

## **Fire-Base Ripcord: The Death of Innocence**

By: James King

After S.E.R.T.s training (Screaming Eagles Replacement Training), Mac and I had hoped to get some down time. We had met during S.E.R.T.s and naturally buddied up after spending 7 days, sharing a foxhole every night and spending time together during classes and training during the day.

But as we tried to kick back and rest up after returning to our parent unit, the first sergeant of our platoon came into our tent and yelled, "Everybody grab yer shit and ruck up. The old man of 3<sup>rd</sup> brigade, Colonel Harrison has op-conned 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon of the O-deuce to his command (the term op-conned meant operational control). You're go'n to Ripcord."

Mac and I eventually picked up on the fact that we were joining an operation already in progress. That operation was code-named "Texas Star". It's objective, like all operations in that sector of I-Corp, was search and destroy. It began the 1<sup>st</sup> of April, 1970, and officially ended the 5<sup>th</sup> of September of the same year. This operation involved several units of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division which we were a part of. Although Mac and I were in different training cadres at Fort Sherman in Panama, we both did our Advanced Infantry training there which was "Jungle Training". I would eventually come in handy while we were on Fire-Base Ripcord.

In 1968 and '69, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne went up against 324<sup>th</sup> and 304<sup>th</sup> N.V.A. (North Vietnam Army), the 6<sup>th</sup> N.V.A. regiment, the 803<sup>rd</sup> regiment and the 29<sup>th</sup> regiment. That was a lot of enemy personnel imbedded and dug in throughout the A Shau Valley where Ripcord was located. For two guys who had yet to see combat the thought of that many personnel surrounding our position was some scary shit, to say the least.

For the N.V.A., the western half of these Northern provinces was a crucial jumping-off point in their diligent struggle to conquer South Vietnam. This is where Mac and I came in. We were just two of several replacements that had been scattered throughout the 101<sup>st</sup>. It was now our turn to fend for our lives and those of our platoon in the never-ending battle to halt the communist insurgents from occupying the A Shau valley, using it as a base of operations to advance further south.

It was late afternoon, still our first day at Ripcord, when our platoon sergeant approached Mac and I. He said to us, "you

two better try and catch some zees, you both got guard duty tonight at 2300."

Mac and I said in unison, "yes sir, sarge." Mac and I continued to talk awhile longer. Mac came from Northern California near Sacramento. I hailed from Louisiana. Mac was 17 when he enlisted and turned 18 this past May. I too had enlisted at 17, but it would be a few months before I turned 18.

I asked Mac, "Why did you join up, Mac?"

"Aw shit Jim, I was fuckin' up in school and would flunked out and my dad wasn't have'n it. So he and my grandpa sat me down and read the riot act to me. I was told to get a job but all I could get was a job flipping hamburgers at the Dairy Queen in town. Anyway, the old told me that I had to enlist to get my act together and took me to the recruiters office and signed me up. The recruiter told me and my dad that I could continue my education, the ly'n fucker. What about you, did you enlist?" Laughing I said, "yea, I enlisted."

"What you laughing at Jim, what's so funny?"

"I'm laugh'n at yo dumb ass and me too. Both of us are dumb fucks to believe what them liar's at the recruiters office said. They told me and my old man that because of my age, I'd be sent to either South Korea or Germany. I asked for Germany and my dumb ass believed the lyin piece o' shit when he said ok, Germany it is. So my dad signed me up too."

"What 'id you do, fuck up in school like me?"

"Nah man I ain't as dumb as yo ass. I just gotta temper. I was being bullied by this tall, lanky kid. I would fight 'im back, but I was always on the receive'n end of an ass whuppin, until my brother taught me how to get past his long arms. Hell, the dude was 6'8". Anyway, one day he fucked wit me again and I beat the shit outta his ass. All those ass whuppin's I got from him, I gave 'em all back to his black ass. After that he and a couple of his friends jumped me after winter prom, so I got my grandma's .38 pistol and shot the fucka in the head. Las I saw of 'im he was float'n in a canal. Two girls seen me so I ran and my dad said I had to enlist. It was the best thing for me because I needed some discipline anyway. So here I am Mac, sitt'n in this shithole wit yo ass."

Mac laughed and we continued talking for awhile longer before we went into a bunker to eat and catch some zees. Mac and I were drawn to each other and were becoming friends. The more time we spent together, the friendlier and closer we got. He showed me photos of his girlfriend and family, I did the same. The old salts who'd been in country for awhile and were still in one piece, would tell you in a very direct manner, not to become

close friends with anyone. If one of you is killed in action, it's hard to pick up the pieces and move on. Or worse, you become shell shocked, which is a state of complete disorientation in which case you have to be med-evac'd out.

This of course, as a edict much easier said than done. It didn't matter that your life expectancy in a firefight was about 7 seconds. We weren't there actually defending our won homeland, we were defending the guys fighting next to you in an overall effort to stop the insurgence of communist troops from the North. Making friends is just human nature, unless you're a cold-hearted bastard. In many cases your life might very well depend on the guy next to you. In my case, that guy was Mac.

