked harmless. When we finally landed we were pointed in the direction of what was eventually to be the TOC. Within seconds I could hear popping sounds in the valley around us. Then came the sssh-crump. I had landed in a shallow depression on the wrong side of Van Hout. He had already

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taken te-te shrapnel in his face. Had I been on the side I was supposed to be I would have caught more of that shrapnel. The rounds were extremely close, within a few feet and the depression was the only thing saving us.

I flooded Van Hout with questions. I didn't know what that stuff was. What the fuck is that noise Van Hout? Mortars, God Damn, get down! I was flabbergasted I didn't have anything to shoot back at. The mortars continued indiscriminately.

People were falling all around. I looked behind and slightly above us and saw that Terry Radcliffe was down. A widening pool of blood flowing out from under him. Van Hout frantically yelled for an "Aid-Man". Radcliffe's helmet had been knocked off. His blond hair rifled in the breeze. He looked serene, like a child that had finally drifted off to sleep.

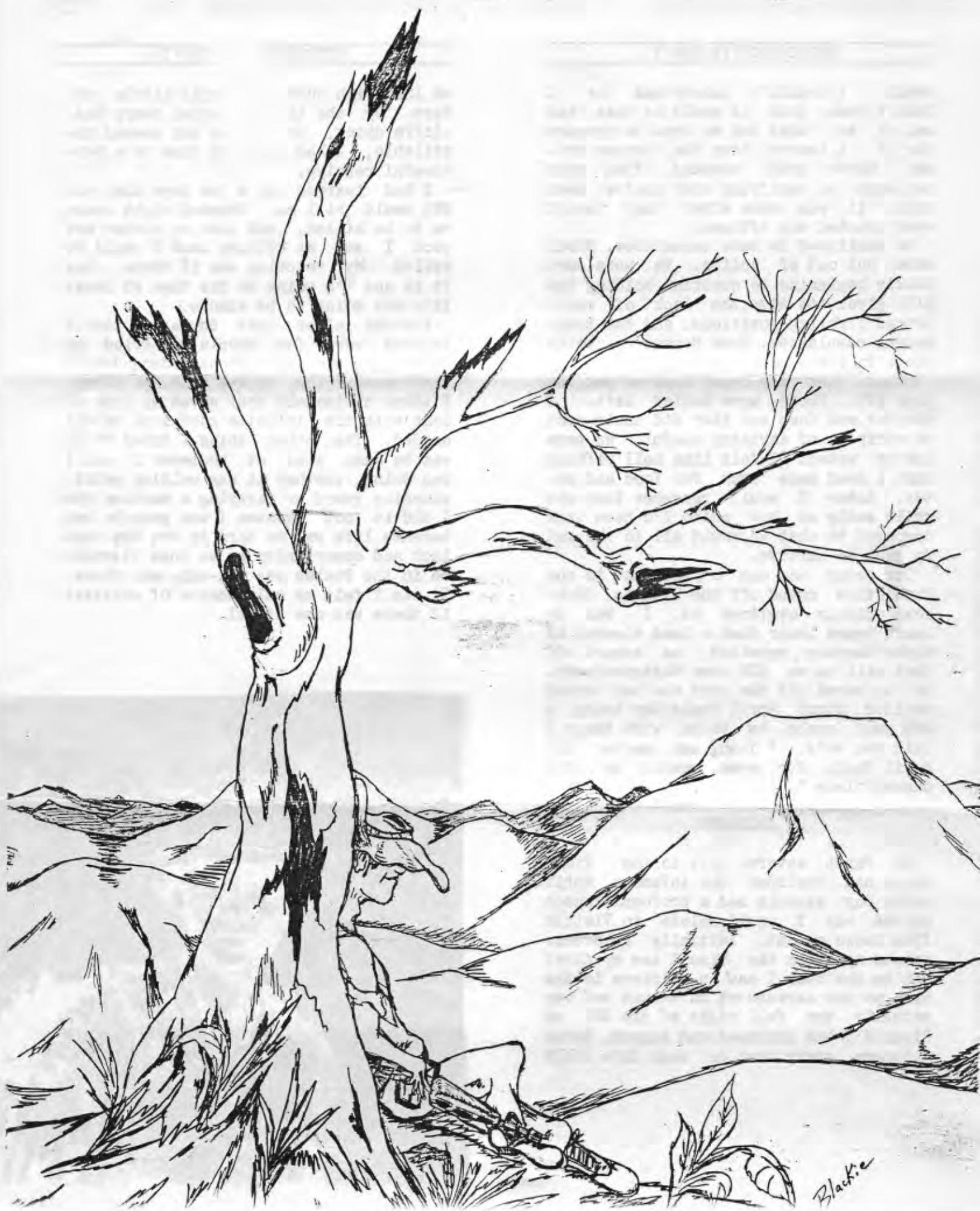
Raw-boned Doc Kellogg scrambled over and felt for a pulse and shook his head at Van Hout. Van Hout replied "Fuck". Kellogg laid Terrys helmet gently across his face. The wind kept on fluttering the golden hair.

