

# Rescue From FSB Ripcord

By Tom Marshall

Fire Support Base Ripcord, one of a string of firebases along the eastern perimeter of the A Shau Valley, came under heavy enemy fire in the early summer of 1970, while American troops were using the base as a jumping-off point for operations in the valley. Their mission was to block NVA divisions positioned to move on the coastal city of Hue.

Ripcord had been carved out near the top of a 2,800-foot-high mountain. First used by the U.S. Marines in 1967 and 1968, the firebase had again been operated by the 101st Airborne Division in 1969 and closed when monsoons prevented its resupply. It was reopened once more in April 1970. On April 1, B Company of the 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry (2/506), 101st Airborne Division was inserted in the firebase.

Soon after the infantrymen arrived, the level of NVA activity increased around the Khe Sanh plain and the A Shau Valley. The intensity of the fighting in the area around Ripcord soon overshadowed ongoing enemy harassment of nearby ARVN Firebases O'Reilly and Barnett. Ripcord came under sustained recoilless rifle fire for the first time on July 2. The fire was coming from Hill 10000, the first high ground to Ripcord's west. That evening, Ripcord also came under attack by 120mm mortars—the first known enemy use of 120s south of the DMZ. The presence of the 120mm mortars—powerful weapons that could be sighted and walked across targets with devastating effect—indicated a major logistic success by the NVA. Clearly, trucks or tracked vehicles had been used to transport those very heavy mortars, base plates and ammunition into position.

On July 10, eight artillery attacks on Ripcord killed two and wounded 17. Between July 11 and 16, ground action below Ripcord would claim another 10 Americans killed and 52 wounded. Only 12 North Vietnamese could be confirmed killed in their heavily fortified positions, and artillery attacks on Ripcord continued.

On July 18, a Boeing-Vertol CH-47 Chinook helicopter carrying a sling load of 105mm howitzer ammunition toward Ripcord was shot down in flames by 12.7mm anti-aircraft machine-gun fire, which was followed up with mortar fire. The flaming wreckage of the chopper crashed into the ammunition storage area, where it touched off a series of explosions. Six 105mm howitzers from B Battery, 2nd Battalion, 319th Field Artillery (2/319), were destroyed as thousands of shells exploded in the fire. Two recoilless rifles and counter mortar radar were lost. **Colonel Benjamin Harrison**, who on June 23 had assumed command of the 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne, was flying over the camp when the

chopper crashed. He later recalled that it looked as if the entire mountaintop was erupting.

That was the second loss of a 2/319 artillery battery in the same region. Two months before, on May 13, 1969, C Battery, 2/319, had been overrun at Firebase Airborne while the 60-man battery was providing fire support for the fighting on Dong Ap Bia—better known to American troops as Hamburger Hill. NVA sappers killed 22 of the American artillerymen.

With the destruction of the Chinook and Ripcord's 105mm howitzer battery on July 18, the tactical situation and defensive capabilities of the firebase were greatly diminished.

On July 20, **Captain Chuck Hawkins**, commander of A Company, 2/506, which had reinforced the original B Company defenders at the firebase, reported that a tap had been made on a land line

between an NVA division headquarters and an artillery regiment on the valley floor below Ripcord. The Americans had learned that surrounding the firebase were four NVA regiments with up to 12,000 men. Their immediate objective was the destruction of Ripcord.

On hearing that new and disturbing intelligence, **Maj. Gen. Sidney Berry**, commander of the 101st Airborne Division, took action. Early on the morning of July 21, Berry called Colonel Harrison and told him, "We're closing Ripcord." The firebase was already scheduled to be closed in October for the monsoon season, and rather than risk heavy losses, Berry decided to withdraw the troops, then pound the enemy with artillery and tactical air power after the firebase was evacuated.

