U.S. Air Power, Viet Troops Hit Ripcord Area

By SPEC. 4 SETH LIPSKY
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CAMP EAGLE, Vietnam—Vietnamese Army ground troops, U.S. helicopter gunships and Air Force jets for the second day in a row laced into heavily entrenched NVA troops Monday along a rugged ridge less than six miles north of Fire Support Base Ripcord, which U.S. troops abandoned July 23, informed sources here said.

ARVN 1st Inf. Div. reinforcements were reported late Monday to be battling an estimated NVA company that was hitting back with mortar and automatic weapons fire.

The exact location, sources said, has no name. It is "just a ridge west of O'Reilly," a fire support base carved into the edge of another ridge about 18 miles from the Laotian border and eight miles north of the upper A Shau Valley.

The pitched battle broke early Sunday morning, sources reported, after helicopter scouts from the 101st Airborne Div. spotted dozens and then an estimated 700 to 800 NVA troops in a patchwork of jungles and clearings about a mile west of O'Reilly.

From then on heavy air power blasted the area, they said, as ARVN troops fought from the ground.

Detailed reports of enemy and Allied casualties were not available late Monday, but sources reported at least 20 enemy had been shot or bombed from the air, and they speculated that a "significant" additional number had been killed by concerted artillery and bomb strikes.

Helicopter pilots first spotted the enemy at 9:15 a.m. Sunday, sources said. Within hours and for the next two days, they said, A1 Skyraiders, F100s, F4 Phantoms and A37s were screaming through enemy automatic and antiaircraft fire that blazed from a series of long, steep, rugged ridges.

The area, one officer who had flown over it said, looked like the Smoky Mountains in North Carolina, but the ridges were steeper and more heavily vegetated.

The Last Few Hours at FSB Ripcord

We Pray, Then Hit the Ground and Pray!

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FIRE SUPPORT BASE RIPCORD, Vietnam—"You just hold on and hope for the best. Everybody thinks the only thing you left behind was a soldier ordered out."

That's the way life was at Fire Support Base Ripcord during the last few weeks, according to a soldier who lived there. The soldier, part of the last unit ordered out of the base, said life was filled with moments of wonder about when the next mortar round would come, when the next helicopter would be hit by enemy fire, or when the next soldier would be carry wounded out to be put on a litter.

The soldiers were tight because everybody kept their cool and kept themselves, said one soldier, "Everybody knew what to do and they did it."

Especially if a group started to form, "You ran," said one GI.

"The worst thing was the mortars," said a soldier who was there. "It was just luck who was going to get it," added another. "It don't bug you if you get shot at, but with mortars, there's nothing you can do about it."

"With mortars it's a gamble, and you just have to take it," said another.

The men said they could see the local air strikes going on in the triple canopy jungles on the mountains near Ripcord. "They would be very within ten meters," said a soldier. "You could see them dropping napalm."

The bombers started fires late in the morning. The men said every time a helicopter came in or a group started to gather, the mortar rounds came.

Just before noon only 18 men were left at Ripcord. One who was there said they waited for the last lift near some ammunition. The fire got too close.

"The 155 (mm. ammunition) was hot, and I was afraid of it cooking off," he said. "We ran up to the pad where the Chinooks had been landing, but a mortar hit the chopper that had crashed, and fuel started to burn, so we ran to the other end and set up security. Just about everybody had machine guns then."

"You couldn't see much because by that time everything was on fire except where we were," he said. "We set up our security and tried to keep away from the fire."

After the helicopters came in, the men boarded and took off. Some said they never saw the enemy, only saw the fire pouring into the camp.

But one man said just as he climbed aboard the chopper and it lifted off he saw about 30 to 40 Reds within 300 meters of the abandoned perimeter defenses. "It looked like ants coming up for a sugar cube," he said.

"If we hadn't gotten out, they would have overrun us," said one man.

But another quickly disagreed. "We went in there to show the Reds we could do it any time we choose to," he said. "There just isn't anything up there to stay for."