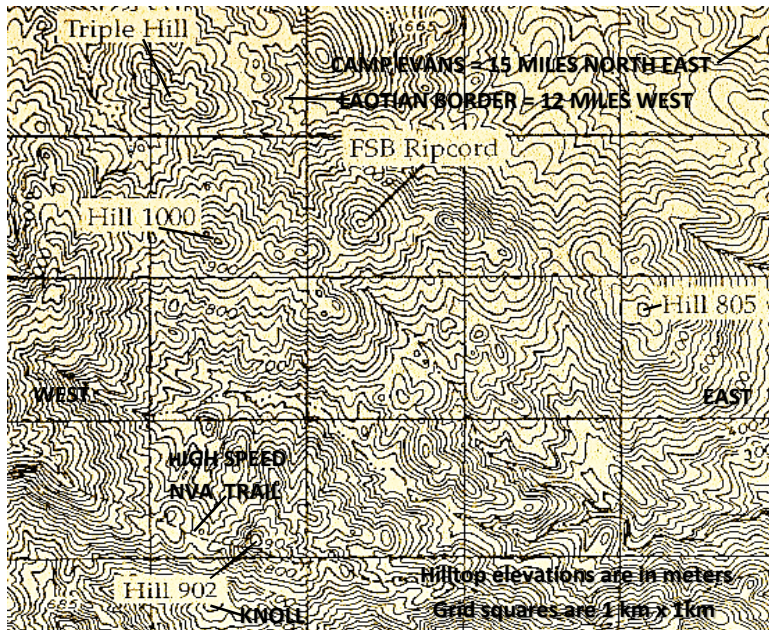


**VETERANS DAY 2017: CONSTANT TERROR BECAME THE NEW NORMAL  
MAJOR ACTION INVOLVING ALPHA COMPANY 2-501<sup>ST</sup>, 101<sup>ST</sup> AIRBORNE DIVISION  
JULY 2<sup>ND</sup> –JULY 12<sup>TH</sup>, 1970 DURING THE 23 DAY SIEGE OF FSB RIPCORD**

*Written by Guy Rudawski, Company Medic for Alpha Company 2-501<sup>st</sup>, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division*

It was scorching hot in the A Shau Valley and it was the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of the 23 day NVA Siege of FSB Ripcord. After eluding death on the July 2<sup>nd</sup> hot Landing Zone at Hill 902, Alpha Company, 2-501<sup>st</sup>, began a search and destroy mission patrolling the mountainous jungle southwest of Hill 902. We were one of ten infantry companies defending Firebase Ripcord and finding the enemy, the North Vietnamese Army, wasn't difficult because they were hunting for us. Daily confrontations escalated from intense firefights to savage battles on



and around the strategic hilltops surrounding Ripcord. Fire Support Base Ripcord itself was attacked continuously for 23 days, from July 1<sup>st</sup> until July 23<sup>rd</sup> when it was abandoned under a relentless NVA assault. *Final analysis revealed the NVA outnumbered us at least 6:1.*

Alpha got pinned down on the 5<sup>th</sup> day by an NVA machine gun firing 600 rounds a minute from a bunker complex. After several hours 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon outflanked the bunker and destroyed it with an antitank weapon. Our casualties were adding up and attempts to evacuate the more seriously wounded by jungle penetrator failed when the helicopters were driven away by heavy NVA fire. On day 6 we located a clearing to serve as a landing zone for the urgently needed medevacs,

but while removing some trees, the NVA attacked with AK47's, machine guns and grenades. The assault was repelled but we suffered 15 wounded and were forced to pull back under fire to a knoll on the southwest side of Hill 902. We dug in and braced for a night of violence as the NVA started probing our perimeter with satchel charges. Before they could attack, airstrikes and cobra gunships were called in, blasting the NVA back into the dark jungle and saving us from possibly being overrun. *The NVA were well trained, well-armed and willing to die for their cause. Not deterred by casualties, they wanted to fight and forced us to go toe to toe on their turf. We were battered, bloodied and we had to get our wounded out.*

