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Marine Inducted Into Ranger Hall Of Fame

By Art Powell

Colonel John W. Ripley, USMC (Ret) was inducted into the U.S. Army Ranger Hall of Fame June 11 at Fort Benning, Ga., making history as the first all-Marine ever invited to join the small, prestigious fraternity of Hall of Fame Rangers.

"To express how this feels is jolly difficult. The Rangers are almost a legendary entity. They've been around since the Revolution, and they've always had that very distinctive air about them: and rightly so. In just about every war this country has had, there's been some kind of Ranger action or special operations. When they told me I was going to be inducted, I just

couldn't believe it," said Ripley, a U.S. Naval Academy graduate.

While Ripley is the only Marine ever inducted based on a military career solely in the Marine Corps, Colonel Rodney J. Wijas, USMC (Ret) was previously inducted into the Army Ranger Hall of Fame in 2005. Wijas joined the U.S. Army in 1960, and while a staff sergeant, earned the Distinguished Service Cross and Purple Heart in Vietnam as a Ranger assigned to a South Vietnamese unit. Wijas left the Army in 1966, completed college and earned a commission as a Marine officer.

Each year, the Ranger Hall of Fame selection committee considers nominations from select Ranger units and associations

representing each era of Ranger history. The 2008 inductees range from a four-star general, John Galvin, to a private first class, World War II Ranger Ellis Reed, who served in the European theater.

"Once a Ranger, always a Ranger, that's my comment," said Major General Walter Wojdakowski, Ft. Benning commanding general.

"No matter what service, what they do, Ranger school and the Ranger tab means you're one of the best leaders in whatever service you're in. We don't differentiate between Marines or Navy SEALs or anybody. If they're wearing a Ranger tab, we're really proud to honor them, and the Marine Corps ought to be proud of him



Col John W. Ripley (opposite page and above center) is inducted into the United States Army Ranger Hall of Fame June 11 at Ft. Benning, Ga. From left: Sergeant Major Randy Harlan, USA, 75th Ranger Regiment operations sergeant major; Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Stone, USA, 75th Ranger Regiment executive officer; Col Ripley; COL Greg Hager, USA, Commander, Ranger Training Brigade; and Command Sergeant Major John Burns, Ranger Training Brigade sergeant major.

too," MG Wojdakowski concluded.

Ripley's visit to Ft. Benning for the induction ceremony differed greatly from his 1965 visit to the post when he was there in the winter for Ranger school. During the first week of his training, one exercise involved being pushed off the end of a diving board into a pool, blindfolded, with weapon and gear, then swimming to the side of the pool. Before Ripley could be pushed into the outdoor pool, Rangers had to break the ice.

"We started the class with about 150 people, but when the others saw me go into the icy water, about 20 of them refused to do it and quit the program right there. It was our single biggest loss during training," said Ripley, who was wounded in action four times during his military career.

More rigorous training followed.

"I came [to Ranger school] from a small, very select unit in the Marine Corps called Force Reconnaissance, and the requirements to get into Force Recon were very, very physically and mentally demanding. Since we specialized in

things like small-unit actions, recon behind the lines and pre-assault recon, we had the opportunity to go to schools, and Ranger [school] was one of them. The Army allowed two or three Marines into

each class," added Ripley.

He attended other schools such as scuba, airborne and pathfinder, but he says he knew the value of Ranger training.

"Everyone knew the elite qualities attached to it, and that was very attractive," he said.

"In our training, we were kept in a constantly deprived state, sleep deprivation all the time, and even [deprivation of] food. ... They did that purposely, and it was a very good effect, because you learned you could operate under these conditions when your body was weak and your mind was addled," explained Ripley.

He said that when he arrived for Ranger training, he was "tougher than woodpecker lips," yet still lost 20 pounds. He finished the school as the top officer graduate.

