

Ripcord Lessons Learned 1970

*This document was typed originally in all capital letters and included some misspellings and grammar errors. I have transcribed it as it appears on the original report. There may be some discrepancies between this digital version and the original paper copy. Double line spaces indicate the end of one page and the beginning of the next**

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
HEADQUARTERS, 158TH AVIATION BATTALION (ASLT HEL) (AMBL)
101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION (AIRMOBILE)
APO SAN FRANCISCO 96383

AVDG-AV-CE 25 July 1970

SUBJECT: Operational Report - Lessons Learned (Feeder Report), 158th
Aviation Battalion (Aslt Hel)(Ambl), Period Ending 31 July 1970.

Command Officer
101st Aviation Group (CBT)
ATTN: AVDG-LC-C
101st Airborne Division (Ambl)
APO San Francisco 96383

In accordance with the 101st Abn Div UNCLAS Msg 070315 dated 100255Z jul 70,
Subject: Operational Report - Lessons Learned, and Div Reg 525-4 dated
1 May 1970, the attached report is submitted.

ROBERT J. GERARD
LTC, Infantry
Commanding

A STUDY IN PLANNING AND FLEXIBILITY

RIPCORDER

MISSION: UNITS LOCATED ON AND IN THE VICINITY OF FIRE SUPPORT OPERATIONAL
BASE RIPCORDER WILL BE RELOCATED AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

AT 0900 HOURS 22 JULY 1970 THE COMMANDING GENERAL 101ST AIRBORNE
DIVISION (AIRMOBILE) SET IN MOTION ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL
EXTRACTIONS, CONDUCTED UNDER INTENSIVE HOSTILE FIRE, IN THE VIETNAM WAR!

**Source Unknown*

WHAT PROMPTED THE COMMANDING GENERAL 101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION (AIRMOBILE) TO MAKE THE DECISION TO REDEPLOY THE FORCES SECURING FS/OB RIPCORD:

IN THE EARLY HOURS OF 1 JULY 1970, ELEMENTS OF THE 3RD BRIGADE, 101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION (AIRMOBILE), AROUND FIREBASE RIPCORD BEGAN TAKING DIRECT AND INDIRECT FIRE. THE INCOMING ROUNDS WERE NO SURPRISE BECAUSE THE BUILD UP OF INTELLIGENCE DATA OVER THE PREVIOUS WEEKS HAD INDICATED THAT THE NORTH VIETNAMESE ARMY WAS MASSING FORCES IN THE AREA AND WOULD PROBABLY DIRECT THEIR THRUST AT RIPCORD. THROUGHOUT THE DAY FIELD ARTILLERY, AERIAL ROCKET ARTILLERY, AND AH-1G "COBRA" GUNSHIPS WERE EMPLOYED AGAINST KNOWN AND SUSPECTED ENEMY POSITIONS. HOWEVER, THE INTENSITY OF HOSTILE FIRE REMAINED HIGH AND LATE IN THE AFTERNOON A CH-47 HELICOPTER DELIVERING ARTILLERY AMMUNITION INTO RIPCORD

WAS HIT BY INTENSIVE 12.7mm ANTI-AIRCRAFT FIRE AND WAS FORCED TO LAND ON THE FIREBASE. ATTEMPTS TO EXTRACT THE CH-47 WERE UNSUCCESSFUL EVEN THOUGH HEAVY PREPATORY AND SUPPRESSIVE FIRES WERE CONSTANTLY DIRECTED AGAINST THE HOSTILE WEAPONS POSITIONS. EACH TIME AN AIRCRAFT ARRIVED AT OR IN THE VICINITY OF RIPCORD IT WAS MET BY SMALL ARMS AND ANTI-AIRCRAFT FIRE.

THE PATTERN OF HOSTILE FIRE ESTABLISHED ON 1 JULY CONTINUED FOR TWENTY-TWO DAYS, WITH THE INTENSITY OF FIRE INCREASING DAILY. DURING THIS PERIOD THE NVA FORCES CONTINUED TO MANEUVER IN AN ATTEMPT TO ENCIRCLE RIPCORD. THEY ESTABLISHED ANTI-AIRCRAFT POSITIONS ON KEY TERRAIN FEATURES THAT GUARDED THE APPROACHES TO RIPCORD AND REGISTERED MORTAR FIRES ON ALL PORTIONS OF THE FIREBASE, CAPABLE OF RECEIVING HELICOPTER TRAFFIC.

DUE TO THE INCREASED ENEMY ACTIVITY, THE DEMANDS PLACED UPON THE 101ST AVIATION GROUP (COMBAT) TO RESUPPLY RIPCORD WERE TREMENDOUS. A ROUTINE LOGISTICAL MISSION HAD SUDDENLY BECOME A MAJOR TACTICAL OPERATION. DETAILED FIRE SUPPORT PLANS HAD TO BE PREPARED AND COORDINATED; INTELLIGENCE INFORMATION, AS TO THE LOCATION OF ANTI-AIRCRAFT POSITIONS, HAD TO BE GATHERED AND DISSEMINATED; FLIGHT SORTIES HAD TO BE PLANNED TO AVOID KNOWN OR SUSPECTED LOCATIONS; GUNSHIPS CREWS HAD TO BE BRIEFED ON AREAS THAT WOULD REQUIRE EXTENSIVE SUPPRESSIVE FIRES;

FINALLY, DETAILED TIME SCHEDULES HAD TO BE PREPARED SO THAT ALL LOADS COULD BE DELIVERED ON THE FIREBASE BEFORE THE NVA COULD REACT AND BRING THE FIREBASE UNDER FIRE. THE EXECUTION OF THESE LOGISTICAL OPERATIONS TAXED THE SKILL AND IMAGINATION OF EVERY PILOT AND

COMMANDER. HOW BEST TO OUTGUESS THE NVA GUNNERS WAS THE QUESTION OF THE DAY. THE ANSWER WAS EVIDENTLY EFFECTIVE BECAUSE THE 159TH AVIATION BATTALION (ASH) WAS ABLE TO MAKE 461 SEPARATE SORTIES, DELIVERING

IN EXCESS OF 3 MILLION POUNDS OF CARGO TO FS/OB RIPCORD BETWEEN THE 1ST AND 22ND OF JULY 1970, WITH A LOSS OF ONLY ONE CH-47 "CHINOOK" ON 18 JULY 1970. THE AIRCRAFT WAS HIT BY INTENSIVE 12.7mm MACHINE GUN FIRE, CRASHED AND BURNED ON THE FIREBASE.

