Keith Nolan, *Ripcord: Screaming Eagles Under Siege, Vietnam, 1970* (New York: Presidio Press, 2000)

This excerpt is from a detailed account of the assault on U.S. 101st Airborne Division's Firebase Ripcord overlooking the A Shau Valley from July 1-23, 1970. The North Vietnamese Army had built up a major concentration of troops surrounding the firebase during the rainy season without being detected by the U.S. and began a heavy artillery barrage to prepare for a land attack. Attempts by the U.S. soldiers to counterattack were largely unsuccessful, despite a number of NVA casualties. Command eventually decided that it was cost-prohibitive either to commit more resources or to maintain the firebase, and it was evacuated under heavy fire. It was the last large infantry battle of the Vietnam War.

Author Keith Nolan interviewed dozens of the actual participants in writing this book; although it reads sort of like a novel, it is not fiction: it is all based on these interviews and other documentary evidence.

This excerpt is taken from the first day or two of the battle. The firebase (which was an artillery installation, but more like a sand-bag bunker than a larger "fort") was taking heavy shelling, and several companies of infantry were moving through the nearby jungle, attempting to pinpoint the Vietnamese firing positions. This excerpt concerns Company C, camped on Hill 902. about 2 km from Firebase Ripcord. It is divided into companies: Charlie One and Charlie Two. Company C had around 90 men at the beginning of the attack (p. 42)

Note that there is a map and glossary at the end of the excerpt.Also:

Claymore: a directional mine that could be set up on a stand and aimed to explode in a given direction. It could be detonated by hand or set as a booby-trap.

Satchel charge: a block of explosive with a timed fuse, sometimes packed with shrapnel.

CH-47 Chinook delivering a sling load of supplies to Firebase Ripcord. (Courtesy C. W. Jensen)

The Quad-50 (silhouetted in center of photo) at the northwest end of Firebase Ripcord. (Courtesy D. Cox)

The wounded being brought down the trail at that time included new guy Mike Womack, with four steel pellets and a chunk of the claymore fuse in his legs. It was a torturous trip. The poncho litter into which Womack had been loaded quickly came apart, dumping him on the ground. The litter was put back together, but as they continued, one of the guys carrying it bumped a nest of red ants, which showered upon Womack in a biting and stinging frenzy. "They set the litter down and broke out the GI insect repellent and gave me a good dousing," Womack later wrote. "The next thing I knew, I was on fire. I had wounds in the back of both thighs that no one was aware of and the repellent was burning like hell." Mercifully, the platoon medic administered morphine. Moving on, the litter team encountered a tree that had fallen across the trail, with U. S. Air Force cluster bombs hanging from it. Unable to bypass the obstacle because of the thick jungle, the litter team had to lift Womack over it, which they did without disturbing any of the bombs, at which point the litter gave way for a second painful crash. Womack thanked God when they finally reached the LZ and he was loaded aboard a medevac Huey. The crew chief stuck a business card in his pocket: "Congratulations. You have been successfully dusted off by Captain John Doe, 326th Medical Battalion, 101st Airborne Division."

The day after the ambush, Charlie One, with which Hewitt's command group was then moving, humped to the top of Hill 902. Lieutenant Campbell was supposed to link up with Hewitt that evening, so as dusk approached Charlie Two jumped on a trail cutting up the mountain from the southwest. Campbell and his point man, Sp4 Thomas C. Manbeck, were extremely cautious as they approached the crest; they were concerned about getting fired on by Charlie One. "As we approached the perimeter, we kept asking for radio acknowledgment that the security covering the trail knew we were coming in," wrote Campbell. Acknowledgment was received, but there was, in fact, no security to worry about. Hewitt had deployed Charlie One in a half circle on the eastern side of the bald mountaintop but had left the western side open, knowing that Charlie Two would shortly take up positions there. "There might have been a couple guys sitting and watching the western half," recalled Campbell, "but it wasn't the way it ought to have been."

It got worse. Though it was already getting dark, a man in the center of the perimeter was boiling a cup of coffee field style: Cut holes in a C-ration tin, light a heat tab inside it, and place a larger fruit can full of water and instant coffee over the intense flame.

Lieutenant Campbell kicked the cans over in an incredulous rage. "You stupid shit," he growled at the startled trooper. "You know better than to light a fire after dark in a goddamn perimeter."

"L. T., I was just cooking a cup of coffee for the captain."

Campbell realized that Captain Hewitt was sitting right next to the man he was berating. "Captain, come here a minute," Campbell said, leading Hewitt away from the CP. Campbell's six months of combat time were actually over, but Lucas had left him in the field an extra month to ease the transition from Vazquez to Hewitt. "Look, I don't want to act like I'm trying to run the company," the veteran platoon leader said to Hewitt when they were out of earshot of the command group, "but we've got to get some things straight out here. First thing is, nobody lights fires out here at night. Nobody lights a cigarette. You just don't do that. We're out in the mountains and the gooks can see that fire from anywhere."

Hewitt nodded, and Campbell went on, questioning the new commander about why there was no security on the west side of the perimeter. Explained Hewitt, "I knew you were coming in."

"I think we got to be a little tighter than that, Captain."

Campbell next asked Hewitt if he'd deployed a three-man LP to cover the trail where it ran into the NDP from the southeast. Hewitt responded in the negative. "You gotta get LPs out to cover the trails unless you're working in small groups," Campbell replied. "Men don't like to go on LP or ambush, but they understand the need for it, and they'll do it if you make 'em."

Hewitt thanked Campbell for his advice. "It wasn't an adversarial conversation, which I was worried about," Campbell recalled. "Hewitt was a real nice fella." Perhaps to justify himself, Hewitt described how his ARVN unit had operated in the

lowlands of III Corps, and Campbell got the impression that Hewitt had been fighting VC, not NVA, and that he'd picked up some bad habits from the South Vietnamese: "The ARVN went out in battalion size, toting chickens and ducks with them, and they had cooking fires at night. They thought security was a matter of numbers."

Campbell, scheduled to leave in a day or two for R&R, after which he was to be reassigned to the rear, sat down that night with his platoon sergeant, Sgt. Thomas H. Herndon—good soldier, good friend—who would be taking over Charlie Two until a new lieutenant arrived. "Sarge, this is something different," Campbell said of the increasing enemy activity. "This thing is changing. You've got to keep everyone's shit together out here. . . ."

As the sappers were to prove, the company did not keep itself together. "In a firefight, they were hellacious soldiers," Campbell said of the draftee infantrymen in Charlie Company. "They'd do whatever you told 'em to do, every damn one of 'em. But there's no sorrier bastard in the world, soldiering-wise, than a U. S. soldier who's not scared, and that's the never-ending problem of being a commander—trying to keep the men combat ready when they decide there's nothing to worry about and get complacent."

