

From: Phil Tolson [REDACTED]
To: [REDACTED]
Date: Saturday, October 24, 1998 5:21 PM
Subject: Tom Marshall "Ripcord" article- June issue

Dear Sirs and/or Ladies:

I recently read the above mentioned article and found it to be interesting but found some of the information to be unnerving.

I was an Infantry Sergeant E-5 in B Co. 2/506th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division and was present for all of the activities leading up to this battle from April 1970 through the end of our involvement on 23 July 1970. I was present during the evacuation of this firebase and was on the last bird to leave Ripcord. I know that is a claim made by many people since the end of the battle but . . . I was awarded a Bronze Star with a "V" device for my actions during this battle, and, the orders awarding this decoration state that I was on the last helicopter to leave the firebase. I doubt that the others claiming to be the "last man" out have such official documentation.

Over the years I have not been contacted by many of the folks involved with this operation and have not been involved with any Veterans groups, publications or anything having to do with the war. It's not that I am anti war or that I think that we did the wrong thing or anything of that nature, it's just something that I filed away for later reference while I went about living my life and raising my family. This changed about a year ago when I received a call from Keith William Nolan, telling me that he had been commissioned to write a book about this battle and he had found one of the participants who informed him that I would be a good source to tell him about the events of the last day since I was there until the end. Nolan also told me that there was a Ripcord Association and that they have annual reunions around the country. I answered Mr. Nolans' questions, sent him some tapes of my recollections and through him found the Ripcord Association.

One of the members of the Association told me about your June issue and also thought that the pilots would be attending this years' reunion in Atlantic City.

During the removal of troops from Ripcord we moved all non-infantry personnel from the firebase first, followed by the infantry personnel that were securing the bunker line. My people and I were scheduled to leave last and we eventually worked our way to the TOC for extraction. We all waited (there were no more than six of us) inside the TOC for our bird to arrive. While we were waiting, I was informed by radio that we would not be leaving as planned, the birds would not attempt to get us out because of too much incoming and ground fire. I was not a happy camper!

I stayed on the radio letting the pilots know just what I thought of them and offering to shoot them down myself if I ever got the chance. We were not in a very good position, I had been informed that there were at least 6,000 NVA troops massed on the mountain planning to overrun and take the firebase. That was the reason for our leaving, we were going to leave and at 1300 hrs. B-52's were coming to attack the mountain and kill the NVA. My plan was to move men to the downed choppers, rocks, bunkers etc, fire a few rounds and then move to a new location. I thought that this would maybe fool the NVA into thinking that there were more of us than there really were, and, keep them off of us for awhile. I was going to call everyone back to the TOC just prior to 1300, let the B-52's do their thing, and hope that the TOC could withstand the pounding that I was sure was on the way. After that, if we were still alive, I was going to see if we could get a ride out of there, if not. . .well we could always hope to last until dark and then sneak down the mountain and head to Evans.

Two of the people with me, (I don't know who they were, they were fairly new to the company and they weren't from my squad), wanted to surrender to the NVA. I told them they were more than welcome to do whatever they felt they should, I wasn't too sure we were going to live through this one, but, they were to leave their weapons, ammo etc. with the rest of us because I planned to pile up a few before they got into the TOC. They decided to stay.

I continued to attempt to raise some assistance and was constantly hounded by a Vietnamese who was on our push saying, "Hey you commanda, surrenda, you die, you die tonight, surrenda". He kept this up for quite awhile, I eventually told him to come on up we would be glad to visit with him. During one of these discussions I received a call from a helicopter pilot with the call sign Ghostrider something, I don't remember the numerical designation but I have remembered Ghostrider every since the first call. This guy told me that he had a couple of birds and they would be coming in to pick us up, I just needed to tell him how many and where they were. I gave him the information he needed, told him that I had been wounded and wasn't moving too well and that I may not be too quick. He told me they would not be landing, they would be moving forward very slowly about two to three feet off the ground and that we needed to get on as quick as we could. I told him that I was going to fire up the radio and frag the TOC as I left and he responded that he understood. Shortly after that conversation he called back to tell me he was only a couple minutes out and was on his way in, I fired a burst into the radio and headed to the doorway, when I saw the bird I pulled the pin, threw the frag and headed out the door to the chopper. I got on the skid, the doorgunner pulled me inside and we were on our way. As I was getting in, another guy jumped in with us, I don't know who he was either. I then went to the console between the pilot and co-pilot, sat on the console and shared a bag of M&M peanut candies I had with them, I can't tell you why I did this, it just seemed like the thing to do.

As you can see, there were only two of us on this bird, not six. The pilot wanted to take me to Charlie Med but I declined and told him to take us to

Evans and I would get to the aid station instead. A few minutes later we were at Currahee pad and the birds were back in the air.

I read Marshalls' article and wanted to meet him at the reunion this year but he wasn't there. I am a little concerned about one thing that he had in his article. He states that two people were left on Ripcord because they were afraid to come out of their bunkers. He also says that they were bayoneted or killed by a flamethrower that night. How does he know this?

When we returned to Ripcord we had a formation and everyone was accounted for, I don't think we were missing anybody.

I just met with Captains Hawkins and Peters at the reunion this week and they have no idea what Marshall is referring to either. Hawkins was CO of Co. A and Peters was CO of Co. B.

Can you tell me how to contact Marshall? I would like a little more information.

You folks might be interested in contacting Nolan concerning Ripcord, I am sure that he has done an in depth research of this battle and can probably provide a better account of the last day than what you were provided by Marshall.

Thanks for your interest

Phil Tolson