DURING THE SAME PERIOD THE COMMANDING OFFICER 3RD BRIGADE, 101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION (AIRMOBILE) RAPIDLY DEPLOYED ELEMENTS OF HIS COMMAND AROUND THE FIRE- BASE TO DENY THE NVA ACCESS TO THE FIREBASE. DUE TO THE SIZE OF ENEMY UNITS

WITHIN THE VICINITY OF RIPCORD, HE WAS CONSTANTLY FACED WITH THE PROBLEM OF EXTRACTING COMPANY SIZE UNITS AND INSERTING THEM AT DIFFERENT LOCATIONS TO MEET THE THREATS AS THEY DEVELOPED. THIS IN ITSELF WAS NO SMALL TASK, SINCE THE AREA IN WHICH THE UNITS WERE DEPLOYED WAS MOUNTAINOUS AND COVERED WITH TRIPLE CANOPY JUNGLE. HASTY PICKUP ZONES AND LANDING ZONES HAD TO BE CUT IN THE DENSE JUNGLE BEFORE ANY AIRMOBILE OPERATIONS COULD BE INITIATED. AGAIN, DETAILED PLANS HAD TO BE DEVELOPED BY THE SUPPORTING AVIATION UNITS. IN PREPARING FOR EACH OPERATION IT HAD TO BE ASSUMED THAT THE AIRCRAFT WOULD BE SUBJECTED TO INTENSE HOSTILE FIRE ON APPROACHES TO THE PICKUP OR LANDING ZONES, THEREFORE PROVISIONS HAD TO BE MADE FOR THE SELECTION OF ALTERNATE LZ'S IF THE FIRE ON THE PRIMARY LZ BECAME TOO INTENSE. FIRE SUPPORT PLANNING FOR THE ESCORT AH-1G ATTACK HELICOPTER HAD TO BE EXTREMELY DETAILED AND CLOSELY COORDINATED WITH ALL GROUND ELEMENTS BECAUSE OF THE SHORT DISTANCES BETWEEN FRIENDLY AND ENEMY ELEMENTS. AGAIN DETAIL PLANNING AND COORDINATION PAID DIVIDENDS, NUMEROUS ASSAULTS WERE EXECUTED. IN A VERYSMOOTH AND PROFESSIONAL MANNER, WITH MINIMUM LOSS OF AIRCRAFT AND CREWS. IT SHOULD BE NOTED, HOWEVER, THAT THE DECIDING FACTOR IN THE SUCCESS OF MANY MISSIONS WAS THE INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCE OF EACH CREW MEMBER. THROUGH OUT THIS PERIOD THE NVA WOULD MANEUVER THEIR FORCES TO ENCIRCLE RIPCORD ONLY TO BE MET BY A COUNTER MOVE BY ELEMENTS OF THE 3RD BRIGADE.

IN RETROSPECT, IT APPEARED LIKE A LARGE CHESS GAME OF MOVES AND COUNTER MOVES. FORTUNATELY THE 3RD BRIGADE WAS ABLE TO ANTICIPATE THE MOVES MADE BY THE NVA AND RAPIDLY SHIFT COMBAT POWER TO OFF SET ANY TACTICAL ADVANTAGE.

BY 21 JULY 1970, IT BECAME APPARENT TO THE COMMANDING GENERAL, 101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION (AIRMOBILE) THAT THE COMBAT POWER REQUIRED TO DENY THE NVA THE RIPCORDER AREA WAS EXCESSIVE. DENYING THE ENEMY A PIECE OF TERRAIN THAT HAD LITTLE TACTICAL ADVANTAGE TO ALLIED FORCES AND TIED UP A LARGE PORTION OF ONE BRIGADE AND DIVISIONAL AVIATION RESOURCES, WAS NOT CONSIDERED TACTICALLY SOUND. THE COMMANDING GENERAL ALSO BELIEVED THAT SINCE THE NVA HAD AN ESTIMATED TWO REGIMENTS MASSED WITHIN THE VICINITY OF FS/OB RIPCORDER, THE ENEMY COULD BE MORE DECISIVELY ENGAGED AND DEFEATED BY MASSIVE AERIAL AND ARTILLERY BOMBARDMENT, AND BY EMPLOYING THE FORCES IN HIS BASE CAMP AREA DESTROY HIS LOGISTICAL RESOURCES AND DENY HIM ROUTES OF COMMUNICATION

BASED ON HIS ESTIMATE OF THE TACTICAL SITUATION THE COMMAND GENERAL 101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION (AIRMOBILE) MADE HIS DECISION TO REDEPLOY THE FORCES TO THE VICINITY OF FS/OB RIPCORDER. ON RECEIPT OF THE MISSION TO REDEPLOY HIS FORCES, THE COMMANDING OFFICER 3RD BRIGADE IMMEDIATELY DIRECTED THAT A PLANNING CONFERENCE BE HELD AT 221045 JULY TO DETERMINE TASKS TO BE ACCOMPLISHED, AND TO INITIATE PRELIMINARY PLANNING AND COORDINATION OF ALL UNITS REQUIRED TO EXECUTE OR SUPPORT THE EXTRACTION OF FORCES.