What Captain Hewitt needed were some old pro Regular Army NCOs. He had none. There simply weren't enough left at that stage in the war. Absent Campbell, two of Hewitt's platoon leaders and almost all his platoon sergeants and squad leaders were products of the Noncommissioned Officer Candidate School (NCOCS) at Fort Benning, which made sergeants of those who showed leadership potential in basic and advanced individual training (AIT). Honor grads were promoted to staff sergeant. The whole process, from recruit to NCO, took eight months. Though bright and motivated, these instant sergeants, known as shake 'n bakes, lacked the experience that normally went with so many stripes. Given that they were the same age as their troops and were often draftees themselves, they tended to be more buddies than taskmasters.

The contacts continued. On June 24, Company C was at the southeastern end of the ridge again when Hewitt reported that

he had fifty NVA in the open, moving up the slope of a partially denuded mountain thirteen hundred meters to the south. The result was a feeding frenzy—mortars, arty, gunships, tac air—but when the company swept the mountainside, there was not a single body, weapon, or piece of equipment to be found amid the craters.

On June 27, Charlie One opened fire on two enemy soldiers whose line of retreat inadvertently led them directly toward Charlie Two. Herndon popped a claymore on them at twenty-five meters, and the platoon opened fire, killing both NVA. As part of a new program to help morale, Charlie One was lifted up to Ripcord the next day for an overnight vacation, complete with a barbecue over sawed-off oil drums. Hewitt and Charlie Two went in the day after that. "It was pay day, and we had a poker game going inside a bunker," recalled Sgt. Jerry D. Moyer, a squad leader bumped up to serve as platoon sergeant of Charlie Two. "Captain Hewitt was in the game. I wasn't. They were playing for forty and fifty dollar pots, high stakes for me. Hewitt was doing real good, talking about 'this is my car payment . . . this is my house payment. . . .' It's kind of ironic that he got killed right after raking in all that cash."

Before Hewitt helicoptered back out with Charlie Two, Lucas attached to his command group Company D's FO, an artillery lieutenant with little to do while his company secured Ripcord. Prior to that, Hewitt's forward observer had been an artillery sergeant. Linking up with Charlie One, Hewitt and Charlie Two returned late that afternoon to the top of Hill 902. Charlie Three, meanwhile, was lifted up for its turn on Ripcord. When the shelling began the next morning, Hewitt and the FO helped direct the counterbattery fire while a handful of troops opened up with M60s and LAWs. In response, the NVA planned a sapper attack on Hill 902. Radio conversations to that effect were monitored by a special signal-intercept (SSI) team in an underground, sandbag-covered conex only a hundred feet from the TOC on FSB Ripcord. It should have been simple enough to pass that information to Lucas. However, for security reasons, SSI teams were under strict orders to bypass their host units and forward their raw data directly to division headquarters, which would decide what to

send back down the chain of command to the line battalions. In this case, division prepared an intelligence warning, but for reasons never explained the alert hit a snag and did not reach Lucas until after the attack on Hill 902. At that point, it only added insult to injury.[2]

With an overconfidence born of inexperience, Hewitt deployed no listening posts that second night on Hill 902. Nor did he insist that everyone dig in and camouflage their positions. The company commander himself slung a hammock between two naked trees to one side of an LZ that had been cleared near the top of the mountain before air strikes removed most of the rest of the vegetation around the upper slopes. "Everybody was too casual, too relaxed," recalled Cafferty, the senior medic, who, along with Sgt. Jack H. Dreher, senior radioman, had dug in near Hewitt. Another member of the command group, Sp4 Robert C. Smoker, an ex-rifleman now in charge of resupply, was supposed to share their hole, but "we were kind of clumped together, which didn't make sense to me, so I wound up digging a hole off by myself."

As before, Charlie One, down to about fifteen men, was on the eastern side of the hill and Charlie Two on the western side with twenty-five troops. The perimeter was a ring of three-man positions, thirteen in all. "Some guys did dig foxholes, but most didn't," said Sergeant Moyer. "We weren't very far apart. We had about ten yards between positions, and the whole perimeter was about the size of a softball diamond with the captain at the pitcher's mound."

Actually, most of those troops who dug foxholes simply scooped out the shallow, half-eroded ones left over from whatever unit had established the first NDP atop Hill 902 years before. "There was no fresh dirt on that hill," contended Sergeant Burkey, whose platoon, Charlie Three, flew in the next morning as the relief force. Burkey was appalled that the company had used the original foxholes "just like every other bunch of idiots that ever went up there. They should have moved off the hilltop a bit and dug a new perimeter. Vazquez made sure you understood that you never go near a foxhole that's already been dug because the enemy knows right where it's at. Vazquez would have come from the rear and kicked me in the ass if he had found us setting up in old foxholes."

Instead of digging in, Sergeants Herndon and Moyer, and Gary Steele, the platoon radioman, had made a little poncho hootch. Two feet high, the shelter provided relief from the sun during the day and some warmth during the cool of the night. A grenade tossed atop it, however, would take out the entire platoon command group, and it was a bad example. Other easy-to-spot poncho hootches dotted the mountaintop. "I thought putting up a pup-tent was really stupid," said Sp4 Stephen L. Manthei, a survivor of ten months in the bush with Charlie One. "I spoke to 'em about it, but they outranked me, and nothing was done. You looked up the hill and the CP was sticking out like a sore thumb, too. It was ridiculous to set up like that after we had ticked off the enemy by firing down at them that morning."

According to Manthei, neither he nor Bob Tarbuck and Don Holthausen, who were in position with him on the south side of the hill, shared the general no-sweat attitude. "We dug our holes deep as we were expecting totally to get messed with," said Manthei. One man was supposed to be awake at all times at each position, and when Manthei took his first watch after dark, "it was a beautiful night, starlit, with some mortar and artillery shows you could see off in the distance. We pulled our guard shifts with a little more intensity than usual that night—at least at our position."

Having probed the firebase and another company that night, good diversions both, the enemy didn't strike their primary target until almost four in the morning. It was the textbook hour for a night assault, a time when bleary-eyed guards, convincing themselves that nothing was going to happen in the two hours remaining before dawn, were most likely to nod off. "It was really quiet on the hill, almost an eerie quiet," remembered Manthei, awakened for another turn on watch shortly before the attack started. The first indication of trouble was the whispered report of an alert guard who had seen movement in front of his position. Manthei put a hand on Tarbuck and Holthausen and silently indicated that they should get in their

holes. The perimeter guard on the radio was instructed to open fire, and that's when "all hell broke loose," said Manthei. "I saw an RPG flash across the hill into the command post, and the radio went dead from that position. The explosion knocked me backwards against the inside of my foxhole, and then in the next instant numerous grenades and satchel charges started going off, gunfire erupted from everywhere, and there was a lot of hollering and screaming in the dark, both by us and the Vietnamese. . . ."

CHAPTER 4

Hell Night

Sergeant Herndon nudged Jerry Moyer awake for his turn on guard shortly before the attack began. "What in the hell, how come you're waking me up now?" Moyer whispered harshly after checking the luminescent face of his watch. "It's fifteen minutes early."

"I don't know," Herndon whispered back. "All I know is Steele woke me up, and I did my hour and twenty minutes."

