

**VIETNAM:
40 YEARS AGO**

Captain John Ripley at the Bridge: “Please, God, Don’t Let Me Screw This Up!”

By R. R. Keene

If you’ve never been to Dong Ha, you haven’t missed a thing. Well, perhaps with the exception of Easter 1972. No one really knows how many of those who were there are still around to talk about it. The South Vietnamese Marines are no more: banished or dead. The North Vietnamese soldiers who fired their weapons in frustration from across the Cau Viet River are scattered and old or dead. John Ripley’s been dead for three years and wasn’t the kind to brag.

So, from time to time we have to retell his legendary tale and pass it to every generation of Marines.

Colonel John W. Ripley: When they talk of Marines with *cojones*, one thing comes to mind—Ripley as a captain at the bridge at Dong Ha.

West of Dong Ha was Camp Carroll, named for Marine Captain James J. Carroll, who posthumously was awarded the Navy Cross for action near the Demilitarized Zone in 1966. The camp sat on a plateau off the south side of Highway 9, perhaps less than halfway between Dong Ha and Khe Sanh. Today, pepper plants have rooted out nearly all traces of the pentagonal-shaped fire support base. The Marines had left Camp Carroll in 1969 as part of President Richard M. Nixon’s “Vietnamization” policy to turn the war over to the South Vietnamese.

“Vietnamization”: It had almost worked, but like so many “good intentions” during the American involvement in Southeast Asia, it, too, went wrong. American promises to the South Vietnamese of dollars, military hardware and assistance were becoming as empty as the ammunition boxes strewn throughout Northern I Corps. The American forces in garrisons beyond the South China Sea had no tactical or strategic plans of returning. In Paris, there was talk of peace talks. In Hanoi, there was, after 30 years of war, a real anticipation of victory. One coordinated push was needed to gain as much South Vietnamese soil, decimate and demoralize the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), and gain the upper hand during negotiations in Paris.



This dramatic painting by Col Charles Waterhouse, USMCR (Ret) captures the spirit of Ripley at the bridge at Dong Ha. His was a feat of physical and mental endurance, as well as great courage.

The ARVN forces had proved less than effective, and they were stretched thin defending their 600-mile land border. For the leaders in the North, the strategy extended beyond the Indochina peninsula. In the United States, there was a presidential election looming. Antiwar sentiment among the population and U.S. government had risen to an all-time high buoyed by continuing American troop withdrawals.

For the U.S. military, the war was back where it started with American advisors.

Hanoi committed nearly its entire army, 14 divisions and 26 independent regiments, to what was called the “Eastertide Offensive.” They had waited for the monsoon season with its heavy and low clouds swollen with rain that limited the deadly U.S. airpower.

“You can surrender with us or commit

suicide,” Camp Carroll’s South Vietnamese commander, Lieutenant Colonel Pham Van Dinh, told two astonished U.S. Army advisors, LtCol William C. Camper and Major Joseph Brown, and offered them his pistol.

It was 2 April 1972, and Camp Carroll’s current occupants, elements of the South Vietnamese Army, were completely encircled by the North Vietnamese Army and about to run up a white flag. The North Vietnamese wanted Camp Carroll, seeing it as the linchpin of the South Vietnamese northern and western defense line in Northern I Corps and a major obstacle between them and Quang Tri City to the southeast.

“That’s not what we Americans do,” replied Camper. “We’ve got other plans.” They grabbed a radio and made for the wire. A CH-47 Chinook helicopter came in for a rescue under heavy fire and almost was overwhelmed by South Vietnamese soldiers attempting to flee with the two Americans. Underpowered and overloaded, the helicopter lifted off and ended up crash-landing on Highway 1. They made it, but Camp Carroll’s garrison of 1,500 surrendered with barely a shot fired.

Almost due east, Dong Ha was in peril with only a few stalwarts wearing tiger-striped camouflage uniforms of the South Vietnamese Marine Corps facing down a column of Soviet-built tanks and self-propelled artillery backed up six miles all the way to the DMZ. Everyone was engulfed in a flood of refugees and ARVN deserters pouring south.

Dong Ha was, and still is, hardscrabble country. Its only claim to fame came a few years earlier when it was one corner of four bases Marines called “Leatherneck Square”: Dong Ha, Cam Lo, Con Thien and Gio Linh. Even today, a tourist guidebook pans visiting Dong Ha. “There’s still an element of the Wild West to Dong Ha. It’s not a particularly friendly or attractive place. ... There is no conceivable reason to visit.”

