

## **GOING TO VIETNAM (Bill Eichenberg)**

These are my best recollections of my journey to the Republic of Vietnam in late 1966.

First of all, I wasn't supposed to go to Viet Nam. When I came into the Army in April of 1966, I had orders to go to Italy. I had taken two years of Italian in college and wanted to spend some time in Italy and other parts of Europe. So, when I was given a preference statement to indicate three choices of where I wanted to be assigned, I put Italy as my first choice. Nowhere did I indicate Vietnam as a choice.

I really wasn't concerned about Vietnam then. When I was in ROTC in college, people would ask if we were concerned about the growing war over in Southeast Asia. We made a joke out of our response, saying that we were only going to be Second Lieutenants, and the Army was only sending Captains and Majors to Vietnam, strictly as advisors. No regular troops were being sent over there prior to 1965.

In fact, I can't say as I even really knew where Vietnam was located, or anything else about it. I just wasn't interested.

I entered onto active duty with the Army on 7 April 1966 at Fort Eustis, Virginia. Since my basic branch was Transportation, I was assigned TDY to the Transportation School for the Transportation Officer Basic Course (TOBC 9-66) which was a nine week course covering the basics of Army Transportation...land, sea and air movements. As I said before, my official orders had me going to Italy (Leghorn) as my permanent assignment after the TDY at Fort Eustis.

There were approximately 45 officers in my class, most of them Second Lieutenants like myself. And, like me, most all of these men had orders to Europe. However, approximately four or five weeks into our course people started to receive changes in their orders. Instead of Europe these folks were either going directly to Vietnam or were being assigned to units that were getting ready to go to Vietnam.

Eventually I too joined the group who would not be going to Europe. I received orders re-assigning me to the 505th Transportation Detachment (TTPO) located right there at Fort Eustis. Actually, I don't remember being too upset over this at the time. The major impact for me was that because of this reassignment I was no longer TDY at Fort Eustis but now permanently assigned. That meant that I no longer got TDY per diem payments; a major drop in my take home pay.

After nine weeks of TOBC we were graduated and things began to change. TOBC was actually fun and although some of the classes were very boring, most of the stuff was new and interesting and, like in the college dorms, there was always people around to do stuff with like going out to eat and to the movies. Also, since I did not bring a car with me, there were guys from whom you could bum a ride since we were all going to the same place at the same time.

Now that I was permanently assigned to Fort Eustis I had to move to another BOQ, actually just across the street. Everyone from my class scattered in different directions and there were only a handful of us who stayed at Fort Eustis. What that meant was that things got lonely real fast.

As for my new assignment, I found that my new unit didn't really exist. It was a brand new organization, and I was the only one assigned so far. I was to be the detachment commander, the only officer assigned to this 16 - man unit. We were attached to a light truck company under the command of Captain Roy L. Taylor, who was supposed to act as a mentor and help us get ready to ship out to Vietnam. The truck company was attached to the 714th TBROS&DE, the only railway battalion left in the active army. The initials of this unit stood for "Transportation Battalion, Railway Operating, Steam & Diesel Electric." Like the name says, this unit had steam and diesel locomotives and other rolling stock which they operated around the post. The Commanding Officer was LTC Bernard J. McNelis and the Executive Officer was LTC Bill Bevers. They had both been in rail units in the European Theater in WWII.

There were several units at Fort Eustis that had been alerted for Vietnam and it was a busy place. The 6th Trans Bn (truck) had just departed during the last month or so, and in addition to my small unit there were others getting ready to ship out. One was the 515th?? Trans Det, which was a railway unit. The CO was 2LT Bill Savage. His unit was also attached to Taylor's truck company and so we did a lot of training and learning together.

When I started asking about my unit, like "what is it; what does it do; what does it have" in terms of people and equipment, the answer I got was to go look at the TO & E (Table of Organization & Equipment). The only problem was, I couldn't find one and neither could anyone else for at least a couple of weeks. Most people said that this was probably a unit that operated a truck terminal. I was also told to be patient, that soon people and equipment would start showing up as if by magic. Needless to say, I didn't really feel in control.

