



Rendezvous at Ripcord

For 23 days in July 1970, FSB Ripcord, defended by elements of the famed 101st Airborne Division, came under siege by a full NVA division. Yet it barely made the news at home, even though it was the last major U.S. battle fought in Vietnam.

by Charles Hawkins

Outside Arlington National Cemetery stands the 101st Airborne Division Memorial, its granite column topped with a bronze screaming eagle, the division symbol. Around its base are granite slabs inscribed with the place names of notable division actions in WWII, Vietnam and the Persian Gulf—St. Marie-du-Mont, Carentan, Eindhoven, Bastogne, Hue, Dak To, Dong Ap Bia, Ripcord.

Ripcord. The name of this desolate Vietnamese mountain-top fire support base is virtually unknown except for a lucky few who survived its cauldron of fire in 1970. It is a story worth telling.

In 1970, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) was still a potent force in I Corps. When the dry season began, the 101st and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) 1st Infantry Division started pushing west and north into the Nam Hoa Mountains beyond Hue. The NVA pushed back.

Initially, Ripcord was to provide support for an allied thrust into the A Shau Valley. Enemy action escalated at places such as FSBs Granite and Henderson (see *VFW* magazine, August 2010 issue), however, and the A Shau plan was abandoned. American efforts then focused on defense and interdiction. The strategic initiative passed to the enemy, and Ripcord became the NVA's primary objective.

'Cheeseburger Hill'

Ripcord is the second highest mountain of the Coc Muen massif, a watershed and infiltration crossroads that dominates the northeastern A Shau. That March, the mission to seize the



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Fire Support Base Ripcord was situated atop a high mountain overlooking the A Shau Valley. It was designed to provide support for a new allied thrust, but was besieged for nearly a month in July 1970.

mountain peak and build a firebase was given to Lt. Col. Andre Lucas' 2nd Bn., 506th Inf.—the “Best of the Currahees.”

On March 12, an “exploratory insertion” by Alpha Company met withering fire as it tried to land. UH-1 Hueys skittered across the rocky mountaintop, discharging their human cargo without touching down. By late afternoon, it was clear that defenses could not be established. So Capt. Albert Burkhart moved his men east to a narrow wooded ridge that offered a chance to dig in. 2nd Lt. Dudley Davis



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155mm howitzers of A Battery, 2nd Battalion, 11th Artillery, 101st Airborne Division, in action on Fire Support Base Ripcord in July 1970. On the 18th, howitzers were shattered, spewing hot shells across the hill.

Both days, the assaults gained ground, isolated and defeated enemy in underground bunkers, only to be beaten back. Fighting was brutal and close-in.

became the first man killed trying to seize and hold Ripcord.

After a series of grim firefights, it was Bravo Company's turn, and it went in hot on April 1. Fighting was vicious in what came to be known as the April Fool's Day assault. B Company, too, pulled off Ripcord.

Lucas then committed his entire battalion to combat operations around the 927-meter-high mountain. On April 10, Charlie Company made a pre-dawn ground assault up the southern slope of Ripcord. Other than a preparatory artillery barrage, not a shot was fired. The North Vietnamese had ceded the first phase of the battle.

As the remainder of the battalion sought the enemy, C Company began building defenseworks that earned Ripcord the reputation as a premier fire-

base. Some of the soldiers called it "Cheeseburger Hill," a wry reference to the division action at Dong Ap Bia (Hamburger Hill) the year before, and the larger battle many expected was coming.

The Siege

At 7:02 a.m. on July 1, a salvo of enemy mortar rounds crashed harmlessly into Ripcord's perimeter. Capt. Dave Rich's B Btry., 2nd Bn., 319th Artillery, and its 105mm howitzers quickly responded with counterbattery fire. This inauspicious event heralded the beginning of a 23-day siege.

That night on Hill 902, three miles south of Ripcord, two platoons of C Company were struck by a large force of NVA sappers and infantry. Spec. 4 Gary Steele remembers: "They started with satchel charges. I don't know how

many, but they lit the night like the 4th of July back home." Steele, who was wounded five times, and his fellow Currahees didn't give up.

"Those of us who were left," Steele recalled, "took the fight over, because now it was our turn." The eight men killed included Capt. Thomas Hewett, the commanding officer, and Pfc. Steve Harber was missing. It was a victory of sorts, but C Company was pulled off Hill 902 later in the day, and the key terrain was never reoccupied.

That day, the standoff attack by fire resumed. U.S. forces responded with a mix of artillery fire, Cobra gunship attacks and thundering air strikes by fighter jets. Soon the daily bomb tonnage doubled from five tons a day to 10, and then tripled to 30 tons. Many of the tenacious NVA chose to die in place.

With Hill 902 ceded to the enemy, Lucas and his boss, 3rd Brigade commander Col. Benjamin Harrison, turned their attention to the two remaining heights by Ripcord, Hill 1000, less than a mile west, and Hill 805, more than a mile southeast.