ON RECEIPT OF HIS MISSION TO BE PREPARED TO PROVIDE AIRCRAFT TO SUPPORT THE RAPID WITHDRAWAL OF MEN AND MATERIALS FROM RIPCORDER AND VICINITY, THE COMMANDING OFFICER 101ST AVIATION GROUP, DIRECTED THE COMMANDING OFFICER OF THE 158TH AVIATION BATTALION (AH) AND THE 159TH AVIATION BATTALION (ASH) TO MEET HIM AT THE 3RD BRIGADE TACTICAL OPERATION CENTER AT 1000 HOURS. ON ARRIVAL AT THE 3RD BRIGADE, THE COMMANDING OFFICER 101ST AVIATION GROUP BRIEFED HIS BATTALION COMMANDERS ON WHAT INFORMATION HE HAD ABOUT THE FORTHCOMING OPERATION, AND ADVISED THEM THAT THEIR PLANS, TO SUPPORT THE AIRMOBILE TASK FORCE

COMMANDER'S CONCEPT OF THE OPERATION, WOULD HAVE TO BE DETAILED YET SIMPLE AND WITH MAXIMUM FLEXIBILITY BUILT IN. HE DESIGNATED THE COMMANDING OFFICER, 158TH AVIATION BATTALION, AS AIR MISSION COMMANDER FOR THE TROOP WITHDRAWAL AND THE COMMANDING OFFICER 159TH AVIATION BATTALION AS AIR MISSION COMMANDER FOR THE EXTRACTION OF ARTILLERY AND OTHER HEAVY SUPPLIES AND EQUIPMENT FROM THE FIREBASE.

THE PRELIMINARY PLANNING CONFERENCE BEGAN WITH THE S-3, 3RD BRIGADE, LISTING THE TASKS THAT WOULD BE REQUIRED, THE APPROXIMATE TROOP STRENGTHS OF UNITS TO BE EXTRACTED, THEIR LOCATION, AND THE APPROXIMATE NUMBER OF CH-47 SORTIES THAT WOULD BE REQUIRED. HE THEN BRIEFLY DESCRIBED THE FIRE SUPPORT THAT WOULD BE AVAILABLE

TO SUPPORT THE OPERATION. PRIORITY OF FIRE FROM FOUR FIRE SUPPORT/OPERATIONAL BASES WOULD BE IN SUPPORT OF THE EXTRACTION. AIR STRIKES AND ARTILLERY FIRE WOULD BE EMPLOYED THROUGHOUT THE NIGHT OF 22-23 JULY, DESIGNED TO FIX THE ENEMY,

TO REDUCE HIS CAPABILITY TO REINFORCE ANY UNIT, TO INFLICT MAXIMUM CASUALTIES AMONG COMMITTED FORCES, TO DESTROY MAXIMUM MORTAR AND ANTI-AIRCRAFT POSITIONS AND TO ENABLE THE 3RD BRIGADE ELEMENTS TO DISENGAGE AND PREPARE FOR EXTRACTION. HE THEN STATED THAT, FOR PLANNING, THE EXTRACTION WOULD COMMENCE AT 0545 WITH THE EXTRACTION OF SOME TROOPS FROM THE FIREBASE, FOLLOWED AT 0600 HOURS WITH THE EXTRACTION OF ARTILLERY AND HEAVY EQUIPMENT. ON COMPLETION OF THE ARTILLERY EXTRACTION THE REMAINING TROOPS WOULD BE LIFTED OFF THE FIREBASE FOLLOWED BY THOSE FORCES DEPLOYED AROUND RIPCORD. HE REQUESTED ONE COMMAND AND CONTROL UH-1H HELICOPTER, 20 UH-1H AIRCRAFT FOR THE TROOP EXTRACTION, SUFFICIENT CH-47 AIRCRAFT TO EXTRACT THE ARTILLERY WITHIN ONE AND ONE-HALF HOURS, AND SIX AH-1G ATTACK HELICOPTERS. THE S-3 WAS FOLLOWED BY AN UPDATE INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING ON THE AREA OF OPERATIONS. THE S-3 THEN REQUESTED THAT THE AIR MISSION COMMANDERS FINALIZE SUPPORT PLANS AND BE PREPARED TO PRESENT THEM AT 1730 HOURS AT THE BRIGADE TOC.

AFTER THE BRIEFING, COMMANDING OFFICER 101ST AVIATION GROUP, REITERATED THE NEED FOR SIMPLICITY AND DIRECTED THE COMMANDING OFFICER, 158TH AVIATION BATTALION, TO PLAN ON USING 30 UH-1H AIRCRAFT ON THE LIFT, TEN OF WHICH WOULD BE PROVIDED BY THE 101ST AVIATION BATTALION (AH). HE ALSO INFORMED HIM THAT HE WOULD HAVE ADDITIONAL AH-1G AND UH-1H HELICOPTERS ON STANDBY STATUS IN THE EVENT THE TACTICAL SITUATION NECESSITATED AN INCREASE IN AIRCRAFT ASSETS.

THROUGHOUT THE REMAINDER OF THE AFTERNOON THE BATTALION COMMANDERS AND THEIR STAFF WORKED OUT THE DETAILS OF THE AIR MOVEMENT PLAN.

RECONNAISSANCE'S WERE FLOWN TO DETERMINE ADEQUACY OF PROPOSED PICK UP ZONES, FLIGHT ROUTES WERE FLOWN TO SELECT THOSE THAT HELD THE MOST PROMISE AND AVOIDED AREAS HAVING EXTENSIVE ANTI-AIRCRAFT POSITIONS; START POINTS, CHECK POINTS, AND RELEASE POINTS WERE TENTATIVELY SELECTED; S-2'S GATHERED INTELLIGENCE DATA FOCUSED PRIMARILY ON

THE ENEMY'S CAPABILITY OF EMPLOYING ANTI-AIRCRAFT WEAPONS AGAINST AIRCRAFT FLIGHT. A LIAISON TEAM WAS DISPATCHED FROM THE 159TH AVIATION BATTALION TO RIPCORN TO COORDINATE WITH THE ARTILLERY UNITS TO BE LIFTED.