On 30 March 1972, an intense artillery barrage rained down on the northernmost ARVN outposts in Quang Tri Province. The 304th and 308th North Vietnamese Army divisions with 30,000 soldiers supported by more than 200 tanks plowed through the DMZ into I Corps.

It was a very good attack plan, but the North Vietnamese had not seriously considered two things. They underestimated the pugnacious fighting character of South Vietnamese Marines and American advisor John Ripley holding the south bank of a 500-foot bridge at Dong Ha.

Ripley was a deceptively slim Marine—all muscle and sinew woven taut in tenacious determination. The 700 men of

the 3d South Vietnamese Marine Battalion and their commanding officer, Maj Le Ba Binh, were fortunate to have such a *co-van*, Vietnamese for “trusted friend.”

At 33, Ripley was an “old Asia hand” on his second Vietnam combat tour. He deployed in country as a reconnaissance platoon leader in 1965 and then commanded “Lima” Company, 3d Battalion, Third



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Ripley retired as a colonel. His valor at Dong Ha is remembered, but more than that, he was a sterling example of leadership, integrity and honor throughout his Marine career and, indeed, his entire life.

Marine Regiment. “Ripley’s Raiders” they call themselves, and they insist the “33” label of Vietnamese “*Ba Muoi Ba*” Bier (beer) really means 3d Bn, 3d Marines. They liked Ripley. He was no wuss. He gave his Marines no slack, kept them in the field and got them in plenty of combat, but also took good care of them, and they took their wounds together.

In addition to the Purple Heart, Ripley won a Silver Star during an attack with Lima Co against an NVA regimental command post.

The men of Lima Co admire their “skipper” and like telling stories about him.

One Marine said, “I remember Staff Sergeant Joe Martin saying, Ripley was on *Harlan County* [(LST-1196)] in port on the Caribbean in 1964. He was cross-decking when one of the ‘squid’ officers of the day said something insulting about the Corps. ‘Rip’ threw him in the drink. They put him in ‘hack’ down over the bilges in the bowels of USS *Boxer* [(LPH-4)], where the hull makes a V. He did push-ups all day. Eventually he took over Weapons, 2/2 and was Martin’s platoon commander.”

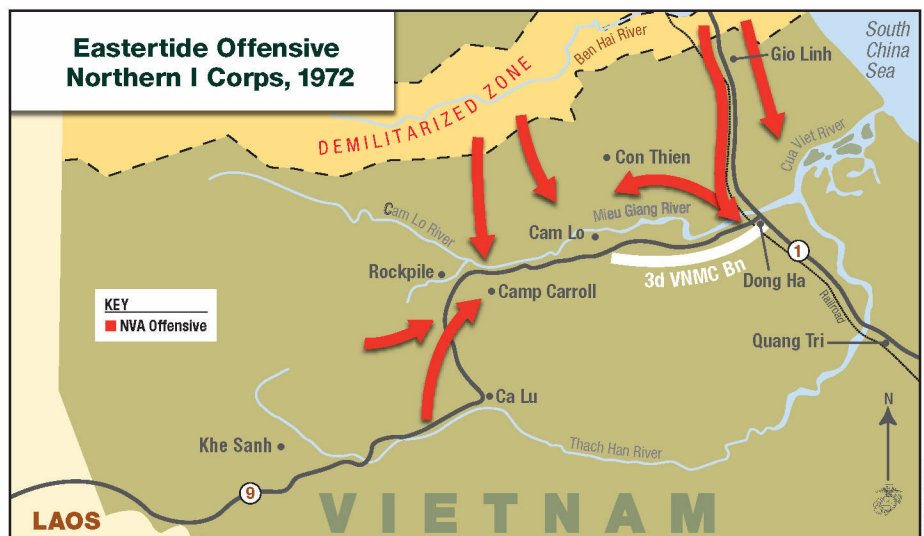
Ripley, even for a Marine, was a physical fitness animal. He was a “The-more-you-sweat-in-peace, the-less-you-bleed-in-war” believer who’d taken it to heart—and all the other muscles of his body—as an enlisted man and later as a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy. It gave him an edge on his exchange tour with the British Royal Marines on the Malay Peninsula, at the U.S. Army’s Airborne and Ranger schools and with the Navy’s underwater demolition teams. He had become jump-, scuba- and Ranger-qualified.

Ripley said, “Endurance: We confuse this with fitness ... but mental endurance is like an extra bandolier. ... You lock-and-load and keep going.”

He also was a man who kept his soul in shape. A staunch Catholic, he believed you do best when at peace with your maker. His was a quiet devotion that gave his Marine persona an extra shot of courage when needed. He was a man with deep and unshakable convictions who believed in his God, his country and his Corps.

