

2/506th 101st Abn Unit History 1970

INTRODUCTION

Who can say at what distant point in the gulf of time will the tribes of man lay down their arms and join hands in peace? That the time will not come easily or soon, this we know. The tyrant chieftains will continue their ravages, sinning against the earth as they do against each other and each new generation will be required to send brave men to check their tyranny. Yet when the last tyrant falls into his mouldy grave, a warrior from the Cherokee nation will step forth from the resting place of his ancestors and stand alone on a mountain somewhere in northern Georgia. His cry will ring clear and true and the chambers of our souls will echo: CURRAHEE.

PREFACE

The year 1970 was not a good year for the "Best of the Currahees." Any soldier will tell you that a year of war is never good. But it was a proud year. You could see it in the faces of the officers and enlisted men. Pride? Pride in themselves, pride in each other, pride in their unit. 1970 was a year when the Currahees of the 2d Battalion (Airmobile) 506th Infantry (2/506) stood alone as never before. It was the year of the battle of Firebase Ripcord. If ever in the Vietnam conflict there was a forward edge of the battle area, Firebase Ripcord in the year 1970 was at that forward edge. Situated deep in the jungled mountains twenty miles northwest of Hue, Firebase Ripcord practically overlooked the frightening A Shau Valley. For the better part of the year the 2/506 operated on and in the vicinity of Ripcord. It was here that we met our enemy, the NVA. And here also was where we experienced most of our heartaches and frustrations, our successes and comradeship. True, there were other places and actions. We began the year at Firebase Jack and during the year we knew others: Shepard, Davis, Granite, Gladiator, O'Reilly, Katheryn, Rakkasan, and Maureen. New places and old, we came to know them all but Ripcord we knew best. It seems only fitting that the thrust of this history be dedicated to the men of the 2/506th Infantry who fought and died by Ripcord and throughout the year of 1970.

HISTORY OF THE 2/506th INFANTRY FOR 1970

The dank chill of the northeast monsoon brought a feeling of excitement to LTC Howard G. Crowell Jr. as he watched the last lift of slicks drop his men on Currahee Pad at Camp Evans. This would be an ambitious month, an ambitious year. He quickly went over in his mind the operations that were planned for the near future. Yes, they were going to be aggressive operations and his Currahees would be taxed heavily. The present stand-down would be a good time to review techniques of operation and go over details with his company commanders.

As Operation Jefferson Glen carried over into the new year and rest and stand-down drew to an end, the excitement mounted. Delta Company under CPT Dwight Walhood would go far and wide searching for the enemy. Two artillery raids were planned for January and Delta Company would make aggressive thrusts to Firebase Shepard and Firebase Davis. The remainder of the battalion would operate in the coastal plains region near Firebase Jack. CPT Vincent Felletter, soon to turn Alpha Company over to CPT Albert Burkhart, would be responsible for the security of Firebase Jack. Bravo Company and Charlie Company were given search and clear missions that would take them to the threshold of NVA territory in the mountains south of Camp Evans. CPT Glynn Hale had turned the command of Charlie Company over to CPT Isabellino Vasquez-Rodriguez, a hardened campaigner who would undertake some of the most successful operations of the new year. CPT Carmelito Arkangel Jr. commanding Bravo Company would lead his Currahees through difficult times as the battalion drove into enemy territory.

The stage was set, the players cast and the machinery of war awoke, ready to strike. And strike the 2/506th did. The raid to Firebase Shepard yielded little in the way of action but the raid to Davis was a different story. Delta Company located and destroyed enemy caches, booby traps and mine fields. As the 3rd Platoon hovered into Davis to join the remainder of Delta Company, enemy small arms fire met the aircraft. Intense suppressive fire quickly discouraged the enemy and he fled the area. Delta Company had found the enemy; they would all live to find him again. Bravo Company in the meantime was having a more difficult time. The VC and the NVA seemed to avoid contact and instead employed booby traps to harass and cause casualties to the men of Bravo. But CPT Arkangel's men were not to be denied their success. They had found the enemy; they would kill him if they could. On 4 February the first platoon lay in wait along a freshly used enemy trail. If the monsoon rains had dulled the senses of the VC it had done just the opposite to the men laying in ambush. They were fully alert as two VC crept silently down the trail. When the last crack of the rifles echoed, two VC lay

dead in the kill zone.