"Okay, we'll straighten this out come daylight. We'll find out what went wrong," Moyer said angrily. Either the platoon leader or the radioman had not pulled an entire guard shift.

Moyer scooted down to a fallen tree about ten feet in front of their poncho hootch. No sooner had the acting platoon sergeant gotten into position behind the tree—with weapon, ammunition, grenades, and the detonators to their claymores within easy reach—than he heard something moving on the side of the hill. You don't cry wolf with the first brush snap, he thought. It was most likely a monkey or a wild pig, but the noise definitely put his ears on alert.

The rustling continued, and Moyer finally contacted Sergeant Dreher, who was on radio watch up at the company CP. "We've got serious movement out here. Wake the captain up, and see what he wants to do. I think we need to go to fifty percent alert till daylight."

"Roger, wait one," Dreher replied. He returned to the radio a moment later: "Yeah, start waking people up. . . ."

Moyer had not been the only one reporting movement. Private First Class Michael K. Mueller, an assistant machine gunner, was on guard two holes down to Moyer's left—the gunner himself and the team's ammo bearer were sleeping against a log just behind Mueller—when he heard something about twenty-five meters down from his foxhole where the scrubby brush below the denuded top of the mountain merged back into thick jungle. Next—and at this Mueller's chest squeezed tight—he saw an enemy soldier, a black silhouette against a dark gray background, crouch down for a moment, then slip off into the shadows. Mueller got Dreher on the horn and was told, "The next time you see that guy—fire 'im up."

Mueller dropped the handset and began spraying the bushes with his M16. It was too late; the enemy was already in position. As soon as Mueller cut loose, a rocket-propelled grenade shrieked out of the dark and slammed into the company CP. Satchel charges began exploding. Hearing someone blow a claymore, Mueller snatched up the detonator to his own, but when he squeezed down on it, nothing happened. The sappers had apparently cut the wire snaking downhill from the detonator to the mine itself.

It was 3:46 A.M. on July 2, 1970. Captain Hewitt, found sprawled in the tangle of his shredded hammock after the battle, missing one arm and both legs, was killed by that first RPG. The newly attached FO lieutenant was temporarily shell-shocked by the same blast.

In the command group foxhole, only about six feet down from the captain's hammock, Dreher was wounded by the rocket that took out Hewitt, as was Doc Cafferty, who'd been sleeping on his air mattress just above the hole. Peppered all over with little fragments, his left arm sliced open from elbow to wrist, Cafferty slid down into the foxhole, grabbing his M16 and an ammo bandolier along the way. "I was so fucking scared I didn't even know I was injured," he recalled. "My medical bag was gone. My rucksack was gone. Everything was gone. We didn't know what had happened to the Old Man, but

he was obviously dead because he never got in the foxhole. Total confusion. There were explosions going off everywhere. It was like waking up on the Fourth of July."

Dreher whispered frantically into his radio handset, calling for illumination and gunships. "I was just hiding in the corner," recounted Cafferty, "and all of a sudden something fell against my back—and it was a fuckin' satchel charge." The sappers were using one-pound blocks of C4 plastic explosives, which produced terrific, head-ringing blasts and, if packed with enough scrap metal, could tear an arm or a leg into bloody ribbons. The satchel charge thrown into the command group foxhole wedged between Cafferty's rear end and the wall of the foxhole as he knelt there. Said Cafferty, "I said to myself, this is it, I'm gone. I'm going to blow all over Dreher—he won't get hurt because it's behind my back—but the thing never went off. The blasting cap didn't work, which was very common, thank God."

When the first rocket crashed in, Moyer was crawling back to wake up Sergeant Herndon and Gary Steele. They rolled out from under their poncho hootch at the sound of the blast, and Herndon stood up on one side and Steele got to his knees on the other, reaching for his M16. Steele immediately spotted someone with a floppy bush hat standing at the top of the hill, aiming down at them with a rocket launcher over his shoulder. Steele was stunned that a sapper could appear behind them so suddenly. The apparition convinced him that the sappers must have already been inside the perimeter when the shooting started. Steele threw his rifle to his shoulder. He thought he had the man atop the hill dead to rights, but as groggy as he was he had forgotten to flip off the safety, and when he pulled the trigger nothing happened. An instant later, he saw the quick jet of flame that was the backblast of the RPG.

The rocket exploded just behind the poncho hootch. Steele, sent flying by the blast, lay where he landed, stunned, hoping the enemy would think him dead. He could feel warm blood leaking from his ears and mouth and rectum, such was the concussive force of the explosion, and he was having trouble breathing. He would later learn that a big chunk of shrapnel

had punched through his back, cracking several ribs, one of which punctured his left lung.

Sergeant Herndon was in even worse shape. The sappers atop the hill heaved a satchel charge down at where they could hear him screaming. It wounded not only Herndon but splattered Steele in his legs and rear end with more shrapnel, painfully flipping him over.

The first illumination round, fired by the mortar platoon on the firebase, popped overhead, trailing thick white smoke as it descended under its parachute. The enemy took cover, but when the flare burned out and the hilltop was again swallowed in darkness, another satchel charge came sailing toward Herndon. It landed on the left side of Steele—*boom!*—rupturing his eardrum. Another flare, another pause in the enemy fire. The flare blinked out. More satchel charges exploded. *Boom! Boom! Boom!*

Herndon's sobs were drawing most of the satchel charges, and Moyer hissed loudly to his buddy, "Shut up, Tom. Shut up."

Sergeant Moyer was back at his log, helmet hastily slapped on. Holding his fire so as not to give away his own position with a muzzle flash, he instead chucked frag grenades down the slope, not comprehending that the enemy soldiers throwing the satchel charges were actually inside the perimeter.

Each time Herndon screamed, Pfc. Richard J. Conrardy, the new platoon medic who had dived behind Moyer's log, muttered that he should try to go get the sergeant. "No, no, hold up," Moyer barked at him, "just hold up a minute—wait till this dies down."

Finally, Conrardy, a tall, skinny, nineteen-year-old conscientious objector from Wright, Kansas, blurted, "I've got to go get him."

Rising to his knees, Doc Conrardy was shot before he could make his move. He pitched backward against Moyer, who knew that the medic was dead as soon as he hit him; the kid was just a lifeless weight. Moyer, however, couldn't make sense of the fact that the shot that killed Conrardy had come from the top of the hill. Another satchel charge exploded moments later, abruptly snuffing out Herndon's screams. The acting platoon leader was dead. For having tried to get to Herndon, Conrardy was posthumously awarded the Silver Star.

Sergeant Lee N. Lenz was dug in with a machine-gun team between Herndon and Mueller to cover the trail that entered the perimeter from the southwest. The position was taken out with a satchel charge in the first moments of the attack. Though it is likely that some sappers had already infiltrated the perimeter, most probably darted in behind the satchel charge that eliminated that key M60. Lenz scrambled uphill for cover. His machine gunner, Sp4 Roger D. Sumrall of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, had been killed by the satchel charge and would be affectionately remembered by Campbell as a "tough, stocky bastard and a good soldier."