AT 1730 HOURS THE FINAL COORDINATION MEETING WAS CONDUCTED, MOVEMENT PLANS WERE SUBMITTED AND AFTER MINOR MODIFICATIONS WERE APPROVED.

AT 1845 HOURS, S-3, 101ST AVIATION GROUP, DISPATCHED THE PATHFINDER PLATOON LEADER AND SECTION SERGEANT TO RIPCORN TO COORDINATE AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL DURING THE EXTRACTION. ON ARRIVAL AT THE FIREBASE THE PLATOON LEADER REPORTED TO THE "KING OF THE HILL" (INFANTRY BATTALION COMMANDER) FOR BRIEFING AND NECESSARY INSTRUCTIONS. HE WAS DIRECTED TO CONTROL THE EQUIPMENT EXTRACTION AND THAT THE PERSONNEL EXTRACTION WOULD BE CONTROLLED BY THE BATTALION TACTICAL OPERATIONS CENTER ON THE FIREBASE. BASED ON THIS GUIDANCE, THE PATHFINDER PLATOON LEADER CONTACTED THE ARTILLERY BATTERY COMMANDERS AND RIGGERS AND DETERMINED THAT ADDITIONAL RIGGING EQUIPMENT WOULD BE REQUIRED TO HAVE ALL LOADS RIGGED AND READY PRIOR TO 0600 HOURS 23 JULY. BY 1945 HOURS THE EQUIPMENT LIST WAS COMPILED AND FORWARDED TO THE 101ST AVIATION GROUP TACTICAL OPERATIONS CENTER.

AT 2030 HOURS TWO UH-1H AIRCRAFT ARRIVED AT THE FIREBASE WITH THE REQUIRED EQUIPMENT. AT THIS TIME, THE "KING OF THE HILL" DIRECTED THE PATHFINDERS TO ASSIST THE RIGGERS IN PREPARING LOADS FOR AIR MOVEMENT AND TO COMPILE A LISTING OF ALL SORTIES TO BE EXTRACTED.

AT 220000 JULY, THE AIR MISSION COMMANDER MEETING WAS CONDUCTED AT THE 159TH AVIATION BATTALION'S TACTICAL OPERATIONS CENTER FOR ALL PERSONNEL INVOLVED IN THE ARTILLERY AND EQUIPMENT EXTRACTION. THE COMMANDING OFFICER 159TH AVIATION BATTALION (ASH) BEGAN THE MEETING WITH THE MISSION AND CONCEPT OF OPERATION.

THE S-2 THEN PRESENTED A DETAILED INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING ON KNOWN OR SUSPECTED ANTI-AIRCRAFT WEAPON POSITIONS AND AN ANALYSIS OF THE NVA CAPABILITY OF HITTING THE FIREBASE WITH DIRECT AND INDIRECT FIRE. THE S-3 FOLLOWED WITH FLIGHT PLANS, THE FIRE SUPPORT AND REFUELING PLANS, AIRCRAFT PROCEDURES, MEDICAL EVACUATION PROCEDURES, RECOVERY PROCEDURES AND REQUIREMENTS FOR STAND BY AIRCRAFT AND COMMAND AND SIGNAL REQUIREMENTS. BASICALLY THE PLAN STATED THAT 10 CH-47 AIRCRAFT PLUS TWO STANDBY AIRCRAFT WOULD BE STARTED, CHECKED OUT AND HAVE COMMUNICATIONS CHECKS MADE IN ORDER TO BE READY FOR LAUNCH AT 230545 JULY. AIRCRAFT WOULD DEPART BY ASSIGNED CHALK NUMBER. ON ORDER, FROM THE BATTALION TACTICAL OPERATIONS CENTER PROCEED DIRECTLY TO CAMP EVANS. CHALKS ONE THROUGH TEN WOULD LAND AND POSITION ON EVANS RUNWAY IN CHALK NUMBER SEQUENCE. CHALK NUMBER 11 AND 12 WOULD POSITION ON THE C-130 RAMP AT EVANS.

ON ORDER OF THE BATTALION LIAISON ELEMENT AT CAMP EVANS, AIRCRAFT WOULD DEPART IN CHALK SEQUENCE AT 45 SECOND INTERVALS AND PROCEED VIA THE PRIMARY FLIGHT ROUTE TO THE FIREBASE (THE FLIGHT ROUTE WAS LOW LEVEL TO USE THE TERRAIN AS A SHIELD FROM KNOWN ENEMY AUTOMATIC WEAPONS POSITIONS). AIRCRAFT WERE TO REPORT STARTING POINT, ENROUTE CHECK POINTS, RELEASE POINT, AND ANY TIME THAT FIRE WAS RECEIVED, TO THE AIR MISSION COMMANDER ON AN ESTABLISHED RADIO FREQUENCY. AT THE RELEASE POINT, THE AIRCRAFT WERE TO CONTACT PATHFINDER RIPCORD ON HIS FREQUENCY FOR PICK UP INSTRUCTIONS. ON DEPARTURE FROM THE FIREBASE THE AIRCRAFT WERE TO MAINTAIN ALTITUDE AND PROCEED TO CAMP EVANS, CHALKS 1-9 WERE TO REPORT TO THE AIR MISSION COMMANDER AND PROCEED BY THE FLIGHT ROUTE, PRIMARY ON ALTERNATE, FOR A SECOND SORTIE; CHALK NUMBER 10 WAS TO REPORT FOR FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS. AH-1G GUNSHIPS WOULD CAP THE FLIGHT ROUTE INTO RIPCORD AND PROVIDE SUPPRESSIVE FIRE ON CALL. IF AN AIRCRAFT WAS DOWNED OFF THE FIREBASE THE CREW WOULD REMOVE RADIO EQUIPMENT AND WEAPONS AND BE PICKED UP BY UH-1H. IF THE AIRCRAFT WENT DOWN ON THE FIREBASE THE CREW WOULD REMAIN ON THE FIREBASE AND BE EXTRACTED WITH THE TROOPS. NO ATTEMPT WOULD BE MADE TO RECOVER DOWNED AIRCRAFT WHILE THE MISSION WAS IN PROGRESS. THE DECISION TO SECURE AND RECOVER AIRCRAFT WOULD BE MADE BY THE AIRMOBILE TASK FORCE COMMANDER AT THE COMPLETION OF THE MISSION. WOUNDED CREW MEMBERS WOULD BE DROPPED OFF AT CAMP EVANS. IN THE EVENT AN AIRCRAFT WAS DOWNED OR A CREW MEMBER WAS WOUNDED, THE AIR MISSION COMMANDER WOULD THEN LAUNCH A STANDBY AIRCRAFT FROM CAMP EVANS.