Meanwhile, slipping silently into terrain where few had ever been, the Battalion Recon Platoon, working in six-to-eight man teams, accomplished missions with singular success. On 25 January and again on 27 January the platoon sprung ambushes on unsuspecting NVA resulting in two NVA dead. Again and again the Recon Platoon displayed their superior ability and by the end of March they had accounted for another two NVA dead and numerous captured weapons and documents. 1LT Gary Watrous had honed his men to a keen fighting edge. It was an edge they would need in the very near future.

Alpha and Charlie Companies had a relatively quiet time during the month of January, but as the cool rains introduced February, both units found themselves heavily engaged with the enemy. Working ever deeper into the mountains, Charlie Company found the enemy. Death is an unpleasant surprise to the unsuspecting. Exactly how many enemy were unpleasantly surprised by Charlie Company is not known but from 7 to 10 February the 2d Platoon of Charlie Company ran roughshod over an estimated NVA platoon. Alpha ran into stiff resistance on several occasions and sustained several casualties due to NVA ambushes, mortar attacks and booby traps. On 1 March Alpha started a short and fierce firefight that yielded one NVA dead. The second of March found Charlie Company again in contact resulting in one enemy dead. We had found the enemy.

The delta model huey settled smoothly on Currahee Pad. A giant caricature of Snoopy, his dog house riddled with mock bullet holes, sat daringly on top of the control tower as LTC Andre C. Lucas walked from his helicopter to the tactical operations center. On 4 March he had assumed command of the 2/506th Infantry from LTC Crowell. The battalion was still working the coastal plains region, occasionally breaking out of the piedmont into the tropical rain forest that covered the first ridge lines of the towering mountains southwest of Camp Evans. Very soon, LTC Lucas knew, the battalion would push deeply into those densely vegetated peaks - deeper than anyone had been in a long time. His Currahees had found the enemy and they would now make an effort to meet him in pitched battle before he could gain access to the populated lowlands.

As Operation Randolph Glen drew to a close, all companies in the battalion experienced contact with the enemy. Alpha, on an exploratory insertion into Fire Base Ripcord on 12 March, received RPG, mortar and small arms fire. They withdrew after taking moderate casualties. During the next five days Charlie Company, acting as a blocking force along the Dong Ke Me ridge line, engaged an estimated enemy company in a running fire fight. Though the company received

moderate casualties, the enemy lost five confirmed dead, three of them sappers from the dreaded K-12 Sapper Battalion. On Easter Sunday, 31 March, Operation Randolph Glen ended.

Operation Texas Star began on 1 April. Texas Star, it was hoped, would take the fighting into enemy territory causing him to make a stand before he could move in strength to the lowlands. Delta Company, 2/506, now under the command of CPT Rembert Rollison was on temporary loan to the 1/506 and was securing Firebase Granite as Charlie Company conducted a combat assault into what would shortly become Firebase Gladiator.

Firebases Granite and Gladiator were the first step in the operation designed to enable our forces to move deep into the mountains. On 1 April we again combat assaulted by helicopter onto Ripcord. Bravo Company met with even stiffer resistance than Alpha Company had two weeks prior.

As RPG, mortar, recoilless rifle, and small arms fire raked the cratered hilltop, Bravo dug in and prepared to hold. All the efforts of the battalion were directed toward the Ripcord area with the exception of Charlie Company still on Gladiator. Alpha Company combat assaulted into an LZ next to Ripcord and the Recon platoon under the command of 1LT John Wilson was inserted onto the hill with Bravo Company. Delta Company was tasked to sweep south toward Ripcord and pass eastward searching for enemy mortar and recoilless rifle positions. As the day wore on it became apparent from the mounting casualties that our position on Ripcord would become vulnerable and extraction would be necessary. Elements from Alpha moved by foot to the hill and aided in carrying off the dead and evacuating the wounded. For the entire day Bravo Company, the Recon Platoon and elements of Alpha Company remained in contact. Cobra gunships were continuously on station providing suppressive fire as everything from log birds, command and control ships and medevacs evacuated the wounded. Finally, on 3 April all elements were extracted from Ripcord. Friendly losses stood at six US killed and 21 US wounded. Ripcord was still in enemy hands.

