

Ripley at the Bridge

By Vicki Vanden Bout

Editor's note: On the 50th anniversary of then-Captain John Ripley's destruction of the highway bridge at Dong Ha, Leatherneck is republishing an account of that fateful day from Ripley's own perspective. We talked to Vicki Vanden Bout, who wrote this article in 1986, and she told us about her meeting with Col Ripley, whom she described as "bigger than life" while at the same time, "extremely down to Earth." She said he "was so excited that somebody was interested in his story" and considered himself nothing more than a Marine who did his job.



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Capt John Ripley reviews a map in Vietnam during his assignment as commanding officer of "Lima" Co, 3rd Bn, 3rd Marines in 1967.

The U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Md., added two memorials to Memorial Hall in the mid-1980s. Both were to honor Academy graduates who performed honorably and upheld the great traditions of the class of 1962.

One of those honored at the ceremony, Colonel John W. Ripley, was featured in a military diorama, "Ripley at the Bridge" in the Memorial Hall foyer in Bancroft Hall. The action depicted in the diorama by Royal Navy Commander Robert Mouat was an almost heart-stopping rendition of the triumph of man over adversity. The high drama portrayed is the stuff of epic movies, and yet was only a small part of the Easter Offensive, 1972.

Col Ripley, who later served as the senior Marine representative at the U.S. Naval Academy, enlisted in the Corps in June of 1957. "I always wanted to be a Marine. There was never any other consideration," said Ripley. Fresh out of Radford High School, Radford, Va., Ripley was determined to act on his not-so-secret desire to be a Marine.

In recruit training, he found out about a program that put active-duty Sailors and Marines into the Naval Academy Prep School prior to acceptance into the Academy. Ripley was selected for the program straight out of boot camp. "I pursued this program. That wasn't too easy because, of course, anytime you identified yourself as being interested in an officer program, well, the DIs went

nuts!" Ripley remembers what the DIs would tell him. "They would yell, 'You haven't even gotten through boot camp yet!' It sure got me a lot of unwanted attention.

"I didn't apply myself very strongly in high school, I was more interested in athletics. But after leaving, I could see there was more potential for the future for someone with a formal education. So, I concentrated on getting my degree," Ripley said.

The Naval Academy offered young Ripley a chance to get his education and remain a Marine. But boot camp left a mark as well. "The impression is so indelible. It's burned in my memory, that sureness of having achieved something. The effect of that has given me strength over the years." Ripley remembers, "Having one of the drill instructors say 'Good job, recruit' meant more to me than any personal decoration.

"There was never anything less than total respect for those Marines, if not fear," said Ripley of his drill instructors.

When Ripley had finally completed his time at the Naval Academy and set off for The Basic School (TBS), Quantico, Va., he was allowed six months of leave. "I threw it away and reported right in. I was ready to be with Marines."

Infantry was always his interest, and he feels fortunate in having done what he enjoys.

After completing TBS, Ripley was assigned to sea duty for a year. "I was on an aircraft carrier. It was very valuable experience," he said.

A variety of other assignments followed including with 2nd Marine Division, Camp Lejeune, N.C. and Company L, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines near the Demilitarized Zone, Vietnam as well in Khe Sanh, and Con Thien. "I got to spend some time in all the garden spots!" Ripley said, laughing.

A stint with the British Royal Marines came next during 1969-1971. "That was a tremendously exciting job," he remembered. Ripley was one of the last U.S. Marines to go through the Royal Marines training with their recruits. One of the things Ripley was impressed



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Capt John Ripley, Vietnam 1972
(Artwork courtesy of John Ripley)



This aerial photo, which looks north over the two bridges on the Cua Viet River at Dong Ha, was taken in 1969 when Naval Mobile Construction Bn 62 was building the bridge at Dong Ha. It was completed in 1970 and destroyed in 1972 along with the accompanying old railroad trestle. (USN photo)

by in the Royal Marines was the unit stability. "It had a very solidifying effect. They leave a man in a unit, instead of moving him around.

"When I got to Vietnam the second time, I had had the best training possible. It was a great advantage to have all that behind me," he recalled.