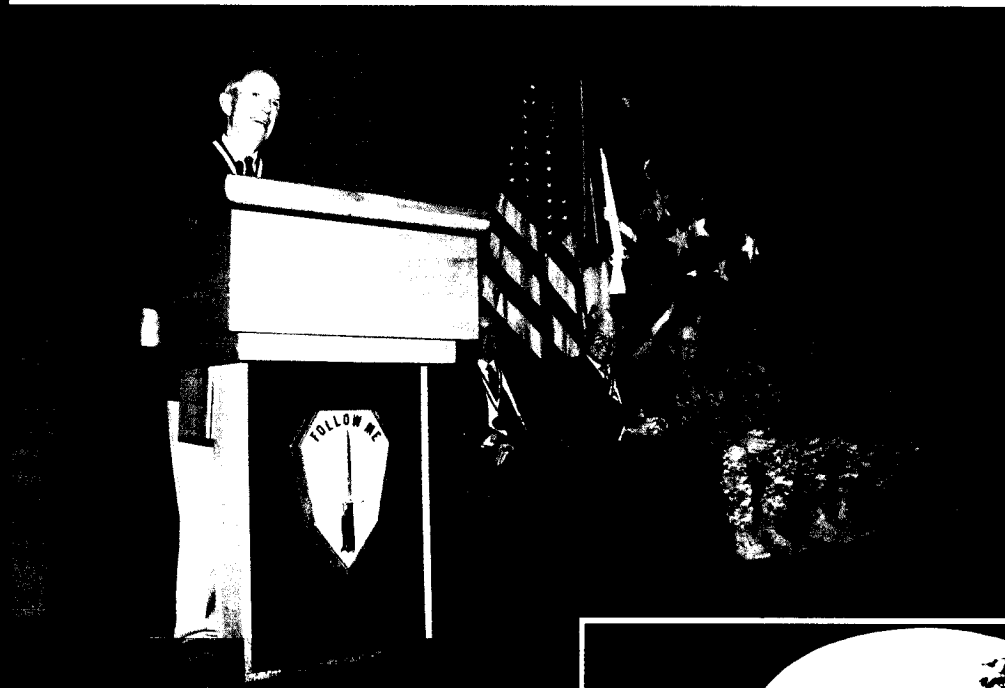
During his second tour of duty in Vietnam in 1971, Ripley was the senior advisor to the 3d Vietnamese Marine Battalion. The benefits of his intense Ranger training paid off during the 1972 North Vietnamese Easter invasion of South Vietnam when he and his battalion were at the Dong Ha bridge over the Cua Viet River.

The bridge had to be destroyed in order for the 735 Vietnamese Marines to hold off several thousand approaching North Vietnamese troops.

"When I started out on the bridge, I knew the likelihood of my being successful was minimal. The enemy was in such preponderance on the other side of the river, I



Capt John Ripley (left), commanding "Lima" Co, 3/3, stands alongside Maj George H. Ripley, operations officer for 3d Marines, in this January 1967 photo taken right after a combat operation along the Demilitarized Zone near Mutter Ridge in Vietnam.



"I find that [being called a hero] humbling ... because there are so many ... Marines that fit that category perfectly, but they never get the recognition."

—Col John W. Ripley
USMC (Ret)

ART POWELL

Above: During his acceptance remarks, Col Ripley said the harshness of Ranger training prepared him for combat rigors that, in hindsight, were frequently humorous.

Right: June 9, 1972: A great day for the Ripleys. Promoted to major that day by the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and that evening, joined by his wife, Mollie, he was presented the Navy Cross at Marine Barracks Washington, D.C., by Secretary of the Navy John W. Warner. (Photo courtesy of Col John W. Ripley, USMC (Ret))

knew they weren't going to let me go out there and be there very long," he said.

Ripley swung on the girders under the bridge as small-arms fire, heavy machine-gun fire and even fire from the main gun of a North Vietnamese Army tank searched him out.

"We had disabled the tank turret so it couldn't turn, but the [North Vietnamese] driver was able to turn the tank itself and they started shooting at me. One round hit the bridge, but was at such a severe angle that it ricocheted off the bridge and exploded on the bank. And, boy, when that 100 mm round went off with me in the steel of the bridge, what a racket," he said.

Ripley credited the company commander of one of the two Vietnamese Marine rifle companies supporting him with "reading [his] mind" when he was on the bridge, providing covering fire when possible as he attempted to destroy the bridge.

"Demolition training from Ranger school taught me one very important thing, and that's how to cut steel. My Marine explosives training consisted, for the most part, of using half-pound blocks of explosives to blow up something," said Ripley.

From the Rangers, he said he learned



how to use minimum explosive charges for maximum effect.

"I learned how to place charges on opposite sides of a rail so the blast twisted a critical support. It would have never been successful had I not known that. I have to credit my Ranger training and also my British Royal Marine commando training," he added.