All that was later found of Sumrall's assistant gunner, Pfc. Stephen J. Harber—he was another good soldier, a quiet, blond-headed draftee with a wife back home in Minnesota—was a jungle boot with a foot inside and one of his dog tags secured to the laces. Harber apparently survived the explosion that killed Sumrall, only to be blown to bits moments later by an RPG. After the illumination rounds started, Steve Manthei saw someone who looked like Harber try to dash up the hill. "There was a hell of an explosion at that moment," recounted Manthei, "and he was gone. He was blown away. There were pieces of human everywhere. It was terrible. Harber had a lucky dollar bill that he carried with him all the time, and right after the explosion a ripped half of that dollar bill floated down next to my foxhole. I still have it. . . ."

Gary Steele crawled back to their blasted poncho hootch for his M16, only to find that the weapon had been damaged beyond use. Luckily, the grenades he had laid out were still there, but he was so rattled that after pulling the pins he threw the first two up where he had seen the RPG gunner without thinking to remove the safety clips on the spoons. Oh, you dumb son of a bitch, he thought; now they're gonna take them clips off and throw 'em back.

There were intense moments of automatic fire and explosions in the intervals between illumination rounds, lulls when new flares popped. "You just can't imagine how many satchel

charges went off. I want to say hundreds," noted Moyer. "There was a little AK fire, but not much. Not as much as we were firing our M16s."

The enemy infantry supporting the sapper attack could be heard down on the slope, and Moyer, like many others, thought they were the ones throwing the satchel charges. C'mon, give me a target, give me something to do here, he thought during one lull as the flares cast weird, shifting shadows through the naked trees. At that moment he heard a satchel charge land behind him. It rolled down against his boot. He crawled over his log like a shot and braced for the explosion. "It never did go off," he recalled. "I scooted back to my position, but it still hadn't registered that we had been overrun. I couldn't comprehend that they were behind me. You know, they don't get behind you. That just didn't happen."

When Mike Mueller opened fire, his team leader, Sergeant Mendez, snapped awake and jumped into the foxhole with him, as did their ammo bearer, a kid nicknamed Shaky. Mendez got behind the M60, ready to open fire and expose the position of this key weapon only when the enemy rushed in behind their satchel charges. Mueller fired single shots down the slope, not realizing until he happened to glance back and saw figures flitting against the night sky at the crest of the hill that sappers had already breached the perimeter. Before Mueller could swing his M16 around, he saw a satchel charge rolling down the hill at them. He pulled his head down. The first explosion was quickly followed by more—*boom, boom, boom!*—then the fourth or fifth satchel charge bounced into the hole, and Mendez, Mueller, and Shaky scrambled out in a heartbeat, going face first into the dirt below their position. *Boom!*

They piled back in. Mueller, having lost his web gear and ammo bandoliers, had only the single magazine in his M16. There was no time to fire, because another satchel charge fell in with them. They dove out of the foxhole again—*boom!*—then jumped back in. The first flare burst overhead at that moment, exposing two sappers in black pajamas who were crouched behind a log above them, methodically flipping satchel charges at their foxhole. Another one rolled in. Mueller

dove uphill, lost his footing, and slid back down the steep slope so that his left leg was across the top of the foxhole when the satchel charge at the bottom detonated. Mueller skidded into the hole, his knee a bloody mess, then popped up and frantically cut loose on the sappers with what was left of the magazine in his M16.

Many things were happening at the same time. Dreher and Doc Cafferty were still in their foxhole when a close friend of the medic's, Sp4 Robert P. Radcliffe, and a man Cafferty didn't recognize in the dark—it was Sergeant Lenz—clambered in with them, desperate for cover. The foxhole was no refuge. "There's too many people in here," Cafferty said. "They know this is the goddamn CP. We're all going to get killed with one grenade. I'm outta here."

With that, Cafferty started crawling away, unaware that almost as soon as he exited the foxhole an RPG exploded at its edge. Dreher survived the blast. Lenz and Radcliffe were decapitated.

Doc Cafferty shimmied over a fallen tree to his right, numbly noticing that his left forearm was sliced open. "I didn't care," he recalled. "I could still function, and that's all that mattered."

Seeing the artillery recon sergeant in a foxhole, Doc Cafferty "just fell in on top of him because I didn't know where else to go. I was scared shitless." It was tight quarters in the little hole, and Cafferty was in an awkward crouch, half in and half out, when "I got hit in the helmet with a goddamn grenade. It bounced off and was laying there in front of my face. It was a U. S. baseball grenade. I might have been able to reach it, but I just froze. I said to myself, that's it, I'm gone. I thought of my mother and my fiancée. . . ."

The grenade never exploded. Cafferty made a point to examine it after the battle and saw that, though the pin was missing, the spoon was still held down by a safety clip. He assumed a sapper had scooped up the U. S. grenade and thrown it without knowing he needed to do more than just pull the pin. Actually, the grenade was probably one of the two that Gary Steele had heaved uphill in such haste that he forgot to remove

the safeties. If Steele had removed them, he would have killed Cafferty and never known about it.

Cafferty suddenly realized that the artillery lieutenant was huddled at the bottom of the foxhole under the recon sergeant. "I swore I was going to kill that guy someday," said Cafferty. The FO was the ranking man on that hill after Captain Hewitt, but instead of taking command, "all he did was hide in his foxhole all night," noted Cafferty. "I guess I really can't blame him for being scared because we all were, but, Jesus, he should have did something."[1]

Furious with the lieutenant, Doc Cafferty jumped from the foxhole. He spotted a sapper and shouldered his M16. "I finally got my shit together and started shooting. I finally got some balls. . . ."

The sapper was standing about thirty feet away, ready to throw another satchel charge down at them. Bullshit, Cafferty thought as he squeezed off his entire magazine, putting most of eighteen rounds into the North Vietnamese. Fuck you.

The sapper went down like a spastic marionette. Jerry Cafferty—a wisecracking, extremely dedicated draftee-medic from an Irish neighborhood in West Haven, Connecticut—saw only then that another sapper was beside the first, and he frantically grabbed a fresh magazine from the bandolier across his chest. The magazine jammed in his weapon. Cafferty had no way of knowing until he inspected the magazine in the morning that it had already stopped a bullet for him. He'd been pumping adrenaline so furiously as he shot the first sapper that he hadn't realized that the second one had been blasting back at him with his AK. Cafferty hadn't felt a thing when a round hit the magazine in question, which was over the center of his chest, mangling the magazine so that it was useless in his M16.

Feeling insanely exposed as he struggled to clear the jam, Cafferty finally popped the malfunctioning magazine back out, thumped another one in, and resumed fire. He cut down the second sapper, along with several more who materialized out of the light and shadows. "I can still picture those guys lined up," Cafferty, awarded the Silver Star, would haltingly recall, still rattled, still haunted. "I just shot. I put it on semiautomatic, and just started firing 'em up as fast as I could. If they stopped

shooting, I figured I got 'em. I was scared to death. I had no idea why I was there in that country, but somebody had to do something. Everybody else on that side of the hill was dead or fucked up. There weren't a lot of other guys firing, and I figured I was already dead. I should have been killed by that satchel charge. I should have been killed by that grenade. I had already said my prayers and said good-bye to my girlfriend and my mother and father. I was gone. I didn't have anything to lose. . . ."

