MANUSCRIPT

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT AS OF: MAY 8, 1995

Tom Marshall

[redacted]

WORDING FOR FRONT COVER

PATRIOTS TOLL

Warrior's Souls – same style but bolder
the price of exit

Firebase Ripcord, 1970
LZ Lolo and Pickup Zone Brown, Laos, 1971

TOM MARSHALL

WORDING FOR BACK COVER

The largest airborne invasion after Normandy in June, 1944, was Laos, in February, 1971.

The 101st Airborne Division was authorized 424 helicopters.

The withdrawal of American Forces was well underway.

Ordered to airborne assault 8,000 South Vietnamese (ARVN) troops into Laos, the 101st Airborne Division was supplemented with operational control of 235 helicopters from units "down south" of DaNang where "the war was over".

659 helicopters were assembled to carry out "Lam Son 719," the invasion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos.

In the 45 days of the Laotian Invasion, 444 helicopters would be shot down.

1,079 helicopters would take anti-aircraft hits with serious damage.

This is the story of many who served in the last two major helicopter actions in I Corps during the U.S. withdrawal in 1970 and 1971. No one wanted to be the last man killed. They served proudly, winning their personal battles and enduring hardships.

Army aviation traditions were born and strengthened in the actions of Ripcord and L.Z. Sophia. LoLo.

If one got shot down, another went down to get them.

The others continued on, completing the mission,

No matter what!

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to those who served on the MIA recovery teams and Prisoner Of War investigation teams, some of which still operate today in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Their relentless, tireless dedication in bringing an end to so many individual stories has helped families and friends with a now grateful nation, to acknowledge the sacrifices in one horrible little war.

Historical Notes

"The enemy advances: we retreat
The enemy halts: we harass
The enemy tires: we attack
The enemy retreats: we pursue"
Mao Zedong[1]

"You will kill ten of our men, and we will kill one of yours, and in the end it will be you who tire of it."
Ho Chi Minh[2].

"Strike to win, strike only when success is certain; if it is not, do not strike."
Vo Nguyen Giap[3].

Author's Note

Like most of his life, it was not his original thought; but Giap lived his maxim, giving hope to the North Vietnamese Army, which endured one loss after another, until 1975.

Copy Tom Paine From "the Last Cartridge"
Copy Tom Paine Quote to Footnote add to Bibliography

[1]Mao Zedong (1893-1976), Founder of Chinese Communist State, The Great Thoughts, ibid.

[2]Ho Chi Minh(1890? - 1969), North Vietnamese leader, quoted in UPI obituary, September 4, 1969, The Great Thoughts, compiled by George Seldes, Copyright 1985 by Ballanture Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, NY.

[3]Vo Nguyen Giap, North Vietnamese General, guoting an ancient proverb, Smith, Robert Barr, To the Last Cartridge, Avon Books, Copyright, 1994, by Robert Barr Smith, p. 324.

ACK newlodgement

Prologue

PREFACE

January 24, 1971
Camp Eagle, I Corps
Republic of Vietnam

Camp Eagle, the headquarters of the 101st Airborne Division, Airmobile, was located northwest of Hue (pronounced Way). I had just transferred into the 163rd Aviation Company in the 101st Aviation Group. For me, it was a godsend, to be transferred into the unit where I could once again, fly solo missions in a Loach. (OH-6A) _ w

I'd entered Vietnam on August 18, 1970. I'd already served three months of relatively light duty supporting the 1st Brigade of the 4th Infantry Division at An Khe, located in the central highlands region of II Corps. After three months of the "good life", I was transferred to the 101st Airborne Division. I was "infused" to Charlie Company, Assault Helicopter Company, 158th Aviation Battalion at Camp Evans Combat Base. Camp Evans was a forward combat operations base north of Camp Eagle, twenty miles south of the DMZ and North Vietnam. My two months with the Phoenix in Charlie Company were action filled, both flying and combat.

My time with the 4th Infantry Division had reinforced the advice given me by Captain David Anderson, whom I'd served with stateside prior to coming overseas. With the experiences as an assistant executive officer in the Airfield Company at Fort Rucker, I learned a lot about the inner workings of the Army. At An Khe, I had the opportunity to view the war from the level of my passengers, which were mainly Captains and Lieutenant Colonels. It was an eye opener. I'd also witnessed the restriction on combatants imposed as the 4th Infantry pulled out. I was intimately aware of the withdrawal of American forces frorn Vietnam, although it was not apparent to those in I Corps. To those in II Corps, the war was simply over. Not won or lost. We were simply folding our tents and moving on.

My two months in the Phoenix had given me a deeper understanding of the war, with my personal knowledge of its direction, and the toll it would take.

In two months with the Phoenix, I initially started with the 2nd Platoon which was providing direct support to Combat Command North, Green Berets operating in Laos and North Vietnam. After two weeks, I transferred to the 1st Platoon, which was then rotated to six weeks of CCN support. It was an eye opener.

During three months in An Khe, I only had confirmed antiaircraft fire directed at me once. In the first three weeks at Camp Evans with Charlie Company, I had taken .51 cal fire, antiaircraft fire in Laos, including 37mm and 57mm flak. I had been in my hootch when 122mm rockets landed within twenty five yards from my back door. I had outrun mortar shells being walked across the Redskin pad, barely making it to the bunker in time. I knew a pilot who had crashed on an "ash and trash" mission, killing a infantryman on the ground. I had flown unbelievably risky missions in instrument flying conditions and participated in hot extractions of green berets in North Vietnam. All this while "the war was over," down south.

My transfer to the 163rd Aviation Company, where I would be transitioned into the OH-6A Cayuse was a dream come true. It was a little four seat observation helicopter. It was then the safest in Army inventory. On the evening of January 24th, 1971. the Commanding Officer called the pilots to the Officer's Club for a company meeting. Orders had come down to change the radio callsign "Roadrunner" to a new name.

I quietly sat in the Officer's Club, as the "new guy", listening to the banter and BS'ing going on among pilots. All were combat veterans. All had served honorably in other assault helicopter company units prior to the 163rd Aviation Company. The 163rd was a REMF company, which provided courier service and passenger service to the headquarters of the 101st

Airborne Division and other commands attached to it. By virtue of the nature and rank of their passengers, it was a privilege to be given a slot in the company.

I was beginning to get used to the area, and finally met the other Loach pilots. Jim Saunders was getting very short. He was the son of an Admiral. He had experience in Hueys, shot down on Firebase Ripcord and shot up around O'Reilley. "Baby Sanh" was a conscientious objector, who'd flown Cobras at Camp Evans and was transferred south. I then remembered Rick Lukens had told me the story of "Baby Sanh" serving as officer of the guard. A GI was killed in the wire, coming back from a drug run. "Baby Sanh" had given the permission to fire.

Bill Gordy, the standards instructor pilot in the company, was a lieutenant. He was the top Loach pilot, having the most hours and was the standards instructor pilot. He was a second tour pilot, having been a warrant officer during the first tour. He was from Pottstown, Pennsylvania, and Amish. He had a distinctly conservative, but friendly, attitude about him and was not a heavy drinker like everyone else. However, he hadn't gotten to know me yet, and his second tour of duty hadn't turned "hot" yet.

The others included warrant officers who had been with the Kingsmen and other units. With the tragic exception of "Baby Sanh," most people were shipped to the 163rd Aviation Company as a reward for having served admirably in other companies. It was as good a job and living conditions as you'd find in I Corps. My record of service in the 4th Infantry, coupled with the fact I'd gone "Voluntary Indefinite" got me the job.

I met the guy I was replacing, named Bruce Bender, from New Jersey. I would only realize years later that he was Rambo, personified. His "Roadrunner" call sign was "One-three" or "13". That was to be my call sign since I was his "turtle." A turtle was the man responsible for replacing you in the aviation

line-up.

That night, we watched the movie, Woodstock, showing the bands, "Group Love-Ins" and other activities underway at the 1969 Woodstock Festival. Watching this in Vietnam, after six months of being a "Nun" didn't help our attitudes about the "green machine" or "Vietnamization". It simply looked as if the war had been declared "over", not won or lost, but "over". Orders had come down that day that the "Roadrunner" call sign would be changed as part of the normal operating procedures. Several captains got into the discussion of proposed call signs. A number were offered and booed or cursed down. "Baby Sanh" came up with the idea, "Hey, you guys read 'Peanuts,' the cartoon strip with Charlie Brown? What's the name of that little, yellow bird?"

For a minute, nobody could think of the bird's name. Everyone started cracking up, laughing and cursing, when all of a sudden, someone blurted, "Woodstock!" The call sign "Woodstock," referring to the little yellow bird in the "Peanuts" cartoon, was a perfect double entendre, which suited our declining attitudes regarding the war. The withdrawal of units "down south" was accelerating and now becoming publicized. It now looked as if the war really was ending.

There hadn't been any significant military action in I Corps since the previous summer. The only time there was combat, it was initiated by American or ARVN patrols. The NVA were lying low or had retreated back into Laos

Our new callsign became a way of complying with the "green machine" while expressing our personal dissatisfaction with the general trend of things. From that day forward, I was "Woodstock One-Three".

Woodstock One-Three was a perfectly acceptable callsign and number to me. With the matter of the callsign resolved, the drinking continued along with the war stories. The conversation continued revolving around the theme of pullouts

of American units, early-outs for Warrant Officers not making the Army a career, and the possibility of twelve month tours being shortened to accelerate the withdrawal of troops.

It was a festive, jubilant atmosphere with the general consensus that the war was over and life was great in a "REMF" unit.

Little did we know, that in the next 60 days, the 101st Airborne, supported by helicopter companies from "down south" would move 8,000 ARVN troops into Laos and support them for 45 days.

659 helicopters would be used

1,072 helicopters would be hit by antiaircraft fire.

444 helicopters would be shot down.

Of those in the room with me, all would take antiaircraft fire during the next 45 days. One pilot would be shot down and evacuated to the states with compression of the spine and burn injuries. Another pilot would narrowly avert losing his life, avoiding a mid-air collision. I would take rocket propelled grenade fragmentation and AK-47 hits. One pilot would be shot down in Laos without injury. And we were the ~~lucky~~ ones.

Pensacola News, Friday, May 11, 1979, Page 2D

"The thing is, helicopters are different from planes. An airplane, by its nature, wants to fly, and if not interfered with too strongly by unusual events or by deliberately incompetent pilots, it will fly.

A helicopter does not want to fly.

It is maintained in the air by a variety of forces and controls working in opposition to each other, and if there is any disturbance in this delicate balance, the helicopter stops flying, immediately and disastrously.

There is no such thing as a gliding helicopter. This is why being a helicopter pilot is so different from being an airplane pilot, and why, in general, airplane pilots are open, clear eyed, buoyant extroverts, and helicopter pilots are brooders, introspective anticipators of trouble. They know if something bad has not happened, it is about to."

Harry Reasoner, July, 1977.

Acknowledgment

to precede this page

Preface

In 1994, President Bill Clinton, who'd refused his Country's call to service during the Vietnam Era, signed a law permitting business and trade with the People of Vietnam. By years end, one-fourth of tourists to the country were American college students. One-half of the businessmen visiting were Americans.

President Clinton, however, was not alone in his opposition to "the war". He'd worked for Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright, a long-time opponent of the war, during Clinton's college years. In Fulbright's 1966 book, The Arrogance of Power, he influenced the anti-war movement with his statement, "In a democracy, dissent is an act of faith, to criticize one's country is to do it a service....it is an act of patriotism."

Some Americans would seek college defferment from the military draft. Some would move to foreign lands, revoking their American citizenship. Some would join local Reserve or National Guard Units, knowing service in Vietnam was unlikely.

One-third of the men's population would honor the selective service draft or volunteer for specific duties.

Only 32% of the total American men's population served in the military during the Vietnam Era.

Only 12% of the total men's population served in Vietnam.

A very small number, less than 3% of the men's population served as combatants, according to military sources.

However, those who served "in-country" understood all were subject to 122mm rockets and 82mm mortar raids. Even in the supposedly "secure rear areas", of "non combatants".

This is the story of many who served in the last two major actions in I Corps during the U.S. withdrawal in 1970 and

1971. No one wanted to be the last man killed. They served proudly, winning their personal battles, enduring hardships in a declining war effort. Army aviation traditions were born and strengthened in the actions of Ripcord, L.Z. Lolo, and L.Z. Sophia. If one got shot down, another went down to get them. And the others continued on, with resolve, and most importantly, faith in each other. It was a time of faith, trust, life....or death.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE 01

FLIGHT SCHOOL 12

FIRE SUPPORT BASE RIPCORD 26

AUGUST, 1970 59

PART ONE/HUMMINGBIRD SEVEN/AN KHE 70

SEPTEMBER, 1970 80

THE 4TH INFANTRY STANDS DOWN 106

THE 4TH INFANTRY LEAVES VIETNAM 129

PART TWO/I-CORPS 138

NOVEMBER 21, 1970/THE PHOENIX TRIBULATION . 138

DECEMBER, 1970 155

THE KHE SANH REVELATION 194

JANUARY, 1971 207

PART THREE/WOODSTOCK ONE-THREE 225

FEBRUARY, 1971 240

MARCH, 1971 293

R AND R 329

LAOS 334

APRIL, 1971 346

MAY THROUGH JULY 1971/MARKING TIME 358

AUGUST, 1971 401

"THE WORLD", SEPTEMBER, 1971 407

OCTOBER, 1971 410

PART IV/JULY, 1987/JOURNEY TO COMPTON 426

PART V/HANGOVER, JUNE, 1989 434

OCTOBER, 1990 448

"A PICTURE, A FLAG & A GOLD STAR" 452

AFTERMATH 467

A PILOT'S PERSPECTIVE 477

EPILOGUE 492

BIOGRAPHY OF W. THOMAS MARSHALL, JR. 503

BIBLIOGRAPHY 505

MAP

PROLOGUE
FRENCH INDOCHINA
1945 - 1954
The History Teacher's Lessons

General Vo Nguyen Giap had a long personal history, over twenty-five years of continuous warfare in Vietnam and Laos, prior to my one year tour of duty, in 1970.

