

The Following Took Place on July 2, 1970, Hill 902, The A Shau Valley, South Vietnam Alpha Company, 2-501st Joins The 23 Day Battle For Fire Support Base Ripcord

By Guy Rudawski, Company Medic for Alpha Company, 2-501st, 101st Airborne Division, South Vietnam, 1970

On July 2, 1970, under cover of darkness, NVA Sappers infiltrate the defensive perimeter and overrun Charlie Company 2-506th on Hill 902. The 4 am attack is well planned and brutal, taking out the Command Position first by killing Captain Thomas Hewitt. Despite heavy losses Charlie defends Hill 902. At first light, dozens of bodies and body parts, American and NVA, are seen scattered about Hill 902. The Charlie survivors, reeling from the battle, complete the gruesome task of recovering and identifying the mutilated remains of their 8 fallen brothers.



Alpha Company 2-501st is briefed about the horrific assault on Charlie and is rushed in early that morning to secure Hill 902 and allow Charlie Company to evacuate. Approaching the Landing Zone (LZ) on top of 902, our helicopters took NVA sniper and .51 caliber fire. Our door gunners* responded with thousands of M60 rounds to suppress the enemy. The NVA were bombing the LZ with mortar rounds; aborting the mission was not an option, "WE'RE GOING IN HOT!" It was too risky for the choppers to land so they hovered at 4ft, "GET OUT! GET OUT!" screamed the crew. As we jumped out, Charlie Company soldiers frantically scrambled aboard.

I recall the sheer terror in their eyes, ghostly survivors of fierce, deadly, close range combat. Momentum carried me toward the northwest side of the LZ and a pile of NVA bodies, grisly carnage from the predawn attack on Charlie Company. The body on top, wearing only a loin cloth, was face up, spread eagle, eyes wide open and in the center of his forehead, a one inch bullet hole. I stared at his pale corpse, into his dead eyes, and at that bullet hole; *images of killing and death forever burned into my memory.* I had an ominous feeling we might take heavy casualties if we got pinned down on this LZ.

The deafening noise level from NVA mortars pounding the LZ, from Cobra gunship rockets exploding and from machine guns blasting was mind blowing and creating chaos. Alpha soldiers, desperate to find safety, lost their footing and fell or slid down the steep south and west sides of Hill 902. I took cover about 10ft below the LZ and edged my way over next to a Second Lieutenant, our new third platoon leader. He was shaking and pleading out loud: "Dear God don't let me die! Don't let me die on my first LZ!" This was his first combat mission and like the lieutenant, every Alpha soldier's courage would be put to the test over the next 16 days. Alpha Company urgently began moving off the hill away from the mortars when Brian Eveleth and Rich Johnson realized that Dave Schmidli was missing. I responded to a cry for "MEDIC!" Dave was found back near the LZ wounded and in shock; the right lens of his glasses was blown out by shrapnel leaving his eye mangled and bloody. He was seriously wounded and needed to be evacuated. NVA mortars continued to rain down and tension escalated but we held our position waiting for a fearless helicopter crew* to circle back and give Dave a ride out of hell.

Alpha Company regrouped and escaped death on Hill 902. Alpha was committed to the fight and our mission was to search out and destroy the enemy and prevent attacks on FSB Ripcord. We followed blood trails as we cautiously worked our way through the mountainous jungle southwest of Hill 902. Nothing, however, could prepare us for the brutality and constant terror we would experience during the next 16 days.

Epilogue: A number of Alpha soldiers took minor wounds that day on Hill 902, each one deserved a Purple Heart. I have a scar inside my left elbow from the flying shrapnel to remind me. We all received Air Medals for our Hot Landing Zone Combat Assault but only Schmidli was awarded the Purple Heart.



RAISING AWARENESS OF THE VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

The 23 day Battle for Fire Support Base Ripcord, July 1-July 23, 1970, was the last major battle and one of the bloodiest of the Vietnam Conflict. The Battle for Ripcord was the culmination of a 4 ½ month covert mission named "Operation Texas Star" during which 409 Americans died, 2067 were wounded and 5 were missing in action. 3 Medals of Honor and 5 Distinguished Service Crosses were awarded.

* "God's Own Lunatics" by Joe Galloway: a tribute to the brave helicopter crews who were our lifeline in Vietnam @YOUTUBE.COM