

# THE DONG HA BRIDGE

**Jim Ramsey, former Lieutenant, US Navy Civil Engineer Corps**



**On Easter Sunday, April 2, 1972, Marine Corps Captain John Walter Ripley entered Marine Corps lore when he single-handedly halted a major North Vietnamese offensive by blowing up the Dong Ha Bridge just south of the Demilitarized Zone in South Vietnam. “Captain Ripley is credited with changing the course of the war”, declares Jim Ramsey, former Navy lieutenant and company commander with the Seabee battalion that built the Dong Ha Bridge three years before Captain Ripley destroyed it.**

**Jim Ramsey will relate the story of Captain Ripley’s heroic actions that day, starting with the order to blow the bridge at 9:00 a.m. By noon, Ripley began deploying 750 pounds of TNT at strategic points on the bridge and at 3:30 p.m. the bridge blew.**

**On March 30, 1972, North Vietnam unleashed the Easter Offensive, a multi-division attack against targets throughout South Vietnam. Three North Vietnamese divisions poured across the DMZ and another division invaded east from Laos, setting their sights on Hue, the former imperial capital of Vietnam. To reach this target, Dong Ha would have to be taken first. All of the South Vietnamese positions north of Dong Ha had been overrun by April 1; the most immediate threat to the town was a North Vietnamese division, with 15,000 troops and 200 tanks that was rolling unimpeded down Route 1 toward the Dong Ha Bridge.**

**By mid-morning on April 2 the North Vietnamese had reached the north end of the bridge. Defending the bridge and the town were a battalion of 700 South Vietnamese marines and 44 South Vietnamese Army tanks. Captain Ripley was the U.S. advisor to the Marine Battalion. This small force could not hope to stop the approaching enemy in conventional fighting. Their only chance was to destroy the bridge. Captain Ripley had acquired demolitions expertise while training with the Navy’s Underwater Demolitions Teams (now known as Seals), so it fell to him to bring down the bridge.**

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Jim Ramsey earned bachelors and masters degrees in Civil Engineering from Cornell University. He completed the Naval ROTC Program at Cornell and served in the U.S. Navy Civil Engineer Corps from 1966 to 1971. In his tour with the SEABEES of U.S. Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 62 (1968-1969) he completed two deployments to Vietnam, first as Administrative Officer in Da Nang and later as Company Commander in Dong Ha.

A Harvard MBA, Jim worked in management consulting and held marketing and business development positions with several companies. A member of the Executive Committee of the Lexington Veterans Association, Jim is a volunteer with the Veterans' Library at the Edith Nourse Rogers Memorial Veterans Hospital, bringing books and companionship to patients.



**Col. John W. Ripley**  
**Dong Ha, Republic of Vietnam, 1972**

On March 30, 1972, a major North Vietnamese force, supported by tanks and artillery, crossed the DMZ, down Highway 1 and over the Cua Viet River. Their objective was to seize intact a two-lane bridge there.

If the enemy got tanks across the Dong Ha Bridge, then they could move swiftly south. The bridge had to be destroyed. Ripley, who was trained in the use of explosives, quickly realized that this was his mission.

Under intense small arms, automatic weapons, tank and artillery fire, Ripley swung hand over hand to plant demolition charges at the first abutment over 100 feet away. Then, forcing himself up into the channel between the steel stringers, spread-eagled, back to the shore, he pulled and dragged two satchel charges on two boxes on TNT- a combined weight of over 180 pounds, back out. It took six trips to set the charges, rig primer cord and detonators, light the fuses, then get back to shore. The bridge was destroyed.

For his extraordinary heroism in the face of an opposing armed force, Col. John W. Ripley was awarded the nation's second highest award for valor- the Navy Cross.

*John W. Ripley Col USMC*