LTC Lucas was determined to take Ripcord and intensified his efforts to clear out the enemy mortar tubes and recoilless rifle positions surrounding the firebase. On 4 April, Charlie Company under the temporary command of 1LT Charles Hawkins combat assaulted to an LZ neighboring Ripcord secured by CPT Burkhart's men from Alpha. As Charlie Company jumped off the choppers they saw for themselves the damage that the NVA had wrought. Men from the pathfinders, engineers and other elements who were with the B Company assault into Ripcord crawled on the lift birds as the men from Charlie Company got off.

Alpha continued southeast toward hill 805 as Charlie Company had been reinserted north of the firebase and Delta was paralleling Charlie Company to the south.

The operation now began to show signs of success. Delta, Charlie and Alpha began uncovering enemy bunkers and mortar positions. Contact was scattered and brief; the enemy was withdrawing. On 10 April LTC Lucas decided it was time to try and take Ripcord again. In the pre-dawn darkness Charlie Company crept forward to squad release points and as the first pink streaks of the new day flashed across the sky the hill top shuddered with the thud-boom of supporting artillery and mortar fire. Charlie Company assaulted in squad column first and then on line. They met no resistance as they swept over the hill; as the first helicopters carrying supplies moved onto the hill, the expected enemy mortar rounds did not arrive. The NVA had vanished, and Ripcord was won.

Charlie Company dug in on the hill the first month and Bravo Company worked even harder on the defense the second month. The firebase received incoming mortar rounds on several occasions but casualties were light and progress was not hampered. The timely arrival of cobra gunships resulted in the destruction of several enemy mortar tubes and crews. Throughout the remainder of April the battalion worked aggressively around Ripcord. Alpha and Delta Companies engaged the enemy in scattered contacts south of the firebase resulting in four NVA dead. Bravo Company, commanded now by CPT Bill Williams, assumed control of Ripcord on 12 May and Charlie Company combat assaulted into an LZ east of the firebase.

The successes in May initially went to CPT Rollison's men in Delta. From the 7th until the 11th, Delta Company engaged the enemy who were in heavily fortified positions along the Ko Va La Dut ridge line south of Ripcord. The enemy fell back as Delta advanced. On 11 May intense enemy mortar fire forced Delta Company to withdraw. Skillfully employing air strikes on known enemy locations CPT Rollison and the FAC pilots from Camp Evans pinpointed and destroyed many enemy fortifications and an untold number of the enemy.

The Recon Platoon, now led by 1LT Michael Doyle, was not to be denied their success either. On 26 May and again on 28 May their stealth and alertness paid off. Four NVA fell from M-16 fire and one the platoon took one NVA prisoner.

During the month numerous bunker complexes and cache sites were located and destroyed. Captured enemy materiel, documents and equipment increased as the "Best of the Currahees" continued their operations in formerly NVA-controlled territory.

During the month of June the battalion operations continued unopposed. Alpha

Company, now commanded by CPT Charles Hawkins, engaged the enemy on two occasions west and southwest of Ripcord. After brief contact the enemy fled. On 16 June Alpha Company assumed control of Firebase O'Reilly from the ARVN, and Delta replaced Bravo Company on Ripcord. Charlie Company, now led by CPT Thomas Hewitt, achieved the most success during June accounting for three NVA dead. Alpha Company received one Chieu Hoi on Firebase O'Reilly on 21 June.

During the latter part of June it became apparent that the NVA were preparing for a large offensive in the Ripcord area. Intercepted enemy radio transmissions, captured documents, and agent reports all indicated that Ripcord was due to come under attack soon.