Giap had been a history teacher in the late 1930's and early 1940's. He had been involved in the revolutionary movement opposing French Colonial Rule, which occupied Indochina (Vietnam) prior to the outbreak of World War II. During World War II, the Japanese occupied the Indochina area and Giap continued guerrilla efforts against the Japanese. In the eyes of Vietminh, the Japanese were simply another colonial ruler.

When World War II ended, the French reassumed Colonial Rule in Indochina. Giap, Ho Chi Minh and others resumed the guerrilla war against the French, known as the Vietminh.

The little history teacher would live the experiences of history and lessons would not be missed. The same lessons would be totally ignored or unheeded by both the French and Americans. In the period 1946 through 1948, Giap, along with many other Vietminh, conducted guerrilla warfare against the French. It was an often bloody affair with political murders on both sides, interspersed with violent ambushes and terrorist bombings. France was interested in preserving Colonial power, the Vietminh in establishing a revolutionary "people's" government.

The singular event which sealed the future of French rule in Indochina was the communist occupation of China. Lying north of Vietnam, and Laos in 1949, the communist

revolutionaries of Mao Zedong ruled China. They would become the supplier and trainers, sanctioning the war against France, and later, America. This was an element that the French had no control or influence over. The same problem would afflict the ensuing American effort.

From 1949 forward, Giap's Vietminh had the sanctuary without which any revolutionary war succeeds. China was Red Communist. The door to the high mountain plains of China was wide open and would never be closed to the Vietminh or the descendent N.V.A. Adopting Chinese communist philosophies and strategies, Giap began preparing division size elements for overcoming French rule.

The French tried to protect their Indochina frontier with communist China through a series of base areas, surrounded by several company size outposts. The base system stretched loosely from the Tonkin Gulf to Eastern Laos in 1950.

The end of French Colonial Rule was predestined when they lost control of the China frontier. The French positions consisted of embattled outposts with wooden walls and log bunkers. They were dispersed on muddy hilltops along Route Coloniale 4. First the Vietminh would pound them with mortars and artillery. Later, they would be engulfed by waves of angrily screaming little men with bayonets.

When the French conceded the Chinese frontier, it simply meant the Vietminh would never be stopped. The communists could always find a safe haven and unlimited supplies. They had unlimited access to Kwangsi and Yunan China, a vast area, safe to train in. There was an inexhaustible supply of modern Soviet block arms and equipment. There was also an inexhaustible supply of young men, peasant children, raised to hate, fight and overthrow the French Colonial power.

From 1950 forward, the Vietminh would be guerrillas no more.

General Giap would train them into a regular Russian-style army. They would be organized in regiments and divisions, better armed than the outnumbered French.

In Hanoi, Saigon and Paris, none of the French Generals and politicians realized what the loss of the Chinese border area meant. ~~Even to the most casual observer,~~ Vietminh victory was assured. They possessed the heart and patience to endure the prolonged death of French rule.

The battle popularly considered the death knell of French rule, as well as the paramount failure of French and American political observers, was Dien Bien Phu. However, most historians, reporters and political observers had ignored the actual event, the battle of Pho Lu, nearly four years earlier. It was located in a northern province some 30 miles south of the border with China. Pho Lu was upstream from Hanoi on the Red River.

By March, 1950, the Vietminh were organized and employed into a swarm of "insect armies", as Bernard Fall aptly named them. After weeks of preparation, Giap's Army attacked Pho Lu. The primitive ~~fort~~ log outpost, stood in a lakefront setting, deep in the emptiness of a wilderness valley. It was a desolate primeval forrest of limestone craigs, with the beauty and mystique of the Silk Road in China, but a hellishly difficult place to inhabit.

employed

At Pho Lu, General Giap ~~chose to try~~ his new tactics and weapons. The tactics were simple enough. With immense efforts, swarms of coolies manhandled artillery weapons onto the high ground overlooking Pho Lu. After that, he bombarded the tiny post to junk. It only took a two day period. In the end, massed infantry waves submerged what was left.

Masses of coolies had moved tons of ammunition and rice. They dug in heavy weapons, carefully positioned. Then they

simply bombarded the post to hell. Giap had learned how to counter the superlative courage, leadership and fighting quality in the French paratroopers of the French Foreign Legion.

Shortly afterwards, in May, 1950, at a godforsaken mudhole (outpost) near Dong Khe, Giap repeated his efforts against a much larger French garrison. He brought well trained battalions and regiments in from China, armed with automatic weapons, heavy mortars, bazookas and recoilless rifles. Convoys of molotova trucks hauled supplies to the Chinese border. There, vast numbers of coolies carried supplies on their backs or by bicycle to the frontier where the battle was to take place.

Dong Khe also lay in a valley surrounded by limestone hills. The small garrison could not hold the high ground outside the post. For two days and nights, dozens of mortars and artillery pieces smashed the outpost. When the bunkers were in ruins and the French heavy weapons were destroyed, waves of Vietminh came running through the night. In human wave attack, they stoically took casualties until they simply submerged the garrison in bodies. At 3 a.m. on the 28th of May, it was over. Dong Khe's radio fell silent to anguished comrades listening in Hanoi.

General Giap had chosen both the time and place well. The clouds and rain of the monsoon had grounded the French aircraft. There was no air support. There were no French forces of any size that could reach the post in time. All the French command could do was sit by its radios and listen to Dong Khe die, alone, in the black night of northern Vietnam.

The French would insert paratroopers and bravely retake Dong Khe a few days later.

General Giap, however, would learn from even that experience. He retreated, rebuilt, rearmed, and reorganized. The Vietminh

recapture of Dong Khe was rehearsed on forts constructed to simulate Dong Khe during the rainy, winter months. The following summer, Dong Khe again fell and it would not be retaken by the French. The frontier was permanently opened to China. This event was also the birth of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

It was not until May 7, 1954, that the Dien Bien Phu Forward Combat Base fell to Giap's Russian-style divisions. It would symbolically, but inaccurately represent the death knell of French Colonial influence in Indochina. No one should have been surprised at the failure of Dien Bien Phu, especially the French.

General Giap now possessed a fearsome weapon. His divisions were trained as Soviet-block regulars. They were multi-armed organisms responsive to a single political will. Every man was driven by faith and a revolutionary zeal. They were quite willing to die and press on regardless of losses. Now that they had supplies and training grounds in China. There would be no stopping them.

After each defeat, Giap and the Vietminh criticized themselves, refitted and shared the lessons they had learned. They would keep coming until they won.

The French had learned a horrible lesson at Dien Bien Phu. The Vietminh had actually tunneled through mountains to provide firing portholes for their artillery, in the mountain sides, looking down on Dien Bien Phu. The French artillery, located in open pits were simply targets. There was no way the French could hit the actual firing slits for the Vietminh artillery. The Vietminh had found a way to live through French artillery barrages and take their time destroying the open gun pits, designed like Nato forces, and American firebases. The Vietminh would evolve to defending their antiaircraft weapons in the same manner, to the great disadvantage of American pilots.

and aircraft bombings. They could

The little history teacher, now a General, had learned the crucial lessons. Unlimited supplies and manpower were required for victory. He also learned that each loss had a lesson, and they would improve with each loss or victory. His tactics were simple enough. Immense effort and dedicated swarms of men and women manhandled heavy weapons onto the high ground overlooking the army. After that he would batter the position into junk and then engulf it with massed infantry waves.

Artillery was tunneled in place. Antiaircraft positions were equally well bunkered and camoflaged.

The lessons lost on the French sealed the fate of American leaders and military planners. There were immense numbers of men and women available to do whatever Giap needed. The availability of supplies through a supply network that could not be stopped was essential. The unlimited supplies and safe areas in China would direct the fate of future war efforts.

Years after Dien Bien Phu, it would be compared to Khe Sanh, Ripcord and Laos. However, none of the comparisons were accurate. The true lessons Giap learned at Pho Lu and Dong Khe were never understood by the media or the press writers and quite possibly American military historians. The Battles of Pho Lu and Dong Khe had made possible the loss of Dien Bien Phu.

It was the lessons learned by the little history teacher that made inevitable the French defeat.

It was the lessons unlearned by American military and political leaders that permitted the beginning of the American tragedy in Vietnam.

Years later, Giap's methods and the media would contribute to a public perception of a senseless military victory at Hamburger Hill, on the western slope of the A Shau Valley in 1969. Afterwards, a large percentage of the American populace, as well as politicians, would turn violently against

American "involvement" in an undeclared war, on the opposite side of the earth.

The simple observation of costly military victories, with a toll of both draftees and volunteers, for hills and mountains vacated a week after the "victory", sickened enough Americans to reverse the momentum. It was the demoralization of the American public that would filter into its Army.

Giap knew it would only be a matter of time, just as with the French. It was that shared understanding with his political leaders, that gave ~~them~~ the North Vietnamese no reason to negotiate with the Americans.

It had taken five years of American buildup to the time of Hamburger Hill. Hamburger Hill would symbolize the single event, dating the tragic, downward spiral and ultimate exit of American involvement. It would take Americans three years to exit the battlefields of South Vietnam.

After Hamburger Hill in 1969, anyone who served, followed orders, and performed their duties, was a Patriot, in the most difficult of times.

When others ran, protested and evaded, those who honored the draft, and those who volunteered, earned their rights as veterans..... and Patriots.

As the war effort receded, the demands on the helicopter crews would not diminsh. Their enemy added new and more powerful antiaircraft weapons, claiming helicopters until the bitter end.

The helicopter crews were volunteers. They would be called upon to support a much less capable Army of South Vietnam as American troops departed. National treaties and vows, would evaporate into the mist of night, just as Indian treaties

had 100 years before.

As the American exit accellerated, it was the helicopter pilots, crewchiefs and gunners, who paid the price.

Some were called Cowboys, some Palladins, all were volunteers.

When the time came to pay the price of American exit, it could only be paid....

in Warrior Souls....

the Patriot's Toll.....

MAP

AIRCRAFT SKETCH PAGE

FLIGHT SCHOOL

Warrant Officer Rotary Wing Class 70-5

February 13, 1970
Fort Rucker, Alabama

As a warrant officer candidate in the initial contact flying with the UH-1 Huey, I'd encountered my first failing flight grade and had my "pink slip" pulled for mis-handling an electrical malfunction. A "pink slip" was the most serious warning a student pilot could receive. Two pinkslips could result in a student being "set back" to the class following his. Under some circumstances, you could be ejected from the flight program altogether, and become an infantryman.

Our training was nearly seventy percent complete. I'd successfully completed the initial contact flying in the Hughes TH-55 at Fort Walters, Texas. It was a spidery looking canopy mounted on a spindly looking airframe. It was referred to as the "mattell messerschmitt" because of its toy-like appearance and agility of a mosquito.

I'd also successfully completed instrument training in the Bell H-47-G at Hanchey Army Heliport at Fort Rucker, Alabama. It was the original helicopter workhorse, first introduced in the Korean War. It was now relegated to serve as flying "instrument platforms" for student pilots.

My training had progressed to the workhorse of the Vietnam War, the "Huey". It was powered by a Lycoming gas turbine (jet) engine, which drove the overhead rotor system and synchronized anti-torque tail rotor system. It was a joy to fly, pulsating with

the hum of a jet engine and the physically encompassing vibration of the main rotors overhead, beating the air into submission, with the whopping sound that would symbolize the Helicopter war.

After several hours training in the jet turbine powered Huey, I had not correctly handled the proper emergency procedures for an electrical malfunction, involving the inverter. All electrical instrumentation was powered by the inverter which had a three position switch, on, off, and spare. I was facing a very serious standardization check ride. The instructor was a retired Army Major, now flying as a Civilian Instructor, who oversaw all instructors in the department. If I failed the ride, I would either be sent back to the preceding class or placed in enlisted ranks and shipped on to advanced infantry training and a ground tour in Vietnam.

Army helicopter training involved repetitive training in emergency procedures. The most serious emergency, a loss of engine power, involved autorotation (a powerless descent) to a full stop on the ground. It wasn't called a glide because where you looked down, was where you were going. The idea was to land there without damage to the aircraft or your passengers. There were no parachutes on helicopter crewmembers due to the rotor blades. There were no ejection seats or parachutes, simply because you couldn't escape the overhead rotor blades.

Autorotations were made possible if the pilot recognized the loss of power. He would have to reduce to collective (rotor blade pitch and engine power) to flat (bottom) allowing the upward (reverse) flow of air through the rotor blades. The "pinwheel effect" of the falling helicopter would spin the blades, allowing one terminal pull upward of the collective, cushioning the aircraft from a 2,000 foot per minute descent to a soft landing. If the pilot raised the collective too early, the helicopter would flutter to a stop too early, rolling upside down, killing those aboard. If the pilot pulled (raised) collective too late, an equally fatal smash into the ground could occur.

Autorotations were simply a helicopter pilot's glide downward to a last chance at survival, one pull of the collective, at the precise aircraft altitude, speed and altitude. Death or injury was the option!

