

RIPCORD REPORT

For Friends and Survivors of FSB RIPCORD, RVN

A Newsletter

No. 32, July 1992

Friendly Fire Casualties
By Maj. Charles F. Hawkins
Courtesy of American Sentinel

Approximately 23 percent of all U.S. battlefield casualties in Operation Desert Storm resulted from friendly fire, a surprisingly high figure, but recently released research of historical data indicates that the figure was not only in line but could have been -- and probably was -- anticipated.

My first experience with friendly fire occurred on April 7, 1970 while I was a lieutenant leading troops in the rugged A Shau Valley area of South Vietnam.

On that day minigun and rocket-armed AH-1 "Cobra" attack helicopters circling overhead were under the control of a sister company. Over the crackling static of my radio I heard a fire mission being sent to the flight leader, and only too late did it become clear that we had mistakenly become the target. In quick succession, each Cobra made a pass, spewing machine gun bullets that spanged off rocks and dug furrows in the earth. None of them struck us. It was a matter of luck. It is often a matter of luck once triggers are pulled.

In any event, a check-fire command was issued, the Cobras quit their misdirected efforts, and we, though badly shaken, continued on our mission.



... at the entrance to Arlington Nat'l Cemetery

The problem of friendly fire has not been the subject of much study. The definitive work often cited during Operation Desert Storm is titled Amicide: The Problem of Friendly Fire in Modern War, and was prepared in 1982 by Dr. Charles R. Schrader (a retired army colonel). Schrader's work, based on case studies and combat anecdotes, suggests that casualties from friendly fire in other wars have been about two percent of all battle casualties. This figure has been publicly compared with the much higher Desert Storm percentage, forcing the military services, and the U.S. Army in particular, to explain what went wrong. [Continued on page 7 ...]

STAFF JOURNAL: LZ OAKTON

It has been about four months since the March Ripcord Report made it into April's mail box -- not bad for an older, former "Old Man" with eyesight that's beginning stiffen. So, instead of the monthly, or bi-monthly, or quarterly newsletter that Roger (Chip of B/2-506) Collins envisioned nearly a decade ago (has it been that long?) the newsletter is a thirdly.

Break.

This is the time of year that Ripcord is much on our minds, and it should be. We should remember our commitment to each other as well as to our country at a time when the crisis in America threatened our national stability. We did a tough job in a time of turmoil for which there was little thanks or appreciation. Instead, we thanked each other and formed bonds that extend across time and space, special bonds that can't be broken or taken away.

When we think about Ripcord, and the intervening 22 years, we should also take a moment to remember those who fell in battle. Theirs was the ultimate sacrifice; it is part of the complex glue of combat that forms the special relationship that Vietnam veterans, and Ripcord veterans, share.

It is a strange paradox that we have, in part, our dead brothers to thank for the bond of combat brotherhood, for the whole of the bond is greater than the sum of its individual parts. Yet we, like other veterans of other wars, are also less whole because those who are gone. When they died -- from bullets, or grenades and rockets, or by mines and mortar fire -- a piece of us died too; perhaps a piece of us that is always dying, a little each day.

Remember Ripcord. It is what distinguishes us. Ripcord is a part of the proud history of the 101st Airborne Division, although it was a little-known, and remains a poorly-remembered battle.

However, as many of you know, visitors to Arlington National Cemetery, across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C., can view the 101st Memorial at the entrance. If they look closely, along with the names of Bastogne and Normandy and others, they will see the inscription "Ripcord" in the grey granite base of the monument. Our fallen comrades are remembered there too, as well as in the black granite of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial.

Break.

News item. The Battle of Ripcord is headlined in a national publication, American Sentinel, in its next issue. The paper features commentary on military affairs and international matters, as well as historical perspectives, topical analyses and a bit of humor and light reading.

By arrangement, each person on the Ripcord Association's mailing list will receive a complimentary copy. (Since yours truly is one of the publishers, it wasn't hard to arrange.) If you like the paper, subscription information is on page 19. If you don't much care for it, well, like we used to say, "its a lick on me."

Gotta run, can't miss the publishing deadline. Curraheel!

Chuck Hawkins, Editor.

Below: Masthead from a recent issue.

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FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS: Joe Shepherd Sr, John Palm, Gary Steele, Ken Hamilton, and Gary Jestes -- Many thanks, and Currahee!

INCOMING

JOHN PALM FINDS ANOTHER RIPCORD VET!