At first light on July 23, 14 Chinooks—each large enough to carry more than 30 men per trip—headed toward Ripcord to begin lifting out the B Company 2/506 troops. Everything went smoothly until 7:40 a.m., when anti-aircraft fire again knocked out a Chinook. The chopper crashed in flames on the firebase's large lower landing pad, preventing the other Chinooks from lifting out the rest of the men, artillery and heavy equipment. The infantrymen would have to be evacuated by Bell UH-1 Hueys, which could carry only six men at a time. All available Hueys in the 101st Airborne were detailed to head for the beleaguered firebase. They would dart in and out one at a time, dodging continuous anti-aircraft and artillery fire.

While events on top of the mountain were taking a drastic turn for the worse, D Company, 2/506, was also using Hueys to assault the valley floor, in an effort to reinforce A

For the helicopter pilots, the rules were simple. If Americans were in trouble, the pilots would come to their aid no matter what.

Company. Once reinforced, the American infantrymen began beating back their NVA attackers. The plan was to extract the infantrymen in the valley once the firebase above them had been evacuated, while gunships and jets kept the enemy at bay.

The Hueys were refueled and assembled for one of the largest hot extractions of U.S. forces in South Vietnam. Sixty Hueys from the companies of the 158th Aviation Battalion "Redskins" at Camp Evans and 60 Hueys from the 101st Aviation Battalion "Hawks" at Camp Eagle-both groups flying Bell AH-1G Cobra gunships-plus the 4/77 "Griffins" in rocket-equipped gunships, joined the lift birds and the other Cobras from Camp Eagle in the mission to subdue the NVA around Ripcord.

Aboard one of the Hueys was *Captain Randy House*, platoon leader from C Company, 158th Aviation Battalion, who was serving as leader of the extraction flight-call sign Phoenix-that day. Approaching the area, he could clearly see that it was time to get on with the mission, but as yet his flight had had no contact with the command-and-control ship flying high above. It turned out that the NVA and some of their Communist Chinese advisers had managed to deny the Americans use of the radio frequencies. Alternate frequencies one, two and three were jammed with voices or continually interrupted via keyed mikes. After boring holes in the sky for 20 minutes, Captain House left his flight to fly over Ripcord. House instinctively knew that a costly screw-up was in the making unless something could be done quickly to help the embattled infantrymen.

House observed that the firebase's upper landing pad, located near it 155mm howitzers, was taking much less mortar fire than the lower pad, which was under continuous shelling-and at any rate was partially blocked by the burning Chinook wreckage. House made contact with a pathfinder (a combat controller) at Ripcord and told him he was ready to continue the extraction. House ordered the 101st Airborne Division's Hueys to approach the firebase along a riverbed, turn above a waterfall on the mountain and continue to Ripcord. Others from the the 158th and 101st Aviation battalions would follow.

House directed the choppers to the available landing areas. As the extraction continued, the pathfinders instructed some birds to land on different pads, but the NVA were clearly listening in on their communications. If a Huey was directed to a particular pad, mortars were fired on that landing area. Undaunted, the pathfinders working the extraction from Ripcord developed their own strategy to foil the enemy's efforts. When they heard the mortar shells fires, the pathfinders would divert each Huey to another pad at the last second. Five soldiers would scramble aboard and the Hueys would lift off, just before the next round of mortars arrived.

One by one, the Hueys touched down. Some of the landing pads were big enough for only one Huey to land at a time, pick up five or six passengers and depart-all under

.51-caliber (12.7mm) anti-aircraft fire, joined by fire from hundreds of AK-47s. One of the upper pads was not targeted as often, receiving only intermittent 88mm mortar and 75mm recoilless rifle fire.

As the evacuation continued, *Warrant Officer Ken Mayberry* was serving as an aircraft commander, with *Warrant Officer David Rayburn* as his co-pilot. There were small groups of men scattered on the mountain-top, and the continuing barrage of 82mm and 120mm mortar and recoilless rifle fire left blackish-gray clouds of fragmentation everywhere on the firebase.