The sun warmed up and began beating down in earnest. Time moved quickly until the afternoon. In our first hour there were some 25 serious casualties including a direct hit on the company C.P.

Finally we received word that we would secure another part of the figure eight shaped hill. A sigh of relief. That little spot we were at initially had to be the hottest little place this side of Tijuana.

In the process of moving I ran into the C.O. He was about as new as I. Rumor had it that he had jockeyed a desk so long that the only way he could be promoted was to go infantry. Whether it was true or not he looked the part with his balding head and bankers disposition.

He recognized me and approached excited as hell asking me what I felt about just having earned an Air Medal. I mumbled "That's something" but silently thought "You fucking jerk, we have just lost something like 25 men and you're going on about your pissy-assed Air-



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Medal". I couldn't understand why I hadn't been told it would be that bad and if so, what had we done to prepare for it. A lesson from the Vietnam primer. Never trust command. Find your own ways of verifying what you've been told. It was rare after that that I ever trusted any officer.

We continued to take casualties. Birds were put out of action. We were seriously beginning to question holding the hill given its size, the lack of reinforced fighting positions, and the tremendous casualties. Even Recons being there in force wasn't enough.

Toward dusk the order came to get the fuck off. There were bodies left. A chopper was down and they did their best to strip it of anything useful. We were low on water. I felt like hell rifling thru a dead mans ruck for food and water. Later I would remember that and smile sadly at how naive I'd been then compared to what we would all in the end do just to survive.

Our group was one of the last in the line that moved off the hill as darkness quickly overtook us. I was to learn years later that a lead element of Alpha Company provided us escort off that hill to an NDP some distance away. As we moved off the guys who had warned earlier about April Fools Day being a bad omen could be heard with their I told you so's. "Yeah, man we're the April Fools for even coming to this damned place".

EPILOGUE

My first several days in the field which had included the infamous April Fools Day assault had a profound impact on the way I would relate to Vietnam from there on out. Initially as events shaped up from the time I saw my first NVA to the fear I saw in soldiers in the bush, to the carnage of an ambush and eventually the full might of the NVA on Ripcord I was confused and scared. Later I became angry that so much life could

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be lost with such a little effort. By the time I'd spotted Terry Radcliffe dying, who I had seemed unkillable, I had been to come to a purposeful resolve.

I had learned in a few days that the NVA could kill me. Command might cause me to be killed, and that no matter how good I got at killing back I could be killed. My reaction was if that's how it is and I'm going to die then at least it's not going to be simple.

Forever after that during my tour I trusted very few people and tried to come at my own conclusions independently from what I saw, or was told, or heard. I think ultimately that saved my life along with the infinite good luck we all needed. The other thing I tried to do was be damn good at whatever it was I was doing, whether it was walking point, standing guard or carrying a machine gun I did it not because I was gung-ho but because life was so hard in the Nam that luck and opportunity as we knew it existed in the States was non-existent there. It was I felt my only chance of survival if there was one at all.