Bob Smoker was in his foxhole when he heard something and, turning, saw the silhouette of someone standing about ten feet uphill from him. The man didn't notice Smoker. By his size, he was obviously Vietnamese, and Smoker's first thought was that he was one of the NVA defectors attached to the company as a Kit Carson scout; but then it hit him that Hewitt, not trusting the scouts, had left all of them on Ripcord. The sapper was so close that Smoker didn't have to sight in but merely raise his M16 quietly and slowly in the silhouette's direction. He squeezed the trigger once. The sapper dropped like a stone, shot in the forehead. Other unseen sappers began whispering urgently to one another. Smoker lobbed two grenades in their direction. He didn't know if the frags killed the sappers or sent them scuttling for cover, but there was no more chatter.

Mike Mueller saw Shaky scramble down the hill after the third satchel charge landed in their hole. Mendez also disappeared in the chaos. Mueller might have been alone, but at that point he found his two missing ammunition bandoliers, which gave him a total of fourteen magazines. He also grabbed his web gear, to which several grenades were attached. Finally able to fight back, he began spraying the log shielding the two sappers who'd been throwing the satchel charges down at his foxhole. He crouched to change magazines, then popped back up to fire another burst—and realized that one of the sappers had popped up himself with his AK.

Mueller could hear shots cracking past his head, then what felt like a baseball bat caught him in his left shoulder, and he dropped back in his hole, stunned and numb. The two sappers, thinking him badly wounded, started down the hill to finish

him off. Suddenly enraged as he realized that this was for real, that these bastards meant to kill him, Mueller was about to pull the trigger of his M16 when Mendez sprang up directly in front of him from a hole in which he'd been hiding, screaming at Mueller as he tried to get away from the sappers, "Don't shoot, don't shoot."

Mendez dove to the left, leaving the enemy in full view again, but after almost shooting his team leader in the back, Mueller was too rattled to do anything but duck back down. Luckily, the sappers had also been unnerved by the commotion, and they scrambled back behind their log. They heaved a satchel charge toward Mendez, then charged down the hill again, one of them slung with bags of satchel charges, the other armed with a folding-stock AK-50.

Mike Mueller, a naive, dependable, Billy Budd type with a stammer that would put a smile on your face, had grown up on his stepfather's homestead in Alaska. To win the Silver Star, Mueller had leveled his M16 at the onrushing sappers and, remembering his training, raised his left index finger at the end of the barrel to give him something to guide on, because it was too dark to use the front sights. Mueller dropped the sapper with the AK-50, then nailed the one with the satchel charges in turn. The second sapper fell out of sight, screaming horribly, and Mueller burned off a couple more magazines, trying to shut him up. Able to take the keening no more, Mueller finally exited his foxhole to finish the man off. He was shot almost immediately in his left leg—again, it felt like a hard-swung baseball bat—by an enemy soldier who spotted him in the flare light. Mueller retreated back to his hole, and Mendez crawled in with him. The bullet hole in Mueller's upper thigh was the size of a quarter; when the shock wore off, his entire leg throbbed so badly he could barely move. The round had shattered the compass in his pocket, scoring his leg with little bits of metal, then ricocheted like a hot poker through the muscle from the ball joint of his hip to a point about six inches above his knee. He was bleeding badly.

The private battles continued. When Steve Manthei of Charlie One, in position with Tarbuck and Holthausen, heard

something moving in the undergrowth below them, he blew their claymore. The movement stopped. Most of the NVA were on Charlie Two's side of the hill, but they did hit the position occupied by Sgt. Daniel Smith, Charlie One's platoon sergeant, on the left flank of Charlie Two. Specialist Fourth Class Robert W. Zoller was killed, and Smith and the third man in the position were wounded.

Smith, terrified, kept screaming to Manthei for help. No way, Manthei thought, hoping that Smith didn't think him a chickenshit for not rushing headlong to his aid. There was no way to get over there without getting killed, though. If the sappers didn't blow you away, your own guys would in the confusion.

Instead, Manthei, Tarbuck, and Holthausen lobbed grenades out in front of Smith's position to keep the enemy at bay. Meanwhile, things were starting to quiet down, most of the sappers having been killed during the first thirty intense minutes of battle, when the Cobras finally made it to Hill 902. To mark the NVA infantrymen supporting the attack, Manthei threw one hand flare directly down the hill to the south and another as far as he could to the southwest, then got on the radio to the gunships: "Dump everything you got in a straight line from one flare to the other."

As the gunships made their passes, the fight on the hill dribbled away to an occasional explosion, an occasional shout. Sergeant Moyer, who hadn't actually seen a single enemy soldier, was still prone behind his log. He didn't hear the satchel charge that landed next to him. As he discovered in the morning, his rucksack had absorbed most of the blast, but he still caught a lot of shrapnel in his buttocks, and the explosion sent him tumbling down the hill. He instinctively kept a grip on his M16. After he could think straight again through the roaring in his ears, he realized that he was lying on his stomach among some tree limbs about fifteen feet from the cover of his log. His legs didn't feel right, and as he reached back to slap them awake he saw that the seat of his trousers was on fire. He frantically swatted out the little flickering flames, thinking not of being burned but being spotted by the sappers.

Moyer's heart was pounding. He had lost his helmet, he didn't have his ammo bandoliers, he didn't have any grenades.

He remembered, though, that he had thumped a fresh magazine in his rifle just before the explosion. He tried to decide if he should crawl back to his log. The problem was that Layne Hammons's gun team occupied the next position to the right of the log. Moyer became convinced that if he moved, Hammons would shoot him full of holes in a case of mistaken identification. The hell with it, Moyer thought, feeling secure enough where he was. I'm just gonna wait here till daylight and see what happens.

What happened was that another flare popped overhead, catching an NVA in green fatigues as he moved up the slope in a half crouch—his AK-47 at the ready—directly in front of Moyer. The man was about twenty feet away. Moyer instantly cut loose on semiautomatic—*pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop*—and the enemy soldier jerked backward four times as at least four rounds hit him. You've got to stop shootin', you fool, Moyer suddenly thought, you ain't got no more bullets. He ceased firing. Everything was quiet. The NVA was nowhere to be seen. Moyer desperately wondered how many rounds he had left. He touched the dust cover of his weapon. It was closed, meaning there was a round in the chamber. Good enough. He wasn't about to remove the magazine and check how many more rounds it contained, afraid that the noise would reveal him to any other enemy soldiers slinking along the slope. He stayed low. It would be morning soon enough.