On 30 June 3d Brigade received an intelligence report that indicated that Ripcord would come under attack by 1 July. The information was quickly forwarded to LTC Lucas on the firebase. If it were true, the firebase didn't have much to worry about; it was the best in I Corps, wasn't it? The bunkers with connecting fighting positions were well fortified and everything was deeply under the ground. If the enemy wanted a fight, the Currahees would certainly give it to them.

The companies in the field were of greater concern since they were more exposed. Yet they were all confident - wary but confident. Wasn't this the reason that the battalion had driven deep into the mountains to meet the enemy, to take the fight to his backyard and defeat him? Certainly; and they were going to do just that.

Alpha Company was still on Firebase O'Reilly, Delta Company was securing Ripcord, Bravo Company was operating southwest of the firebase and Charlie Company was securing Hill 805 to the southwest. The Battalion Recon Platoon was operating on a wide front northeast, east and southeast of the firebase. The Echo Company mortars had six tubes on Ripcord and three on O'Reilly. The mortar crews worked around the clock firing defensive targets during the night and "movement" preparations during the day. The 2/506 had invested two and a half months of labor on Ripcord, and an estimated fifty thousand dollars worth of defensive wire had been laid.

On several occasions the enemy sappers had attempted to infiltrate the perimeter at Ripcord. One captured document stated that twenty-two members of sapper recon teams had died while attempting to breach the wire during reconnaissance missions. A ground attack against Ripcord would be suicidal, or would it?

Shortly after 0600 hours on 1 July, the strong morning breezes chased the fog through the valley. It promised to be another beautiful day.

In the jungle around Ripcord, NVA recoilless rifle crews were too busy consulting their watches and checking their firing data to enjoy the morning. At 0702 hours enemy gunners to the southeast of Ripcord loaded their weapons and scuttled for their bunkers. At 0703 Firebase Ripcord erupted as the enemy rounds scattered debris and sent shrapnel singing through the air. The siege of Ripcord had begun.

Miraculously no one was injured in the initial barrage but after eight successive heavy weapons and indirect fire attacks throughout the day, six US personnel were evacuated with wounds. The enemy employed 75-mm recoilless rifles, 60-mm and 82-mm mortars, as well as RPGs and small arms fire against the firebase and late in the day two Chinook helicopters were shot down.

Throughout the day, Charlie Company, from its vantage point on Hill 902, was able to listen to the pop of enemy mortar tubes and direct accurate artillery and gunship fire on these locations. Charlie Company was proving to be a definite thorn in the enemy's side – a thorn that did not go unnoticed.

No one can really accurately record all that happens at various command levels during battle. No matter how good the system or the organization, there is always the matter of human frailty and error. Reports are often mis-sent, or forwarded and never received and some are neglected. The error may be due to a wrong letter used in code or the result of a tired or overwrought commander or radio operator. At any rate, an intelligence report concerning the strong probability of an enemy sapper attack against Charlie Company never reached LTC Lucas and certainly did not reach CPT Hewitt in his field location.

In the pre-dawn hours, when the night is darkest, man's body and soul are at their lowest ebb. At 0345 hours on the morning of 2 July, exactly three hours prior to daybreak, the NVA launched a company size sapper attack against Charlie Company's defensive position on Hill 902.

It is possible that no one in Charlie Company knew what was transpiring even when it did happen. The sappers came silently at first, dressed only in shorts, their bodies painted black against the night and carrying small satchel charges. With the sudden violence of exploding satchel charges it was impossible to tell whether the company was under mortar attack or whether sappers had actually breached the perimeter. Many men died before they fully realized what was happening, while others fearing a mortar barrage clambered into their foxholes where they too died from the accurately thrown charges. Infantry always accompanies a sapper attack,

either to cover the withdrawal or to press the advantage to final victory. When the small arms and RPG fire began, Charlie Company reacted. Men fought like demons. CPT Hewitt was mortally wounded and in his place stepped the Command Post medic, SP4 Cafferty, and a CP radio operator, SGT Jack Dreher. The perimeter had been breached and the dangerous task of clearing the enemy from within as well as fighting them from without fell to these and a few other daring individuals. One by one the enemy died or fell back as the men from Charlie Company fought back. SP4 Muller, a team leader in second platoon fought alone in his fighting position, reporting his situation occasionally over the only radio his platoon had left. When the firefight was finally over, Muller, exhausted and weak from multiple wounds, had seven enemy dead in front of his foxhole. In all, the battle on Hill 902 had lasted over an hour. Eight members of Charlie Company had died and scores were wounded but the enemy left 20 dead on the slopes of Hill 902, and countless blood trails led off through the jungle.