AT 222100 JULY 1970, THE COMMANDING OFFICER 158TH AVIATION BATTALION (AH) CONDUCTED HIS AIR MISSION COMMANDER'S BRIEFING FOR ALL PERSONNEL ENGAGED IN THE PERSONNEL EXTRACTION PHASE OF THE OPERATION. THE MISSION WAS CLEARLY DEFINED AND WAS FOLLOWED BY A DETAILED INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING. AGAIN PARTICULAR ATTENTION WAS PAID TO THE LOCATION OF NVA ANTI-AIRCRAFT WEAPONS POSITIONS. THE INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING WAS FOLLOWED BY THE AIR MISSION COMMANDERS CONCEPT OF THE OPERATION. HE ENVISIONED A THREE PHASE PLAN. PHASE I WAS THE INITIAL EXTRACTION OF TROOPS FROM FIREBASE RIPCORD COMMENCING AT 0545 HOURS; PHASE II WAS THE EXTRACTION OF THE REMAINING TROOPS FROM RIPCORD COMMENCING ON ORDER, APPROXIMATELY 0800 HOURS.

AFTER THE COMPLETION OF THE HOOK MOVE FROM THE FIREBASE; PHASE III WAS THE EXTRACTION OF A COMPANY SIZE UNIT FROM A FIELD LOCATION APPROXIMATELY ONE KILOMETER SOUTH-EAST OF RIPCORD.

THE S-3 THEN BRIEFED THE DETAIL ON FLIGHT ROUTES, ALTITUDES, ENROUTE FORMATIONS, FIRE SUPPORT, COORDINATING INSTRUCTIONS FOR ARMED HELICOPTERS, RULES OF ENGAGEMENT, DOWNED AIRCRAFT PROCEDURES, TIME PHASING OF FLIGHTS AND AIRCRAFT TIME INTERVALS WITHIN EACH FLIGHT, AIRCRAFT REFUELING PLAN, PROVISIONS FOR MEDICAL TREATMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS FREQUENCIES AND CALL SIGNS TO BE USED. FLIGHT LEADS AND ALTERNATE FLIGHT LEADS WERE DESIGNATED FOR EACH OF THE TWO FLIGHTS OF 15 AIRCRAFT.

PRIMARY AND ALTERNATE FLIGHT ROUTES WERE ESTABLISHED INTO RIPCORD AND THE PZ IN THE VICINITY OF RIPCORD. EACH FLIGHT WOULD FLY IN A TRAIL FORMATION WITH THIRTY SECOND INTERVALS BETWEEN AIRCRAFT AND A FORTY-FIVE SECOND INTERVAL BETWEEN FLIGHTS. THE AMC STATED THAT IF ENEMY FIRE PERMITTED HE WOULD CLOSE THE INTERVAL AND PLACE TWO AIRCRAFT ON THE FIREBASE AT ONE TIME, BUT THAT HE DID NOT WANT TO REDUCE EACH PILOTS ABILITY TO TAKE EVASIVE ACTION TO AVOID ENEMY FIRE IF IT BECAME AS INTENSE AS THE INTELLIGENCE PICTURE INDICATED. THE EXTRACTION OF THE PERSONNEL FROM THE FIELD LOCATION WOULD, BE SINGLE SHIP BECAUSE THE PZ WAS NOT LARGE ENOUGH TO ACCOMMODATE MORE THAN ONE AIRCRAFT. THE AH-1G GUNSHIPS WERE TO ESCORT THE SHIP INTO THE PZ'S PROVIDING SUPPRESSIVE FIRE ON "HOT SPOTS" ENCOUNTERED IN ROUTE. ON ARRIVAL AT THE FIREBASE THEY WOULD PLACE SUPPRESSIVE FIRES ON KNOWN OR SUSPECTED ENEMY LOCATIONS. THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT, TO INCLUDE GROUND COMMANDERS TO CONTACT FOR CLEARANCE TO FIRE, WERE SPELLED OUT IN DETAIL. SINCE ENEMY FORCES WERE IN CLOSE PROXIMITY TO SOME OF THE FRIENDLY ELEMENTS TO BE EXTRACTED, IT WAS NECESSARY TO KNOW THE EXACT LOCATION OF ALL FRIENDLY

ELEMENTS. QUESTIONS WERE THEN ANSWERED AND THE PILOTS WERE RELEASED AT 2300 HOURS.