As Mayberry and Rayburn's chopper approached the landing zone, Rayburn was dismayed by the ferocity of the mortar fire. Both pilots were experienced combat veterans and had taken hits on multiple occasions. The scene reminded Mayberry of one equally hot extraction he had participated in south of Ripcord, at LZ Kelley, where he had flown through a wall of tracers and was rocked by an airburst that nearly nosed him into a mountain. Of 20 Hueys in that earlier operation, only four aircraft had remained flyable after the extraction.

Mayberry and Rayburn grimly continued their approach. Mayberry counted nine mortar shells exploding around the landing pad he was headed for. He also saw six GIs standing in the open, waiting for him. Someone radioed him, "Go around!" but Mayberry replied, "We're going in."

Rayburn looked over at Mayberry and said, "Ken, are you sure you want to do this?" Mayberry kept looking straight ahead, watching the LZ they were approaching. Finally, he said, "We're their only way out, and if we don't get them...." Both knew that they were all that stood between the troops on the ground and the NVA surrounding them. Their unwillingness to give up on what was clearly a very dangerous rescue mission was typical of the resolve demonstrated by many warrant officers who flew Army helicopters in Vietnam. It was an unspoken, solemn vow. The Phoenix crews would do their best, no matter what.

As they made their final approach, the fire got heavier. Mayberry slammed the Huey down amid exploding mortars while six heavily laden soldiers rushed for the helicopter. A mortar round hit in front of the soldiers, a second round just behind them. The infantrymen were thrown to the ground, all of them badly wounded.

Mayberry shouted to his crew chief, *Spc. 5 John Ackerman*, and door gunner *Spc. 4 Wayne Wasilk*, "Get them!" The two young Minnesotans rushed 20 yards through the mortar fire, helped four of the wounded infantrymen up and carried them to the helicopter. Fire continued to fall all around them. It seem to Rayburn that he could feel the AK-47 rounds and mortar fragments peppering the Huey as if the helicopter's skin were his own.

Mayberry looked over his right shoulder, through the cargo door to his right rear. Mortar rounds were being walked up the mountainside as he watched. He held his breath, waiting

for the next hit. The crew chief and door gunner struggled to get the injured men into the cargo bay. The crew chief shouted, "Go! Go!" and Mayberry lifted off in clouds of fragmentation. Moments later, a second chopper, piloted by *Warrant Officer Dave Wolfe*, came in and picked up another group of six soldiers—again under heavy fire. At the time, Wolfe thought that his bird had suffered amazingly minor damage during the pickup. There had been no wounds to his crew or the passengers.

Flying behind Mayberry's Huey, Wolfe called Mayberry on the aviation net (VHF) in a state of amazement and disbelief. Wolfe disregarded all normal radio procedures which typically involved using call signs and waiting for replies, announcing to Mayberry: "Ken, you're smoking. I don't see flames, but there is smoke everywhere. You're losing fuel. There are pieces falling off everywhere. I think you better put that thing down now." Both Hueys were still 10 miles west of Camp Evans, over the Annamite mountain range. Mayberry came on the radio and responded, "I've got a little vibration. I might be losing some instruments. All my packs are badly wounded, so I'm going direct to Charlie Med pad (the 187th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital); we'll check it out there." *Specialist 5 Larry Frazier*, Wolfe's crew chief, watched Mayberry's limping Huey, amazed that it was still flying and relieved that his bird was not in the same condition.

Mayberry and Rayburn carefully piloted their bird back to base. On the ground, they counted more than 40 holes from enemy fire. Their close shave did not stop them for long, however. As soon as they could get a replacement aircraft, they continued to extract troops from "hover holes" below the mountaintop.

Frazier had helped six infantrymen scramble aboard under fire at Ripcord. Shortly after they lifted off, a rifleman motioned to Frazier and handed him a piece of paper that he had taken from his pocket. Frazier read what was written on it and handed it to the pilots. It read, "Thanks for saving our asses." It was a heartfelt thanks Frazier would not forget. He was impressed that the GI had written it while under artillery bombardment, before being picked up. The GI knew the birds would get them out, no matter what.