Even as CPT Jeff Wilcox took over the reins of Charlie Company and they were combat assaulted to another location, Ripcord continued to receive incoming mortar and recoilless rifle rounds. During the day another Chinook helicopter was shot down on the firebase but only one US soldier was wounded. The well constructed bunkers and fighting positions were seeing maximum use. There was, as yet, no sign of a ground attack.

Bravo Company, still working southeast of Ripcord and now commanded by CPT Benjamin Peters, saw limited action on several occasions killing three enemy and capturing a 12.7-mm machine gun on Hill 805. 1LT Romig, now in charge of the Recon Platoon, continued successful ambush operations killing several NVA. The siege continued for the next five days with no significant changes in the tactical situation. Then on 6 July as one of 1LT Romig's recon teams approached Hill 1000 to the west of Ripcord, they heard the sounds of enemy mortar tubes firing and the NVA talking.

Bravo Company assumed control of Ripcord early on the 6th and Delta Company went to the west, toward Hill 1000 and the recon team. The recon team had been ordered forward to gather more information on the enemy locations and strength. As the recon team drew closer to the enemy, they met with small arms fire and RPGs. With several wounded, the team drew back to a secure location as Delta Company moved forward. CPT Rollison sent a two-squad attack force forward to attempt to recover some of the equipment left by the recon team. Then CPT Rollison, deciding that there was more on Hill 1000 than met the eye, ordered the two squads to return and requested a heavy artillery preparation on the top of

the hill. The artillery was not long in coming, and for one hour 105-mm, 155-mm, and 8-inch rounds impacted on the enemy locations.

With gunships on station, CPT Rollison led his entire company forward in a determined assault on Hill 1000. After roughly an hour of contact Delta Company had managed to flank what they thought to be the enemy's major element. Small Light Observation Helicopters (LOH) equipped with miniguns flew low over the battle providing suppressive fire and observation of the contact area. As Delta Company systematically engaged the enemy in his bunkers, the LOHs noted that an increasing amount of enemy fire was coming from the west and southwest of Delta's location. CPT Rollison now realized that there were many more enemy forces than those he was engaging. Delta Company had managed to surround five heavily fortified bunkers, but they were only part of a much larger bunker complex. The men of Delta had little choice but to withdraw. The withdrawal, however, was not an easy one. CPT Rollison had several men wounded and two killed. His unit had been in contact now for the better part of two hours and they were running low on fragmentation and smoke grenades. In a daring maneuver, LTC Lucas loaded cases of smoke and fragmentation grenades on his C&C ship and returned to the scene of the contact. Flying at an extremely low altitude and drawing enemy automatic weapons fire all the way, he hovered over CPT Rollison's location and dropped the necessary ordnance to him. LTC Lucas and the pilot got away unscathed; the helicopter received seven hits, and Delta Company with the aid of air strikes withdrew to a secure area. The attack was not without its successes, however; Delta Company had killed seven enemy.

Throughout that night and during the next morning, air strikes and artillery pounded Hill 1000 again and again. Charlie Company moved from a location northwest of Ripcord where they had been experiencing light contact to assist Delta Company in a second assault on the hill. The second assault was as ferocious as the first. Delta and Charlie Companies managed to advance only slightly farther than the day before. The enemy had dug in so well that only a direct hit from a 250-lb or 500-lb bomb would destroy their bunkers. As friendly casualties increased, it became apparent that Hill 1000 was not going to be taken that day or any other. Delta and Charlie Companies withdrew under cover of air strikes and cobra gunships. Late in the afternoon, after the contact, LTC Lucas landed and discussed operations with CPT Rollison and CPT Wilcox. He determined that the efforts against Hill 1000 would be too costly to justify further assaults. Delta Company was combat assaulted on the morning of the 9th to the O'Reilly area and Charlie Company was moved back east of Ripcord. That night and the next day

time-on-target artillery preparations struck Hill 1000 but American forces no longer ventured up its scarred slopes. Ripcord continued to take incoming mortar and recoilless rifle rounds.