As an advisor, Ripley found himself in the same area where he had served five years before. "I was the advisor to one of the best doggone units. The 3rd Battalion, Vietnamese Marines were incredibly good," he said. Ripley was to find out just how good those Marines were sooner than he would have thought likely.

As Col John Ripley began to describe the events leading up to the start of the Easter Offensive, it became evident that his second tour in Vietnam is clearly etched in his memory. As his story unfolded, time seemed to fall away and the thousands of miles between Dong Ha and Annapolis disappeared.

During Ripley's first tour in Vietnam, he had been a company commander. "I had fought in virtually the same areas that we were in. On a number of occasions, I was the only man in the battalion who had been to the places we were going. We went out to Khe Sanh, for example, and walked along Cau Rock Ridge out to (Hills) 1015 and 950. I was the only American, the only man who had been there before. During my first tour I had been out there 12 months," Ripley pointed out.

Things were slow and quiet at the end of March 1972, but already signs of the approaching chaos and combat were appearing. The North Vietnamese Army was testing the defenses of the outer fire bases. "I had returned from R&R several weeks before this and gone up north that last time, thinking 'Well, this is the end of it. I'll just sit around and wait for my time to go home.' That was it. There wasn't any reason in the world to expect

that to change. Things were slow. We were mainly doing scouting patrols. I remember going out and swimming in the river."

The 27th of March was when things came unglued. "It became apparent that it [the NVA probe] was on a much larger scale than what we anticipated. They [the NVA] started putting pressure on the outer fire bases. It didn't seem the enemy had anything serious in mind. Those fire bases [Fire Base Sarge and Nui Ba Ho] had been overrun once before when I was there. I figured it was the same thing.

"Major Walt Boomer was on Sarge and Capt Ray Smith was up on Nui Ba Ho. That's where the first approach was made. Well, the enemy didn't back off and a very serious element was introduced. Artillery fire started." Ripley then believed something more than just a probe was coming.

The Vietnamese Marines were moving up north to face down the threat and

to stop the NVA movement south. They didn't yet understand there was a reason to be terribly concerned. "I still didn't believe it was super serious. I thought, 'Well, we'll just have to stay here for the next few days or a week and then we'll be back to sitting on bunker tops again.' " The NVA had set a pattern of engaging the South Vietnamese and then backing off again.

But this time the NVA didn't disengage. Ripley's battalion moved up to Dong Ha as the 7th Bn and another unit had moved up to Mai Loc. "We were considered the Division reserve, the unit least likely to get involved." The situation looked pretty bad at both FB Sarge and Mai Loc. "That night I spent at Dong Ha under artillery fire, all night long. This was a poignant reminder of the past as I spent the night in the old 3rd Marine Division morgue. It was the same place where I had identified the remains of my Marines five years earlier." The shells landed constantly all through the night.

It was clear to Ripley by that time that this activity wasn't just an average change of tempo in the action. The enemy was clearly serious about whatever they were up to. "What a change it turned out to be," said Ripley.

The next day was Easter Sunday. Nobody really knew what day it was; the only way they could tell was if it was time to take a malaria pill. (Malaria pills were taken each Sunday.) Days ran together. At daylight the artillery slowed, and Ripley went out to do a crater analysis.

"There's a way you can look at a shell crater and determine, pretty accurately, which direction it came from. Size of the crater, details like that. I had just seen this thing blow up in front of me, so I ran over there to make an analysis. I was surprised, actually, to find that it pointed, not to where I believed the artillery to be but generally in the DMZ area, where we didn't think the threat was coming from. And then when I came back from that, that's when I got a call from Col Turley's folks." Lieutenant Colonel Gerald H. Turley, USMC, was the newly arrived assistant senior advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Corps. During an indoctrination visit to the northern provinces of South Vietnam, a series of bizarre incidents occurred which, in essence, made him coordinator of the defenses of Northern Region One. "Things had indeed gotten

very serious, and he said there was a large number of tanks coming south along this road here (Route 1)." Ripley traced the road on the map with his finger.