AT APPROXIMATELY 2300 HOURS THE 159TH AVIATION BATTALION LIAISON TEAM ON RIPCORD CONTACTED THE BATTALION TOC AND INFORMED THEM THAT THERE WOULD BE A MINIMUM OF TWENTY-FOUR SORTIES TO BE LIFTED FROM THE FIREBASE, WHICH REPRESENTED AT LEAST SIX ADDITIONAL SORTIES. THE COMMANDING OFFICER 159TH AVIATION BATTALION MADE THE DECISION NOT TO CHANGE HIS PLAN AT THAT TIME BUT TO HAVE THE AVIATORS ALREADY BRIEFED MAKE ADDITIONAL SORTIES INTO THE FIREBASE.

AT 2345 HOURS THE DECISION WAS MADE BY THE COMMANDING OFFICER, 3RD BRIGADE TO REINFORCE THE UNIT DEPLOYED SOUTHEAST OF RIPCORD AT FIRST LIGHT ON 23 JULY TO RELIEVE PRESSURE AND ASSIST THEM IN BREAKING CONTACT FOR THE EXTRACTION. ON RECEIPT OF THIS ADDITIONAL MISSION, THE COMMANDING OFFICER 101ST AVIATION GROUP (CBT) (AMBL) PASSED THE MISSION TO THE COMMANDING OFFICER 158TH AVIATION BATTALION AND AUTHORIZED HIM DIRECT COORDINATION WITH COMMANDING OFFICER 3RD BRIGADE. HE THEN ORDERED THE COMMANDING OFFICER 101ST AVIATION BATTALION TO PLACE 12 ADDITIONAL UH-1H AND TWO ADDITIONAL FIRE TEAMS ON FIVE MINUTE ALERT STATUS BEGINNING 0545 HOURS 23 JULY TO BE PREPARED TO REINFORCE THE 158TH AVIATION BATTALION IN THE EXTRACTION OF RIPCORD.

ON CONTACTING 3RD BRIGADE, THE COMMANDING OFFICER 158TH AVIATION BATTALION THAT THE UNIT TO BE COMBAT ASSAULTED INTO THE AREA WOULD BE A COMPANY SIZE UNIT, ANT THAT THE LZ WAS APPROXIMATELY 150 METERS NORTH OF THE PZ THAT HAD BEEN ESTABLISHED FOR THE EXTRACTION. HE ALSO LEARNED THAT PHASE I OF HIS PLAN HAD BEEN ELIMINATED AND THAT THE INSERTION WOULD REPLACE IT.

AFTER FORMULATING A PLAN TO SUPPORT THE "ADD ON" MISSION, THE COMMANDING OFFICER 158TH AVIATION BATTALION BRIEFED THE FLIGHT LEADS AND GUNSHIP SECTION LEADERS OF THE REVISED PLAN AND CHARGED THEM WITH BRIEFING THE PILOTS PRIOR TO THE 0530 PZ TIME.

BY 0400 HOURS 23 JULY ALL LOADS WERE RIGGED AND LISTS FINALIZED. THERE WERE A TOTAL OF TWENTY-FOUR SORTIES TO BE AIRLIFTED FROM RIPCORD, AND INCREASE OF SIX SORTIES OVER THAT ESTIMATED PREVIOUSLY. THIS INFORMATION WAS RELAYED TO THE 101ST AVIATION GROUP TACTICAL OPERATIONS CENTER SO THAT PLANS COULD BE MODIFIED TO ACCOMMODATE THE ADDITIONAL SORTIES. TO FACILITATE CONTROL THE PATHFINDER PLATOON LEADER ESTABLISHED FOUR PICK UP PADS AND DESIGNATED MEN TO CONTROL EACH PAD. PAD # 1, THE 105mm HOWITZER AREA; PAD # 2, THE CH-47 LOG PAD EAST OF THE BATTALION TACTICAL OPERATIONS AREA; PAD # 3, THE 155mm HOWITZER AREA, PAD #4, THE IMPACT ROCK AREA.

THE COMBAT ASSAULT COMMENCED AT 230545 JULY WITH THE LANDING OF THE FIRST HELICOPTER IN THE HASTILY PREPARED LANDING ZONE. THE LZ WAS EXTREMELY HAZARDOUS DUE TO ITS SMALL SIZE, LARGE SURROUNDING TREES AND A LARGE FIRE THAT HAD SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE AREA. THE AIRCREWS MADE THE ASSAULT IN THE PRE-DAWN LIGHT UNDER INTENSE ENEMY FIRE, TO INCLUDE .51 CALIBER FIRE FROM A NEARBY HILL. THE AH-1G GUNSHIPS RENDERED THEIR VALUABLE SUPPORT BY ESCORTING THE SLICKS INTO AND OUT OF THE LZ AND BY CONCENTRATING SUPPRESSIVE FIRE ON ALL ENEMY WEAPONS POSITIONS. CREW CHIEFS AND DOOR GUNNERS ALSO FIRED SUPPRESSIVE FIRES ON THEIR APPROACHES AND DEPARTURES, ADDING THEIR VOLUME OF FIRE TO PROTECT BOTH AIRCRAFT AND PASSENGERS.

AT 0636 HOURS, PHASE I, THE INSERTION, WAS COMPLETE.

MEANWHILE AT 0550 HOURS THE COMMANDING OFFICER 159TH AVIATION BATTALION (ASH) WAS INFORMED BY THE AIRMOBILE TASK FORCE COMMANDER THAT THE CH-47 MOVE HAD BEEN DELAYED APPROXIMATELY 30 MINUTES BECAUSE OF A DELAY IN THE AIR FORCE TACTICAL AIR SUPPORT. CONTACT WITH THE BATTALION LIAISON OFFICER ON RIPCORD INDICATED THAT ALL LOADS WERE READY FOR EXTRACTION AND THAT ENEMY FIRE ONTO THE FIREBASE HAD BEEN LIGHT.