A day rarely went by without flying three straight in autorotations and a couple of 180° (reversal of direction) autos.

We also practiced autorotations at a hover. All of these were totally powerless landings to the ground. Slightly less emphasis was placed on "minor" cockpit emergencies. I quickly became competent at autorotations. Only helicopter pilots understand the adrenalene rush of not just surviving, but excelling at controlled crashes!

Autorotations were so demanding and exacting that the descent profile was remotely similar to the Appollo moon landing. A specially rigged Bell H-47G was actually used to train astronauts for the first moon landing!

My "pink slip" was earned for mishandling an electrical malfunction which, if not understood, could lead to an emergency landing that might not be necessary.

I commuted to class with Corky Franklin, a former Air Force NCO; Jack Grass, a former Army NCO; and Avon Mallette, a former National Guardsman from Mississippi. We were all married students, permitted to live off post during the latter half of training at Fort Rucker. As I got in the car, there was a usual, good natured banter. Avon joked, "Marshall, are you going to pass that damn check ride today, or are you going to be a grunt and pack a rifle?" "Hell, I'll pass that check ride. I'm not about to go walking the jungles," I said. Everyone had a good laugh.

It was Friday the thirteenth. As I filed into the briefing room, I looked on the blackboard and found Mr. Baldwin's name on line

thirteen. The aircraft tail number had seven digits, ending with thirteen. To top it off, it was parked on pad thirteen! "Oh boy, this will be interesting," I thought to myself.

Later that morning after the weather briefing, I met Mr. Harry Baldwin, a former warrant officer, who retired as a major and was a civilian standardization instructor pilot in the Huey. We completed the pre-flight and took off. We went through a variety of autorotations and a detailed review of emergency procedures.

During the last trip around the traffic pattern, Mr. Baldwin simulated a failure of my primary electrical buss and I was slowly losing my engine instruments. While I had my eyes out of the cockpit, Mr. Baldwin pulled two circuit breakers. The first disabled the flashing yellow caution lights and red warning light system. The second circuit breaker disabled my inverter, the source of electrical power for my critical engine instruments. To further complicate matters, he turned the inverter to off.

As we continued around the pattern, I began calling out the prelanding check, from memory. "Engine, transmission instruments, ..." Then I noticed they were not "green" (normal). I was surprised to see them at 30% of the normal level and I'd had no caution or warning light indication.

After a few seconds of mentally reviewing the steps to take, I checked a circuit breaker and found part of the problem.

Obviously I had an electrical problem. First thing to check, all circuit breakers, "Aha! Two disabled" I thought to myself. I looked back at the instruments, still no change. That was obviously only part of the problem. I recycled my essential and non-essential electrical buss circuit breakers. Damn, ..., stumped!..... I kept visually checking for something else, all the time still flying in the traffic pattern, watching traffic, maintaining speed, heading and altitude. As I looked up at the overhead

console, I mentally reviewed all the steps, then I found it! The inverter, the source of electrical power for the instrumentation was switched "off", not working.

I immediately recycled it and instantly, all the instrumentation came on.

Mr. Baldwin said, "That's enough for today." We landed and hovered back to the tie-down. I had passed! In the debriefing, Mr. Baldwin explained in detail what had happened and how it was properly handled, along with other options and possible causes. I was relieved to have remained in my class without being set back or thrown out of the class altogether.

"Mr. Baldwin," I asked, "do you have any advice for a future W-1 (Warrant Officer, Grade I) heading off to Vietnam?"

He looked at me, and without a smile said, "Be extremely careful. Don't volunteer for anything. Don't do anything you haven't planned in advance. And most of all, I'll tell you what I told my son, 'Don't get yourself killed over there.'" He told me about his son, Larry, who was also in a warrant officer flight class.

"Thank you sir," I said. We shook hands and I continued on with my class. With that sequence of events, I concluded thirteen was obviously not a sign of bad luck for me. It would be a day I'd remember well, ten months later.

I went on to gunnery training and got checked out in the various armament systems used in the UH1B and "Charlie Model Gunship." We finished our tactical training and graduation soon arrived.

Warrant Officer Rotary Wing Aviator Class 70-3/70-5 graduated on April 7, 1970. In the jubilation of class graduation, none of us could have known that nearly one-third of our combined graduation class of 130 men would be dead in the next twelve

months. When the term "decimation" started in the days of the Roman army, it meant one out of ten people were killed. Worwac Class 70-3/70-5 was not much different from most Army helicopter pilot classes. Casualties would be high and should be expected. Those who volunteered to apply for the Warrant Officer Candidate Program knew this well in advance. Additionally, we had volunteered for duty in Vietnam as part of their application for army helicopter training.

The year before, I'd entered three months of Army basic training at the "armpit of the universe", Fort Polk, Louisiana. Afterwards, we entered flight school at Fort Wolters, Texas. We then trained for nine months, including eighteen hours of daily harassment in pre-flight. The days then evolved to sixteen hour days of classrooms, link instrument trainers and 220 hours of student pilot "stick time" in TH-55's, OH-13, and UH-1 helicopters.

As a class, we had been told that one out of three would be killed in action and others would be claimed by accidents.

Most of us believed we would live through it. Our greatest fear was becoming a "crispy critter", one who survived a crash and fire, minus nose, ears, fingers and toes. The speaker at our last safety meeting, prior to graduation at Fort Rucker, was a Warrant Officer who had reconstructive surgery at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. He was a grim reminder of the risks and realities we faced, no ears, nose or fingers. What else he might also have lost, we were left to imagine.

We were, however, highly motivated volunteers, eager to accept the physical and mental challenges, having been drilled in the virtues of Duty, Honor, Country. When I'd enlisted, I went through the routine batteries of qualifying exams given all enlistees. During Basic Training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, I was offered a slot in Officer Candidate School or a slot in the Army Preparatory School for West Point. I wanted to get married and fly helicopters, so I refused both. I also suspected I'd miss the

war if I opted for either one.

The Warrant Officer Rank, higher than enlisted and non-commissioned officers (Sergeants) but below commissioned officers, was adopted by the Army in the early 1960's for Aviation Specialists. It allowed a pilot specialty with requisite officers club privileges without diluting the managerial level "Commissioned Officers". It was just fine with the warrants, who simply wanted to fly.

During my final flight physical prior to graduation, I was put on a medical hold to evaluate borderline high blood pressure. During the time of my medical hold, I was assigned as the assistant executive officer of the Airfield Company at Fort Rucker. This was the company that housed all the ground control radar operators and air traffic controllers at Fort Rucker. They provided the staffing and training of tower personnel and air traffic control specialists.

Captain David Anderson was the commanding officer. His executive officer was First Lieutenant Gary Moffatt. During the weeks after graduation, I would come to learn a lot about the inner workings of the Army and dealing with the "system" or "green machine" as it was frequently called. All of this was an eye-opener to me since my family had no military background.

I had enjoyed my time with Captain Anderson and Lieutenant Moffatt. Moffatt and I had gone scuba diving a couple of times in Pensacola and Destin. We often spent weekends together. Captain Anderson had us over to his quarters one night for dinner. On June 14, 1970, I had been released with full clearance for flight duties by the flight surgeon at Fort Rucker. I had completed my medical hold and was expecting orders to leave. The following Friday night, my wife and I were invited to dinner with the Anderson's. We spent the evening watching slides and movies of his tour in Vietnam. The most interesting were his movies of his UH-1C Gunships operating off a Navy barge

docked on the MeKong River, in the Delta, the southernmost region in South Vietnam. "Tom," Anderson said, "be sure to take lots of film. Always keep your camera on hand and, if you can, get hold of a good movie camera. I've enjoyed my movies much more than the slides. But, sometimes you'll be too busy to take photographs." We enjoyed a good laugh.

June 23, 1970
Fort Rucker, Alabama

This morning, Captain Anderson called me into his office. I reported, "Good morning, sir. You requested my presence?"

"Yes, Mr. Marshall. Have a seat. Your time with the Airfield Company is coming to a close shortly. You've done an excellent job here. I would like to recommend you requesting "voluntary indefinite" status as a warrant officer. I believe you could receive a transition into a Chinook or some other aircraft prior to going to Vietnam. Have you ever thought of this?"

"No, sir. I haven't," I replied. However, having gotten to know Captain Anderson during the past two months, I was ready to take his advice.

"What do I need to do, sir?"

He said, "I'll have the paperwork started for you. You go ahead and sign it, I'll take care of the rest. We'll have it telexed to the Headquarters, Department of the Army, and see what we can do with the warrant officer branch there."

"Thank you, sir. I'll do it immediately."

The next day, I had the paperwork filled out and it was forwarded to the chief of the warrant officer personnel branch in the Department of the Army, in the Pentagon. Two days later, I received notice that I would be assigned to the OH58A "Kiowa" transition class. The OH58A was the "Kiowa" under Army terminology, yet everybody referred to them as the civilian name of "Jet Ranger," which was considered a luxury civilian aircraft rather than an Army helicopter. This was not the massive twin rotor "Chinook" I had envisioned but a tiny four seat light observation helicopter. I was not impressed. I cautiously asked Captain Anderson if it was worth pledging a "voluntary indefinite" status for.

Captain Anderson explained, "Tom, you've seen my movies and slides. Remember my slides near Cambodia with the Slicks (Hueys shot) down" The way things happen in combat, you want to be anywhere but in a Huey's cockpit. When gunships get shot down, more Huey's are lost. Even flying Scouts is more survivable than a "hot C.A (combat assault)" in Hueys.

With that explanation, I requested the training slot. I'd never heard that in flight school!

* * * * * *

~~June 23, 1970~~
Camp Eagle
I-Corps
Republic of Vietnam

A/1st On June 23, 1970,
Colonel Benjamin Harrison assumed command of the 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division "Currahee". His initial orders were to set up a forward command post near the Demilitarized Zone. A plan was set to reopen Firebase Shepard overlooking the abandoned Khe Sanh airfield. The move was in response to numerous sightings and armed "contact" by the 2/17th Air Cavalry Squadron. North Vietnamese regular forces were openly moving through Khe Sanh, the DaKrong and A Shau Valley areas. The level of NVA activity increased around Khe Sanh and the A Shau. The harrassment of ARVN Firebases O'Reilley and Barnett was soon overshadowed by intense contact in the Ripcord area of operations.

Vo Nguyen Giap, the North Vietnamese General, had apparently commenced another major offensive. It was designed to extract a high price in American casualties. It was a carefully veiled attempt to humiliate American troops in the eyes of the international press reporters.

* * * * * *

Washington D.C.

On June 24, 1970, the United States Senate voted to repeal the Tonkin Gulf Amendment, allegedly our reason for being in South Vietnam. Political events were underway which would dramatically affect our nation's history, and those "in country" (in South Vietnam). On June 30, 1970, the U.S. Senate would pass the Cooper-Church Amendment, barring funds for support of United States ground troops in Cambodia and Laos without Congressional approval.

In 1964, the United States had in effect, filled the power vacuum of French Colonial rule, which departed in 1954, after the fall of Dien Bien Phu. In 1969, having "won" the vast majority of battles, it would be the anger over lives lost, in a faraway land, that would ultimately render a political end to the war. The military victory at "Hamburger Hill" (Dong Ap Bia" in May, 1969) and the American casualties there, became a profane reason to leave Vietnam. Senator Ted Kennedy pursued an end to American involvement, joining others decrying the casualties.

The Republican majority U.S. Congress, on August 6, 1964, unanimously passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. This act allowed advisory units of U.S. Forces to develop contingency plans for expansion of the U.S. "Advisory effort". Although "U.S. advisors' had been serving in Viet Nam since 1962, the "Tonkin Gulf Resolution" permitted growth to over 14,700 Army and 700 Marine personnel in January, 1965.

President Lyndon Johnson, elected in large part by an "anti-war" stance in his election campaign, reversed himself and accellerated the military buildup. By February, 1965, Army personnel had been killed in a Viet Cong mortar attack at Pleiku. Marines relieved beleaguered South Vietnamese troops around Quang Tri and the DMZ in March 1965. The war became fully engaged for Americans with the introduction of the 173rd Airborne Brigade in April, 1965. The nature of the enemy had also changed. The insurgency/guerilla phase was effectively replaced by divisions of

North Vietnamese Regular Army forces living along the border areas of Cambodia and Laos, conducting operations in South Vietnam.

In November, 1965, more than 400 men of the 1st Air Cavalry were helicoptered into the Ia Drang Valley. Despite being encircled and suffering horrible losses, the North Vietnamese attacking from Cambodia suffered even greater losses. The helicopter war would underpin the history that followed. The Huey helicopter would earn its place, not only in history, but in loving respect as the machine that carried soldiers to safety.

Despite news reports to the contrary, the strength of the Viet Cong local guerrillas was essentially destroyed in the TET offensive of February, 1968. The North Vietnamese would expand the war with small unit ambushes and assaults, using commando tactics referred to as "sapper" strikes. Reducing the size of the combat units, limited potential losses to him.

The mounting loses and war protesters convinced Lyndon Johnson not to run for re-election. In November, 1968, Richard Nixon was elected President. He met President Thieu of South Vietnam on June 8, 1969, at Midway Island in the Pacific. The Vietnamization process; replacing Americans in combat with trained Vietnamese was agreed upon, as well as the departure of American troops. They jointly announced the withdrawal of the first 25,000 U.S. troops. It began with the withdrawal of the 9th Infantry Division in the Delta of South Vietnam.