But they were right. Eventually some one got me a copy of a T O & E and I found out that we were going to operate a trailer transfer point, not a truck terminal. The difference is that a TTP is supposed to be located somewhere along the main truck route, and not at either end like a terminal. Its main mission is to facilitate the transfer of loaded or empty trailers from the tractors of one unit or convoy to the tractors of another that is continuing on the route. In other words, the tractors did not make the entire trip with the trailer. They would take one segment and then another would take over.

My detachment would consist of sixteen troops, including myself as the Detachment Commander. It also was supposed to have an NCO in charge, an E-7?, a maintenance sergeant E-5, two or three senior drivers E-5, and the rest would be either drivers or mechanics. What we ended up getting was an E-5 wearing Staff Sergeant stripes, Lewis Crellan, who had just been transferred out of France. The next senior man was Lavoid Carroll who was a Spec Five (E-5) and a senior driver. Our maintenance sergeant was a Spec Five named Raymond Letourneau. I'm not sure just who reported in when and in

what order, but sure enough over the next few weeks folks came drifting in until soon we had our full complement.

I can't remember all of the names of the men in the unit but a few still stand out:

Danny Matney from Bluefield, West Virginia

Ernest Irvin

???

As far as I know all of these guys made it safely back to the States after their Vietnam tour. Some day I will check their names against those on the wall, just to make sure.

We spent the months of July and August training and acquiring our equipment. Someone had requisitioned our equipment against the authority of our T O & E and it slowly dribbled in. We were authorized three M-52 Truck Tractors, one 3/4 ton maintenance truck, a portable steam cleaner, and one M-151 jeep. Later in August we would prepare these vehicles for overseas shipment. We loaded them onto flatcars destined for the port of Beaumont in Texas. They would then go by sea to Vietnam. Our other equipment was loaded into Conex inserts, which were large cardboard cartons on pallets. These were loaded into a boxcar and supposedly were routed with the vehicles. The ship that our equipment sailed on was the *SS Bessemer Victory*. It would sail from the Gulf Coast port of Beaumont through the Panama Canal and then across the Pacific. This trip would take several months, however, as the ship, recently taken out of mothballs, encountered many mechanical difficulties en route.

Life at Fort Eustis that summer was very frustrating. I was really on my own as to how to get the detachment ready to ship overseas. CPT Taylor was not much help. He was a nice enough guy, but didn't seem to care one way or another what we were doing or how we were getting along. When I would go into his office with a question or concern he would most often turn it back on me to do whatever I thought best. His usual comment after I had briefed him was, "mighty fine!"

On a personal level I was having trouble with the heat and humidity. I was not used to not ever being "dry" and I had a lot of trouble sleeping at night. Also, I found out real soon that I needed transportation to get around the post. During TOBC I could usually bum a ride with someone or there would be busses to take us from place to place. Now, even though there was a post bus and we could use the official taxi service for duty related trips, it was very inconvenient not to have my own car. I started looking around and found an ad in the post newspaper for someone selling an old Dodge sedan, which I purchased. Not fancy, but now at least I could get off post to eat.

Eating was the major problem. As an officer, we were not allowed to eat in the troop mess halls. Also, there was no field ration mess available, so the only food services were the PX cafeteria, which did not serve a dinner meal, and the Officers Club, which required a coat and tie in the main dining room and which was closed at least one or two nights per week. This meant that I had to go off post to eat dinner, usually by myself. There was nothing except a couple of bars close to post. The only real restaurants were at

least 10 to 15 miles away. In this respect, going to Vietnam was an improvement; at least I could eat in the mess halls and could use government transportation.

Finally we were ready to go. The date was 7 or 8 September, 1966. We assembled early (before dark) in the morning in front of the barracks building with the gear we were taking with us. This consisted of a duffle bag and maybe a small valise. Also, our weapons (M-14's) were issued. After taking a headcount to make sure everyone was there we boarded busses for Patrick Henry airport. From there we took a short flight to Friendship International Airport in Baltimore. There, after a short wait, we boarded a TWA flight to the West Coast. The plane landed briefly at LAX and then proceeded on to San Francisco.

The interesting thing about these flights is that, probably because of our relatively small group (20 to 25?) we were not on a charter but a regularly scheduled commercial flight. We were in our fatigues and with our weapons slung over our shoulders. I remember that on the TWA flight we had to put our weapons on the floor under our seats. I'm sure that the "regular" passengers really appreciated having armed troops aboard their flight. I also remember having to tell the flight attendant not to serve cocktails to my troops, most of whom were under 21. I still cannot understand how the Army (and especially the Transportation Corps, which should know better) allowed us to travel this way.