On day 7, with air support, we finished clearing the LZ and Medevacs managed to evacuate some of the wounded when all hell opened up. NVA 82mm mortars and sniper fire quickly zeroed in on the LZ. The accuracy of the mortars was lethal, the explosions were deafening and the earth shaking concussions broke bones and sent Alpha soldiers flying; shrapnel tore through flesh and we took 11 more casualties. *Senior Medic, Doc Bill Stafford was critically wounded by a blast from a mortar round while assisting wounded onto a chopper. Knocked to the ground and bleeding from wounds to his back, he crawled off the LZ believing "this was it, I'm not going to live." It was Bill's second tour as a Combat Medic in Vietnam and this would be his 3<sup>rd</sup> Purple Heart.* The unrelenting mortar attack created chaos and numerous wounded were stranded on the LZ; I was able to drag the wounded men to cover and provide treatment. We hunkered down until the shelling stopped then pulled back to the knoll for a very tense but uneventful night. *Outnumbered and undermanned, tension among the troops escalated and morale started to waver; some of the wounded were defenseless.* Our request for reinforcements was denied by Brigade. Realizing this was a hornet's nest of entrenched NVA, Brigade ordered us to head northwest the next day so they could bomb the area.

**RAISING AWARENESS OF THE VIETNAM EXPERIENCE**

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## PAGE 2

Before moving north on the 8<sup>th</sup> day we attempted to medevac the wounded, but again a deadly hailstorm of mortars blasted us. A backlog of rucksacks piled on the LZ caught fire causing ammo to cook off and grenades to explode. The urgency of our situation intensified when Battalion alerted us that a large NVA unit was coming after Alpha. Without delay we started a forced march northwest through rugged jungle. The terrain proved too difficult for some of the wounded forcing us to use a high speed NVA trail, risking ambush with no flank security. *Among the wounded I remember a soldier incapacitated by fear and pain, he was sobbing "I can't go on"; another with a broken jaw; open head wounds; a soldier with a broken ankle was given morphine, tightened his boot and dragged himself along with help from a soldier brother and Doc Stafford with severe wounds to his back and spine, his right lung collapsing, struggling to breathe.* Alpha Company's wounded men limped, crawled and dragged themselves for 2 kilometers; it was a grueling test of the limits of their physical stamina and courage. *I have flashbacks of this intensely stressful and perilous escape... how vulnerable we were, the physical exhaustion and how miraculous that we got away.*

As dusk fell on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, third platoon was sent ahead to secure a Night Defensive Position for the company. Before the main body of the company with all the wounded could move up, a squad of NVA cut us off. It appeared we weren't detected by the NVA, but it was not safe to link up with the company so we set up a separate NDP. *After the last 7 days, we were physically depleted, mentally stressed and sleep deprived.* I was in a position with the platoon leader, we were on edge fully expecting the NVA to attack that night.

During the early morning hours, we heard what sounded like hand to hand fighting coming from a nearby position... choking, grunting and someone yelling "gooks" ... then eerie silence. The men in that position did not respond to our calls. We requested artillery illumination but the dense jungle made it impossible to see. We believed the men were dead and we believed the stealthy NVA were inside our perimeter.

*The possibility of hand to hand combat with the NVA was frightening; we were amped up and willing to kill anything that moved. I focused on ways to survive and control my fear and thoughts of death.*

Dawn emerged without incident and we discovered, with great relief, that both men were alive. *We learned that a fight ensued after one of them fell asleep and reacted to a nightmare, attacking his partner thinking he was NVA. His partner, believing he was being attacked by NVA, defended himself. They wrestled, strangled and tried to kill each other in a brief death match until each realized the mistaken identity. When they didn't respond to us we believed they were dead and NVA were inside our perimeter. Had we opened fire we may have killed them. Although a tragedy was averted, the harrowing experience of that night would haunt us and be especially disturbing for the two soldiers who mistakenly tried to kill each other.*

References for this fact based story include 3 books: Ripcord, Screaming Eagles under Siege by Keith W Nolan, 2003; Hell on a Hilltop, America's Last Major Battle in Vietnam by Major General Benjamin Harrison, 2004; Remembering Firebase Ripcord by Christopher J Brady, 2015; Other Sources: [www.AlphaAvengers.com](http://www.AlphaAvengers.com) (History of Alpha Company 2-501<sup>st</sup> 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne); Email interviews with William Stafford III; Donald R Wood's Memoirs: personal letters home from Vietnam; Accounts from Military citations and awards; my personal letters home from Vietnam; my personal recall of events facilitated by prolonged exposure therapy.