AT 0625 HOURS THE TASK FORCE COMMANDER RELAYED THAT THE FIREBASE WAS READY TO RECEIVE CH-47 AIRCRAFT. THE FIRST CH-47 PICKED UP ITS LOAD AT 0632 HOURS AND RECEIVED NO ENEMY FIRE. THE FIRST THOUGHTS WERE THAT THE EXTRACTION COULD BE COMPLETED WITHOUT ENEMY INTERFERENCE. THIS THOUGHT WAS SHORT LIVED. THE SECOND AIRCRAFT RECEIVED SMALL ARMS FIRE ON APPROACH AND THE SOUTHERN SIDE OF THE FIREBASE WAS POUNDED BY MORTAR ROUNDS. FROM THAT POINT ON THE ACTIONS AND SKILL DISPLAYED BY THE CREWS AND THE INTENSITY OF HOSTILE FIRE RECEIVED THROUGH-OUT THE REMAINDER OF THE EXTRACTION HAVE NEVER BEEN EQUALED IN ANY CH-47 HELI-

COPTER OPERATION. USED VIRTUALLY IN A COMBAT ASSAULT ROLE, THE AIRCRAFT FORMED A CHAIN THAT CONTINUALLY BRAVED THE INTENSE ENEMY FIRE TO ACCOMPLISH THE MISSION.

IF AN AIRCRAFT RECEIVED HEAVY FIRE ON APPROACH, OR IF THE PAD TO WHICH IT WAS LANDING WAS RECEIVING INCOMING MORTAR FIRE, THE AIR MISSION COMMANDER WOULD BREAK OFF THE AIRCRAFT AND DIRECT THE NEXT AIRCRAFT INTO ANOTHER PAD TO PICK UP A LOAD.

THIS DEADLY GAME OF OUTGUESSING THE NVA GUNNERS AND MORTAR ROUNDS CONTINUED UNTIL THE 18TH SORTIE, WHEN AN AIRCRAFT WAS HIT BY 12.7mm FIRE AND DOWNED ON THE FIRE-BASE. AS PLANNED, THE CREW DEPARTED THE AIRCRAFT AND THE OTHER AIRCRAFT CONTINUED THE MISSION. SHORTLY AFTER THE AIRCRAFT WAS DOWNED, IT RECEIVED A DIRECT HIT BY MORTAR FIRE AND WAS COMPLETELY DESTROYED. THE LAST SORTIE, NUMBER 24, WAS EXTRACTED AT 0745 HOURS AND THE CH-47 PORTION OF THE OPERATION WAS COMPLETE. LOADS EXTRACTED BY THE CH-47 AIRCRAFT INCLUDED 155mm HOWITZERS, MINI-DOZERS, COMMUNICATIONS EQUIP-MENT, AMMUNITION AND MISCELLANEOUS CARGO. EIGHT OF THE 10 CH-47'S EMPLOYED WERE HIT BY HOSTILE FIRE.

AT 0830 HOURS THE FLIGHT LEAD OF THE FIRST FLIGHT OF 15 UH-1H AIRCRAFT ARRIVED AT RIPCORD. THE AIRCRAFT WERE SPACED AT 30 SECOND INTERVALS TO ENABLE THE PILOTS TO EVADE THE 12.7mm FIRE ON APPROACH AND THE MORTAR FIRE IMPACTING ON THE PICKUP PADS. ON THE INITIAL SORTIES, RADIO CONTACT COULD NOT BE ESTABLISHED. SOME AIRCRAFT LANDED TO FIND THAT THE TROOPS WERE NOT WAITING TO BOARD BECAUSE OF THE INTENSITY OF MORTAR FIRE, AND HAD TO HOVER TO A PAD LOCATED CLOSER TO THE BUNKERS. BECAUSE OF THESE DELAYS, SPACING AND TIMING OF THE AIRCRAFT BECAME ERRATIC AT THIS TIME THE AIR MISSION COMMANDER DIVIDED THE AIRCRAFT INTO FLIGHTS OF THREE, TO KEEP THE NUMBER OF AIRCRAFT EXPOSED TO FIRE AT ONE TIME TO A MINIMUM AND TO GIVE THE PILOTS ADDITIONAL FLEXIBILITY. AS EACH FLIGHT FLEW INBOUND TO RIPCORD THE REMAINING FLIGHTS ORBITED OVER RELATIVELY FLAT TERRAIN TO THE NORTHEAST. WHEN THE LAST AIRCRAFT IN THE FLIGHT REPORTED HE WAS ON FINAL APPROACH TO RIPCORD THE NEXT FLIGHT OF THREE TURNED INBOUND. THIS FORMATION ALSO ENABLED THE AH-1G GUNSHIPS TO ESCORT THE AIRCRAFT ONTO THE FIREBASE AND LAY DOWN THEIR DEADLY SUPPRESSIVE FIRES MORE EFFECTIVELY. ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS, THE GUNSHIPS FLEW BETWEEN THE LIFT AIRCRAFT AND THE ENEMY POSITIONS IN ORDER TO BRING EFFECTIVE FIRE TO BEAR AND, IN SO DOING, PREVENTED SEVERAL UH-1H AIRCRAFT FROM RECEIVING HITS.

AT 0850 HOURS THE COMMANDING OFFICER 101ST AVIATION GROUP (CBT) (AMBL) DETERMINED THAT THERE WERE INSUFFICIENT LIFT SHIPS TO COMPLETE THE EXTRACTION IN A TIMELY MANNER, BECAUSE OF DELAYS DUE TO HOSTILE FIRE. HE THEN DIRECTED THE COMMANDING OFFICER 101ST AVIATION BATTALION TO LAUNCH SIX ADDITIONAL UH-1H AIRCRAFT AND A LIGHT FIRE TEAM TO ASSIST IN THE EXTRACTION.