For his actions at the Dong Ha bridge, Ripley was awarded the Navy Cross. In addition, a book, "The Bridge at Dong Ha," was written about his exploits, and a diorama in Memorial Hall at the Naval Academy, titled "Ripley at the Bridge," was devoted to the actions of all academy graduates who fought in Vietnam.



COURTESY OF COL. JOHN W. RIPLEY, USMC (RET)

Excellence and heroism mark the life of Col John W. Ripley. Here in July 1966, while the platoon leader of 4th Plt, 2d Force Reconnaissance Co, he accepts the scuba school honor graduate plaque from Maj Don Norris, commanding 2d Force Recon. One month later, then-Capt Ripley would be in Vietnam, and two months after that, of the four platoon commanders from 2d Force who went to Vietnam at the same time, he would be the only survivor.

Ripley was awarded six awards for valor and 14 personal decorations during his Marine career, including the Navy Cross, the Silver Star, two awards of the Legion of Merit and two awards of the Bronze Star with combat "V."

Read his biography and the word hero comes to mind.

"I find that [being called a hero] humbling and somewhat embarrassing because there are so many, so, so many Marines that fit that category perfectly, but they never get the recognition," he said.

"The best that I can do is hope that I represent those men by my demeanor and the way I conduct myself the rest of my life."

He pointed out that the men who provided covering fire for him while he was on the bridge paid a high price. Most of the Vietnamese Marines didn't survive the battle.

"When we finally got out of there and

returned to Hue City, we had 52 [Vietnamese] Marines out of 735 with us. All of those men who protected me were lost. Did they get the recognition? No," he said. "It's something that straightens your backbone forever. You just cannot lose sight of that."

While in the process of destroying the bridge at Dong Ha, "it took everything that I had inside me," Ripley said.

And he credited his Ranger training, when he was exhausted, hungry and cold during that winter in 1965 at Ft. Benning, for preparing him to reach inside and find a "second effort," one that went beyond a tired body and an exhausted mind and allowed him to overcome physical weariness and accomplish the mission.

Later in his career, Ripley became involved in education, serving at the U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Md., and with the Navy-Marine Corps ROTC program at Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Va. He also was selected to serve as the director of Marine Corps History and Museums and as director of the Marine Corps Historical Center, Washington, D.C., a position he held until his final retirement from the Marine Corps in 2006.

His daughter Mary Ripley was at the Ranger Hall of Fame induction ceremony to support her dad.

"This recognition couldn't have come at a better time in his life—a wonderful end to the winter. He never talks much about things like this; he classically underplays all of his accolades. He does talk about the value of his Army training during the actions at Dong Ha, and what an honor it is to be recognized by the Rangers," she said.

"This is a very big deal," Lieutenant Colonel Jeff Knudson, commanding officer of the Marine Corps Detachment at Ft. Benning, said, regarding Ripley's induction into the Ranger Hall of Fame.

"The selection process has the entire history of the Rangers to look at," said Knudson, whose staff of 18 supports approximately 1,200 naval service students who attend schools at Ft. Benning each year.

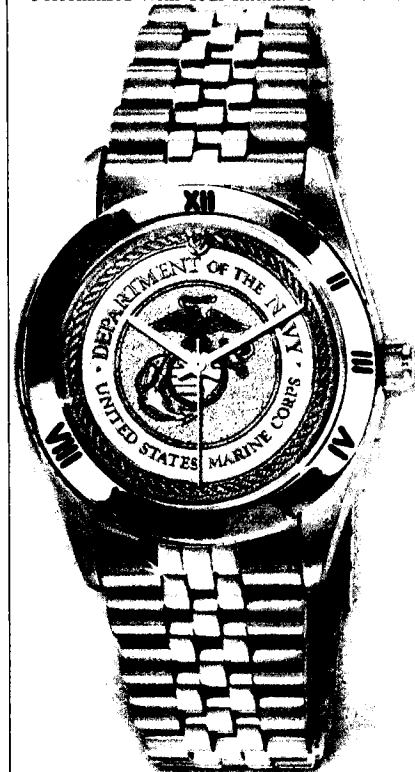
"The cream rises to the top, and as they [members of the selection committee] continue to look at Rangers for the Hall of Fame, Marine Rangers will continue to be recognized," said Knudson.

Editor's note: Art Powell is a public affairs specialist at Marine Corps Logistics Base Albany, Ga.



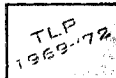
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