

HISTORY – 597TH TRUCK COMPANY IN VIETNAM
JUNE 1965 TO JUNE 1966
(23 June 2007)

The 597th Truck Company (medium S&T), Fort Eustis VA – was alerted for deployment in the spring of 1965. On June 1st, the 597th had its full complement of officers

Captain Ronald Bodogiski
1LT Gary Agansky
2LT Rod Stubbs
2LT David Helmer (just out of TOBC 7-65)
CWO xxxx Smith

One of the first tasks was to load the unit's equipment on rail cars for shipment to Oakland Army Terminal during the first week of June. The officers and enlisted men of the 597th then went on short leaves to move their dependents back home and prepared for departure to Vietnam. All of the company flew from Patrick Henry Airport in nearby Newport News VA and flew overnight on June 22nd to Oakland CA on charter aircraft – except for 2LT Stubbs. Since he lived on the west coast – he was assigned the critical mission of being at the port as liaison with the Navy in Oakland – to ensure the company's TOE was loaded onboard a military vessel bound for Vietnam.

The men of the 597th boarded the *USS James G. Breckinridge*, a WW II troop ship – which was carrying several other units to Vietnam – as well as personnel and dependents that would be dropped off at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Once loaded, we sailed beneath the Oakland Bay and Golden Gate Bridges where hundreds of well-wishers and anti-war activists waved their good byes. The trip to Vietnam took 23 day or so and the ship arrived in the waters of Vietnam on July 13th at Vung Tau - - but the 597th would not land until two days later – July 15th at the Qui Nhon. With the assistance of the landing craft of a sister unit the 1098th Medium Boat from Fort Eustis that had arrived a few days earlier – the personnel and equipment of the 597th came ashore. The entire unit was then off loaded, by nets, into the landing craft that took us to shore. What we did not know was that Utter's Battalion of Marines from Okinawa arrived a couple of weeks before and secured the greater Qui Nhon area.

The first “home” of the 597th was adjacent to the small landing strip in Qui Nhon – whose sandy conditions made it difficult to put up tents. Our mission during July and August was to being the built-up of supplies and ammunition to various supply depot\’s in the immediate area. In mid August - - we moved our base camp to Phu Tai, just south of the “y” junction of highways 19 and 1 west of Qui Nhon. The 597th Truck Company was soon joined by the 2nd, 58th and 61st truck companies in the compound west of Qui Nhon. These units would remain in this base camp location for the remainder during 1965 and 1966. More truck companies would follow into this theater of operations.

In mid August – we began our first convoys into hostile territory and saw our first combat action. While it will NOT be a highlight of the 101st Airborne history – we moved part of their brigade BY truck to blast the way clear, heading west on Highway 19 and up the An Khe Pass to the hamlet of An Khe – which would later become the large base camp of the 1st Air Calvary which begin arriving in September. The reason the “airborne” was trucked in their first battle – was that their aircraft was still on ships in the harbor and were not operational.

For the next month or so - - the truck units from Qui Nhon moved the entire 1st Air Calvary into their prime base camp in the Central Highlands. CONEX containers, PSP and all the other equipment to build a major facility for this unit was trucked into An Khe (Camp Radcliff) – over the pass which would be the scene of many ambushes in later years. The supply area at An Khe where cargos were off loaded was also known as the “golf course” for reasons I do not know.

In October – we extended our line of operations west on Highway 19 to Pleiku, across the infamous Mang Giang Pass – scene of the massacre of the French Mobile Force 100. The road west of An Khe to Pleiku had a number of blown bridges to work around via temporary bridges or other by-passes. It was rather uncanny going by a monument to this tragic event - that by then – was riddled by bullet holes. Highway 19 was a decent two lane paved road from Qui Nhon to Pleiku – but with the heavy monsoon rains and the pounding of the heavy loaded cargo trucks – so took its toll. Pot-holes in the road appeared faster than the ability to patch the highway.

Typical convoy operation during this time was to pick up the loads in Qui Nhon, move to an assembly point near the junction of Highways 19 and 1 – run west in the daylight to Pleiku. After dropping the loads and picking up empties – run back to Qui Nhon in the SAME day – a trip of more than 200 miles. Sometimes – we would find ourselves driving home late at night – what a thrill. At this time – there was limited security for the convoys – while en-route. The convoy (or serial) commander had a machine gun mounted in the rear of the jeep. Sand bags were in the floor of the jeep to protect somewhat from land mine explosions. Speed of operations was essential. Our job was to get the beans, beer, fuel and bullets to the real heroes of this war.