After the operation ended, Wolfe flew back to refuel at Camp Evans. Frazier hopped down from his crew chief's well and walked forward to open Wolfe's door and move his sliding armor plate back. As he reached for the pilot's door handle, he was startled to see Wolfe's "air-conditioning." Frazier pointed out the damage and trajectory of the enemy rounds that had holed the bird—many had hit very close to Wolfe's seat. The lower part of his pilot's door had been blown away by rounds passing through the nose radio compartment, exiting under Wolfe's legs, through the left pilot's door. They also found several holes in the fuselage under the door gunner's seat. Frazier later joked about Wolfe's reaction: "If he hadn't been sitting down, he

might've collapsed." Wolfe had been so distracted by the damage to Mayberry's Huey that he had been unaware of just how badly his own bird had been hit.

Captain House, still circling above Ripcord, continued the extraction with the other lift companies. They were circling in sight of Ripcord, keeping an eye on the deadly landing zones marked by mortar explosions. House continued to fill the position of command and control. He had just seen his Hueys getting shot to hell while getting the job done. Painfully aware that there were troops still waiting for extraction on the firebase, House understood his importance in the role of impromptu air mission commander. He figured the sooner they finished, the better.

House called to the leader of the Ghostrider flight, "Rider one-six, Phoenix one-six." Ghostrider one-six responded, "Go!"

"This is Phoenix Lead. The other briefers are not up," said House. "It's pretty strong (anti-aircraft fire) west of Ripcord. I hate to be the one to keep this damn thing going, but give me your poz (position)."

"Between Phon Dien, blueline by Jack (southwest of Camp Evans combat base over the river)" came the reply. House then gave the pilots instructions on the best approach direction. Ghostrider Lead briefed the other birds in his flight, but he knew all of the pilots in the area could see the continuous bombardment underway. Ghostrider Lead continued, "I'm not gonna order you into that stuff, but if you think you can get onto the pad, do it!"

The Hueys would come as long as there were Americans on the ground. The pilots and crews saw what they would have to go through and made their approaches one by one. The airwaves became clogged with incessant reports: "Pretty white stuff on top," called a Ghostrider as he approached the upper LZ in a flurry of mortar shells.

"It's CS," another pilot calmly remarked—tear gas.

Another asked, "Are we using CS?"

"No," responded the first pilot. "They are."

Not only would the Huey pilots fly through walls of .51 caliber anti-aircraft tracers to land amid exploding clouds of tear gas, which might temporarily blind them.

While he was sitting on the ground at Ripcord, Ghostrider one-six called over the radio, "Mortar fire hitting all areas of pad, 5 to 10 meters of pad, all the way down the hill!"

Another Ghostrider, also touching down at Ripcord, called, "Go in top pad, one more hit just right beside me!"

A pathfinder at Ripcord asked, "Did a slic (UH-1D) just get shot down?"

Commander one-one, from A Company, 101st Aviation Battalion, replied, "No, a mortar hit him sitting on the ground."

Ghostrider Chalk-Seven broke in with: "Taking small arms fire 100 meters out. They're leading it onto the pad."

Ghostrider Lead called, "Abort, Chalk-Seven!"

Chalk-Seven responded: "No, I've aborted three times

already, I'll just continue in!"

Ghostrider Lead said: "I'll leave it up to you. Go in if you can!"

Another pilot called out, "POL (the fuel dump) just went up-took a mortar, right beside me."

The lift companies-Ghostriders, Lancers, Comancheros, Black Widows and Kingsmen-continued the procession. Many of the choppers were taking hits. The smoke, the streams of green and gold enemy tracers, the jets swooping low, laying napalm while Cobra gunships attacked lines of enemy troops-all of it nearly overwhelmed the senses of the chopper crews.