American troop strength in Vietnam peaked in 1968 with 536,000 men and women. In 1969, the decline had begun, with a troop level down to 475,000. Unknown to me, the 1970 troop strength would decline to 334,600, a 38% decline from 1968. By the end of 1971, only 156,800 troops would remain, a mere 29% of the 1968 peak.

Now, in June, 1970, the rescission of the Tonkin Gulf

Amendment by a Democratic majority Congress had in effect told President Nixon to "get America out", just as anti-war protestors clamored. The rescission marked the reversal of our involvement and national intentions. A unilateral withdrawal of American troops was now under way. The beginning of "the end of the war" had started.

In the summer heat of South Alabama, completing final training, eagerly anticipating departure to Vietnam, I was unaware of the political and military reversal now underway. (The Tonkin Gulf rescission was not widely understood.) Little did I know how a political descision in Washington D.C. would profoundly affect me.

MAP

I CORPS

FIRE SUPPORT BASE RIPCORD

Firebase Ripcord
I-Corps
Republic of Vietnam
Firebase Ripcord had been opened on April 1, 1970, when Company B, 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division air assaulted onto the hill. The hill served as a firebase, part of the interlocking firebases along the eastern perimeter of the A Shau Valley.

Firebase Ripcord was established as a major combat base in I Corps. As an operating base, infantry patrols would walk out into their assigned "A.O." (area of operations) to block the NVA divisions positioned to move on Hue.

Hue ("way") had been overrun by the NVA during the "1968 Tet Offensive". NVA had held the city for over 20 days. The battle for "Hue City" by Marines and soldiers was widely covered by TV reporters. A clear military victory for U.S. and ARVN forces soon became the most mis-interpreted action of the war, convoluted by reporters into an NVA political "victory". It was the largest population center north of DaNang and more importantly a provincial capital.

Unknown to us, Firebase Ripcord was very important to the Commander U.S. Forces Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (Comusmacv) General Creighton Abrams.

American military leaders, now aware of the President's intentions, were faced with managing a withdrawal from an ongoing war. The 9th Infantry Division near Saigon was now

gone, as well as the 25th Infantry, the "Tropical Lightening" which returned to Hawaii. The First Infantry Division, the "Big Red 1", was also gone. The 4th Infantry Division at An Khe would be next. With dramatic American troop reductions underway, some offensive moves had to be made to put the NVA's heads down and disrupt any offensive intentions they had.

Ripcord was part of the overall plan that General Creighton Abrams would culminate with an as yet unknown invasion to the heart of enemy forces, in Laos. I Corps, home of the 101st Airborne Division, was nearest the NVA homeland and subject to the greatest military threat. It was widely considered the "worst A.O." (area of operations). The Cambodian Invasion in May, 1970, was one of the critical offensive moves to buy time for the withdrawal, hitting the enemy as hard as possible, where he least expected it.

Specialist John Mihalko was a member of a reconnaissance (Recon) platoon in the 101st Airborne Division at Camp Evans. The Recon Platoon members were well trained, seasoned veterans blended with new guys who fit in well. The men were a proud and diverse group of personalities. They worked well together, their confidence was based upon combat experience and reliance upon each other in the most difficult of situations.

They were concerned that their platoon leader, a lieutenant, had derosed (Date Expected Return from Overseas Duty) and was replaced with another. The familiar questions ran through John's mind. Is the new Lieutenant Wilson "gung ho"? Does he have his shit together? John would never learn the answers to those concerns. The Lieutenant's tour of duty would come to an end in 48 hours on Ripcord.

Reports were coming in over the radios that the April Fool's Day insertion on top Ripcord was not going well. The combat assault in was "hot", "very, very hot". Reports of continuous mortar fire, machineguns and AK-47's poured from the radios.

The hot "C.A." (combat assault) on top of the mountain was into a cauldron of hell. Everything bad that could happen was happening. The troops on Ripcord were taking a pounding from NVA mortars, rocket propelled grenades, AK-47's and 51 calibre machine guns. The enemy that they had searched for in March without finding them, were now in abundance and ready to slug it out.

John and his platoon headed out to the helicopter pad in stunned silence. They were deep in thought, pondering their collective fate. The situation was bad and getting worse. Reinforcements were having extremely difficult times getting into Ripcord. The choppers were delayed getting there and took heavy fire if they made it in. Word was coming in on the radios that casualties were mounting. The NVA showed no sign of relenting or their characteristic flight from the battle, once surprise had been lost. After interminable waiting, the helicopters arrived at the PZ (pickup zone) and they mounted up.

The recon platoon had been trained to work silently, cruising through the jungle in search of the elusive enemy. They were highly effective because they worked in small groups. They usually had the element of surprise on their side. The hit hard in swift and deadly ambushes. The recon platoon was now directed to conduct a combat assault with all the cards stacked against them. No element of surprise, a hot LZ. No stealth in the jungle shadows, squad maneuvers in the open, to assault enemy bunkers!

As the helicopters arrived and they mounted up, the reports from Ripcord continued to get worse. Casualties were mounting. A few Slicks had been shot down earlier in the day, raising the anxiety levels of their passengers. John looked at the helicopter crews without envy, knowing they would have to go out to Ripcord time and time again, totally exposed to anti-aircraft fire going in, with mortar fire on the pads.

Infantrymen, used to being on the ground, knew that was the time

of critical exposure, that he could do nothing about. In their own ways, each member of the platoon was working with his innermost fears. Time waiting had permitted their fears to consume their thoughts and reak havoc with nerves. There were no jovial "thumbs up" signs between teams as they boarded Slicks. They were faced with the fear and the impending reality of a hot combat assault, in circumstances they normally would avoid.

As they arrived on station and began circling near Ripcord, all aboard the helicopters could see the carnage under way. Mortar fire prevented their helicopters from landing immediately, so they circled in helicopter "daisy chains" just out of range. During one of the turns, John glanced down and got his first glimpse of Ripcord. It didn't look like much at altitude, simply a bald mountain top, surrounded by lush green jungle. As they began their approach, he could see incoming mortar rounds impacting on the hill. He also saw a Slick lying in the jungle, shot down by the North Vietnamese. It was a sickening sight. They circled, descending, finally the crewchief shouted above the roar of the rotor blades and jet engine, "We're going in, get ready!"

A mile out, on extended final approach to Ripcord, the doorgunner shouted, "Taking fire" and began laughing as he opened up his M-60 machinegun. John watched Cobras working out beside them. Now the crewchief and doorgunner were both firing. Mortar rounds were impacting on the hill where they were supposed to land.

John thought the doorgunner had to be one of the most "gung ho" people in the Army, or simply crazy! With mortal combat underway below them, the doorgunner shouted, "Isn't this neat?!" On final, the mortar rounds came in like a hail of rain. The landscape ahead was spewed into the sky in front of them. The helicopter was shuddering in deceleration, shaking as it lost airspeed. With mortars impacting on the LZ and all around it, the pilot initiated a "go around". Breaking off the approach, he

pulled in maximum power, accellerating through the fire, without touching down.

Go-arounds on the second and third tries were equally unsuccessful. After a last fourth try, the Huey was running low on fuel and the pilot told them, "We're returning to Camp Evans". Just as they relaxed, thinking they wouldn't have to go in there, the pilot continued saying, "We're going to refuel and try it all over again." It was just another day for the air crews. They would keep trying until the combat assault was successfully completed. Luckily for John, his C.A. was called off.

On April 3, the rumor was that Ripcord was going to be evacuated. The word came down that his recon platoon members were coming in. John's spirit soared as he went out to meet his surviving teammates. As he met them, they looked as if they had been through a meat grinder. Their fatigues were tattered with blood, the legs of one man were exposed from his thighs to his knees, dripping in blood from wounds that he didn't even seem to notice. People were glad simply to be alive. The April Fool's Day assault shook John up as it probably did the rest of the battalion.

"Word" was then spread, "we're staying on Ripcord". At that point, John realized the Ripcord area of operations was going to be the recon platoon's home for a long time to come. There were one hell of a lot of bad guys out there and they could mount a real attack any time they chose to. After several months "in-country", the events left him with his first bitter fellings. For the first time, he mentally questioned decisions of those above him. The only casualty in his platoon was the new lieutenant, killed in action.

John, like other combat veterans, came to realize that simply being good was not enough to survive in close combat. Luck and fate had a big say in the matter of who lived and who died. Like everyone else, he'd become a pawn on the chess board of the

Ripcord area of operations. Not known to John and others, the combat assault into Ripcord was a "piece of cake", compared to the extraction under artillery siege, which would occur on July 23rd.

Ripcord was expanded by combat engineers to house 400 men. It was the starting point for many foot patrols, searching the hills and valleys below. Infantry patrols would walk the hills below the 2,800 foot mountaintop, searching for the enemy. The "Screaming Eagles" presence at Ripcord would block the NVA Divisions from moving into the area of Hue, the Provincial Capital and largest population center north of Da Nang.

On the 28th of April, Company B, 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry, while patrolling a valley floor below Ripcord, discovered an occupied NVA position. They successfully assaulted and killed 15 NVA. Among the weaponry captured, they were startled to find US equipment. An M-60 machinegun, an M-79 grenade launcher and most importantly, a PRC-25, FM radio were discovered. It was now obvious, the NVA units in the field were monitoring American radio conversations. Contacts, vicious firefights and nighttime battles would continue.

* * * * * *

On the 17th of May, the NVA stepped up activity across I Corps. A Chinook helicopter was shot down in the mountains, west of Firebase Nancy. The entire crew was lost. Other aircraft were taking heavy antiaircraft fire resupplying the ARVN Firebase, O'Reilley, near Ripcord. The pilots were now taking fire at places they generally considered safe. "Something was up" with the NVA.

The next day, just south of Fire Support Base O'Reilley, a Phoenix Huey supporting combat engineers was shot down in flames. Three crewmembers and two passengers were killed in the crash. A Phoenix crewchief, Specialist - 4 Easterling, for the

second miraculous time in two months, jumped from the helicopter an instant before it crashed into the ground. He would survive being knocked unconscious, and walk out of the jungle two days later. To have survived jumping from a crashing helicopter, which killed all remaining onboard, was a trial of survival instincts and reflexes matched by four other Phoenix crewmembers.

Another Phoenix crewchief, Specialist 5 Mike Amos, had jumped from his crashing Huey, before it impacted the mountain lowlands on December 21, 1969. After recuperating on the Hospital Ship Repose, Mike returned to the Phoenix. He'd had no reluctance to "get back in the saddle".

Fate, however, would place him in another Phoenix Huey on February 14, 1970, also shot down. Three Phoenix Hueys were in loose trail (single file) formation, east of the A Shau Valley. Captain Ronald Swanson was piloting with Warrant Officer "Frenchie" Las Hermes. They deposited the combat engineering team and departed the landing zone, climbing to altitude. Warrant Officer Jack Glennon following less than a mile away, saw a rocket propelled grenade impact the fuel cell. The Huey errupted in an explosion. It flew 200 more yards, fluttered, and fell toward the mountain foothills. Determined to survive, aware there was nothing else he could do in the aircraft, Mike unclasped his safety harness and jumped from his seat at 80 feet above the ground. The Huey slammed into the ground killing two immediately. The third would die of complications (pneumonia) in less than four weeks.

Mike was rescued the next day by a medical evacuation (medevac) Huey. This time he'd be transferred to the Hospital Ship Sanctuary. He would go home to heal a broken leg. Amos' story, was strangely similar to Specialist 4 Easterling, who'd also survived two crashes by jumping.

Unfortunately for Phoenix crewmembers, this test of survival

skills would not be the last instance.

Also on May 18th, Rangers operating southwest of Tun Tavern, destroyed two NVA trucks. One a small 2 1/2 ton truck and one a larger five ton model. Both were carrying supplies toward O'Reilley and Ripcord. The sequence of these events demonstrated the North Vietnamese were successfully infiltrating not only men, but weapons and supplies on a scale not publicly acknowledged in Saigon or Washington D.C.

Enemy contact generally subsided at the mountaintop firebase until July 1, 1970. Things dramatically changed when infantrymen of the 803d NVA regiment used assault rifles, rocket propelled grenades and sachel charges to attack night defensive positions of the battalion, spread on the valley floor.

* * * * * *

On July 2, Firebase Ripcord came under sustained recoilless rifle fire for the first time. Ripcord was being pounded from Hill 1000, the first high ground to it's west. Ground assaults conducted by Americans in Delta and Charlie Company, 2/506th, were disappointing. There had been several friendly casualties. The reluctance of the company commander, to lead the men up the hill in the face of obviously horrendous odds, was angrily observed by the upper ranks. Most units were operating at 60% of assigned strength. Only so much could be realistically asked of them.

That evening, Ripcord began receiving 120 millimeter mortar attacks. It was the first use of the 120's except on the DMZ. The very large mortars indicated a major logistic success by the enemy. It was now obvious to all they were being supplied by trucks or tracked vehicles. Vehicles were necessary to transport these very heavy mortars, base plates, and ammunition. The 122mm rocket was well known by all those serving in Vietnam. It was, however, an indiscriminant weapon which was not very

accurate in terms of aiming. The use of the 120mm mortar, however, was entirely different. It could be sighted and walked carefully across specific targets. Ripcord was now under an NVA artillery siege.

On the night of July 3, the Ripcord perimeter began receiving probing ground attacks. These would occur nightly for the next week. An Infantry Company, D Company 2nd Battalion, 501st Infantry, at the base of Hill 805 in the valley below Ripcord, had heavy ground attacks four nights in a row. The surrounded company, in its night-defensive position, required a continuous stream of combat air support flights along with helicopter flare ships and gun ships. Air Force forward air controllers remained overhead to save them from being overrun. All available in range artillery, including 105mm, 175mm, and eight-inch guns were employed in defending the ground troops in the field.