In the hushed stillness that had fallen over the hill, Gary Steele could hear Vietnamese voices about twenty feet up from where he lay next to his smashed poncho hootch. The sappers were talking loudly, as if they owned the hill. I guess they think they won the war and we're all dead, Steele mused bitterly. Though in considerable pain from his wounds, he pulled the pin on a grenade, removed the safety clip, and crawled toward the sappers, afraid that if he didn't take care of them, they would eventually take care of him. They were squatting together, apparently planning their next move. Steele quietly pulled the spoon off the frag, let the grenade cook off—one, two, three—then tossed it into the group and scrambled back down the hill as fast as he could manage.

Steele lay low again until twilight, when he spotted three fellow survivors in a position down the line to his right as the sky began to turn a neon gray. No fire had come from that foxhole during the night, and Steele had assumed the three men there to be casualties. They were not. They were simply cherries—replacements too scared and confused to start blasting away in the dark.

When Steele saw them in the first hazy light of the morning, he called to them, "I'm wounded. I'm comin' over."

Not sure which side held the hill but expecting the worst, Steele pulled the pin on his last grenade and kept his hand wrapped around the spoon as he started crawling toward the foxhole. He was determined that if any sappers jumped him along the way, they'd be in for a big surprise when they rolled his body over.

To get to the foxhole, Steele had to get past a fallen tree. There wasn't enough room to crawl under it, so he backed up, got on his haunches, and dove over it. As he did so, a shot cracked out from behind. Instead of hitting the meat of Steele's buttocks, which would have been a bad but not permanently disabling wound, the round went straight up his anus, destroying his whole rectum.

It felt to Steele as though someone with a pointy-toed boot had kicked him for all he was worth right in his anus. The pain was so intense for one terrible second that he was surprised he didn't drop his grenade and blow himself up, but then everything went numb and he crawled on, furious that the cherries weren't laying down some cover fire. Another round cracked out, grazing his right knee.

Steele finally reached the foxhole, but it wasn't much of a hole, and for Steele to pull himself in, one of the cherries had to get behind some other piece of cover. The petrified kid did so only reluctantly. Steele held up his frag, meaning to get rid of it, but he was fading at that point and instead slipped and let the spoon fly off. One of the new guys snatched the grenade and heaved it down the hill. Steele asked for a cigarette, then lay back in the hole, feeling relieved, almost safe. The last thing he remembered before passing out was turning to the cherries and saying, "I quit."

* * *

It is impossible to know if any sappers escaped the perimeter before dawn. Four of them were definitely still inside at daybreak. They tried to slip out the way they had come but, having waited too long, were silhouetted against the twilight skyline as they started down from the top of the hill. Mike Mueller, rising up from his foxhole, squared the sights of his M16 on the head of the first sapper, then emptied the rest of the magazine on the next one in line, leaving them both sprawled dead on the hillside. The other two darted behind some debris, and Mueller lobbed two frags in that direction. The enemy soldiers did not reappear. They were found later where the grenades had gotten them, one of them sprawled atop an RPG launcher that was pointed toward Mueller's position.

CHAPTER 5

Picking Up the Pieces

The silence just before twilight was so total that Sergeant Moyer wondered whether he was the only man left alive on the hill, although he knew that was impossible. When it got light enough, he made eye contact with Layne Hammons. Moyer held up two fingers and pointed to his front. Hammons's assistant gunner, Chuck Damron, pulled the pins on two frags and, moving down to Moyer, scanned the jungle with hard eyes as he asked in a hard whisper, "Whatcha got?"

"The last dink I seen was right there," Moyer answered, gesturing to the spot where he had blasted the now-missing NVA.

Damron threw his grenades, then stayed with Moyer until the relief force began landing. Moyer checked how many rounds he had left—he had to know—and discovered that in addition to the one in the chamber he had only one more in the magazine. He turned loose of his M16 as Damron helped him up the hill. They passed the bodies of numerous half-naked, charcoal-streaked sappers along the way, and a dumbfounded Moyer realized for the first time that the enemy had been inside the perimeter with them.

The top of the mountain had been secured shortly before the arrival of the relief force by Doc Cafferty, who, hearing shouts and screams from wounded men on Charlie Two's side of the hill, did what had to be done to get to them. The senior medic

rounded up two guys from a nearby foxhole—they looked scared to death, and he had the impression they'd played turtle during the whole fight—and, barking at one to get on his right, the other his left to cover him, he nervously started up the hill, not trusting that his wide-eyed companions wouldn't freeze if they ran into trouble. One of the wounded men screeching in pain was the sapper with the bags of satchel charges who had been cut down earlier by Mike Mueller. There was a single shot in the morning stillness that abruptly silenced the enemy soldier, then Mueller heard Cafferty shout, "Currahee."

The old regimental motto served as a catchall password in situations where friend could not be distinguished from foe. Mueller gave the obscene counterresponse with his distinctive stutter: "C-c-currahee, m-m-mother-f-f-fucker."

"Alaska, is that you?" Cafferty shouted, hearing the stutter.

Mueller called back that it was, and Cafferty shouted, "Get up here and help me clear this hill."

"I'm w-w-wounded."

"We all are, man. Get up here."

Cafferty and Mueller walked the entire hilltop at that point, methodically shooting each sprawled-out NVA in the back of his head. "To this day I regret having to do that," Cafferty would recall sadly, "but what was I going to do? I didn't want to walk by one who wasn't really dead and have him shoot me in the back."

Bob Smoker threw unexploded satchel charges off the hill. There were dozens of the one-pound blocks, and it didn't register with Smoker in the heat of the moment that any one of them could have exploded in his hands. Meanwhile, in the absence of anyone else able or willing to take over, Doc Cafferty realized that he was the de facto commander of Charlie Company. Frantic to get to the wounded, he first had to reestablish the perimeter. He spread out the survivors to fill the empty foxholes, then, grabbing what few battle dressings he saw lying around in the debris, he started doing what he could for the wounded, bandaging those he had bandages for and organizing litter teams to get them up to the LZ.

Gary Steele dimly realized that six troopers were carrying him up the hill in a poncho. Cafferty hit him with morphine—

the pain miraculously ebbed away—and slapped the biggest dressing he had over Steele's split-open anus, then told a new guy to stay with Steele and keep him talking, to make sure he didn't go into shock.

"Where you from?" the cherry babbled encouragingly. "Hang in there. . . . You're doing great. . . . You're going home, man."

Steele knew what the cherry was doing. He had done it himself for other wounded men in other firefights. He wasn't listening. Instead, he asked about the guys who had been at his position.

"Sergeant Moyer's doin' good," the cherry said.

"Where's Tom?" Steele knew that Tom Herndon was dead but wanted to see him one last time before he was medevacked.

"Tom's fine," the new guy lied. "He's over there, he's okay—"

"Bullshit. How many pieces is he in?"

Nearby, other troops were stacking up the dead sappers. "How many did we get?" Steele asked angrily. "A lot," the cherry said. The body count was fifteen, not including the numerous blood trails leading down the hill. Against that, Company C had one man, Steve Harber, who was missing in action (MIA), seven killed in action (KIA), and six officially wounded in action (WIA).