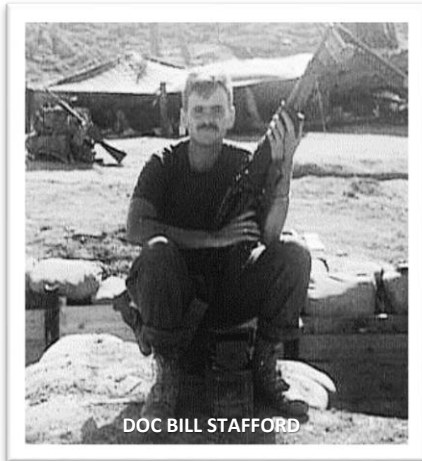
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William Shakespeare, Henry V

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On the 9th day we secured a location to cut an LZ and finally got all the wounded evacuated. Mangled and bloody, they were mentally and physically spent. The nightmare was over for now but tough challenges would lie ahead for many and their sacrifices would go unappreciated back home. *Among them was Doc Bill Stafford who was sent to Japan for life saving medical care. Eventually he returned to the US for years of treatment and was medically discharged from the Army. Stafford never fully recovered from his physical wounds and like many of us, the effects of PTSD would torment his soul. Bill confesses it was an arduous path but with family support he “found his way home”.*

In the past 7 days we had over 40 wounded but remarkably no deaths. I sat against a fallen tree taking a breather, sweating and staring at my blood stained jungle fatigues, when a squad leader approached, “Doc we’re putting you in for a medal for what you did back on that LZ.” Then he proceeded to reveal his crisis of conscience: “*What we’re doing here isn’t right, this ain’t right killing these people; we shouldn’t be killing these people... I’m going to stop firing my weapon.*” This was surreal to me. Why now? We’re fighting for survival against tenacious NVA who want us dead and he’s turning into a pacifist. During the stress of battle there is no time to consider the correctness of what you’re doing. I saw no other way but kill or be killed.

The remaining men of Alpha Company pressed on to a location 1km southeast of Ripcord. We felt the shock waves as B-52s slammed the earth southwest of Hill 902 with 500lb bombs. On July 11, Alpha, Bravo and Charlie Companies 2-501<sup>st</sup> were airlifted back to Camp Evans to get resupplied and reinforced. We received new orders: return to Ripcord on the 12<sup>th</sup> and force the NVA off Hill 1000. The greatest threat to Ripcord was Hill 1000. It was a strategic NVA stronghold and they weren’t going to give it up. The NVA were well-armed and fought from fortified bunkers impervious to airstrikes. During the previous 5 days Charlie and Delta Companies 2-506<sup>th</sup> suffered heavy losses on Hill 1000 including 2 KIA whose bodies could not be recovered. *Like most Alpha soldiers, I was afraid of the violence and death awaiting us on Hill 1000. To some this seemed like a suicide mission that was being compared to Hamburger Hill, May 1969. Would I survive? Would this be my last ride?* The chaplain held a special service for us. Two Alpha soldiers refused to saddle up; they were so afraid they chose to go to jail rather than Hill 1000. Once more into the breach, Alpha Company boarded choppers on July 12<sup>th</sup> for an air combat assault onto Triple Hill and prepared to attack Hill 1000 from the north. Bravo and Charlie companies would attack from the west flank. At the same time our brothers from Delta Company, 2-501<sup>st</sup> would begin their heroic 5 day bloody battle with the NVA on Hill 805.

**Epilogue:** *Dante’s Inferno* describes 9 Circles of Hell. His vision of the 7th Circle of Hell is a place of murderous violence, with a river of boiling blood and burning rain falling from the sky. Young soldiers of the 2-501<sup>st</sup>, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne, many of them draftees and working class poor from small towns across America, were about to combat assault onto Triple Hill with the formidable mission to take Hill 1000. Commitment to this mission was less about duty, honor, and country and more about loyalty to each other.



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