After four nights of continuous pounding by the enemy, they were ordered extracted from Hill 805. While awaiting for helicopters in the pickup zone, Captain Chris Straub's "Kit Carson Scout" (a North Vietnamese Prisoner of War who volunteered to serve as a scout for U.S. Troops) pulled a pin on a handgrenade, killing himself. It seriously wounded Straub and two others standing near him. The scout was deeply depressed at the killing of his former comrades in the past four nights. The former NVA simply couldn't live with the fact that they were killing so many North Vietnamese that he'd helped find.

On the evening of July 4th, the NVA celebrated the American holiday by massing to attack another US Infantry Company in the valley below Ripcord. The command post, 1st and 2nd platoons of Company C, 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry, were the targets.

At midnight, NVA Sappers (Combat engineers carrying very destructive explosive charges called satchel charges) crawled through the night defensive perimeter. Once in place, satchel explosive charges were blown in a coordinated attack while B-40

rockets and RPG's flashed into the American positions.

NVA swarmed through the positions, shooting, grenading and bayoneting. In the surreal nightscape of tripflares, explosions, tracers, automatic weapons and screams, the company commander and seven other GI's died. Six others were wounded in action and one missing, believed captured. The NVA left 15 bodies. Several more were believed killed or wounded.

The platoon medic, who survived the onslaught, reorganized the defensive perimeter with the survivors and called for artillery and gunships. Jets would also come to their aid. It was much like actions depicted by Hollywood many years later. The movies would have visual accuracy, but the Hollywood script writers and directors, in their metaphoric interpretations, would miss the targets of truth and meaning.

* * * * * *

On the afternoon of July 5, Sergeant Robert Granberry was informed his Recon team of E Company, 2/506th, would search Hill 1000, located just west of Firebase Ripcord. Granberry was raised hunting and fishing in the woods of northwest Florida. He was comfortable in the "bush". His father had been a decorated Navy Corpsman(Medic), serving in the South Pacific in World War II. Granberry and his men were an experienced, very successful recon team.

Granberry was over the hump of his tour and had developed the "sixth sense", awareness of danger and enemy threats. He and his team had survived countless ambushes they'd perpetrated on NVA. They had once been bombed mistakenly by two F-4 Phantoms directed by a "visually impaired" Air Force Forward Air Controller. When the Phantom dove on Granberry and his men, they knew to run until the high pitched screaming sound changed as the bombs were released and the jet climbed skyward. The bombs had been close, but not close enough. A Cobra

gunship had also nearly attacked them while under close combat. The cobra diving on them was the ultimate terror. Luckily, he broke off at the last second, recognizing friendlies.

Having survived these encounters, the five other team members were listening to the action reports of the line companies below Ripcord. The news was bad and kept getting worse. Hill 1000, the Recon team's next day objective, was the apparent source of enemy attacks and mortar fire.

The team members sat together at lunch, overlooking the hilltop "saddle", a narrow ridge which connected Hill 1000 and Ripcord. Tomorrow they would cross it in daylight and search for the NVA positions. With their common experiences and awareness of situation reports from companies on patrol, they began joking about the need for a "sky pilot", a chaplain. The grim humor, common among those in deadly environments, included jokes of a need for "last rites".

Granberry recognized the underlying concerns, imbeded in the words. Each man was dependable and experienced. Recognizing the seriousness of the situation, he polled his team members. They all agreed, they'd appreciate a chaplain holding a short "prayer meeting" that evening. There was a short, somber offering of prayers later that afternoon, officiated by a Chaplain, on behalf of the Recon Platoon. Afterwards, jokes continued about "last rites".

After a restless night, punctuated by NVA harassment of the firebase and troops below, morning came. Recon team, only 6 members strong, including Granberry, moved across the hilltop ridge towards Hill 1000.

In mid-afternoon, they'd entered the base of Hill 1000 and began hearing metallic noises of NVA troops moving munitions and mortar pieces. Granberry knew the NVA protected their artillery pieces. The NVA had carried them too far to risk them casually.

There was obviously a company defending them, if not more.

He called in the observation to a 2nd Lieutenant atop Ripcord and asked for instructions. A few minutes later, the reply came, "engage the enemy position." Granberry couldn't believe it! Including himself, there was a radioman, a medic, and four soldiers. Astonished, he informed the Lieutenant he was only a recon team, and asked him to reconsider. The Lieutenant, obviously obeying a superior, repeated, "this is a direct, lawful order. Engage the enemy!"

Granberry informed his team members of the order. With his men, he carefully reviewed the options; refuse the order in mutiny and face a court martial. They could attack the position and get killed or wounded (if very lucky). With anger and trepidation, they agreed to proceed with the attack. Greatly outnumbered, under-manned and without the cover of darkness, they silently moved forward.

They quietly moved up the hill, utilizing as much natural cover as possible. The sounds were now louder, mixed with NVA voices. They were getting close, but could not see the enemy defensive positions. In the next blinding instant, three rocket propelled grenades exploded above them. A series of deafening roars showered shrapnel from above, badly wounding all six men hugging the ground.

The PRC-25 radio on the back of "Dixie" Gaskins disintegrated in the explosion, saving his life. Granberry awoke in pain to the moans of others, his M-16 melted to the shape of a "C", useless. Shrapnel had hit all over his back and legs. He drew his 45 caliber pistol, awaiting the charge of NVA soldiers to finish them off. Thankfully, it never came. Instead, a soldier from Company D led the rescue from behind them. They were carried out of the firezone and medevaced.

They had followed orders, which they knew were simply stupid.

Considering the options given them, the outcome had been "as well as could be expected."

A series of unsuccessful company sized assaults after artillery bombardment would commence the following day. What was unsuccessfully attempted by a 6 man team, was twice repeated by an understrength 80 man company. None of the future assaults would be successful, all would suffer casualties.

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On the 8th of July, Companies B and C of the 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry would again assault Hill 1000. They would loose two KIA and four wounded, without dislodging NVA from Hill 1000. The NVA had not only maintained, but improved their defensive position since April. There was obviously a lot more to the NVA fortifications than met the eye. There had to be a large complex, mostly underground and well manned.

On the 10th of July, eight artillery attacks were placed upon Ripcord, killing two and wounding 17. During July 11 through 16, ground action below Ripcord would claim another 10 Americans killed and 52 wounded. Only 12 NVA could be confirmed killed in their heavily fortified positions. Artillery attacks on Ripcord would continue.

On July 18, 1970, a Chinook helicopter carrying a sling load of 105mm Howitzer ammunition onto Ripcord was shot down in flames by 12.7 millimeter anti-aircraft fire. Mortar fire after the crash created a fire and volcanic-like plume of smoke. The flaming wreckage touched off a series of explosions in the ammunition storage area where it crashed. Six 105 millimeter howitzers from "B" Battery, 2nd Btn./319th Field Artillery were destroyed as thousands of shells exploded in the fire. Two recoilless rifles and counter mortar radar were lost as well. In the words of Colonel Harrison, flying overhead, it looked as if the entire mountaintop were erupting.

This was the second loss of a 2/319th Artillery Battery in the same region. Beginning at 3:00am, May 13, 1969, "C" Battery, 2nd Battalion/319th Field Artillery was overrun at Firebase Airborne, while firing support for the fighting at Dong Ap Bia (Hamburger Hill). NVA sappers claimed 22 U.S. killed from a battery of approximately 60 artillery men. The guns were destroyed, rendering the battery combat ineffective.

With the destruction of the Chinook helicopter on top of Ripcord's 105mm howitzer battery, the tactical situation and defensive capabilities of Ripcord were now greatly diminished. 105mm howitzers were necessary because they were capable of "close and continuous" fire support with a high rate of fire. The adjustment capabilities of the 105mm were instantaneous. Their fires were adjusted instantly by those depending upon them. The larger 155mm howitzer battery was designed to back up the Direct Support 105mm units. The Ripcord 105mm artillery was now destroyed, leaving the base incapable of close-in artillery support. The beginning of the end of Ripcord was begun. American patrols in the hills surrounding the firebase were taking considerable losses.

Colonel Harrison then requested Brigadier General Sid Berry to immediately reopen Firebase Gladiator. There was an immediate need to position a battery of 105mm howitzers to support the troops in the Ripcord area. That evening, an engineer mine and booby trap element was dispatched from Camp Evans with a recon platoon for security. They were flown to commence the mine clearance of Firebase Galdiator. The following morning, a 105 howitzer battery was operating at Gladiator. By nightfall, the 105 battery was providing direct support to troops in the field around Ripcord.

On the evening of the 19th, Colonel Harrison realized he had five of eight total infantry battalions in the division under his operational control. All five had some elements in fire fights and hot contact with the enemy troops. It was becoming clear that

Ripcord was a major battle brewing, with NVA forces massed in the vicinity. Elements of the 66th NVA Regiment were confirmed north and west of Ripcord. The 29th and 803rd NVA Regiments were now located southeast of Ripcord. Harrison realized that with the extraction of some troops in the field, that those remaining became more dependent upon fire support.

That evening, he sent for his air liaison officer (ALO), Major Brown, of the United Stated Air Force. Colonel Harrison was prepared to spend the night on Ripcord and asked Major Brown to get his gear together. Major Brown, knowing the situation reports from the field around Ripcord, instantaneously assessed the prospects of living in a muddy hole under artillery seige. He then responded to Colonel Harrison that he could do a much more effective job coordinating air support from his aircraft above Ripcord. Colonel Harrison angrily told him he expected continuous airborne FACs with relief on station. If at any time he could not talk instantly with a FAC in the air, he would send a helicopter to pick up Major Brown and have him report to a bunker at Ripcord. With this type of encouragement, Major Brown and other forward air controllers would provide some of the most effective and intense air support witnessed in the entire Vietnam war. The Forward Air Controllers benefitted from the experience of Colonel Harrison, who was also an Army Aviator with a prior combat tour commanding an Aviation Battalion in Vietnam. The Colonel had the knowledge of both the situation on the ground and was capable of speaking aviation terminology. He would have many direct conversations with the aircrews involved and would request the most specific types of missions for the critical, tactical needs.

The following day, Captain Chuck Hawkins, commander of the battered infantry troops, Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry, reported that a tap had been made on a communication land line (wire) between a North Vietnamese Division Headquarters and an artillery regiment on the valley floor below Ripcord. It was learned that there were now four NVA

regiments, with up to 12,000 men surrounding Ripcord. Their sole purpose was clearly the destruction of the firebase. Colonel Harrison was shocked to realize they had four NVA divisions attacking. They obviously weren't going to run away. He immediately ordered his staff to develop plans to destroy the enemy regiments. The staff came up with a plan requiring six additional U.S. Battalions to be inserted in the fight. In the middle of the night, Colonel Harrison realized the severity of the situation for Alpha Company and immediately ordered them extracted. They were extracted under fire at first light, successfully.

General Berry realized that with a division headquarters on the valley floor below Ripcord, the North Vietnamese were there to stay. They were there, in a force with troops numbering between 8,000 and 12,000 regular soldiers. The force was adequate in size to initiate a land attack against the capital of Hue or to stand in positions and attack Firebase Ripcord and the patrols surrounding it.

Early the next morning (July 21), Brigadier General Sid Berry called Colonel Harrison and said, "We're closing Ripcord. What do you need in the way of support?" Colonel Harrison was surprised. It had never occurred to him to withdraw. Harrison had been entirely too close to the situation in terms of the tactical operations and had not observed the overall picture. For the infantrymen around Ripcord, it was a little late. One platoon had been reported overrun by NVA, while a company was now in danger of being overrun. Berry was able to observe that the battle forming was going to claim an even greater number of lives. The firebase was already scheduled to be closed due to weather in October. Rather than continuing daily losses, General Berry concluded it was time to withdraw the troops. They would pound the enemy after the closing with artillery and tactical air power.

General Berry had asked Colonel Harrison what was needed for

the extraction and evacuation. Colonel Harrison immediately told him he needed an aircav squadron, an aerial rocket artillery battalion, and unlimited close air support sorties, all planned well in advance. On the following day, July 22nd, the major commanders met at Camp Evans. This included the Marine Air Wing General from Marble Mountain, Air Force and Navy carrier air wing representatives. He told the Marine General that he needed four sets of air every hour, for 12 continuous hours, starting at 0600 hours on July 23. The Marine General said it would be impossible to designate and control that many strikes--48 sets of two to four aircraft each. Colonel Harrison's air liaison officer with the Air Force assured him he could do it. He had no intention of spending nights on Ripcord. The S-3 Air, Captain Stallings on Colonel Harrison's staff, would spend his daylight hours in a light observation helicopter (Loach) controlling a number of the air strikes. They set in motion 42 sets of Marine, Navy and Air Force aircraft bombing carefully selected targets in the perimeter and foothills surrounding Ripcord.

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On the morning of July 21, fresh troops were inserted to strengthen A Company, 2nd of the 506th just prior to extraction. They were involved in a running battle with large numbers of NVA. The birds of the 158th Aviation Battalion and 101st Aviation Battalion were bringing in new troops with water and ammunition. Some exhausted troops were being rotated back to Camp Evans. The LZ's were hover holes, just large enough for one Huey to hover down into. During short final and the hover down, all were subjected to NVA 12.7mm machine guns and even heavier volumes of AK-47 fire.

Warrant Officer Don Mears and his "peter pilot" were in a string of Phoenix Hueys, assigned to extract troops from one of the hover holes in the jungle valleys below Ripcord.