Cafferty found Dreher, the senior radioman, sitting deaf, wounded, and dazed after having coordinated illum and supporting fires while dodging satchel charges. Captain Hewitt was nearby in a mangled clump, both legs and one arm blown off, his remaining limb hanging on by a few strands of muscle. Seething at the stupidity of the captain's death, sickened and saddened by the waste, the senior medic wrapped Hewitt's remains in a poncho.

Moving on, Cafferty also policed up Lenz and his good buddy Bob Radcliffe, whom he was stunned to find in the foxhole he had vacated during the fight. They had no heads—a piece of skull the size of a cupped hand was flopped down on one's back—and their upper bodies were red and black mush, cauterized by the heat of the RPG that killed them. Sergeant

Lenz was identified by the cutoffs he had worn during the recent battalion stand-down when the company was trucked down for an afternoon at Eagle Beach, the division's R&R center on the South China Sea. He was still wearing the cutoffs under his fatigue trousers.

"It was the worst thing we'd ever seen," said Manthei of the scene on the hilltop. "I remember this one black kid, he lost it. He grabbed a machine gun and poured about three hundred rounds into some dead gooks that were piled up on the south side of the hill. We all consoled him, and told him it don't mean nothin', you gotta move on, that we were gonna get all our boys and get the hell outta there."

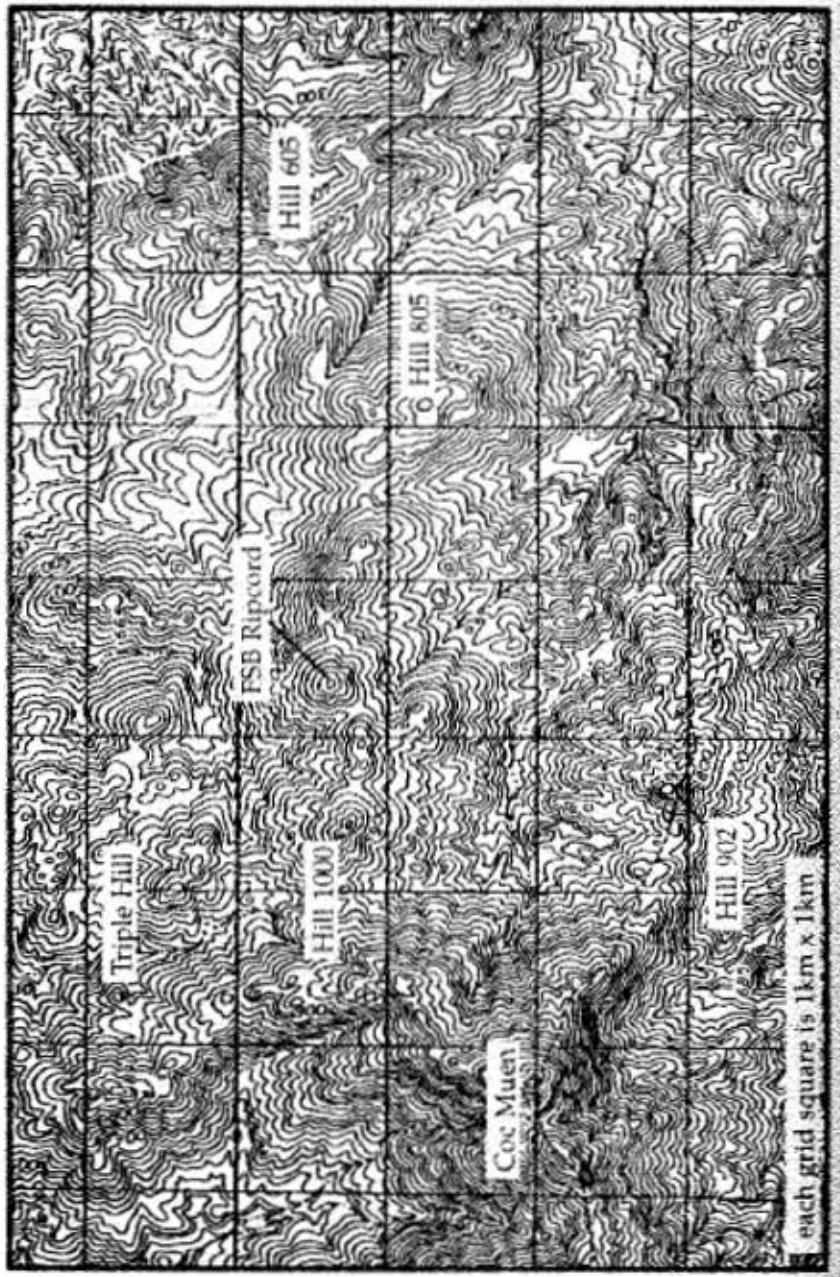
Captain Lieb and Sergeant Burkey's platoon, Charlie Three, had departed Ripcord under mortar fire and were inserted into the LZ on 902 under ground fire. Burkey's people urgently fanned out across the hilltop, securing it, shocked at the devastation that had been wrought upon their buddies from the other platoons. "Some of the survivors had that thousand-yard stare," said Sgt. Frank Bort, a squad leader in Charlie Three. "They were devastated."

For all that, when Burkey tried to medevac his buddy Cafferty, whose left arm hung limp and bloody, the medic shot back, "No way, I'm not leavin' this hill till all my men are out of here."

Cafferty placed Hewitt's remains inside one of the Hueys. When Steve Harber's foot-filled jungle boot was found, part of Charlie Three pushed down the mountain, trying to find the rest of his body. There was no sign of the missing man. During the search, Sgt. Rodney G. Moore saw someone's brains splattered against a tree. "I didn't know if it was from an American or a Vietnamese," he recalled, adding that "everyone was uptight because we knew the North Vietnamese had the hill zeroed in, and the longer we stayed there the more likely it was we were going to get mortared."

Captain Lieb called in tac air when the mortaring began. Red smoke was popped, a warning to the pilots, as the Hueys landed for the KIAs and WIAs. The wounded included several guys who claimed to be deaf, so desperate were they to get to the rear. After the casualties were evacuated, what was left of

Charlie One and Two was shuttled to Ripcord. Lieb and Charlie Three were lifted out shortly before noon. Rodney Moore was the last man on the last Huey. The enemy mortar was thumping again. The slick came to a hover several feet off the ground, and the four guys with Moore immediately hauled themselves aboard, knowing that the pilot had no time to linger. Moore, terrified that he might be left behind, jumped toward the skid with a surge of adrenaline and hit the metal with one foot just as the pilot started to lift off. Having turned as he pushed himself up, he landed on his rear in the center of the cabin so that he was looking out the door as a mortar round exploded an instant later off to one side of the landing zone. Several more rounds landed on top of the smoky hill as the helicopter banked away.