Alpha Company had been on Firebase O'Reilly for three weeks and had not been involved in any of the contact around Ripcord since the siege had begun. Since the battle of Hill 1000 had started, however, they had been standing by with their rucksacks ready, waiting for the word to go. On 10 July CPT Hawkins got the word and Alpha Company combat assaulted to an LZ secured by Charlie Company. Charlie Company then assumed control of Firebase O'Reilly. Working just east of Ripcord, Alpha Company was tasked to conduct a two company assault against Hill 805 to the southeast of Ripcord. Delta Company, 2/501st would join Alpha in the assault. On the 12th, Hill 805 was secured. Delta 2/501 secured the hilltop itself and Alpha dug in on an LZ some 200 meters west. The two companies had experienced light contact during the assault and had destroyed numerous bunkers.

Perhaps the enemy did not realize that two companies had dug in on Hill 805, from which they enjoyed excellent observation of Ripcord and much of the surrounding area. The friendly commanders knew that the enemy occupied the area, but just how many there were no one was sure. That night at approximately 2030 hours, mechanical ambushes that CPT Straub's men of Delta 2/501 had placed began to detonate. At 2045, Delta 2/501's perimeter on the top of the hill erupted with the crash of enemy mortar and RPG rounds, and a brisk exchange of small arms fire followed. Alpha Company did not initially come under attack though they were only 200 meters from the scene of the contact. As Alpha Company observed the muzzle flashes of enemy rifles and the fire trails left by the RPGs, CPT Hawkins realized that his men were in a perfect position to provide supporting fire against two of the three avenues of approach that the enemy was using in his assault against Delta 2/501. Alpha Company poured heavy fire into the ranks of the attacking enemy, and soon they too began to receive small arms and RPG fire. The enemy, however, did not know Alpha's exact location, and their fire was ineffective. Delta 2/501, however, was receiving heavy mortar, small arms, RPG and heavy machine gun fire. CPT Don Workman managed to move his company some six hundred meters off the LZ into a defensive perimeter, but mounting casualties meant that this position would soon be vulnerable. With several men killed and more than half the company wounded, CPT Workman called for assistance. CPT Rollison and Delta Company were alerted and thirty minutes later they were combat assaulted into another LZ near Delta

1/506. Charlie Company, now commanded by CPT Kenneth Lamb, combat assaulted right behind Delta Company and secured the LZ in preparation for the extraction. As Delta Company's lead elements tumbled from the lift birds they ran into a hail of small arms fire. Quickly returning fire, they drove the enemy off killing several and capturing a 51-cal. heavy machine gun. The next few hours of the afternoon were hellish as CPT Rollison and his men pushed toward CPT Workman's beleaguered infantrymen. Just as darkness closed on the LZ, the final lift helicopters completed extraction of all three units. Casualties in Delta 1/506 were heavy but our own Delta and Charlie Companies experienced light casualties.