Mears piloted the aircraft to a hover in a valley southeast of

Ripcord, flying through a visual display of anti-aircraft tracers. Green 12.7mm rounds were visible in all sectors of the operation, as well as some intended solely for his Phoenix Huey.

Six heavily laden infantrymen scrambled aboard amid the cacophony of incoming and outgoing fire. The Huey hovered with one skid touching a fallen log. With outgoing troops aboard, the crewchief shouted on the intercom, "clear!"

Mears steadily pulled in collective power, the Phoenix Huey ascending through the same anti-aircraft fire found on the way in. The co-pilot was reading out critical instruments for Mears, who had to keep his eyes on the rotor blades and encircling trees, warning him, "you're gonna overtorque...redline...there it goes!"

Mears replied, "Fuck it, we gotta get out!" The ascension continued, carrying very thankful troops to safety. It was no surprise that a very popular chorus in the Phoenix Officers Club was ~~a Rolling Stones~~ an Animals song with the refrain, "We gotta get outta this place!"

The flight of his Phoenix Huey would be repeated many times today.

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On the morning of July 22, after the TAC Air Strikes (jets), artillery bombardment, while Cobra's shot up the area, the Hueys returned to extract other troops below Ripcord.

During the night of July 22nd and the early morning of July 23rd, over 2,200 rounds of artillery pounded the surrounding area. Navy, Air Force and Marine fighter bombers began flying continuous strikes commencing at daybreak on July 23rd.

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At first light, on July 23rd, fourteen Chinook helicopters dashed in to begin lifting out the 2nd Battalion 506th Infantry from the top of Ripcord. They could carry thirty to forty men per trip. Everything was going smoothly until 7:40. Anti-aircraft fire again destroyed a Chinook. It crashed in flames on the lower pad preventing the other Chinook helicopters from lifting out the rest of the men, artillery, and heavy equipment. The Infantry would now have to be slowly pulled out by Huey helicopters, which could carry six men at a time. Because of the blocked landing pad with the Chinook wreckage, all available Hueys in the 101st Airborne were put to the task of darting in, one at a time, to extract the remaining soldiers while under continuous anti-aircraft fire and artillery bombardment.

While action on the 2,800 foot mountaintop was taking a drastic turn for the worse, Hueys of the Phoenix were combat assaulting troops of D Company, 2/506, to reinforce A Company on the valley floor.

With reinforcements, they could beat back North Vietnamese attackers. While gunships and jets kept the enemy at bay, they would be extracted after operations on the mountaintop above them were completed.

With the crash of the Chinook, the Hueys were refueled and assembled for the largest "hot" extraction of U.S. forces in South Vietnam. Thirty UH-1 Hueys from the companies of the 158th Aviation Battalion at Camp Evans would be joined with 30 Hueys from the 101st Aviation Battalion at Camp Eagle. The Redskins (Cobra gunships), the Hawks (Cobra gunships) from 101 Aviation Battalion and Griffins (aerial rocket artillery) of the battalion formed up with the lift birds and the other Cobras from Camp Eagle.

Normally either Aviation Battalion would have had the aircraft capability to perform the extraction alone. Anti-aircraft fire had now damaged so many Hueys that some companies could only

provide 10 or 12 of the normal 20 Hueys per company. The two Aviation Battalions of Camp Evans and Camp Eagle would work together.

Captain Randy House, Platoon leader from C Company, 158 Aviation Battalion, correctly observed it was time to get on with the mission, but there'd been no contact from the Command and Control ship flying high above. The NVA and some highly qualified Communist Chinese advisors were denying use of the radio frequencies normally used. Alternate frequencies one, two and three were jammed with voices, or the keyed mikes of the enemy. After boring donut holes in the sky for twenty minutes, Captain House, the Phoenix lead, departed his flight to overfly Ripcord. With no further communication from Colonel Harrison, House instinctively knew a "clusterfuck" was in the making, unless positive steps were taken.

He observed the upper pad, by the 155mm howitzers was taking much less mortar fire than the lower pad, now under continuous shelling and partially blocked by the burning Chinook wreckage. House made contact with a pathfinder on Ripcord, ready to continue the extraction. The pathfinder briefed him with specific landing recommendations.

House ordered the Phoenix birds to commence the extraction, coming inbound along a river bed, turning over the mountain waterfalls, inbound to Ripcord. Others from both the 158th Aviation Battalion and the 101st Aviation Battalion would follow, until all soldiers were extracted. House then instructed them to the pads with thirty second intervals between Hueys. As the mission proceeded, the Pathfinders on Ripcord would instruct some birds to different pads. The NVA were listening to the Pathfinders. If a Huey was directed to Pad 1, mortars were fired on Pad 1. Hearing the mortar shells fired, the Pathfinders would divert the Huey to another pad at the last second. Five soldiers would scramble aboard and the Huey would depart, just prior to the next round of mortars impacting.

One by one, the Huey helicopters of the 101st Airborne Division touched down. The small pads were big enough for one Huey to land, pick up five or six passengers and depart. All of this under continuous 51 calibre anti-aircraft fire and hundreds of AK-47's. The main pad was under continuous fire with 120mm mortar, and 82mm mortar fire. The NVA had, however, not targeted one of the upper pads as closely. "Light" 82mm fire and 75mm recoilless rifle fire was being received. But it was intermittent, not the consistent, continuous fire being received at the lower pad level.

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In that olive drab, "green line" of Hueys, the only hope of salvation for soldiers on that mountain top were "birds" of the "Phoenix" and other 101st Airborne Division units..

The final evacuation of Firebase Ripcord commenced. Chief Warrant Officer-2 Ken Mayberry was a Phoenix Company aircraft commander (A.C.) with Warrant Officer-1 David Rayburn as co-pilot. There were small groups of men left on the mountain top. Artillery bombardment was coming in in the form of 120 millimeter mortars, 82 millimeter mortars and recoilless rifle fire. Luckily, the heavier stuff had tapered off, but the mortars were continuous, exploding blackish grey clouds of fragmentation everywhere on the firebase. A single mortar shell could easily destroy a Huey, killing all on board. As they 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 prior occasions. The scene was familiar to them, but the intensity was far greater than Rayburn had experienced. Mayberry had already experienced one equally hot combat environment near LZ Kelley, south of Ripcord. He'd flown through a wall of tracers, and was rocked by an airburst on the way out. Whether it was a satchel charge mine in the trees or a fused RPG-7 didn't matter. It had been terrifyingly close. Of 20 Phoenix Huey's, only four aircraft remained flyable after

which nearly invented him

that extraction. Despite having the experience to know what was unfolding, Mayberry continued on the approach.

Rayburn looked over at CW-2 Mayberry and said, "Ken, (are) you sure you want to do this?" Mayberry kept looking ahead, flying the aircraft, and watching the LZ. Ken said, "We're their only way out, and if we don't get them...., (the NVA will)." It was the resolve demonstrated by many warrant officers, flying Army helicopters in Vietnam. Americans were on the ground. They were coming to get them, no matter what.

In the Phoenix Company, it was the unspoken, solemn vow, lived, not uttered, Americans were on the ground. The Phoenix would come, no matter what!

As they came on short final, the fire got heavier. Mayberry slammed the Huey down amid the exploding mortar bombs, and a group of five heavily laden soldiers rushed for the helicopter. A mortar round hit in front of the soldiers and another simultaneously just behind them. The group was thrown to the ground, all badly wounded. Mayberry shouted to the crew chief, Specialist-5 John Ackerman, and door-gunner, Specialist-4 Wayne Wasilk, "(go) get them!" They rushed twenty yards through the mortar fire to pick the men up and carried them toward the helicopter bay. The firing continued, landing all around the helicopter. Rayburn could feel AK-47 rounds impacting and fragmentation from the mortars peppering the Huey, as if the Huey's skin was his.

The crew chief and doorgunner struggled to get the men into the cargo bay. Mayberry lifted off in black-grey clouds of fragmentation. A second Phoenix bird came in and picked up another group of six with amazingly minor damage and no wounds to the crew or the passengers. CW-2 David Wolfe flew behind Mayberry and called him on the Aviation Net VHF in a state of shock and disbelief. He disregarded all normal radio procedures, which typically involved using call signs and waiting

for replies. Wolfe flying behind Mayberry came on the radio, "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." They were still about 10 miles west of Camp Evans in the Annamite mountain range. Mayberry came on the radio, "I've got a little vibration. I might be losing some instruments. All these men (we picked up) are badly wounded, so I'm going to take it direct to the Charlie Med pad (187th Surgical Hospital) and we'll check it out there." Specialist 5, Larry Frazier, Wolf's crewchief, watched Mayberry's limping Huey, amazed it was still flying, relieved his bird wasn't in the same condition. Wolfe, awestruck by Mayberry's combat damage hadn't yet observed his own damage.

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At the Mobile Army Surgical Hospital, which was coincidentally located adjacent to the Phoenix Officers' Quarters, Mayberry brought the limping bird down to a careful landing and shut it down off to the side of the pad, out of the way of normal traffic. With the engine shut down, the caution lights shut off, and no apparent fire, he sat there shaken. Mission accomplished. People were already attending the wounded. Rayburn climbed out and walked around to help Mayberry out. Mayberry then realized he had been slightly wounded in the lower calf and had a bloody boot. Medics pestered Mayberry, offering aid for his wound. Mayberry patiently waved them on to his passengers.

After Rayburn helped Mayberry down to the ground, they hobbled around the aircraft. After walking around, they stood in stunned amazement at the battle damage, amazed it had brought them home. Rayburn grimly said, "Well, Ken, this one's derosing." They were physically fatigued and emotionally drained, yet they shared an incredible sense of being "alive," evolving from the dread and fear of the action, passing to the exhilaration afterwards. Rayburn had now endured the worst.

For Mayberry, it was the quiet acceptance of one more "hot PZ (pickup zone)". The Huey had effectively been destroyed by enemy bullets and mortar fragmentation. Those walking around the aircraft were in awe that it had made it back. It was now rendered junk, worthy of a grave in the South China Sea.

Mayberry and Rayburn ~~left~~ hovered the bird ~~sitting there~~. They walked ~~back to the "Phoenix Nest" with their crew,~~ back to the "Phoenix Nest" got a replacement aircraft and rejoined the extraction of troops below the mountaintop. Several hours later, Mayberry's adrenaline ebbed. That evening, he hobbled over to the flight surgeon's hootch and a medic removed the shrapnel from his calf. He wouldn't receive his "Purple Heart Medal" orders for 19 years. The soldiers he'd brought in were badly wounded. Mayberry had been "embarrassed" with his "minor" wound. He'd only wanted to get back in the saddle and complete his mission.

Unknown to the Phoenix crew, Mayberry's Huey was dismantled and shipped back to the States (DEROS'ed). When an army aviator said he DEROS'ed (Date Eligible for Return from Overseas Duty) his bird, those in the business understood an extremely difficult mission had taken it's toll on the aircraft, as well as the pilots and crew. Everyone knew there were limits to the amount of "good luck" one started the tour of duty with.

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While atop Ripcord, Specialist-5, Larry Frazier, the crewchief on Wolfe's Phoenix Huey, had helped six infantrymen scramble aboard under fire. Shortly after they lifted off to the relative safety of "only anti-aircraft fire" a rifleman motioned to Frazier. He handed Frazier a piece of paper from his chest pocket. Frazier read it and handed it to the pilots. It read, "Thanks for saving our asses."

It was a heartfelt thanks that Frazier would not forget. He was impressed that the GI had written it under artillery bombardment,

before being picked up on top of Ripcord. Even before being extracted, the GI knew the "birds" would get them out, no matter what! Americans depended totally upon each other, with confidence and faith, built upon many prior incidents, mostly with happy endings.

After the operations ended, Wolfe flew back to POL to refuel at Camp Evans. Frazier hopped down from his crewchief's well and walked forward to open Wolfe's door and move his sliding armored plate back. As he reached for the pilot's door handle, he was startled to see Wolfe's "airconditioning".

Frazier would joke about Wolfe's reaction later, "If he hadn't been sitting down, he might've collapsed." It had been close, very close to Wolfe's seat. The lower part of his pilot's door was blown away by rounds passing through the nose radio compartment, exiting under Wolfe's legs through the left pilot's door. They would also find several holes in the fuselage under the doorgunner's seat. Wolfe had been so distracted by Mayberry's damage he'd not observed his own. They had been very, very lucky!

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Warrant Officer Butch Doan was flying as a co-pilot in a Phoenix bird that couldn't land in sequence due to the clogged landing pads. His aircraft commander had elected to go around and join back up at the end of the formation. They would approach again and get their passengers amid explosions. Doan, however, pledged to himself never to go around a hot LZ, to never hesitate to pick up any American under fire, ever. That attitude would be gratefully acknowledged by others, with Doan receiving the Silver Star for another action, seven months later.

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Captain House, Phoenix Lead, still circling above Ripcord,

continued the extraction with the other lift companies. They were now circling in sight of Ripcord, fully aware of the deadly landing zones marked by mortar explosions. Captain House remained in the empty position of Command and Control, circling above Ripcord.

House called Ghostrider Lead, "Rider one six, (Phoenix) zero-six".

Ghostrider one-six, "Go!"

House had just observed his Phoenix birds getting shot to hell, while getting the job done. He was painfully aware of the troops still on Ripcord, waiting for extraction. House also knew he had to continue his role of impromptu Air Mission Commander. The sooner they finished, the better.

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

Ghostrider Lead, "Between Phong Dien, blueline by Jack" (southwest of Camp Evans Combat Base over the river).