But the Hueys kept coming. When one chopper was shot down, another landed to retrieve its crew. By noon, only 18 fighting men remained at Ripcord from an original force of nearly 400. Driven from their secure positions by exploding 155mm ammunition that had been ignited by the fires, those remaining soldiers ran to one end of the firebase and attempted to form a security perimeter. They could see NVA swarming up the mountainside toward them like ants, breaching the lower perimeter wires less than 100 yards away.

Most of the GIs were carrying M-60 machine guns, firing from the hip as they moved from one position to another. They simply wanted to get off that Godforsaken mountain alive. *Private First Class Daniel Biggs* watched as a Huey approached the pad and landed in the exact spot where two mortar shells had hit seconds earlier. Biggs later told a *Stars and Stripes* correspondent, "He came right in, didn't turn away or nothin'."

Above Ripcord, another flight was concluding the mountaintop evacuation of troops. *Warrant Officer Jim Saunders*, a Navy admiral's son, was on short final approach when the Huey was shot out of the sky by 12.7mm heavy machine guns. Saunders' bird crashed further down the mountain, on Ripcord's lower landing pad, in the midst of a group of NVA. The Huey continued to slide down the mountain until it became entangled in the firebase's lower barbed wire perimeter.

The crew fled the burning wreckage of the chopper and scrambled up the steep hillside toward another pickup zone. Saunders looked over his shoulder and saw NVA crawling through the concertina wire at the perimeter, less than 25 yards from him. Saunders and his crew ran madly up the steep hill, shedding their armor and flight helmets as they went-anything to lighten the load and speed their flight.

They made it up to the top of the next hill only to confront another group of NVA clambering up the other side. Hueys were circling above them, machine guns were firing all around, and a door gunner waved them on toward a clear area at a slightly lower level. They dashed downhill between two more columns of NVA who were tangled in concertina wire, so close to each other that they did not fire for fear of hitting other NVA. Saunders and his crew finally made it

onto another Huey and escaped in a hail of small-arms fire. A short while later, the last Huey to lift off from the firebase sustained major damage and heavy casualties to its passengers. The last men off the mountain were members of B Company, 2/506. They had also been the first ones to arrive in April. The troop withdrawals from the valley floor below would not end for another two hours.

By early afternoon on July 23, all known survivors at Ripcord had been carried back to Camp Evans. However, several battle-dazed Americans, hiding in their bunkers, had been unwilling or unable to run the gauntlet of mortar fire to reach the Hueys. Some had apparently even hid from their own comrades who had searched the bunkers to ensure that everyone got out. The troops who had stayed behind were killed that night by NVA using flamethrowers or bayonets. The NVA swarmed over their conquest until airstrikes abruptly ended their celebration. The remains of several American soldiers were recovered six weeks later.

Operations in the area around Firebase Ripcord had proved to be a costly undertaking. Between April 1 and July 31, 1970, 135 UH-1H Hueys were seriously damaged and rendered unflyable. The vast majority of the division pilots and crew members survived despite combat damage to their aircraft. Ten Cobras and three Hughes OH-6a Loaches also sustained serious hits. Only two of the six Huey lift companies involved in operations in that area did not lose a crew killed in action. All the pilots who participated in the evacuation earned Distinguished Flying Crosses. The crew chiefs and door gunners received Air Medals with a "V" for valor.

Despite the losses, the action at Fire Support Base Ripcord was a highly successful fighting withdrawal. It left the enemy in control of the jungle, but nothing else. The NVA were pounded continuously by Boeing B-52s and tactical air support, and the mountain jungles were defoliated.

Helicopters, including gunships and lift ships, were crucial to the evacuation of Ripcord. The withdrawal could not have succeeded without the courage and daring of Huey pilots and crewmen who repeatedly braved direct mortar fire, recoilless rifle fire and walls of neon-green .51-caliber anti-aircraft tracers to save the lives of their countrymen.

*As an Army helicopter pilot, Tom Marshall was awarded 22 Air Medals for more than 1m,000 combat flying hours, logged while he was serving with the 4th Infantry Division at An Khe in 1970-71.*

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