It all came together on Easter Sunday, 2 April 1972.

Ripley was the lone *co-van* with 3d VNMC Bn spread between Cam Lo and Dong Ha. He listened as the CO, Maj Binh, received his orders via radio. The brigade commander ordered Binh to “hold Dong Ha at all costs.” He promised to throw in a few 106 mm recoilless rifles and some M48 ARVN tanks, but to the north, the



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



dust and diesel smoke over Highway 1 and the unmistakable rumble of metallic treads heralded the approach of T-54 and PT-76 Soviet armor—lots of it.

Today, there is a large multistoried market at the southwest corner of the highway bridge, which once stood in tandem with a deteriorated French-built railroad bridge over the Cua Viet River. When the Vietnamese Marines consolidated their defensive positions, they noticed the red flag of the People's Republic of North Vietnam and, below it, North Vietnamese infantry, crouched with AK47s at high-port, starting toward both bridges.

Ripley later told Marine historian Charles D. Melson, "an absolute fire storm" ensued, most of it directed at Marines and him courtesy of the communists.

There was no close air support to call on, but there were U.S. destroyers offshore, and they knew how to put naval gunfire with precision on tanks. Over the horizon rose the smoke of burning fuel. At noon from south of the Cua Viet River, the 90 mm cannon from two ARVN M48s started going off, destroying several North Vietnamese tanks. Still, there were just too many tanks and not enough firepower to stop them. Other ARVN tanks were reluctant to provide support. At 12:15 the first NVA tank with the bravado of being an unstoppable 40-ton behemoth treaded its way onto the highway bridge.

It was then that a tactical miracle came in the form of a veteran 90-pound South Vietnamese Marine—Sergeant Huynh Van Luom went forward alone and ex-

posed onto the bridge. He carried only two ammunition boxes filled with dirt and a small strand of concertina wire to use as cover.

When Sgt Luom extended his M72 light antitank assault weapon, the lead tank stopped. Luom pressed down on the firing mechanism, which activated the rocket and its warhead. It missed. Now, the tank did not hesitate to move forward. Sgt Luom armed a second LAAW, aimed and fired. This one hit the tank head-on and jammed the turret. The tank commander threw his vehicle in reverse and backed off the bridge.

Ripley always remembered Sgt Luom's action as the "bravest single act of heroism I've ever heard of, witnessed or experienced." He realized the sergeant had



Above: John Ripley returned to Vietnam in July 1997 with members of L/3/3. At Dong Ha, it was a new bridge that Ripley admired, with a huge market nearby (where this durian fruit atop the wall was purchased). Shoppers in the market had no idea of Ripley's involvement 25 years earlier; most weren't even born then.

Below: The market on the southern banks of the Cua Viet River as seen from the new Dong Ha Bridge is a thriving place of business and the central commerce site for Dong Ha. It once was the site of 3d VNMC Bn positions as they fired across the river at NVA troops and tanks and laid down protective and covering fire while Ripley mined the bridge.



"single-handedly stopped the momentum of the entire attack." The column would not move forward and would not turn around. The whole thrust of the NVA's southern assault came to fumes from idling diesel engines. The column was vulnerable.

It is still the subject of speculation as to why the tank column didn't grind the diminutive sergeant under its tread and roll, followed by great numbers, across the bridge, but it didn't and that changed everything. Ripley later said, "It was one of the most inexplicable parts of the whole affair."

In a 2009 story, Army historian COL Frederic L. Borch wrote that Ripley received a call from U.S. Marine LtCol Gerald H. Turley, assistant U.S. senior

advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Corps. Ripley asked about air support. Turley replied that the threat facing Ripley, "Ain't the only war in town ... every fire base ... is taking crap and some have already gone under. ... You're all we have. There's nothing to back you up."

"We've got to blow that bridge," Ripley radioed Turley. "We've got to buy some time."

Neither Ripley nor Turley had that kind of authority. Ripley later said, "Lieutenant Colonel Turley took matters into his own hands and said: 'Do it and worry about the consequences later.'"

As if a reminder, the North Vietnamese

started pounding the south bank with artillery and raking it with small-arms fire.

While the ARVN forces were unenthusiastic about facing off with North Vietnamese tanks, Ripley found MAJ James E. Smock, U.S. Army advisor to the 290th ARVN Tank Bn, willing to step forward and provide what proved to be critical aid.