When we arrived at SFO we were met by an officer and several NCO's from MOTBA (Military Ocean Terminal, Bay Area) who loaded us onto army busses. Our duffel bags and other stuff (except the weapons) were put in a truck. Then we were taken to Oakland Army Base/Naval Supply Center, Oakland and offloaded in a large warehouse at the docks. After again taking roll calls and making sure everyone and his stuff were matched up, we marched up the gangway of the *USNS Simon Bolivar Buckner*.

The *Buckner* was built as a troop ship for use in WWII. It had been in mothballs for many years but was put back into service for the Vietnam War because there were so many units going over that air transport was too costly and hard to acquire. Other vessels that were being used at the time were the *Pope*, the *Patch* and the *Rose*??

One of the things which I did as CO before we left Ft. Eustis, on the advice of SSG Crellin, was to appoint on orders Carroll and Letourneau as acting sergeants ("acting jacks"). This would classify them as NCO's and give them better quarters on the ship, which meant sharing an inside stateroom with 3 to 5 other NCO's. The troops were below decks in bunks that were stacked 5 or 6 high. They could also eat in the dining room instead of below decks in the troop mess halls.

After we got our stuff squared away we got the word that officers and NCO's could leave the ship if they wanted. I took advantage of this and called Aunt Elaine and Uncle Bill from a pay phone. Unc came over and picked me up and I went to their house for dinner and a nice visit. They took me back to the ship sometime around 11 pm.

The next morning we got underway and it was a thrill to sail under the Golden Gate bridge. We went out of the bay and turned south to sail down the coast of California to

San Diego so that we could take on the Marines. We ended up with a ship consisting of half Marines and half Army. I remember coming into San Diego bay and it looked like we were sailing into some tropical island because of the palm trees lining mission bay. We docked at the foot of Broadway in downtown San Diego at the Naval Supply Center.

Here again the word went out that officers and NCO's would be allowed to leave the ship. I again found a pay phone and called my folks in San Bernardino. Luckily that day was a state holiday, Admissions Day, and my parents had the day off from school. They were able to come down with Jim and Tom, and also Katie (in her nun's habit) and we went to a famous seafood restaurant for dinner. However, before they came down I went around town with my NCO's and hit a couple of dives for a beer or two. Sensing that I was slowing them down, I took off on my own and ended up at the U.S. Grant hotel where I went up to the rooftop bar to pass the time until my folks arrived.

We sailed early the next morning. I remember we had a band playing as we departed (or was that in Oakland??). Altogether we were on the ship 28 days, and it was a great vacation for me. I had not really had a break since TOBC had ended in June and had been putting in long hours with the training and packing. I remember taking what seemed like a footlocker of books and I got a lot of reading and relaxing done. The NCO's took care of the troops, and, aside from having to conduct a class occasionally, I was able to be by myself most of the time.

On the ship I was in a four man stateroom. The other three occupants were MP Second Lieutenants from a Military Police Company. There were bunk beds along one wall (2 by 2) and then a desk and chair and a closet on the opposite wall. We had our own bathroom with toilet and stall shower. The best thing was that we had a porthole. My roommates were pretty good guys and we all got along quite well. We even ended up with a song to share - "I'll see you in September" which was playing on the radio frequently, and a line from a movie we had seen on board. This was Boris Karloff playing an Indian who said "I'm the only one who knows the way through these woods." We had a lot of fun with that line and I remember it to this day.

Before Vietnam we docked in Okinawa. The MP Lieutenants and I were able to get off the ship. We got a local taxi and headed for Ft. Buckner (named after the same guy as our ship) and went to the Officers Club. I remember having a crab Louie salad and a gin and tonic. I also remember my impressions of the ride to the Fort, looking at the huts and the people. It was my first stop in Asia. One of the things that stood out was an A & W Root Beer stand along the way.....I thought that was an interesting sign of civilization.

On the way back from Ft. Buckner we went to the Navy installation at White Beach (this may have been where we were docked) and again went to the O-Club to drink. It was just a pleasure to be off the ship after twenty or so days at sea.