Alpha Company, in the meantime, had been sliding silently deeper and deeper into enemy territory. They destroyed numerous bunkers and as they progressed farther to the southeast the size of the enemy bunkers increased. By midmorning on the 20th of July, the men of Alpha Company had moved to the base of Hill 805. CPT Hawkins had moved part of his company across a river that ran south by the base of Hill 805 and set the remainder of his men in ambush posture on the bank above the stream. At approximately 1200 hours, one of the forward elements found a high speed trail that showed signs of recent use and running next to the trail was a string of commo wire. The lead element had already rigged a wire tapping device and had set up a hasty ambush by the time the CP element and interpreter arrived. For five hours the wiretap yielded information to the interpreter and one of the Kit Carson Scouts. The enemy initiated contact twice during the exploitation of the wiretap but they continued gathering valuable information. In the meantime, the remainder of the company initiated two ambushes on watering parties as they approached the stream. The information gathered from the wiretap indicated that an entire NVA division and not just two regiments as was previously thought was waiting to attack Ripcord. The NVA Division Headquarters was at one end of the commo wire and a regimental headquarters was at the other. The night was uneventful and heavy artillery rained in on the suspected enemy base camp locations. On the 21st, reconnaissance elements from Alpha Company returned toward the scene of the previous day's activities. They had gone only a short distance when they encountered three enemy. Two were killed and the teams returned. Later in the day, an outpost for a day defensive position spotted two NVA. Well aimed fire by SP4 Journell killed one of the enemy. A search of his body revealed diagrams and a plan of attack for the NVA to use against Ripcord. Journell had killed a courier on his way to the NVA Division Commander. Alpha Company waited until dark and then moved some 200 meters to a defensive perimeter. Here they would wait until early morning when CPT Hawkins planned

to move west and cross a river in an attempt to get out of the NVA-infested area. This plan, unfortunately, was never to materialize.

At higher headquarters radios and phone lines were alive with traffic. Command and Control helicopters constantly overflowed the Ripcord area. On the evening of the 21st, Brigadier General Sidney Berry, the Division Commander in the absence of Major General John Hennessee, made a difficult decision. Ripcord would be evacuated. LTC Lucas was notified, plans for the evacuation were drawn up and the battalion prepared to execute the evacuation on the 23d of July. Charlie and Delta Companies were already at Camp Evans after aiding Delta 1/506. This left only the few personnel on Ripcord and Alpha Company to bring in.

At 0900 hours on 22 July, CPT Hawkins received a coded message from LTC Lucas ordering Alpha Company to return to an LZ location just east of Ripcord. At 1245 hours, the lead element moved out of the perimeter and started to the north. They had moved about 100 meters when the point man engaged three enemy at 20 meters. As the enemy died, the platoon moved forward to exploit their success. In the next thirty seconds, success for Alpha Company came to a screaming, bloody halt.

The lead element had assaulted into the flank security of an NVA Battalion. At the same time, the main NVA assault force made a human wave attack with supporting mortar fire against the remainder of Alpha Company. Outnumbered six to one, Alpha Company battled against these odds for the entire afternoon. Often without communications and frequently surrounded, the men of Alpha Company fought as their brothers had fought on Hill 1000, Hill 902 and on Ripcord itself. Continuous air strikes consisting of 250-lb bombs and napalm plus constant gunship cover eventually broke the enemy attack and Alpha Company slowly pulled back into a defensive perimeter.

As darkness fell, an attempt to insert Delta Company was aborted due to burning napalm on the landing zone. CPT Rollison and his men would try again at first light to move in and assist Alpha Company.

On the 23d of July, Delta company was successful in landing and reached Alpha Company in short order. An LZ was cut and CPT Rollison and CPT Hawkins prepared their men for extraction. The evacuation of Ripcord, meanwhile, was going smoothly. The artillerymen and their guns were removed first followed by the remainder of the personnel. A constant stream of helicopters hovered into Ripcord and back out carrying their precious cargo to safety despite the nearly continuous fire of enemy gunners. Miraculously, very few men were injured during

the extraction and only three killed. The enemy, however, had dealt one final blow to the "Best of the Currahees." LTC Lucas landed on Ripcord after the extraction had started in order to help supervise. As he stood discussing the operation with his S-3 MAJ Tanner, a 120-mm mortar round landed killing MAJ Tanner instantly and mortally wounding LTC Lucas. The battle of Ripcord was over.

The cost had been high. Twelve of Alpha's finest men lay dead and an additional 50 had been wounded. The enemy too had paid heavily in the contact. Sixty-five NVA soldiers had gone to meet their fate and a large amount of NVA equipment lay scattered over the battlefield. Alpha Company would be combat effective in a week with new replacements, but the NVA battalion would wait months for people to filter down the Ho Chi Minh Trail before they would be ready to fight again.