House then gave instructions on the best approach direction and separation. Ghostrider Lead briefed the other birds in his flight, but all 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 gravity of the life and death mission, to extract those in danger of being overrun was understood by all. The radio conversations continued in tense staccato. The sparsity of words manifested grim determination of the pilots.

The essence of the "Phoenix Rule" was also a requisite for Ghostrider aircraft commanders. The "riders in the sky" would

continue the extraction. The Hueys would come, as long as there were Americans on the ground.

The pilots and crews saw what they'd have to go through and one by one made their approaches. The radio's became clogged with incessant reports: "Pretty white stuff on top", called a Ghostrider as he approached the upper LZ in a fury of mortar shells.

"It's CS (tear gas)", one calmly remarked.

Another asked, "Are we using CS?"

"No," responded a pilot, "They are."

Not only would the pilots fly through walls of 51 caliber anti-aircraft tracers to land amid exploding mortar bombs, they'd have to endure the posibility of tear gas, which might temporarily blind them!

Sitting on Ripcord, Ghostrider one-six called, "Mortar fire hitting all areas of pad, 5 to 10 meters of pad, all the way down the hill!"

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

Another, "On short final - going around!"

The Pathfinder atop Ripcord called, "Did a Slick just get shot down?"

Commanchero one-one (A Co./101 Avn. Btn), "No, a mortar hit him sitting on the ground."

Ghostrider Chalk seven, "Taking small arms fire 100 meters out of LZ. They're leading it onto the pad".

Lead called, "Abort, Chalk Seven!"

Chalk Seven, "No, I've aborted three times already, I'll just continue in!"

Ghostrider Lead, "I'll leave it up to you, go in if you can!"

Another bird called, "POL just went up, took a mortar, right beside me."

The Ghostriders, Lancers, Comancheros, and Kingsmen aircraft continued the procession, just as the Phoenix had. Many were taking hits, suffering wounded crewmen.

The smoke of fires, streams of green and gold enemy tracers, the sight of jets swooping low, laying napalm, with Cobras attacking lines of enemy troops, overwhelmed the senses. But the Hueys kept coming. When one was shot down, another dove down to retrieve the crewmembers.

As long as there were soldiers on Ripcord, they would come.

By noon, only 18 fighting men remained atop Ripcord from a force of nearly 400. Driven from their secure positions by 155mm ammunition exploding from flames, they ran to the other end of the firebase to form a security perimeter. They could see NVA soldiers, swarming up the mountainside like ants, breaching the lower perimeter wires, less than a hundred yards away. Most of the GI's were now carrying M-60 machineguns, spraying the enemy. Rambo would have been proud, the way they would move from one position to another, firing M-60 machineguns from the hip, on the move, but they simply wanted to get off the godforsaken mountain, alive. PFC Dainiel Biggs watched as a Huey approached the pad. Two mortar shells hit directly on the pad. The pilot continued his landing to the exact spot within three seconds. Biggs later told a Stars and Stripes correspondent, "He came right in, didn't turn away or nothin".

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Above Ripcord, another flight was concluding the mountaintop evacuation of troops. Warrant Officer-1, Jim Saunders was a Navy admiral's son, piloting a Huey in. On short final, they were shot out of the sky by 12.7 millimeter heavy machine guns and crashed just down hill of the lower landing pad. As they crashed through the lower barbed wire at the perimeter, there were North Vietnamese assaulting the fire base all around them.

They evacuated the burning wreckage, and immediately started climbing the steep hill to another pickup zone, where another aircraft could pick them up, assuming it didn't get shot down while trying. Saunders looked over his shoulder and saw North Vietnamese crawling through the concertina wire at the perimeter. They were less than twenty-five yards from him. They were so busy getting through the wire, they had not tried to shoot him yet. The crew immediately ran like hell up the steep hill, throwing off their chicken plate (armor) and flight helmets as they went, anything to lighten the load, to run as fast as they could away from death.

They made it up to the top of the next hill. On the other side of the hill was another group of North Vietnamese. Other Hueys were now circling with machine guns firing and waved them on to another pad at a slightly lower level. They began running down hill again between two more columns of North Vietnamese, who were tangled in the concertina (razor) wire so close that they didn't fire for fear of hitting other NVA! Saunders and his crew made it onto another bird and escaped in a hail of small arms fire.

A short while later, the last helicopter off also sustained major damage and heavy casualties. The troop withdrawals from the valley floor below would end within two hours. Thus ended the Firebase Ripcord saga. All the pilots had truly earned Distinguished Flying Crosses, as well as the crewchiefs and

doorgunners who received AirMedals with "V" for valor.

By early afternoon, all known living soldiers on Ripcord had been carried back to Camp Evans. Several shell shocked men, hiding in their bunkers would not run the gauntlet of mortars to the Huey's. They would even hide from the men searching the bunkers to assure everyone got out. They would die by flamethrowers or bayoneted in their bunkers that night. NVA swarmed their conquest until air strikes ended their celebration. Some American soldiers' remains would be recovered six weeks later.

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The last fighting men off the mountain were members of B Company, 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry. They'd also been the first ones out there in April.

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The day after Ripcord was evacuated, on the 24th, Colonel Harrison conducted a press conference at Camp Evans. Between 25 and 30 members of the media, mostly from Saigon news offices, showed up to hear the story of Ripcord. Some newsmen were obviously disappointed that it wasn't a major U.S. disaster. Unknown to the newsmen, Captain House's decisive action avoided major problems. Colonel Harrison's communication with House and others had been denied by enemy jamming and mechanical failures.

Colonel Harrison would extol the virtues of the Chinook pilots who'd worked the mountaintop under continuous fire, until one was shot down blocking the largest landing pad. They deserved the praise they'd received.

Virtually no mention was made of the Phoenix, Ghostriders, Lancers, Kingsmen, Comancheros, Black Widows and others who

flew through the walls of green tracer fire only to land among the greyish clouds of mortar bombs, snatching GI's from death.

The Chinooks flew from 6 am to 7:40 am. The Slicks flew from 6 am until after 2:00 pm. It had been a nightmare for all.

Military historians would say that it was one of the most complex and brilliantly executed air mobile operations ever conducted. The flight lead, assumed by Captain Randy House, Phoenix 1-6, was absolutely superb in maintaining a continuous stream of aircraft to the available locations to pick up troops. Captain House would extend his tour to command a rifle company, Company C, 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry Brigade, 101st Airborne Division. Apparently testing the accuracy of 51 calibre and AK-47s in a helicopter combat environment had not been enough.

Ripcord was not the first nor the last firebase to close under enemy contact. Ripcord was, however, the only U.S. firebase closed in a "retrograde" operation, without breaking contact with the enemy. There was continuous action days before the withdrawal, which continued up to the moment the last soldier was removed. The North Vietnamese General, Giap, who'd masterminded the attack on Ripcord, had also masterminded the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in May, 1954. At that battle, the defensive troops of the French totalled 14,000. Offensive troops surrounding them were 40,000. The attackers outnumbered the defenders 2.9 to 1.

During the siege of U.S. Marines at Khe Sanh, defensive troops were 6,600 with 20,000 offensive NVA troops attacking. The attacker/defender ratio was 3:1.

At Ripcord, it was an astounding 800 defensive troops versus a minimum of 8,000 offensive troops, or an attacker/defender ratio of 10:1. There were 406 casualties on Ripcord, including killed and wounded, out of 800 at the beginning of the operation. More

than 50% became casualties. The defender/casualty rate of 2.2% on Ripcord was actually higher than the French suffered at Dien Bien Phu.

Ripcord was a highly successful fighting withdrawal. It left the enemy in control of the jungle, but nothing else. Their offensive threat to Hue and the lowlands ended for two years. They were then pounded continuously with B-52's and tactical air. Helicopters, including gun ships, as well as lift ships were critical to Ripcord. The withdrawal could not have been made without the courage and daring of Huey pilots braving direct mortar fire, recoilless rifle fire and walls of 51 calibre anti-aircraft tracers.

Beginning with April 1, continuing through July 31, 1970, a reported 135 UH-1H Hueys took serious antiaircraft damage, rendering them unflyable. The vast majority of the Division pilots and crewmembers had survived combat damage to their aircraft.

10 AH-1G Cobras and 3 Loaches (OH-6A) also sustained serious hits.

Only two of the six Huey lift companies did not lose a crew killed in action. Even in the usually "safe" missions of the larger twin rotor Chinook, 38 sustained serious damage, with three crews killed.

The pilots among the companies of the 101st Airborne Division agreed that Ripcord was about as bad as it could get. Those still remaining in-country in March, 1971, would learn that Ripcord was just "a training mission".

The sum of all damage and casualties, in four months of the Ripcord operations, would be exceeded in one day, the coming March 5.

As if the horrors of "LZ Lolo" wouldn't satisfy the dogs of war,

the harrowing of that day would be repeated at "Pickup Zone Brown" on March 20, 1971.

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Sergeant Robert Granberry, who'd led the near fatal assault on Hill 1000, back on July 5, was lying in a hotel bed on his stomach, slowly sipping whiskey in Honolulu, Hawaii, on R and R leave. The whiskey eased the pain as his fiance changed the numerous bandages of his RPG wounds. Watching the TV news coverage of Ripcord, he had an omniscient understanding of the event, not conveyed in the evening news.

He still had five months to finish in his tour of duty, in the worst A.O.

AUGUST, 1970

Fort Rucker, Alabama

In the month of July, I completed the transition at Fort Rucker. The "58" was a dream to fly, but it had extremely sensitive controls for a new pilot. I had a very difficult time the first ten hours of student flight. I was beginning to wonder whether I'd master it at all. I only had 220 hours in flight school and was not an experienced helicopter pilot. I did, however, have experienced instructor pilots who were very patient, and by the time I completed the 25 hour course, I could at least take off, land safely and perform autorotations.

Captain Donaldson, my instructor pilot, and I were debriefing after I completed my check ride with a standardization instructor pilot. I asked, "Sir, do you have any last words of advice for me prior to my tour in Vietnam?" "Mr. Marshall," he carefully replied, "you can basically fly the machine now. But be careful as you build time. Don't over-extend yourself, don't do anything you don't plan, and most of all, don't get yourself killed." That seemed to be the "canned" response by most veteran instructor pilots, but I would learn they were "pearls of wisdom" rooted in combat experience. "Thank you, sir. That's excellent advice. I'll do my utmost to follow." I departed for leave at home, in Pensacola, Florida, on the way to South Vietnam.

Pensacola, Florida

On the evening of July 25, while home in Pensacola, Florida, with my wife and parents, we watched ABC TV news. The correspondent was standing on a pad at Camp Evans in I Corps. The 101st Airborne had an emergency evacuation of Firebase Ripcord underway. In the background, you could see smoke from a mountain top and a near continuous stream of Hueys going to and from. The crash of artillery firing in the background could

be heard. The 101st Airborne was obviously evacuating a Firebase in danger of being overrun. I proudly and confidently thought to myself, "Well, hang on men. I'll be there soon."

I was eagerly awaiting my involvement, to participate in history, having no earthly idea what changes that experience would entail. I believed that training and dedication would allow me to control fear. I'd been led to believe, I could control my fate. Alcolyte warriors believed it.

Combat veterans, I would learn, knew better. They were aware of the horrifying circumstances and actions that identify heroes, and unfairly claim lives, even those not supposed to die!

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On August 2, I was enjoying my final two weeks leave prior to departing for Vietnam. As I began reading the Army Times and looking through past issues, I realized my flight class had many members who had been in-country since the first of May. Word had already come that George Berry was killed on May 23rd, in-country only three weeks. He was with the 158th Aviation Battalion of the 101st Airborne Division. He was shot and killed while flying as a co-pilot at Firebase O'Reilley.

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Dan Dewey died on June 5th. He was hit by 12.7 millimeter machine gun fire in an OH6A observation helicopter. Charles Richardson was killed on June 5th also. Flying with Bravo Company, 2nd of the 17th Cavalry, 101st Airborne. He had been shot and killed by small arms fire.

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On July 15th, Gene Mizer, a co-pilot in a UH1C Gunship, was killed in what was reported as an aircraft accident. They were

flying low-level at high speed up a steep ravine, lost power, rolled over and exploded. It sounded suspiciously as if they had been hit by anti aircraft fire, but there was no verification, no witnesses other than at a long distance, and nothing left of the wreckage. The Army had a policy, that without witnesses or wreckage obviously from antiaircraft fire, it would be chalked up as an "accident" rather than a combat loss.

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On July 18th, 1970, Mike Dickus was the left seat observer during an OH-6A flight orientation to a Scout Platoon. His aircraft took intense ground fire, crashed and burned. He died of burns in Japan.

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Also on July 18th, Jim Dunnavant's gunship crashed west of Tam Ky. He was with the 176th Aviation Company. He was a helicopter air casualty by ground fire.

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Ed Crouse died on July 20, 1970. He was shot while riding as a gunner observer on a Loach (OH-6A) while training for aircraft commander of an OH6 helicopter.

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I hadn't even left the country yet and the killing of my fellow flight school classmates had started. With the knowledge of their losses, I had taken the first step toward an awareness of the grim reality of war, and becoming a "veteran". The war was now taking on a personal dimension I had not anticipated. North Vietnamese were the enemy, but death was the ultimate opponent. The sacrifice of classmates' lives became known losses of friends, not just statistics. I was slowly becoming aware of my own

mortality and the lethal environment I'd volunteered for.