On July 6, Recon Team Bravo, led by Sgt. Robert Granberry, reported sounds of enemy activity on top of Hill 1000. The six-man team was then ordered to attack the enemy position, which it did, resulting in the loss of the entire team to wounding by enemy rocket propelled grenades (RPG) and small-arms fire. Delta Company, commanded by Capt. Rembert Rollison, was sent to their aid.

Next day, D Company assaulted Hill 1000, and again on July 8, supported by a platoon-sized C Company. Both days, the assaults gained ground, isolated and defeated enemy in underground bunkers, only to be beaten back. An understrength platoon of C Company, led by 1st Lt. Jim Campbell, seized one of two knolls on Hill 1000 on July 8, but was recalled by Lucas in the late afternoon.

Fighting was brutal and close-in. Lucas even flew overhead in an observation helicopter, dropping cases of fragmentation and smoke grenades to his beleaguered Currahees, and adjusting fire. But the NVA fortifications were too numerous, too well-defended. Rollison's company strength fell to 40 men; the remnants of C and D companies were withdrawn.

Ripcord continued to take a daily

Bravery Abundant

pounding by enemy rockets, mortars and recoilless rifle fire. Capt. Ben Peters' B Company, now defending the perimeter, and Rich's artillerymen and those of A Btry., 2nd Bn., 11th Arty, bore the brunt of these attacks. Helicopters began to receive hits regularly. Some crashed. Others staggered over the jungle and back to the rear base at Camp Evans.

On July 10, A Company combat-assaulted from FSB O'Reilly to relieve pressure against Ripcord. Joining Alpha on the 12th in a two-pronged ground assault on Hill 805 was D Co., 2nd Bn., 501st Inf. (Delta Raiders), commanded by Capt. Christopher Straub and now under operational control of the 2/506th. After some minor skirmishes, Hill 805 was seized by Alpha and Delta. They dug in, expecting the worst.

At 10:30 that night, four enemy columns, led by black-painted sappers, slammed into the defenders on Hill 805. The Americans slammed back. The enemy was stopped in his tracks by U.S. artillery and mortar fire, shredded in a murderous crossfire of rifles, machine guns and grenade launchers, and turned away. Blood smeared the approaches to Hill 805, but it was NVA blood, not American.

Battered, but undeterred, the NVA continued their costly assaults against Hill 805 for four more nights. Delta Raiders stayed to defend the key hilltop, relieving some of the pressure on Ripcord and buying valuable time for its defenders. "It was costly," recalled Sgt. Ray Blackman, "but many of our wounded refused evacuation, preferring to stay to fight alongside their friends." When they were finally withdrawn on July 17, Straub's company strength had been cut in half.

Meanwhile, the remainder of 2nd Bn., 501st Inf. (Geronimos), commanded by Lt. Col. Otis Livingston, air-assaulted near Hill 1000. Leading with his battalion scouts and following with A, B and C companies in echelon, Livingston led his battalion up the backside of this NVA-infested stronghold.

Four times Livingston's battalion attacked uphill against fierce opposition, and four times it was turned back by superior numbers of enemy troops.

Each time the Geronimos retaliated with fighter-bomber air strikes and Co-

Besides the Medal of Honor awarded to Lt. Col. Andre C. Lucas, which as Col. Benjamin L. Harrison, 3rd Brigade commander, said was meant to be a "tribute to all the soldiers involved in Ripcord, a way to let the world know that something big and important had happened there," battlefield courage at Ripcord was recognized by about 500 citations. The late Keith Nolan described many of these actions in his superb 2000 book, *Ripcord: Screaming Eagles Under Siege—Vietnam, 1970*.

Two Distinguished Service Crosses (DSC) were earned, by Capt. David F. Rich and Sgt. John W. Kreckel. Rich, commanding officer of B Btry., 2nd Bn., 319th FA, was wounded seven times in the battle, finally being evacuated. He had done four years in Vietnam by then and had already received the Silver Star. Kreckel earned his DSC posthumously for putting himself directly in the line of fire, saving the life of a fellow GI.

At least 43 Silver Stars recognized the heroism of GIs at Ripcord. A few earned two Silver Stars. Infantrymen, artillerymen and engineers were among the recipients. Virtually every helicopter pilot involved in the evacuation got a Distinguished Flying Cross; every crew chief and door gunner earned the Air Medal for valor.

Unit performance was recognized, too. The Valorous Unit Award went to the 101st Aviation Group. Others no doubt deserved it.

Officers rated their men highly. 1st Lt. James H. Campbell said of the draftee infantrymen, "In a firefight, they were hellacious soldiers." Capt. Christopher C. Straub recalled, "They fought like tigers and showed how much they cared for each other." 2nd Lt. Sheldon C. Wintermute recounted: "They did an absolutely fantastic job. For all the stuff you read about bad morale in Vietnam, quite frankly, I never saw it."

As Nolan found, "There were moments of stunning courage," and "the men who did their best at Ripcord won a personal victory inside a larger defeat."