The 597th and other truck companies were called to support the FIRST major action of the 1st Air Calvary – the battle in the Ia Drang Valley near the Cambodia border beginning in late October. This turned out to be the deadliest battle in the Vietnam War and was the subject of the book “They Died So Young” by Col Thomas Moore. This was later turned in the movie “We were Soldiers”.

We operated fuel and ammunition convoys from the supply depots in Pleiku to the operating Battalion areas of the 1st Air Calvary. Such locations visited included Plei Mei Special Forces camp, Duc Co (on the border itself) and the Plantation. After the battle – the 597TH moved captured weapons back to An Khe and 200 or so bodies in refrigerator trucks to the Graves Registration point in Qui Nhon. The losses to the 1st Air Calvary greatly limited its combat operation abilities for several months.

Later in November – the Republic of Korean (ROK) Tiger Division took over security of Highway 19 from near Highway 1 to the base of An Khe Pass. These fine soldiers knew how to fight the enemy with an Asian mentality. In late December 1965, the 3rd Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division arrived by air in Pleiku and was moved by truck to a nearby camp they established. 2LT Helmer was there to “welcome” the new arrivals from Hawaii on Christmas Day and wondered if some of these soldiers were ones we had dropped off the troop ship at Pearl Harbor while the 597th was in en-route to Vietnam.

Daily convoys continued to operate on Highway 19 from Qui Nhon to either Pleiku or An Khe – with an occasional mission on Highway 1 to Phu Cat Air Force Base not too far from Qui Nhon.

After the 1st Air Cavalry began fully combat ready in early 1966 – operations switched to supporting their Operation Masher north on Highway 1 (Street without Joy) to Bong Son. There were a number of “Yankee Go Home” signs along the way – as we were operating in Ho Chi Minh’s home province. It was during one of those truck convoy missions that 1LT Stubbs’ jeep came under fire, ran off the road and into the rice patties. Lt Stubbs was to sustain injuries to pelvis etc that required rehabilitation in Yokohama Naval Hospital for more than five months before returning to the states.

Convoy operations for March – June developed into a pattern with daily round trips from Qui Nhon to Pleiku or to An Khe and the occasion trip to Bong Son in support of another 1st Air Cavalry mission in that area. The 597th was like Mary had a little lamb – and followed the 1st Air Cavalry wherever it was to go. Our company’s motto was “You Call – We Haul”, a philosophy I have used in civilian life.

One frightful mission was to Happy Valley (poorly named) --- some 10 miles or so north from Highway 19 near the base of An Khe Pass. Driving over rice patty dikes to reach an Air Cavalry artillery unit low on ammunition was a challenge – especially in the rain and night. Command and control in the dark is very difficult – without night vision goggles.

Captain Bodogansky left early as company commander because of an injury. Captain Ken Pittman was selected to be the company commander from the 27th Battalion HQ. In April, 1LT Gary Agansky completed his two-year active duty obligation and then flew back to the states. I do not know who replaced either Stubbs or Agansky in the company.

One of the more interesting convoys during our tour was to the town of Cheo Reo – in the province of the same name. This town was located some 80 or so miles on a narrow dirt road southeast of Pleiku. The mission was to take loads of PSP to rebuild an aircraft landing strip. The road to Cheo Reo was winding and littered with damages from the war. The road was “protected” by American Green Berets and Montenards tribesmen. After we unloaded the cargo – some of the drivers took the liberty to swim in the river on the east side of the town. When the NVA later invaded South Vietnam in 1975 and the ARVN decided to make a very hasty and ill-advised retreat from Pleiku to the coast – the ARVN and civilians suffered massive casualties trying to cross this river. This route was

the only escape route at the time – since Highway 19 had been cut off by the quickly advancing NVA troops.

Several times I visited the families of those we killed in traffic accidents and “paid them off” with C rations. In hindsight – what a low value of life was in the Vietnamese culture.

Soon, late June rolled around and CWO Smith and 2LT Helmer had completed their year tour in the county and flew to the USA – via Con Tom and Saigon. As they departed Vietnam – next mission for the 597th was to Dak To near the Laos border. In that famous battle – Bill Carpenter (West Point graduate) called in the 101st Artillery on his infantry company that was being overrun by the North Vietnamese.

David Helmer
Major US Army TC (retired)