But, who was going to blow the bridge? In reality, Ripley was the logical choice, an example of the best man for the job being in the right place at the right time. Remember all those military schools Ripley attended? They were packed with classes on demolitions and, when Ripley was a teenager, he would impress friends

and relatives by hand-walking under a large bridge near his home in Radford, Va. And, he confided to Smock almost with delight, "I've always wanted to blow up a bridge."

ARVN engineers had placed 500 pounds of TNT and C-4 plastic explosives near the bridge in the event it would need to be destroyed. But according to the book "Bridge at Dong Ha," by retired Marine Col John G. Miller, "These engineers had not placed the explosives under the bridge, much less attempted to rig it for destruction, since they were terrified of being so far forward."

The bridge, recently completed in 1970, had been professionally and solidly constructed of wood, reinforced with steel "I" beams, girders and concrete abutments by U.S. Navy Seabees and, therefore, was not about to collapse easily. Ripley quickly surmised what it was going to take. In a nutshell, COL Borch explained, "The TNT would be used in concert with satchels of C4. ... The C4 would cut the girders and the exploding TNT would lift ... the bridge up and then twist it off its [concrete] supports, sending it crashing into the water below."

The only problem was it couldn't be done. Not by one man. Especially if that one man was strapped with two 15-pound satchels of C4 explosives, blasting caps

and hanging from the girders, moving hand over hand and under fire from angry North Vietnamese. But nobody had said to Ripley it couldn't be done.

He readied himself and whispered a near perfect Marine prayer—"Please, God, don't let me screw this up!"

Ripley hoisted himself atop a chain-link fence topped with razor wire, grabbed the beam's flanges and climbed through the wire, which tore at his arms and legs. "Just don't bleed to death before you make it through," said Smock.

He swung his body out and was 50 feet above the river. He needed to hand-walk 100 feet to the first abutment. That was when NVA riflemen on the north bank spotted him and started shooting. South Vietnamese Marines on the south bank opened up and drew the communist fire away.

"Jesus, Mary get me there. Jesus-Mary-get-me-there. JesusMarygetmethere," is how Borch describes Ripley's Gregorian-like chant as his hands and arms carried his body across the girder.

Melson wrote that about halfway out, Ripley "tried to swing himself up into the steel girders by hooking his heels in either side of the beam. It was then that he realized that he still had his web gear on and his rifle slung over his shoulder. All at once the weight was oppressive. ...

His arms ached with pain, his finger grasp felt insecure, and he could not hang there indefinitely. ... After several attempts to swing his body, he lodged his heels on the beam."

Ripley wedged the two satchels on either side of the girder and slightly off, creating a "crooked earmuff charge" designed to shear the beam.

Smock had been busy hoisting 50-pound boxes of TNT and satchel charges. Each time he climbed the fence with the boxes, he took fire. Ripley edged the boxes along the beams to where he had placed the satchel charges. In the back of Ripley's and Smock's minds was the question, "Why haven't the tanks rolled across the bridge?"

Ripley was particularly worried. "Why aren't they directing more of their attention to me? What are they doing over there?"

The North Vietnamese were watching in frustration as Ripley swung from one I beam to another. Their small-arms fire pinged around and below Ripley, but didn't hit him. The Vietnamese Marines kept putting out suppressive fire.

A communist T-54 tank had carefully maneuvered down the bank into position. Its turret pointed the 100 mm gun at Ripley and fired.

"Mother of God! They've got me this time!" he recalled thinking. The round hit less than two feet away, glanced off a beam and ricocheted into the south bank. Ripley almost lost his grip.

Ripley went back to work inserting blasting caps. He had no crimper to fasten the caps to the fuze. He had to bite the cap to open one end. If he bit too low, he would not get a good crimp. If he bit too high, he might set off the cap, which would take the top of his head off. Nonetheless, he was meticulous in setting the charges. Ripley patiently moved from beam to beam—all six of them—and set his charges. He gave himself 30 minutes of fuze cord, lit it and started back.

The mining had taken three hours, but finally Ripley was back with Smock on the south bank. That was when he discovered a box of electric caps. Ever the thorough, attention-to-detail perfectionist, Ripley knew he had to go back under the bridge, and under fire, to set the electric caps as a backup to the burning fuze cord.

Smock admonished him. "Hey, you dumb jarhead! That isn't necessary. What are you doing that for?"

"You tankers don't know anything," replied Ripley.

Smock said he was smart enough to know Ripley had enough to blow the bridge and "three more like it." Smock also was smart enough to hook up a few



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The new bridge at Dong Ha looking north is a much more civil scene than during the Eastertide Offensive of 1972 that brought down its predecessor.