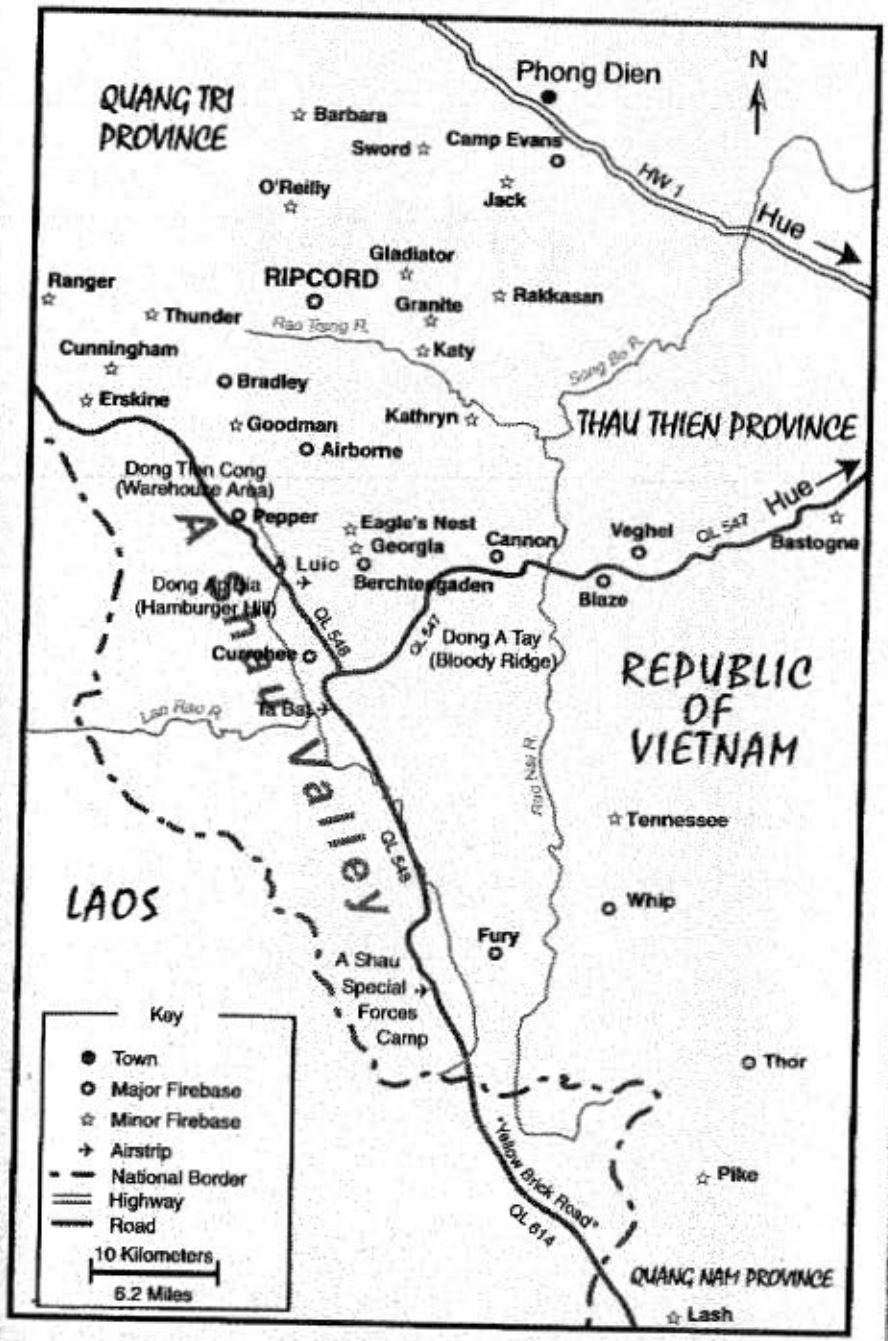
Glossary

AA antiaircraft fire
ADC assistant division commander
AIT advanced individual training
AK-47 standard communist 7.62mm automatic rifle; a version with a folding metal stock was known as an AK-50
AO area of operations
ARA aerial rocket artillery
Arc Light bombing mission by B-52 Stratofortresses
arty artillery
ARVN Army of the Republic of Vietnam
ASP ammunition supply point
blivet rubberized bag used for transporting and storing fuel and water
CA combat assault
C&C command-and-control helicopter
CAR15 shortened, all-metal version of the M16 5.56mm automatic rifle
C4 plastic explosives
CG commanding general
Chinook nickname for the CH-47 transport helicopter
CO commanding officer
Cobra nickname for the AH-1G helicopter gunship
CP command post
CS tear gas

DEROS date eligible for return from overseas
DISCOM Division Support Command
div arty division artillery
DMZ demilitarized zone
DOW died of wounds
EOD explosive ordnance disposal
E1 pay grade for recruit private
E2 pay grade for private
E3 pay grade for private first class
E4 pay grade for corporal or specialist fourth class
E5 pay grade for sergeant or specialist fifth class
E6 pay grade for staff sergeant or specialist sixth class
E7 pay grade for sergeant first class
E8 pay grade for first sergeant or master sergeant
E9 pay grade for sergeant major or command sergeant major
FA field artillery
FAC forward air controller
FDC fire direction center
FO forward observer
FSB fire-support base
G1 personnel officer at division or corps level
G2 intelligence officer at division or corps level
G3 operations officer at division or corps level
G4 logistics officer at division or corps level
HE high explosive
HHC Headquarters & Headquarters Company
Huey nickname for the UH-1 helicopter
Intruder nickname for the A-4 all-weather jet fighter-bomber
JP4 aviation fuel
KIA killed in action
klick kilometer
LAW light antitank weapon
LNO liaison officer
LOH light observation helicopter
LP listening post
LRRP long-range reconnaissance patrol
LZ landing zone
MA mechanical ambush

MACV Military Assistance Command Vietnam
MG machine gun
MIA missing in action
M16 standard U.S. 5.56mm automatic rifle
M60 standard U.S. 7.62mm light machine gun
M79 standard U.S. 40mm grenade launcher
M203 M16 rifle modified with 40mm grenade launcher under barrel
NCO noncommissioned officer (pay grades E4 to E9)
NDP night defensive position
NVA North Vietnamese Army
OCS Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia
OP observation post
ops operations
Phantom nickname for the F-4 jet fighter-bomber
PIO public information office
POL petroleum-oil-lubricant
PRC25 standard infantry radio
PSP pierced steel planking
R&R rest-and-recreation leave
REMF rear-echelon motherfucker
RIF reconnaissance in force
ROTC Reserve Officer Training Corps
RPG rocket-propelled grenade
RPD standard communist 7.62mm machine gun
RTO radiotelephone operator
shake 'n bake nickname for graduates of the Noncommissioned Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia
S1 personnel officer at battalion or brigade level
S2 intelligence officer at battalion or brigade level
S3 operations officer at battalion or brigade level
S4 logistics officer at battalion or brigade level
SOI signal operating instructions
SSI special signal intercept
TOC tactical operations center
USAF United States Air Force
USARV United States Army Vietnam
USMA United States Military Academy at West Point, New York

VC Viet Cong
WIA wounded in action
WP white phosphorus
XO executive officer



(For a detailed map of hill country around Firebase Ripcord, see page 242.)