WORLD MAP

On August 18th I boarded a National Airlines jet to New Jersey. I out-processed with another warrant officer, Chris Rummel, a Cobra pilot, also from Pensacola. On August 20th we landed in Anchorage, Alaska. It was a beautiful modern airport in absolutely gorgeous, clear, cold weather.

The morning of August 22nd we landed at Bien Hoa Airfield near Saigon. We had enjoyed a fairly comfortable but long flight across the Pacific. The doors opened and we stepped off the plane into the most oppressive heat and humidity I had ever experienced. Worse even than my hometown, Pensacola, Florida, on a hot, humid July day. As our eyes became accustomed to the bright sunshine, we broke out in sweat.

As I walked over to get my bags, I saw a former classmate sitting with other warrant officers off to the side in their Nomex flight suits, obviously enjoying the hell out of watching "Newbies" come in-country. I looked over recognizing Bob Martin who said laughing, "I'll be damned, Marshall. I've been here nearly four months and you're just getting here. Short! Where the hell have you been?" I explained to him I'd been on a medical hold and then had a transition in a Jet Ranger. He said, "Well, you'll enjoy flying them. Most of them are VIP birds around here. But, let me tell you, keep your chicken plate on. We just had a 58 pilot die flying over Saigon from an AK round in the chest." That got my attention. I asked him how it was going and he said, "Things are not so bad in the south. It is worse along the border areas. The 101st Airborne has really had its ass kicked up at Firebase Ripcord. There is talk of sending other aviation units up there to help support, but it hasn't happened so far." He asked me where I was going and I didn't know. We shook hands and I left for the 90th Replacement Detachment at Long Bihn Army Depot.

We rode in an Army school bus with chain link fence over the outside of the glass windows, as if it were some sort of protection. I had a funny feeling once I got off the bus at the

Replacement unit at Long Binh. I figured I was about 11,500 miles from Pensacola, and eleven hours ahead during the next day. I had hoped of being immediately assigned to a unit and getting shipped out right away.

I would spend the next two days filling out necessary paperwork and go through an initial briefing with the personnel officer. He told me that he expected me to be assigned to the 4th Infantry Division, which was getting newly arrived OH58's. That was my primary reason for being assigned there, due to the new inventory of the aircraft and few readily trained pilots.

That afternoon, I was sipping a beer in the Officers Club when sirens announced a rocket attack at Long Bihn, but it was 10 miles away. I didn't even hear the explosions.

On August 23rd I was formally assigned to the 1st Brigade Headquarters in the Headquarters Company of the 4th Infantry Division. I was told I would be the brigade aviation communications officer until my aircraft arrived sometime during mid or late September.

By Monday, August 24, I was tired of sitting on my can with nothing to do. Chris Rummel had left this morning to fly Cobras in the Delta. I was supposed to leave today for An Khe, but the Air Force C-130 had maintenance trouble. I was told I won't get there before the 26th of August. Typical Army situation. Hurry up like hell to get there, and then hurry up and wait, and wait, and wait.

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The next day, August 25th, Barry Godfrey, another classmate, died during a high-speed, low-level turn. His main rotor blades hit the ground at Binh Hoa Airfield, not far from where I was sitting on my can. He died during an orientation and demonstration flight. Army flying was a high-risk endeavor.

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By Tuesday afternoon, the waiting seemed interminable! I was still waiting at the 90th Replacement Detachment. The fifth day of waiting and I was pissed off at the Air Force. There were thirty officers, mostly majors and above, waiting to go to An Khe.

I spent a lot of time looking around the PX and gift shop. I bought my brother a carved, wooden elephant for his birthday. It only cost $4.00 but was quite an attractive piece of wood carving. Eighteen years later, I'd see how they were made in a movie scene of "Apocalypse Now".

Listening to the other officers talk, all of whom are second or third tour veterans, it became clear that I did not want to go to the 101st Airborne, north of Da Nang or up near the DMZ. It was a consensus of their opinions that things had not really improved much in I Corps since the summer of 1968 when the siege of Marines at Khe Sanh was ended by the 1st Air Cavalry Division.

I got my first introduction to a Vietnamese hootch maid during my time at the 90th Replacement. I shared quarters with three other officers. We had an older Vietnamese woman who may have been only 30 or 40 years old but looked 70 or 80. She was about five feet, two inches tall and weighed at least 60 pounds, had very dark, wrinkled skin and at least half of her teeth missing. The rest were stained black by chewing beetlenut, the Vietnamese equivalent of chewing tobacco. She walked by shuffling her feet. The other Officers laughed at my revulsion.

I called on Major Wolfe, my assignment officer and asked him to re-assign me to the local area. He said, "Mr. Marshall, you are trained and assigned to fly an OH58. That is what you went voluntary indefinite for. Just sit tight and let the Army take care of things." The "green machine" was working whether I liked it

or not.

I sat around the Officer's Club that afternoon and met another warrant officer who had flown OH58's up north. His unit had "stood down", been deactivated, and the colors shipped stateside. He had several months left in-country and had the experience to enjoy time away from combat. I asked him if they were putting mini-guns on the OH 58's. He said the initial experience with mini-guns was so unfavorable that the birds were not coming back (getting shot down). In an effort to make the pilots more cautious and improve safety, they removed the mini-guns and had a greatly reduced casualty ratio with the "58." We talked about the 101st activity going on at Firebase O'Reilley now. It seems that after Ripcord, O'Reilley, an ARVN firebase, was the next to fall. Things were not going well in I-Corps. I spent the afternoon playing the slot machines, which were managed by the NCO Association. I got so bored, I listened to country music for the first time in my life. Late that evening, the word came, pack up for an early morning departure.

On August 28, at 4:30 am, I packed up my duffle bag and boarded a school bus for the Air Force flight line. We were dropped off beside a large, four engine turboprop transport, a C-130 Hercules. Our bags were secured in cargo netting on the rear ramp and we assumed our seats in the "tactical" web frames along the windowless fuselage. In a roar of jet engines, we departed for An Khe.

A little more than an hour later the C130 made a steep approach into a very small airfield at An Khe, which was just outside Camp Radcliffe. After a rapid descent from approximately 10,000 feet where the air was cool and dry, we were again hit by the wave of heat and humidity. There was the smell of jet fuel, the noise of helicopter operations, and outgoing artillery fire. The noises were quickly overcome by the smell of burning feces in a mixture of gasoline and diesel fuel. My senses were staggered as I looked up at nearby Hong Kong Mountain with a sixth sense

awareness, someone was watching, who'd like to kill me.

MAP

PART ONE

HUMMINGBIRD SEVEN

AN KHE

The morning of August 28, 1970, I arrived at the airfield just outside An Khe. This was the central mountain plains headquarters area for II Corps and home of the 4th Infantry Division, which was a standard Army Infantry Division with helicopter air mobile assets, assigned to give it mobility. It was, however, not an airmobile unit like the 101st Airborne Division or 1st Air Cavalry Division. Helicopter companies were assigned (attached) to it indefinitely, but were not "organic" units, part of the 4th Infantry Division.

An Khe was situated on a broad mountain plain about 1,000 feet above sea level, mid-way between Qui Nhon on the coast of the South China Sea to the east and Pleiku at the Cambodian border to the west. I was assigned to the bachelor officer quarters barracks at the Replacement unit. I was informed I would have four days of indoctrination and acclimatization. The enlisted men had only been through basic training and advanced individual training that covered less than four months. As a warrant officer candidate, I had been through basic infantry training plus nine months of flight school and ground school. It had been a very long year, not to mention four weeks of training in the OH58 afterwards.

Four days of "classes and acclimatization" sounded like a waste

of time. I was fresh from the states, with a very positive attitude and a determination to do my very best as a warrant officer and helicopter pilot. I was like a race horse, chomping at the bit, to get going with my flying and win the war.

The Army, however, had different plans. I had already been in-country since the 22nd of August. I was told I had four days of indoctrination and two days of intelligence briefings. Then, I would serve as a communications officer in a bunker 25 feet below ground until my OH58 arrived sometime in late September. That would mean that I would have almost one month in-country time before even starting flying. I thought it was absurd that I wasn't flying the next day.

On Saturday morning, August 29, I began my aviation briefing with the Division Aviation Officer, Captain Hunter at Division Headquarters. He was well organized and had the entire area of operations mapped with major areas of activity and incidences marked. He looked at me as I came in the door. "Mr. Marshall, a newbie to fly jet rangers."

"Yes, sir."

He said, "I bet you're full of piss and vinegar, anxious to get going. You want to go out and hop in one and start flying tomorrow, right?"

"Yes, sir. I'm ready."

"Well, you're going to find the Army has different plans and you'll be doing it the Army way." He gave me volumes of information to read regarding the area operations, nature of the operations underway, and precautions to take in day to day operations. After the initial briefing, the realities of the "green machine" were sinking in. I was sent away with reading instructions and orders to return that afternoon.

Later that day in the afternoon session, he looked at me and asked, "You want to end this tour alive?" "I fully intend to." He said, "Well, you'd better realize right now that you'll have to make decisions that may not be popular with those you're working for. The 4th Infantry Division is not "air-mobile". We are, however, operating in an air-mobile support capacity. The men and officers of this division are not as well trained in helicopter operations and tactics as designated air-mobile units. They will ask you to do things, thinking you can do anything. You have to make the decision whether or not to attempt something, no matter what is asked. It is your responsibility to keep the aircraft safe and deliver its occupants safely. I'm telling you.....and you'd better remember it,.....believe it and commit it to your heart and mind, or you won't make it out of here alive. The first basic rule is when flying with brigade or battalion, you will not do any hovering reconnaissance or slow, low-level flying. The NVA are out there. They will not let you see them until they want to and they will shoot you out of the sky. It may be months before you see the first live NVA soldier out there, or it may be the first day. Hovering in a single ship capacity will simply guarantee you being shot down. The last Loach we had shot down was four months ago with a new guy like you, who was talked into doing low-level reconnaissance. He got low and slow, and they shot him out of the sky. They captured him, an artillery captain and door gunner alive, tied their hands, physically beat them near death and then shot them each in the head with a single bullet execution. We recovered the aircraft. We recovered the bodies. Luckily for their families, they won't be listed "missing in action." With incidents like this, it's pretty clear the NVA aren't interested in Prisoners of War. If the pilot obeyed our rules, it would have never happened.

Secondly, ...never commence any activity without knowing your personal capability of accomplishing it, safely. Your aggressive nature and sense of independence will be the two factors that will cause you the greatest risk and ultimate harm. Remember that." I thought to myself, "Yeah, yeah, let's get on with the program

and fight the war." "Last," he said, "obey the rules of engagement." Captain Hunter then began talking about the My Lai incident, which had only been a year and a half earlier with the trial still pending. It was then the rules of engagement were handed to me. I was also given several pages of security forms to acknowledge security levels, security codes, communication procedures, then I signed the rules of engagement statement.

I walked back to the replacement unit bachelor officer's quarters and began to meet the other officers coming in-country. I was the only warrant officer in the group. The rest were lieutenants who were scheduled to replace lieutenants in infantry field units and support units. I was also the only aviator in the group. On the following day, Tuesday, I got my orders. I was assigned to the 1st Brigade, Headquarter's Company, 4th Infantry Division. I was designated a command and control pilot carrying colonels, lieutenant colonels, majors and captains around "at altitude". I was told that meant no gunships or scout missions unless I got bored and asked for one with another unit. I was getting a brand-new jet ranger, which would be brought in from Saigon sometime in the next two to three weeks. I was elated!

Well, war is hell. I woke up on Sunday morning after they stopped serving breakfast and had a Budweiser. It didn't particularly taste good either. All beer here is 3.2. alcohol. The Army really doesn't consider it an alcoholic beverage. I still drank a Pepsi or RC when available. Cokes are nowhere to be seen.

When I moved into my unit, I'd share a room with one other man. Most rooms had a small refrigerator/ice chest to keep drinks cold. We were rationed three cases of beer, four bottles of wine, and three-fifths of liquor per month. It sounded like a reasonable amount. I didn't think I could drink that much in a month if I had to, but that too would change.

I'd been impressed by the aviators' living conditions. They had

it better than anyone else. Well, everything considered, I thought it would be an interesting, fairly nice year here. I started out with the most desirable of all aviation jobs and my very own, brand new jet ranger. I still couldn't believe it.

The hardest thing to remember is that a war is going on here. I'm told action comes here in spurts. I'm told you get hit and then for three or four more months, nothing. Complacency is a big problem. Needless to say, I didn't intend to be complacent.

I bought a Yashica GT-35, Electronic Eye, camera that was completely automatic. I loved it. David Anderson had impressed upon me the importance of a good camera, always loaded, for the "combat tourist." I'm passing the time fiddling with my radio and camera. I have a seven second delay and tripod for the camera that enables me to take pictures of myself.

When I was in the Replacement Unit at An Khe, I was having a pretty good time. I was the only warrant officer and there were a bunch of lieutenants and captains. Every time a Loach or "58" flew over they ask me what it was and if that's what I'd fly. They were always trying to pose hypothetical tactical situations wondering what a pilot would do. Needless to say, I've been feeling pretty important around here. It was also obvious, they were not well trained or experienced regarding helicopters.

That night, I ate dinner with the division safety officer and a bunch of pilots in his unit. Lieutenant Alexander, my stick buddy OH58 class, was there. Kind of nice to see someone I knew. We both felt like old buddies since we're both new guys. Spent part of today in the mole hole, the underground communications center; it was really interesting. All the units in the field maintain communications with headquarters, where all the decisions regarding troop movements and supplies were made.

On the afternoon of August 30, 1970, I completed my intelligence