

FROM ANONYMITY TO IMMORTALITY



A TRIBUTE TO COL JOHN W. RIPLEY, USMC (RET) JUNE 29, 1939-OCTOBER 28, 2008

BY LTCOL THOMAS "TOM" W. WILLIAMS, USMC (RET)

I was personally and professionally fortunate to have Col John W. Ripley as a former battalion commander, as a friend, and as a mentor.

Unquestionably, he is a legend of our Corps! Unfortunately, he has now passed away. He is one of the few, the proud, the Marines who by his heroic deeds and his exemplary leadership will be assured a prominent place in the illustrious history of our Corps.

He was the most personable and charismatic leader I ever served with! His optimistic work ethic, pride, integrity, and strength of character were palpable. His winning smile and engaging personality was contagious. As his Operations Officer, I have seen him walk into a tense controversial situation and within a matter of minutes he would have full control of the debate. Likewise, by sheer strength of character, I have seen him personally transform a stale atmosphere into a pleasant and productive environment. The exemplary standard he set was always a guide for his subordinates to follow.

He was an extraordinarily dynamic leader in every aspect of the definition. On the other hand, physically he was not an exceptionally large man, but when you were in his presence there was no doubt that you were in the company

of a giant among Marines! You could not help being persuaded by Col Ripley but on the other hand there was a stern confidence about him that you instinctively knew would not tolerate nonsense.

He will be missed not only by his immediate family, but also by those of us he personally touched. We few who had the good fortune of being closely associated with him professionally and by those Marines who experienced his astonishing exploits through the written word will always benefit from his example. Fortunately, he enriched my life in many ways. As his Battalion Operations Officer, I was privileged to be the one responsible for implementing his guidance and expectations for his Battalion, 1ST Battalion, 2ND Marines. It was my pleasure to become his right arm for execution of his policies and direction.

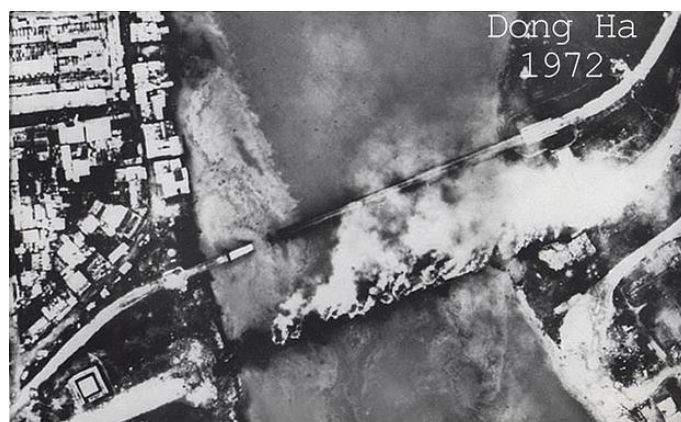
One of the best examples of the special trust and confidence he possessed within the Marine Corps was being assigned command of 1ST Battalion, 2ND Marine Regiment. That assignment was no happenstance. Few people were aware that the U. S. Ambassador to Norway had communicated to the Commandant of the Marine Corps, at that time, that the Marine Corps was neither equipped nor trained properly to fight in the extreme cold regions of Norway. Because of the cold weather training and practical field experience he received as a British Royal Marine Exchange Officer, Col Ripley was the logical choice to reverse this lack of capability within the Marine Corps, and so he did.

For eighteen months, we trained, we properly equipped the battalion, and we prepared for the inevitable cold weather we would ultimately experience more than 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle in Norway during Operation Anorak Express 1980.



Most Marines of my era were more familiar with “Ripley at the bridge,” referencing his exploits in stopping the North Vietnamese armor attack literally in their ‘tracks’ at the Dong Ha Bridge on Easter Sunday during the 1972 Easter Offensive, earning him the Navy Cross for that day’s valor. As his Operations Officer, I was uniquely privileged to hear firsthand the details of his actions on that fateful day. It was a very chilly winter’s night in a small out-of-the-way village hotel somewhere in the hinterlands of Norway, while we were on a final liaison trip to Norway. It was in this setting, as we prepared for the continuation of the next day’s planning conference with the Norwegians that I personally heard his step-by-step recollection of how he set the explosives, while under intense enemy fire, to drop the bridge at Dong Ha.

Col Gerry Turley’s book “The Easter Offensive” is a good source for learning more about this extraordinary feat of heroism. As a matter of fact, it was Col Turley who ordered Captain John Ripley to drop the Dong Ha bridge. I was also privileged to serve Col Turley three separate times in my career.



In time we all make our exit from this life and hopefully we will have made a modicum of difference, a positive influence on others, and especially by improving our Corps. In the case of John W. Ripley, Colonel of Marines, he has gone from Anonymity to Immortality in his lifetime. By his achievements and exploits he was truly a legend in his own lifetime. In my mind’s eye, he was and continues to be the model of what an exemplary Marine should look like, act like, and more importantly how we Marines should be perceived by our fellow countrymen, our Marines, and by our allies.