At 2300 hours, Mac and I moved out to our fighting positions on the perimeter, per sarge's orders. He came over and said, "stay alert guys, the guys on this post before you had heard noises down below consistent with enemy movement. This spot is at the top of a deep ravine that goes down into the jungle thicket."  
"Got'cha sarge," I said to him.

There was no wind this night and the mosquitoes were eating us alive until someone came by with bug repellent to ease our pain. The guys in the fighting position just over from us were making themselves a big target by talking too loud. The reasoning behind it, I heard later, was that "the gooks knew where we were" but it was still a cardinal sin! That was because you also can't hear the enemy out in front of you. We bummed a light off their lit cigarettes and kept them cupped to avoid making targets of ourselves. There were enemy snipers on the hills across from us.

Those guys down the trench were maintaining a M60 machine gun on the berm. It must've been 2 1/2 hours later, around 0200, I heard them snoring. I began to pray then I stopped, "what was that?" I thought I heard a noise somewhere down the hill in front of my position. I listened vigilantly for the next 15 minutes or so, but I heard nothing. Then a few minutes later it was back again. I tossed a rock at Mac. He quietly eased over to my position, right up next to me.

"Mac, did you hear any noises?" I asked.

"I thought I heard a noise consistent with something being dragged."

"Shit, that's exactly what I heard." We both stopped, looked over the berm and down the hill for what seemed an eternity. It was pitch black and I couldn't see shit, even trying to use my

night vision that we all naturally have. We listened for 30 minutes. At this point, we knew we weren't mistaken. We both definitely heard the noise again. It was like something being dragged uphill. But this wasn't just any hill.

I unfocused my eyes hoping to catch a glimpse of anything at all just to confirm our suspicious instincts, but it was no use. It was like a wall of darkness that kept closing in on us as the night went on.

I decided to do a low crawl over to the guys snoring. At this point, Mac and I both was scared as fuck outta our minds. They should have given me a "who goes there" challenge, but I got nothing. I kicked one of them in the foot and woke him up. "What the fuck..."

I cut him off, "guys, we heard a few time like something being dragged uphill."

They both sat up and listened for all of a minute, but heard nothing. One of them said to me, "you're full of shit" and uttered something about being "scared ass cherries." I was tired of being called a "cherry"; it really struck a nerve when he said it. So I said to both of them "fuck off asshole" and went back to my position. I told Mac what they said about us.

Mac said, "fuck 'em, they're just a couple of dickheads."

Right at that moment we heard it again! Were we the only one's paying attention? No one else budged an inch or said anything! Were Mac and I imagining hearing these sounds?

I told Mac, "go up and ask the sergeant if we could get some illum." Illum is an Illumination flare that will light up more than an acre of area like it was noon. The only drawback to sending up a flare, it will also give away our fighting position as well.

It had been 5 or 6 minutes since Mac left, when I heard the kerplunking thud sound of the flare leaving it tubular chamber. I saw it open up and start its descent back to earth under its mini parachute. What I saw next, and what I experienced for an hour after that, was a fright no man should ever have to face, not to mention, a 17 year old. It was just the beginning of what could've been the end.

When I raised my head just enough to look over the berm, what I witnessed was every soldiers' worst nightmare come true. It was an enemy invasion, of whom we crudely referred to as "gooks." As loud as I could, I screamed, "sappers in the wire! Sappers in the wire!" There were too many to count. Before I'd

even realized it, I'd emptied 3 mags. No matter how many I took out, more seemed to appear.

Green tracer rounds flew past my head from every direction below my position within my purview of 180 degrees. Screams from below screeched in my ears as the gooks were being gunned down. Then there was an explosion just off to my right. My worst nightmare now seemed catastrophic. That explosion took out the two smartasses who were manning the M60. There went most of our firepower on this sector of the berm! In lieu of that, I pulled the pins on 3 frags and lobbed them over the berm. I ducked a second before each of them exploded to avoid catching any shrapnel. When I looked back over the berm I could see the carnage they left behind.

In what seemed like no time at all, I'd burned through 7 mags. I could still hear the enemy screaming as their child-like bodies were being ripped apart by lead and grenade shrapnel. I'd gone through so many magazines of ammo, the gunpowder fumes and the smoke from grenades and the enemy's satchel charges were starting to burn my throat and nasal passages and my eyes as well.

It was out of pure instinct of survival that I made my way over to the M60 machine gun position. The two smartasses both had bloody head wounds and had fallen on top of one another. I didn't even have time to check and see if they were dead or still alive. At the top of my lungs I yelled, "Bravo, bravo" which was our call sign for the medic. I lobbed 3 more frags down into the wire. The screams never stopped!

I looked down and realized that I only had 4 mags left. I yelled, "ammo, ammo" and could only hope to God I got resupplied within the next few minutes. The N.V.A. down in the valley and from hills across from us were dripping 82mm mortar rounds on us at a sustained rate, about 20 second apart. They flying dirt and rocks stung my face...more flares were launched from up above and behind us. Our artillery was trying to quiet the enemy mortars. Our Quad 50's were shredding the enemy below us and across at hill 1000.