The following exchange of correspondence brought the Ripcord Association to the attention of Wayne R. Sinks (E/2-506 Mortars), boosting our roster strength by one.

Feb. 4, 1992

Dear Mr. Palm,

Several years ago I saw in the VFW Magazine "Authors and Queries Section" your inquiry about fellow members of the 2/501st Infantry and Co. D (101st Abn.), Hill 805, FSB Ripcord, July 12-18, 1970.

As much has been written about Hamburger Hill, it is hard to believe NOTHING was written about Ripcord! But then again, I guess you had to be there -- Heaven forbid!

Wasn't it amazing how the press didn't find out about it until it was over and even at that some of the casualties were being "hidden" in the Apache Snow Operation? Sixty one Americans killed and another 354 wounded and who has ever heard of it?

I was on Ripcord for quite some time. My MOS was 11C10 (mortars, 81-mm), but I spent my first six months with Co. B as 11B10 (infantryman). My next six months was with Co. E in mortars. We were on Ripcord for the duration of the battle 'till the evacuation on July 23, 1970.

I was with the 2/506th Infantry -- Currahee! Our battalion commander and battalion S-3 were killed during the evacuation. The battalion CO, Lt. Col. Andre Lucas, later received the Medal of Honor. Also killed was 1Lt. Bob Kalsu in artillery. He had played pro football with the Buffalo Bills.

I subscribe to Vietnam Magazine and wrote them a letter about the battle a few months ago, and they never even acknowledged they got the letter!

If you have written a book about Ripcord, or know of any info in any books regarding it, please let me know about it.

Sorry about the sloppy writing, but it's almost midnight and I have to work tomorrow.

Thanks for your time.

Wayne R. Sinks, Chuckey, Tenn.

Mar. 23, 1992

Dear Chuck,

Greetings! We haven't been in contact for a while, but after belatedly answering the enclosed letter, I thought I'd pass it on to you for whatever interest it provides you. I'm not sure from Wayne's letter whether he knows about the Ripcord Report, so I'm sending him a copy of the latest one I have, #29, April '91.

I always enjoy your Ripcord newsletters, especially your own accounts. You put heart as well as mind into your writing. Well done!

I think it's time I made a contribution too, for the report, so I enclose a check.

One question: On page 2 of the last issue one MIA is listed in the Ripcord casualties. Wasn't this later corrected to zero MIA? If he stayed MIA (unless blown to pieces), wouldn't this have raised a repeated stink, from relatives, congressmen, etc? (In a bad April 71, Co. D, 2/501st encounter, I think there were initially MIA accounts too.)

What has happened to Chip Collins by the way? He was an early contact of mine in the 1970s.

In case I didn't tell you, my 2nd son, who also served in 'Nam -- Air Force, stayed in and ended up a pilot (KC-135 refueling tanker) in Desert Storm. He returned Jul. 1, 1991, 30 years to the day after I retired from the Navy. He had a war at the beginning and a war at the end of his career! Between us, we cover 55 years of service -- 1936-1961, 1970-1991 -- and four wars: WWII, Korea, Vietnam and Gulf War.

Regards. Hope all goes well. Visit if you're back this way.
John W. Palm, Lutz, Fla.

THE ENEMY

Major Malcom A. Danner
Major Billy J. Biberstein

Editor's Note: This article is from the May-June 1969 issue of Infantry, "...the professional magazine for infantrymen," and is the fourth (and last) in a series reprinted in the "Ripcord Report."

"The North Vietnamese don't like it under the yoke of the Communist party ... American Infantry Units are weak, their fire power is poor and their equipment is poor ... We know we cannot defeat the Americans, as it is almost impossible to defeat you ... We will win the war politically, not militarily ..."

These are some of the random thoughts and views of a young lieutenant in the North Vietnamese Army who was wounded in action and subsequently captured by an American unit in South Vietnam in 1968.

The information, views and opinions in this article are those of the NVA lieutenant and do not reflect the official position of any Department of Defense agency.

This is his story, continued ...

AMERICAN UNITS ARE WEAK

The North Vietnamese soldier is better than the South Vietnam soldier but the ARVN have artillery. The American soldier is stronger built and more intelligent but he is not familiar with the terrain so the North Vietnam soldier has an advantage. The U.S. soldier is very poor when moving through the terrain. The American infantry units are weak, their firepower is poor and their equipment is poor. An example of this is an American unit cannot take or destroy a machine gun position in a properly prepared bunker except by calling for air or artillery; however, the NVA can destroy any American bunker with its



B40 or B41 rocket. [Editor's note: Huh? Say again, over.]

