

(From John Dodson, West Point '68, Three Tour VN Vet, for a Class Book on Experiences)

John Darling was with me in Ranger School, carried the machine gun a couple of times, and Harry Hayes was a wonderful fellow Southerner teammate, funny as hell, on the 150's team tables, one of the few of us who did not have to worry about his weight. Neither came back from VN. Miss them both.

But it was Donny Workman who was really special to me. The Troll. He was older, with prior service, a runt of a guy but tough as nails, and for my money he was the best natural leader in our Class when we graduated. He was my Cadet Regt CO when I was CO of G-3 under Al Haig. When I was having trouble with my classmates over their haircuts one time, he came down before a big WPR and asked to go through my company on his own. I said sure, not clear what he was up to. Turned out, he spoke with each man about 'what he was doing to support the company commander?' Donny, of course, was almost in a jump seat in the class academically, had a string of turn-out stars, and should have been studying, not going through my company, for his own sake. For me, academics were not a real problem. That selfless, totally spontaneous action stuck in my mind as one of the true leadership moves I experienced at WP. It was never forgotten.

I would have walked through alligators for the guy.

On that first trip back to VN last fall I did a memorial service for him in-country.

Ripcord was the last major battle of the VN war. It was a little north of the end of the road I had almost finished as a Plt Ldr into the A Shau Valley, Rt. 547. LTG Zais stopped us near the lip of the Valley in the fall of '69 when the drawdown began. Some of my 101st Engineers were there (326th), but nobody traveled a road for Ripcord - it was all air assault. What had seemed to be two NVA regiments turned out to be their mainline full Division, and they wanted Ripcord out of "their" Valley. There were three MOH's and a half dozen DSC's awarded there, one MOH to Donny's Bn Co LTC posthumously. He had ordered Don on that final mission and was killed on the last day, two days after Don. Don commanded D Co, 1/506th, of the 101st, and air assaulted into a hail of fire on the backside of a supporting Hill to Ripcord, that an entire Battalion had tried for four assaults to take from the front, before it was withdrawn. Donny's mission was a mistake. His D-Company was attacked as soon as he was on the ground, fought for two days against 6-1 odds, we heard, and was decimated. All of this was supposed to be clandestine, as the war was supposed to be winding down. LTG Berry, a real gentleman from Mississippi, an Aviator, who was later the Supt who tried to resist Congress from opening WP to women in 1978 and ended his career, was commanding the 101st during this battle. It was he who finally decided to let the NVA have the real estate, just pay for it dearly. But too late for D-Company.

Several of us were in country in I Corps, down the road at Camp Eagle or strung out on Rt 547 at FB Blaze, when Donny went down at Ripcord and was MIA for several days. A month or so earlier, Jimmy Llewellyn, who had been his XO at WP, and I had met with him before his last R&R when we heard he was taking leave. He had just come off an ambush in which he had killed a Chinese advisor the night before with a claymore, a large Chink body with a lot of intel that had to be debriefed and he had had no sleep. We quickly realized he needed decompressing before he should see his wife, and we drank a lot of beer at Cam Ranh Bay, to help him to act semi-normal when he made it to Hawaii. It was to be the last time, as it turned out, for him to see her.

Most officers were only in the bush about half their tour during that period, but Donny was too valuable in the field and his company was chosen for this critical job when Berry was still determined to hold Ripcord, which had been used as one of the "bait" sites in that last period of the negotiations in Paris, when we were supposed to "not take casualties." An extraordinarily dumb order. About the only way you could "not take casualties" in the short run over there was not to patrol. Until you got overrun - not knowing where in hell Charlie was. But he was not hard to find at the northern end of the A Shau.

The idea was to take strong positions in Comanche territory with a battalion or so, and when the NVA arrived, to bomb the be-Jesus out of them. But Ripcord was also re-occupied by the 101st, near Rendezvous FB, pursuant to an ambitious last interdiction operation planned, of the Ho Chi Minh Trail down the A Shau, the same reason we were building Rt 547 when I got there. I was under then COL Morris (later LTG & Chief of Engineers), whom many of us knew. But the NVA were already there, and moved in a couple of regiments at Ripcord, as I recall, that then it turned into a full Division, and it got too expensive in casualties to hold Ripcord. The Troll was with the final platoon, all that was left of his company, being extracted on that supporting Hill just southeast. He was reportedly approaching one of the last choppers taking out his exhausted and wounded when the pilot was hit by heavy AK-47 fire and the chopper pitched over, the rotor blade spinning, cutting him into two pieces - from the right shoulder diagonally, throwing his head and shoulders one way and his body the other.

He had been in the field almost an entire year and had three weeks to go until his DEROS.

Although the official record does not say this, we heard at the time that the troops still ambulatory at the time panicked when Donny was decapitated, and mobbed the choppers that made it to the ground, hanging off the struts. We do know their dead were left behind on that Hill. After all living friendlies were finally out, they unleashed all hell on the NVA Division there, starting 24 July 1970. Over 150 tons a day of HE and napalm for about a week, we heard. Some reports said the NVA took so many casualties at Ripcord, as at Ia Drang and Tet, that it delayed their next year's offensive a year in rebuilding that Division. I did some strange work as an Engineer during that time in-country, and worse later in SF for short bursts the following year out of places like Duc Lap, Dak Seang, Ben Het, finally Chi Lang when I was in an Infantry role and a paymaster for the CIA, but you guys who went Infantry up front and went through this stuff day after day for months at a time in the bush have my full respect. Sometimes I wonder how any of us are still sane.

As I recall, it was about a week before they got all our people's remains out of Ripcord. Mostly body parts.

Llewellyn took Donny home.

John D