While the evacuation of Ripcord was in process BG Berry was constantly in the air over the Firebase in his C&C helicopter. At one point when things seemed to go a bit rough for the men on the hill, BG Berry radioed the Tactical Operations Center on Ripcord and asked if there was any particular assistance they needed. The TOC radio operator, with a casualness that is typical of man in a tight situation, answered, "No sweat sir, we'll get out of this shit." And they did.

For an entire week after the evacuation heavy concentrations of artillery and countless air strikes shook the ground around Ripcord. Ripcord was over and as the enemy scuttled for cover and areas away from the incessant bombardment, the men of the 2/506th uttered one word common to all. CURRAHEE.

The first six months of the year had seen the battalion perform successfully against the enemy. The last half of the year was different, as we ran into very few enemy to perform successfully against. It was a relatively quiet time for all and for some a much needed respite.

LTC John C. Bard assumed command of the Best of the Currahees after LTC Lucas' death and the battalion moved to Firebases Katheryn and Rakkasan in August and September. Delta Company traded commanders as CPT Rollison became the Battalion S-4 and CPT Frank Wilson stepped into his place. We experienced practically no contact with the enemy until early in October.

Delta Company had one platoon led by 1LT James Warren sweeping north toward a ridge line just three kilometers north of Firebase Rakkasan when the point man encountered an enemy bunker. In the short but fierce fire fight that ensued several men were wounded, LT Warren withdrew his men and called artillery and gunships in on the enemy location. Later in the month Delta Company found NVA graves and booby traps in the same area.

On 11 October, Alpha Company left Rakkasan and moved into an area adjacent to where Delta Company had made contact the week prior. For five days, the men of Alpha Company made sporadic contact with the enemy and encountered several booby traps. Finally on the 18th, several NVA were spotted just before dark carrying heavy rucksacks only 300 meters from Alpha Company's perimeter. The enemy was engaged with small arms fire and gunships were employed. One NVA was killed.

Again on the 24th Alpha Company initiated another contact with an NVA carrying party. SP4 Robert Counts led a six-man ambush team into place along a recently used enemy trail two kilometers north of Firebase Rakkasan. Just as darkness fell the ambush was finally set. Throughout the long night the men waited and when morning came they waited still, not moving or eating. At 0830, five NVA crept south along the trail, widely dispersed and cautious. Counts waited until the last of the enemy had entered his kill zone and then initiated the ambush by detonating a claymore mine. Two of the enemy fell in the following hail of small arms fire and the other three dropped their rucksacks and fled south. It was a quiet time but there were still enemy to be found.

The area of operations remained quiet and the battalion combat assaulted into a new area to the west of Rakkasan just north of the familiar Gladiator. Charlie Company began running into booby traps as did several recon teams now led by 1LT Robert Seitz. As October stretched into November Charlie Company pushed farther and farther west into virgin territory.

Soon enemy caves, bunker complexes and cache sites began to be uncovered. Charlie Company pressed on, engaging the enemy on several occasions. The enemy, however, appeared to have no desire to make a stand and continued to flee the area. CPT Lamb and his men were finally extracted and the area was subjected to a heavy bombardment of artillery and air-strikes. During much of Charlie Company's operations, LTC Bard was with them on the ground and once received minor wounds from an exploding booby trap.

On 13 November Delta Company received fire from enemy small arms and RPGs while conducting a combat assault. Two members of Delta Company died and several were wounded. As cobra gunships rolled in the enemy fled.

On 19 November the battalion returned to Camp Evans for a stand-down; LTC Bard moved up to fill the Division G-3 slot and LTC Joe F. Bellochi assumed command. November and December were big months of changing commands: CPT Hawkins became the Battalion S-1 and CPT Samuel H. Wrightson took over Alpha Company. CPT Wilson left for Division and CPT Peter A. Vanderland

became the Delta Company commander. CPT Lamb left for a job at Division G-3. CPT Frank Lynch assumed control of Charlie Company and CPT Peters turned over Bravo Company to CPT Carl Jensen.

The year was over.