I again looked over the berm and couldn't believe my eyes! At first glance, I estimated a count of at least 100-150 more enemy coming up through the wire. The M60 already had a 100 round belt in it, I took control of it and got in on the party by utilizing the M60's superior firepower to kill as many as

possible and hopefully drive the rest back down into the thicket of the "aw shit" valley.

I aimed down the slope, just above ground level, and cut loose. After the third 100 round belt, the barrel turned bright orange from the heat of so many 7.62 bullets passing through the barrel. That's when Mac showed up with the sarge and a medic.

The sarge said, "control your rate of fire." Mac changed the barrel for me and fed another hundred round belt into it. I opened up with a sustained rate of 6 round bursts, monitored by the tracers which were every fifth round in the belt of ammo. I did a search and traverse, 45 degree sweep of the slope down in front of me. The N.V.A. was still hitting us with mortars, R.P.G.'s (Rocket Propelled Grenades), 51's (the enemy's heavy machinegun rounds) flying past my head. It was indeed, more than I bargained for, especially after being promised a duty station in Germany.

From the time Ripcord was opened, the N.V.A. had launched several attacks against the Firebase. These were only probing attacks against Ripcord to discover fighting positions, our response time. Each time the enemy would attack, they took note of everything, from alertness of those on the berm, to what we would respond with. All this was being recorded for the upcoming battle for Ripcord. The report they would give tonight would not be a good one having lost so many men. Indeed, it was very costly for them tonight. Yet, they were a determined foe.

Eventually, after the better part of an hour, the fighting came to a lull, I don't know for how long. The fight for Ripcord came July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1970, that fight would last for 23 days straight. This story that took place in a dark moment of American history...a story hidden in the annals of time...a story kept in the darkness of Pentagon archives...a story the Pentagon does not want to be told. There are no official documents to confirm this account of how we left Firebase Ripcord...yet they know it's true.

It was July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1970, 1145 hours, mortar rounds rained down on us continuously now, it would have been almost surreal if not for the death and destruction that came with it, like miniature eruptions of a volcano...R.P.G.'s, 75mm recoilless rounds were a constant pressure on my ears as they mixed in with the enemy's mortars. Sappers had overran the perimeter and the CP, the gooks' .51 cal's were ripping us apart on top of this fuck'n hill as if the gates of hell had opened up. The enemy had come up the side of Ripcord to announce that they were here to

take back their hill from us. The gooks were everywhere now...they had swarmed over the rim of the hill like angry army ants and were devouring everything in sight. We fought back, we fought hard and with a purpose of survival... our gunships were helping us to evacuate...I was burning through belts of ammo as we leapfrogged backwards toward the LZ, I had used all the belts that Phil carried and now I had burned through all but two of the belts I was carrying. The enemy was trying to stop us from leaving this fuck'n hill. They kept coming and kept fighting and if not for the heroics of our gunships pilots braving the anti-aircraft and .51 cal's to mow down the N.V.A. who were coming after us, I truly thought we might not make it off this hill. The evacuation had been going on all morning and four pathfinders were helping us off this hill, a mixture of the 101<sup>st</sup>, the 506, 501, and the remnant of the 502 infantry. The sarge had led us backwards through all the gooks threw at us, the enemy that wanted to add us to the American body count. We fought and fought, trading bullet for bullet. Phillips went down next to me; he'd only tripped over something and fell. Finally, the sarge said run for it. We ran toward the LZ, the pathfinders were waving us on. We ran with the enemy's bullets helping us along. Something hit me in my boot heel; I went down and rolled looking up. Someone's hand helped me get up and we ran with the rest of the guys. I had one belt of ammo left—if I ran out of ammo before getting off this hill I wouldn't last two seconds. We were the last squad headed for the last two slicks that were leaving Ripcord. The 324<sup>th</sup> and the 304<sup>th</sup> N.V.A. divisions had truly committed to deny us this hill, and then the worst thing that can happen in combat happened. As I jumped up onto the floor of the Huey, I turned around and ran that last belt of ammo at the gooks. I looked and to my horror I saw arms waving, the arms of our guys waving, laying there on the ground wounded in this fight to keep the hill, laying there wounded and we were leaving them.

I pointed and yelled over the noise of the chopper, "Sarge, look—the wounded" and I attempted to jump from the Huey as it lifted off, leaving Ripcord. There were 7 to 9 wounded G.I.s laying there waiting to be evacuated and though I was out of ammo I tried to jump back on Ripcord. We do not leave ours behind...hands grabbed me, holding me, stopping me from jumping from the Huey. I screamed, "No!"

I screamed over the chopper noise with tears in my eyes, "we can't leave 'em...we can't leave 'em", as Sarge and a couple of others held me. I kept saying "we can't leave 'em" over and over, as my voice got lower and lower. I tasted the salt of my

tears and blood that I shed as we flew off the east side of Ripcord.

"We can't leave 'em, we can't leave 'em, we can't leave 'em," I said just above a whisper...