THE ACTIONS OF THE PATHFINDER TEAM THROUGHOUT THE EXTRACTION PLAYED A VITAL ROLE IN THE SUCCESSFUL ACCOMPLISHMENT OF THE MISSION. AFTER THE DEPARTURE OF THE FIRST CH-47 AIRCRAFT AT 0636 HOURS, THE NVA BOMBARDMENT OF RIPCORD BEGAN AND INCREASED IN INTENSITY UNTIL THE FINAL PASSENGER SORTIE HAD DEPARTED. THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE EQUIPMENT MOVE THE PATHFINDERS CONSTANTLY EXPOSED THEMSELVES TO THE HOSTILE FIRE TO DIRECT THE LANDING TRAFFIC AND TO HOOK UP LOADS TO THE AIRCRAFT.

THE FACT THAT ONLY ONE CH-47 HELICOPTER WAS SHOT DOWN DURING THE EXTRACTION CAN, IN A LARGE PART, BE ATTRIBUTED TO THE UNPARALLELED EFFORTS AND DISREGARD FOR PERSONAL SAFETY OF THESE MEN.

WHEN THE INITIAL UH-1H AIRCRAFT ARRIVED FOR THE PERSONNEL EXTRACTION, COMMUNICATIONS COULD NOT BE ESTABLISHED BY THE INFANTRY BATTALION TACTICAL OPERATIONS CENTER ON RIPCORD. THE PATHFINDER PLATOON LEADER DIRECTED TWO OF HIS MEN TO ESTABLISH A RADIO SITE ON THE CREST OF THE HILL. COMMUNICATIONS COULD STILL NOT BE ESTABLISHED SO ONE PATHFINDER RAN TO AN AIRCRAFT ON THE PAD AND ASKED HIM TO ESTABLISH COMMUNICATION ON THE PATHFINDER FREQUENCY. DURING THE TIME THAT COMMUNICATIONS WERE OUT, THE PATHFINDERS DIRECTED EACH AIRCRAFT ONTO THE DESIRED LANDING PAD BY THE USE OF HAND AND ARM SIGNALS AND ASSISTED THE WOUNDED MEN ON BOARD. WHILE ACCOMPLISHING THIS, BOTH THE PATHFINDER PLATOON LEADER AND SECTION SERGEANT WERE WOUNDED. THE SECTION SERGEANT WAS EVACUATED BUT THE PLATOON LEADER CONTINUED TO SUPERVISE THE EXTRACTION.

WITH INCREASED CONFUSION RESULTING FROM INTENSE HOSTILE FIRE, THE PATHFINDERS HASTILY FORMULATED A PLAN THAT GREATLY FACILITATED THE MOVE AND PROBABLY REDUCED THE NUMBER OF CASUALTIES. THE MAJORITY OF PERSONNEL WERE EXTRACTED FROM PAD #2, SO THE PATHFINDER PLATOON LEADER SELECTED THE CLOSEST BUNKER TO THE TOUCHDOWN POINT AND THE FIVE PERSONNEL WHO WERE TO BOARD THE NEXT AIRCRAFT REMAINED THERE UNTIL CALLED. AS EACH GROUP LEFT THE BUNKER FIVE MORE WERE MOVED INTO THE BUNKER.

THIS PLAN REDUCED EXPOSURE TIME OF THE AIRCRAFT AND THE PERSONNEL BOARDING THE AIRCRAFT. AT 1130 HOURS, THE PLATOON LEADER ORDERED ONE OF HIS MEN TO LOAD ALL SECURE COMMUNICATION EQUIPMENT AND BOARD THE NEXT AIRCRAFT. FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER THERE WERE ONLY 25 PERSONNEL REMAINING ON RIPCORD. THE INCOMING FIRE HAD BECOME SO INTENSE THAT FURTHER EXTRACTION FROM PAD # 2 WAS UNFEASIBLE, SO THE PATHFINDER PLATOON LEADER DIRECTED ALL PERSONNEL TO THE "IMPACT ROCK" AREA WHERE THEY WERE SAFELY EXTRACTED AND PHASE II OF THE PERSONNEL LIFT WAS COMPLETED AT 1214 HOURS.

ON COMPLETION OF THE RIPCORD EXTRACTION THE UH-1H AND AH-1G AIRCRAFT BEGAN PHASE III OF THE OPERATION. THE PICK UP ZONES WERE EXTREMELY SMALL AND CUT IN TREES APPROXIMATELY 150 FEET HIGH. THE AIRCRAFT WERE REQUIRED TO HOVER DOWN INTO THE PZ, HOVER OVER THE ROUGH TERRAIN WHILE TROOPS LOADED AND THEN MAKE A VERTICAL DEPARTURE OUT OF THE CONFINED AREA. ON NUMEROUS OCCASIONS THE CREWCHIEFS AND GUNNERS DEPARTED THE HELICOPTERS TO ASSIST TROOP LOADING.

THE GUN SHIPS PROVIDED CONTINUOUS SUPPRESSIVE FIRES FOR THE UTILITY AIRCRAFT WHILE THEY PERFORMED THEIR DIFFICULT TASK, THE SUPPRESSIVE AND NEUTRALIZING FIRES OF THE GUNSHIPS WERE SUFFICIENT TO PREVENT THE ENEMY FROM DESTROYING A SINGLE UH-1H AIRCRAFT DURING THE EXTRACTION EVEN THOUGH ONE 12.67mm POSITION WAS NO MORE THAN 100 METERS SOUTH OF THE PZ.

AT 1401 HOURS THE LAST MAN WAS EXTRACTED FROM THE PICK UP ZONE AND THE REDEPLOYMENT OF FORCES ON AND AROUND RIPCORD WAS ACCOMPLISHED.

DETAILED PLANNING, FLEXIBILITY IN EXECUTION, SKILLED FLYING ABILITY, AND UNCOMMON VALOR ON THE PART OF BOTH AIR CREW MEMBERS AND SUPPORTING GROUND PERSONNEL ARE THE INGREDIENTS OF ANY SUCCESSFUL AIRMOBILE OPERATION.

RIPCORD IS THE PROOF.