"We didn't have the wherewithal to stop that many tanks. We had little hand-held weapons. And we certainly didn't have anything on the scale that



Col John Ripley

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was needed to deal with the threat. Originally 20 tanks had been reported." Ripley chuckled softly at the memory.

The number of tanks turned out to be around 200. Several days later an aerial observer, quite high up, flew over Route 1 and said, "You got bumper to bumper tanks from the Ben Hai River all the way to Dong Ha. They can't even turn around they've got so many of them."

The headquarters staff, as well as the advisors, had believed the war was winding down. Instead, they were faced with an enormous threat. "Let me assure you, we were not dealing with logical progression here. It wasn't, 'What do we do next, what do we do here, how do we deal with this?' It was heightened, rapid-fire decision making.

"I was the only advisor represented there. Normally you had two advisors,

but my assistant had already gone," Ripley remembered. The decision had been made to cut back to one advisor per battalion and Ripley was there alone. That morning when they saw the tank threat across the river, he was doing everything he could to determine how to stop the armor attack. Across the river, from near a railroad bridge, something attracted his attention. Ripley looked across.

"My gosh! That's not our flag! It was a North Vietnamese flag. We knew they already had one end of the bridge. So, then we made an effort to get back to the main highway bridge. That was when they started an artillery barrage that was just indescribable. I've never seen anything like it in my life. Hundreds and hundreds of rounds of artillery trying to reduce resistance at Dong Ha. The enemy didn't want any trouble crossing the river.

"We couldn't get through Dong Ha, so we went through a route I knew south of the old Marine combat base there. I had used it a number of times in my previous tour. The Vietnamese had no idea it was there. Again, I was lucky that I had known where I was. Otherwise, I never would have gotten back to Route 1. From there the question was, 'How do I get up to the bridge?' "

There was a tank battalion near the bridge. The Vietnamese were reluctant to let Ripley have a tank to get to the bridge, but there really wasn't any other way. "It took a bit of persuading, but I finally convinced them. I got help from the tank battalion's advisor." The U.S. Army advisor who joined Ripley on his bridge adventure was Maj James E. Smock, who was attached to the Vietnamese tank battalion.

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Ripley and Smock found five ARVN engineers beneath the bridge when they arrived. The engineers had placed 500 pounds of TNT and plastic explosives, anticipating the order for the bridge's destruction. The placement of the crates of explosives would not have destroyed the bridge. The blast would only have dropped a span and the tanks would still be able to cross.

Ripley and Smock started to rearrange the crates of explosives, while the ARVN engineers simply disappeared. Ripley had to clear a high chain link fence topped with razor wire and steel tape.

Then Smock began to push the boxes of TNT over to Ripley who would hand-walk out to place the boxes where they would do the most damage.

"I would hand-walk out, then swing up to get my heels into the I-beam." Smock would hand up the crate of explosives to Ripley. "Then I'd swing down on one T-beam and then leap over and grab another T-beam." The entire time Smock and Ripley were working on the tremendous task in front of them, the North Vietnamese were on the other shore watching.

"That was one of the most inexplicable parts of the whole affair. I could see them there, ganged up, and eventually the tanks began moving in on the north bank. The whole thing was almost surrealistic. I kept thinking, 'Why aren't they trying to get across the bridge? Why aren't they directing some of their attention to me? What are they doing over there?' And yet the NVA never seemed to do that with any seriousness." Ripley is convinced that, had the forces

been switched around, an American would have said, "I'll knock that guy off just because it would be so easy. The North Vietnamese seemed to think 'that poor little old bird over there is so obviously susceptible, leave him alone.'"

Ripley estimates it must have taken him and Smock about 2 ½ hours to complete the job they had set out to do. The COVANS (a nickname the Vietnamese had for the advisors) must have felt relieved that the job was nearly complete. The last task was to detonate the explosives.

Ripley, not finding any electric detonating caps, finally discovered several time fuses. He had to think back to remember how to estimate the length of the fuse to allow enough time to get him and Smock out of range of the blast.

Ripley could not measure the fuse properly, and he couldn't find any crimpers. "I had to take the blasting cap and open the one end. Then I had to take it and stick it backwards in my

mouth with the opening out and put it way back in and bite the end of this thing. It was gagging me, it was so far back in my mouth."

