

CONSTANT TERROR BECAME THE NEW NORMAL. PART 2: HILL 1000*Written by Guy Rudawski, Company Medic for Alpha Company 2-501st, 101st Airborne Division*

Just before dawn on the 16th there was a sharp crack and a massive tree crashed down across 20 year old Richard Timmons' chest. *The trees, shattered and weakened from artillery and rocket damage, were groaning and snapping in the high wind. I have flashbacks of the sinister violent wind, a piercing, wailing sound as if lamenting or grieving, so deafening you could yell and not be heard.* We immediately got to "Timmy", lifted the tree and dragged him out . . . his face purple, his eyes bulging, and his body lifeless. He served his country in Vietnam for 131 days. He survived some of the harshest conditions and most brutal combat of the Vietnam War only to be crushed to death by a tree. The relentless wind prevented us from evacuating his body until the 17th. Timmy was the 25th soldier from Alpha Company who give his life for his country during the past five months.



RICHARD R TIMMONS
 Fond Du Lac, Wisconsin
 12/01/1949 - 07/16/1970
 PANEL 8W LINE 23
 Non-Hostile Ground Casualty

The American Public support for the war dropped to 25% and there was no tolerance for more US casualties. The NVA on Hill 1000 were not intimidated and they held the high ground. Division was indecisive about how to proceed, the concern being that Hill 1000 could become another Hamburger Hill and nobody wanted to be responsible for that. ("Hamburger Hill" Dong Ap Bai, Hill 937, was 15 km south of Ripcord. In May, 1969. The 101st Airborne Division assaulted Hill 937 for 10 days and took 72 KIA and 372 wounded).

The 3rd Brigade Commander, believing the NVA were vulnerable, called for additional ground forces to take the fight to the enemy. However, Division level command was under pressure to limit resources being consumed to maintain Ripcord, including ammunition. On July 16th we were stunned to received word that there would be no more assaults on Hill 1000. In addition, Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, and Delta (11 KIA and 56 WIA on Hill 805) 2-501st battalion would be extracted and returned to Camp Evans on the 18th.

Alpha Company evacuated Timmy's body on the 17th then snaked our way thru the eerie jungle toward the extraction LZ on Triple Hill. It was a spine-chilling journey as we encountered hillside caves strewn with bloody bandages from NVA casualties and came across a downed Helicopter shrouded in vegetation ... unnerving images of the violence and death at Ripcord. *In the early afternoon on July 18th, as we waited for extraction, I had a clear view of Ripcord from Triple Hill. What happened next would be the beginning of the end and a crippling blow to the 101st Airborne's control of the embattled firebase.*

A massive Chinook helicopter with a crew of 5 hovered 30 feet in the air to deliver a sling load of artillery ammunition at Ripcord. As it prepared to release the sling, .51 caliber machine gun rounds from Hill 1000 ripped into the rear engine housing and it caught fire, flashing flames and smoke inside the cabin. The ship just dropped out of the sky, crashing and leaking 1200 gallons of fuel into the artillery ammo dump. The rotors, still spinning, smashed into everything, then the machine tipped over. *According to eyewitnesses at the scene, Flight Engineer Michael Walker was pinned facedown with the weight of the enormous Chinook crushing his legs. The artillery ammo dump blew up like a volcano and the intense fire began setting off artillery rounds, one explosion after another that would last for hours. Attempts to save 21 year old Michael Walker failed; he was surrounded by flames and exploding ammo, pleading for someone to shoot him. On July 18th, Michael Walker burned to death, leaving behind an expectant wife who gave birth on July 20th.*



MICHAEL A WALKER
 Scotts Bluff, Nebraska
 10/11/1948 - 07/18/1970
 PANEL 8W LINE 29
 STATUS: KIA

"When the situation turns to shit, sometimes all the training seems to make little difference.

You try to stay calm on the outside but inside is chaos. Combat is ten times worse than I can describe."

Guy Rudawski (1970 letters home from Vietnam) Company Medic for Alpha Company, 2-501st 101st Airborne Division

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From Alpha Company's location on Triple Hill we watched, helplessly, the chaos and danger unfolding on the firebase. Tear gas rounds erupted creating a white fog drifting around the firebase and White Phosphorous rounds, spewing chunks of burning rain, started more fires. The south and east sides of the firebase were incinerating. Six 105 howitzers, crucial to the defense of Ripcord and life-saving support for line companies in the surrounding jungle, were reduced to scrap metal. Soldiers, deranged with fear, ran for their lives to escape the inferno and exploding artillery.

As the horrific destruction continued on the firebase, Alpha Company and the 2-501st battalion helicoptered out, following orders to return to Camp Evans.

From our airborne perspective, Ripcord appeared as a ghostly, smoldering hellhole and the shocking events of that afternoon replay like a surreal video in my head.

The 2nd battalion 506th infantry remained in the jungle to defend Firebase Ripcord. They would have to hold out as long as possible because there would be no reinforcements. Ripcord was now defenseless and at the mercy of the enemy. Over the next 5 days the firebase turned into a lunar landscape as the NVA punished Ripcord with 75 mortar rounds a day, including the devastating 120mm. There would be heavy casualties on both sides and 35 more Americans would sacrifice their lives.

On July 22nd the decision was made to evacuate Ripcord.

Under relentless NVA mortar shelling, .51 Caliber machine gun fire, and NVA soldiers breaching the perimeter with AK-47s, the firebase was abandoned on July 23rd. It would take 22 Chinook and 100 Huey sorties to evacuate the firebase as well as the troops in the jungle. *The brave helicopter pilots and crew members were our life line, repeatedly risking their lives to save ours.*

Airstrikes were conducted to destroy the abandoned firebase as well as any NVA in the surrounding jungle. 13 American bodies were left behind. By the end of August 1970, 8 bodies were recovered; 5 still remain MIA. Alpha Company and the 2/501st would help provide security for this critical recovery mission.



Firebase Ripcord June 1970



CH-47 Crash and Explosion
 FSB Ripcord July 18, 1970
 Photo Credit Rav Potts



The Ghost of FSB Ripcord
 August 1970, After Airstrikes

RAISING AWARENESS OF THE VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

Despite our overwhelming firepower: the artillery, the quad 50 machine gun, the cobra gunships, the Douglas A-1 Skyraiders dropping 500lb bombs, the NVA kept coming! It was unreal!