Above left: It was 2 March 2012 when members of L/3/3 gathered at Semper Fidelis Memorial Park, National Museum of the Marine Corps, Triangle, Va., to dedicate the “CAPTAIN J. W. RIPLEY LIMA CO RVN-1967” Memorial, honor their fallen comrades and remember their CO. Also on hand was retired Col Gerald H. Turley, who was assistant senior advisor to the VNMC during the Eastertide Offensive.

Above right: They unveiled their monument and gathered for a group photo while former Ripley Raiders A. C. Boley (kneeling, left) of Salem, Va., and Robert Peugh of Dewey, Okla., held the “Ripley’s Raiders” banner. It was a mark of the esteem and respect they have for their former commander. During the war, they demonstrated that respect when many extended their tour just to continue to serve with Ripley.

boxes of TNT under the old railroad trestle hoping that when the Dong Ha bridge blew, it also would take the old rail bridge.

Ripley finally made it back. He found a jeep battery to give him the electrical source needed to detonate the caps, and they ran toward the Vietnamese Marines’ lines. It was there he touched the wire to the battery terminal: nothing.

It was then that Ripley saw a young girl separated from her mother. An NVA mortar round hit behind her. Ripley sprinted to the girl, scooped her up and ran toward the mother. That’s when they were all blown off their feet. The timed fuzes had burned like sparklers, slowly, but steadily until they reached the explosives.

When the dust and smoke cleared, there was a 100-foot gap between the south bank and the rest of the bridge. The wooden timbers were on fire and would burn for days. The old French bridge was blown in half. The North Vietnamese ceased firing, turned off their tanks, opened the hatches and looked.

At 1630 Ripley reported both bridges destroyed. The NVA, still threatening, sent their PT-76 amphibious tanks to the river’s edge. That’s when the Navy unleashed more gunfire from offshore and a flight of South Vietnamese A-1 Skyraiders hit the armored column.

What remained of the NVA armor eventually would make a minor thrust into South Vietnam, but not through Dong Ha. It would take the North Vietnamese Army another three years to launch another and final offensive.

In the meantime, Ripley was presented with the Navy Cross, the U.S. Army awarded Smock the Silver Star, and the Vietnamese were left to fend for themselves.

Ripley retired in 1992 and became president of Southern Virginia College and later president of Hargrave Military Academy, also in Virginia. In 1999, he became the director of the Marine Corps History and Museums Division.

Respected as a warrior, and later for his personal and professional integrity, he received numerous accolades. In 2002, he was the first Marine officer to be named a Distinguished Graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy. In May 2004, the 22d Marine Expeditionary Unit in Afghanistan named their forward operating base “Ripley.” In 2006, a new dormitory at the Naval Academy Prep School in Newport, R.I., was named “Ripley Hall,” after the graduate. And in 2008, Ripley was inducted into the U.S. Army Ranger Hall of Fame.

Colonel John Walter Ripley died at his home in Annapolis, Md., 28 Oct. 2008. He was 69.

Epilogue: At Christie’s, a restaurant on Da Nang’s Han River in 1997, Ripley raised a glass of what is now “333 Bier,” “Ba Muoi Ba Muoi Ba,” which those around the table insisted stands for 3d Bn, 3d Marines, 3dMarDiv. It was his first time back since the Eastertide Offensive,

and Ripley was celebrating his first tour with fellow members of Lima, 3/3 who had returned with him for an in-country reunion with Military Historical Tours.

They basked in the warmth of camaraderie under the glow of the evening lamps. They were young Marines again, fresh from the field, happy to be alive and in the Corps. As Ripley raised his glass, he gave this toast: “Here’s to the drunken Marine with beer in his canteen. You’ve heard of the Unknown Soldier, but never an unknown Marine!” They shook with laughter. It was followed by the sound of empty glasses slammed to the table.

Editor’s note: On this 40th anniversary, should you want to read more about the 1972 Easter Offensive, two exceptional books are “The Easter Offensive: The Last American Advisors, Vietnam, 1972” by Col Gerald H. Turley, USMCR (Ret) and “Ride the Thunder: A Vietnam War Story of Honor and Triumph” by Marine veteran Richard Botkin. To learn more about the life of Col Ripley, read “An American Knight: The Life of Colonel John W. Ripley, USMC,” by Norman Fulkerson. All are available from the bookstore at The Marine Shop. Call toll-free, (888) 237-7683, or go online at www.marineshop.net.



Leatherneck—On the Web

To see more photos of the Capt J. W. Ripley, “Ripley’s Raiders” Memorial dedication, go to www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/ripleymemorial