The ARVN forces are weak because their equipment is poor; more than poor. The RF/PF and CIDG (Vietnamese civilian paramilitary groups) are also poor. There is some collaboration among the RF/PR units done by the Local Force units and then the arrangements are passed on to the NVA. I feel there are many communist agents and sympathizers in the South Vietnam units and agencies. I know that on the B52 strikes we normally had advance warning as to where and when they would occur. The warning usually came by a message from division to the regiment and it normally arrived two hours prior to the strike. As I remember the most time we ever had was four hours. In one instance warning arrived just minutes before the air strike and we just made it out of the area when it was hit and demolished. I think that 70 to 80 percent of all NVA casualties are caused by artillery or air.

[Editor's note: By contrast, nine percent of all U.S. combat deaths in the Vietnam War occurred in aircraft losses; 40 percent died of gunshot wounds; 45 percent by some form of indirect fire; and the remainder from other explosions or unknown causes. Source: War Without Fronts, by Thomas C. Thayer, a "CONFIDENTIAL" analysis of the Vietnam War that has since been declassified.]

The quality of our officers is good to bad. Some are knowledgeable about military matters and some are not. This depends on the unit. The officer-EM relationship in the NVA is very good. During off duty hours we talk with each other, and have a mutual understanding as we all have the same problems and troubles.

Without the Local Force units in South Vietnam the NVA is useless. The LF are the link between the NVA and the South Vietnam battlefield areas. The NVA soldiers feel very sorry for the LF units, even pity them, as they lack weapons, food and equipment. The VC units are very poor -- they are weak both politically and militarily. We all have an understanding though and the VC and NVA are close and united.

I have heard of the Chieu Hoi program but I don't know what it is. I have heard a little about it from an airplane but we really didn't pay much attention as it was very poor propaganda and the voice did not sound sincere.

I have seen lots of psyops leaflets but they are very poor and we laugh at them, they make no impression on the soldier of the NVA. I saw them in Kontum and Darlac provinces as we moved toward our objectives. The quality of the writing is very poor and not good Vietnamese. The Americans should let the Vietnamese write them as they know how to put the story or what you want to say into poetry, the Vietnamese are a very poetic people.

All the men in my unit could read and write and they had to have a minimum of a second class education.

In the infantry units, the education minimum is lower but most can read or write to some degree.

We do have radios to listen to and when we can get batteries, we listen to music. We are not allowed to listen to the South Vietnam radio station and I do not like to listen to the news because it is usually propaganda and politics.

I have heard about free elections in South Vietnam. It is quite normal for South Vietnam to have free elections but we do not know if the elections are a political trick or if they are real.

Many soldiers worry about their loved ones. I thought of my mother many times but there was no mail. When we first entered South Vietnam eight months ago, our superiors assembled the unit and instructed us to write a letter home to our relatives and tell them we were happy and in good health. I did have a letter box number and so did my men. Our leaders told us it would require four months for the letter to arrive in North Vietnam and five months to return. I have never received a letter from North Vietnam and none of my men have either.

The people in North Vietnam are like the deaf and blind, they do not know what goes on, just what the communists tell them. When North Vietnam denies having the NVA in South Vietnam, our leaders are speaking incorrectly. They are lying. I think it is silly and ridiculous. If we don't fight, our families will be harassed by the government. This kind of propaganda is for you to pick up, it is not broadcast to the North Vietnamese people or our military units. This really doesn't affect the morale of our troops as they are not made aware of it.

The North Vietnamese people have no opinion of the allied forces assisting South Vietnam as they are too far from the front. Among the NVA forces in South Vietnam this kind of talk is not carried on because of the

political officer's presence. I am not surprised at the presence of the Free World Forces in South Vietnam as they have a right to request aid the same as the North Vietnamese government.

I really don't know about the bombing halt as I've been in South Vietnam since February. At first the people in North Vietnam were very scared of the bombs but now they consider it a rule of the war. The people just complain that they don't know why you drop them; the people don't really know the political situation. I hear they were pleased and happy when you stopped bombing them. They had guessed you would stop the bombing before you did. They feel that you stopped the bombing because you wanted peace.

I have heard a little about the peace talks on the radio from Hanoi but I have no opinion on them. I think the only answer is a North Vietnam and a South Vietnam. There are just too

many differences on each side. Once divided, the country should be controlled by an International Commission at the DMZ. The U.N. cannot control it as they have the problem of communism versus the free world. Most of the people want a united Vietnam because they want an end to the war. They want a unification of both sides.