By this time the North Vietnamese were furious. Ripley had really stirred up a hornet's nest. The NVA were shooting up everything they could. "I was lying there on the ground with Smock going through this ridiculous little exchange. I was exhausted."

Ripley looked up, "There right in front of me was the doggone box of electric caps. I couldn't believe it. And I thought, 'Man, if I leave here and the time fuses don't work, I'll never get lucky enough to get back under there.'"

Ripley climbed the fence again. He worked quickly to prime the boxes of explosives. The entire time the time fuses were still burning. He trailed the wire leads from the caps to some communications wire.

At that time, Smock looked at the old railroad bridge and realized that any armor or engineer unit could re-

An Advisor's Uniform

This coat was worn by Col John Ripley when he was a Republic of Vietnam Marine Division advisor. It is currently in the collection of the National Museum of the Marine Corps. According to the Museum's uniforms and heraldry curator, Owen Conner, The South Vietnamese Marines were easily recognizable for their "Tiger Stripe" camouflage. Wearing the same uniform as the men in the Division, American advisors had their U.S. rank and insignia embroidered on the coats. Then-Capt Ripley also wore his equivalent Vietnamese rank sewn to his right pocket. These uniform coats were worn tucked into the trousers, similar to the way U.S. Marines wore their sateen utility uniforms.

This is the type of uniform Ripley was wearing during his actions at the Dong Ha Bridge. (Photos courtesy of the National Museum of the Marine Corps)



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**—Col John Ripley,
USMC (Ret)**

pair and use that bridge. He put the crates of explosives in place under the undamaged portion of the railroad bridge. Then Ripley ran another wire to blow both bridges at the same time.

The two made a mad dash back to the relative safety of the South Vietnamese lines, with the Vietnamese Marines cheering them on. They were safe. Once there Ripley found a jeep that had been blown over and proceeded to use the battery in an attempt to detonate the explosives.

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Part of the bridge was composed of 12-inch timbers, and when the explosion went off, the timbers were ignited. They continued to burn for the following five days. A terse message reported the results of Ripley and Smock's efforts to LtCol Gerald H. Turley, acting chief advisor, 3rd ARVN Division, "The Dong Ha Bridge has been destroyed."

"LtCol Turley took matters in his own hands. He had accepted an enormous responsibility and assumed the authority," said Ripley. "Col Turley took care of the advisors; he's the reason we all got out."

The North Vietnamese offensive was stopped by the combined efforts of a handful of advisors and the Vietnamese. As long as his men were still out there, Turley wouldn't give in to pressure to pull back. Ripley said he believes that every Marine should be ready to accept that kind of overwhelming responsibility.



This dramatic painting by Col Charles Waterhouse, USMCR (Ret) depicts Ripley's courageous efforts at the bridge at Dong Ha.

"I don't think it ever entered his mind not to do what he had to do. Despite the fact that someone might say, 'Do you realize what you're doing?' What did they want him to do? Turn the radios off and leave? That's just not the Marine Corps way. Ever!"

The Vietnamese Marines eventually regrouped and recaptured Quang Tri. In the process they suffered extremely heavy casualties.

The folks back in the States at that time just didn't want to hear about the Easter Offensive. "People didn't want to know about it. The war was sour news and old news. It was a non-event. The biggest attack of the war and it was turned around by an incredibly few people determined to do something," said Ripley. "The Vietnamese Marines were extraordinary.

"My formula, my view is to be de-

cisive," said Ripley, "no matter what. When something needs to be done, do it." If you truly believe something is right, seize the opportunity within the confines of your authority.

"You also need to be aggressive. Not just in the traditional aspect of our trade, as in taking the fight to the enemy, which I think is the only sensible way to fight. Sitting on well-prepared defenses doesn't do it. But I think an individual's nature is just as important. Don't sit down and wait for an opportunity or for perfect conditions. Achieve your goals. Launch on them. Or you'll wait forever."

Author's bio: Vicki Vanden Bout is a former Leatherneck writer who joined the staff in 1985 as a photojournalist. She later became associate editor and contributing editor in July 1986. 🐼

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