Lt. Col.
Andre C. Lucas

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bra rocket attacks. But it was no use. On the 17th, Livingston and his exhausted soldiers were withdrawn. Taking the place of the Geronimos was a single rifle company from the 1st Bn., 506th Inf.—D Company, commanded by Capt. Don Workman.

Fighting Withdrawal

On July 18, disaster struck. A Chinook helicopter, ferrying a load of fuel to the firebase, was shot down and crashed onto the ammo dump. Burning fuel flowed into the bunkered facility. What the enemy could not achieve by ground attack was accomplished in seconds by a half-inch-sized bullet. The ammo dump exploded. Dave Rich's battery of howitzers was shattered; hot shells flew across the hill, spreading more destruction. The death knell for Ripcord had been sounded.

Two days later, Workman and D/1/506th air-assaulted east of Hill 805 to try to work up its reverse slope. It barely got off the landing zone before

enemy mortars found the range. For two days, Workman and his men held on grimly in the face of nearly overwhelming odds. Rollison brought his company again to the rescue, followed by Capt. Ken Lamb and C Company. The three companies made a fighting withdrawal, but it cost the lives of Workman and a dozen of his men.

Meanwhile, from July 14 to 19, A Company penetrated enemy territory along a valley southeast of Ripcord. Contact was frequent, but one-sided, as A Company bloodied the enemy in a series of short, sharp firefights.

On the 20th, it discovered and tapped an NVA telephone wire. The wire tap revealed the presence of a full NVA division surrounding Ripcord, not the one or two regiments that had been suspected. This firsthand battlefield intelligence helped the acting division commander, Brig. Gen. Sidney Berry, make the difficult decision to withdraw from the Ripcord area of operations (AO).

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In place of U.S. troops on the ground, Berry would employ massive firepower of artillery and air strikes against known enemy locations. Bombs dropped daily in the AO had reached 50 tons, but would triple in the next three days. Even so, tough fighting lay ahead.

A Company's luck ran out July 22. Heading out of the valley for extraction, it ran headlong into an NVA battalion. "For a week," recalled Spec. 4 Jody Smith, "we owned that valley." But no longer.

Alpha's daytime engagement was the longest and most costly of the siege. The NVA commander bet that he could overwhelm the Americans before they could bring their awesome firepower to bear. It was a bad bet, but not by much.

When it was over, when the last 250-pound bomb and napalm canister had been dropped, some on top of Alpha's position, when the last RPG had spent its explosive energy, the Currahees remained in control of their patch of jungle. The cost was high. More than 90% of Alpha's troops were either dead or wounded. The NVA left 64 dead behind.

1st Lt. Fred H. Edwards of B Co., 326th Eng. Bn., graphically described Ripcord: "Mortar rounds had exploded on virtually every square foot of the hill, charring it to a gray-black heap. It looked evil, malevolent. When the helicopter landed, it was like being dropped into an absolute hellhole."

The Extraction

On July 23, A Company clung to its hard-won real estate and B Company secured Ripcord. Airlifts had been planned to extract the remainder of Lucas' Currahees in the face of stiff enemy resistance. Ripcord was first. At the same time, Rollison had gone again to assist a battered friend, and was helping A Company. They would leave last.

Throughout the day, jets roared overhead, dropping 154 tons of bombs from 84 sorties. Helicopters slipped around hills and hovered into Ripcord to pluck their precious cargo away from enemy shellfire. Ben Harrison called it the "greatest feat of airmanship in modern warfare."

Finally, at 1:35 p.m., the last Huey

climbed out of the valley southeast of Ripcord and sped toward Camp Evans. The siege was ended; the withdrawal complete. And the final U.S. tally was heavy: 74 KIA and 400 WIA.

Not surprisingly, 85% of the KIA in the battle for Ripcord were grunts. The 2nd Bn., 506th Inf., sustained 45 KIA while 2nd Bn., 501st Inf., counted 18 KIA. Of the five artillerymen killed, four belonged to A Btry., 2nd Bn., 11th FA.

Capt. Randolph House, commander of C Co., 158th Avn. Bn.—one of a number of assault helicopter companies involved in the battle—took control of air operations and the evacuation of the fire base. Disregarding enemy ground fire, he and his airmen plucked troopers off the firebase and then led the way into Alpha and Delta Company's location in the valley southeast of Ripcord.

It was a near-run thing, but House's airmen pulled off the extraction of the last of the 2/506 defenders under the guns of enemy soldiers dug in on surrounding ridge lines.

There was a final penalty. Lucas and his operations officer, Maj. Kenneth Tanner, were consumed by a barrage of 120mm mortar fire that struck Ripcord on July 23. Tanner was killed outright and Lucas was mortally wounded. For his heroism during the siege, Lucas was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Ripcord wasn't a textbook battle; most combat operations aren't. But the evacuation from Ripcord was a successful withdrawal under fire, and the largest such airmobile operation of its kind in history. The NVA wanted a fight and the 101st obliged. A week afterward, the Currahees returned to the Nam Hoa Mountains. This time there were few enemy left to contest them. ✪

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