I compare the war to a Chinese Chess game. The Americans and the South Vietnamese are compared to the horse (a knight of our chess game). They are strong but don't know the moves. The NVA is a weaker horse but knows the moves.

We know we cannot defeat Americans as it is almost impossible to defeat you, but the military operations just occur to back the political aspects. We will win the war politically, not militarily.

[Editor's note: Pretty damned prescient for guy captured in 1968.]



Continued from page 1 . . .

Things indeed seem to have gone wrong in Desert Storm. Of 488 battlefield casualties in Iraq and Kuwait, 107 -- 23 percent -- came at our own hand, a stark contrast to Schrader's two percent figure. This gives the appearance of symptomatic and poorly understood ills within the military system that fights our wars.

This appearance is misleading because the two percent number is wrong. New historical evidence indicates that we wound and kill our own personnel more frequently than previously thought.

We know that egregious errors in warfighting are not new, but detailed examination of mistakes is distasteful, and helps explain why more work has not been performed to understand friendly fire. A challenge of the two percent figure shows that Desert Storm friendly fire casualties are in line with historical experience, but with a lethal twist.

Initially, it seemed that two percent was "about right," based on personal experience, but on further reflection I realized that I wasn't sure, and wondered what the actual statistics from the historical record would show.

Memory fades with time, even that of combat veterans; events are forgotten, poorly recalled. Schrader's assessment, based on interviews and war-story evidence, did not look at hard data in the day-to-day life of a battalion in combat.

To refute or confirm Schrader's claim, the new study examined historical combat data from staff journals of the 2d Battalion, 506th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, for a four-month period in the Vietnam War. The data show 175 combat actions from February through May 1970 that resulted in 159 battlefield casualties -- 33 killed in action (KIA), and 126 wounded in action (WIA).

Ten of the combat actions involved friendly fire incidents, resulting in zero KIAs, and 22 WIAs, or 13.8 percent of battlefield casualties caused by friendly fire. The worst month during this period was April, in which the battalion suffered 15.8 percent of losses to friendly fire; the best month was February with 10.3 percent.

The cause of wounds varied: There were two incidents involving AH-1 Cobra attack

helicopters, where rockets wounded a total of eight soldiers. On three occasions friendly mortar fire accounted for five WIA, and four WIA resulted from three small arms fire incidents. An artillery incident wounded four; and close air support from F-4 "Phantom" jets, dropping bombs and napalm, injured one trooper.

It could have been worse, a lot worse, if the two Cobras that came in hot, firing on me and the men I led, had injured anyone. They didn't, and I did not have to include casualty data from an 11th friendly fire incident in the study of the battalion in which I served so many years ago.

Conclusions

At least one unit in modern warfare (in addition to those in Desert Storm), for a period of approximately four months, suffered friendly fire casualties at levels five to eight times greater than the accepted historical norm -- much closer to that of U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf.

The lethal difference between Desert Storm and the Vietnam War study is that, in the relatively low intensity of the Vietnam fighting, there happened to be no KIAs, and in the higher intensity Desert Storm there were 35 KIAs due to friendly fire.

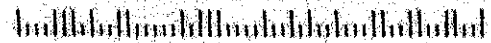
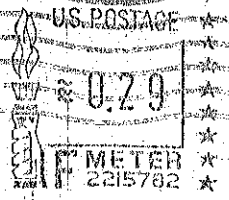
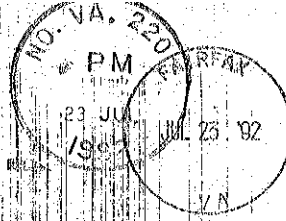
A similar, but more detailed analysis of the historical record of combat prior to Operation Desert Storm would have changed expectations for friendly fire casualties. It could also have helped preparations, including modification of tactical procedures used on a complex battlefield.

There are, of course, great differences between the 1990-1991 Gulf War and Vietnam; but there are similarities too. Comparisons and contrasts should be made, not only between the Vietnam War and the war against Saddam Hussein, but also with organized historical combat data from other wars.

Major Charles F. Hawkins, USAR, has served 24 years as an infantry officer. He is President of the Historical Evaluation and Research Organization of Fairfax, Virginia.

RIPCORD REPORT

For Friends and Survivors of FSB RIPCORD, RVN



**JUNGLE
JOLLIES** by
gack

Ed, you gotta do something about that cold. Do you want Ho Chi Minh to accuse us of germ warfare?