Our first stop in Vietnam was at Da Nang to let the Marines disembark. I don't remember anything in particular about this except noticing all the military activity in the area. After offloading the Marines we sailed down the coast of Vietnam, at night, which was scary

for me because every once in awhile you could see flares or explosions and hear loud sounds. Didn't seem too inviting.

The ship was going down south to Vung Tau, south of Saigon. Here is where we anchored and prepared to disembark the army units. However, I remember as we got there, there being a huge thunderstorm with lightening and it was quite a show.....just when that occurred I'm not sure.

Before we began offloading in the morning some transportation guys came on board to explain the procedure. We were not at a dock, so a flat barge was towed and lashed to the ship. The troops were to go down a gangway to the barge, and then board landing craft that would take us to the shore. This was to be just like an amphibious landing except without the hostile enemy opposition.

This was the first time that I learned what our ultimate destination was, a place called Pleiku. Everyone else apparently knew where their units were going but I guess it never occurred to me to ask. Since I didn't know anything about Vietnam I'm not sure that it would have made any difference.

We were dressed in our fatigues with steel pots (helmets) and our weapons. My detachment was the only one issued ammunition, because the TC liaison said that since we were going a ways inland that we should take this precaution. When it was our turn we got our stuff, went down the gangway to the barge and then loaded into a landing craft. It was a short ride to the beach. I don't remember getting wet so we must have landed up on shore. We were directed to some deuce-and-a-halves for a short ride to a landing field. There we disembarked and were told to wait for our aircraft.

We were all clustered together alongside a runway that was made of perforated steel planking (PSP). Our adrenaline was pumping away and we were apprehensive as to what lay ahead of us. We were making small talk when there was a loud explosion and we all hit the dirt. It seemed like a couple of hours had passed before someone explained that the loud noise was just a jet breaking the sound barrier. That explanation didn't help our nervousness much.

After a relatively short wait a cargo aircraft came in to pick us up. It was an Air Force C-123, a smaller two-engine version of the C-130. We boarded this aircraft and flew to the large airfield and supply complex at Bien Hoa. What I remember specifically about this flight, my first on an Air Force aircraft, was the little Thai? officer in the swivel seat behind the flight deck. He was in khakis with a billed hat and a .38 caliber pistol in a holster around his waist. Looked like an airborne cowboy.

When we debarked at Bien Hoa we were again told to wait there and another aircraft would be coming in to pick us up. So we sat on our duffel bags and waited. A couple of things that stood out here were the heat and humidity, especially on the concrete runway areas, and the interesting stuff going on around us. An example was watching them load a group of Vietnamese and their livestock on a C-130. I also remember that we found someone with cold sodas in a barrel with ice that we could buy. That made me feel a lot

better because I wasn't sure that I would ever see another cold soda after I left the safety and comfort of the ship.

Sure enough, as promised, a C-130 came in to pick us up. Before loading, I had a chance to talk to the pilot, an Air Force Captain, who told me we were going to Pleiku, up in what were called the Central Highlands. He said that Pleiku was relatively nice, and had weather similar to Colorado Springs. Never having been to either place it was hard for me to relate to, but nevertheless I felt better because of his description. He was very friendly, and I tried to figure out how old he was, because he was the only Captain I had ever seen who had grey hair.

The ride to Pleiku on the C-130 was interesting because there were no seats on the plane. We had to sit on the deck and hold on as best we could; trying to make sure that our weapons and duffel bags would not slide around and hit someone. The ride took about an hour or less, and when we landed at Pleiku it was late afternoon or early evening, but still light.

After getting off the plane we looked around for someone to tell us what to do next. But there was no one to meet us, so we headed for the air terminal where a lone airman was on duty. He didn't know where we were supposed to go either, but mentioned that there was an army replacement depot a short distance away and said that he could phone them for me. Soon I was on the phone with an NCO at that unit, who told me that the repo depot was for individual replacements only and that they didn't take units.

However, he seemed reasonable enough, and after I explained that I had only sixteen people he agreed that we could stay there overnight. He sent a deuce-and-a-half to pick us up and I had the men check into the Repo Depot as individuals so that there wouldn't be a problem. My NCO's got the men assigned to bunks and then made sure that they were fed. I was assigned to the officer's tent, which was a large GP medium with only two other occupants, who turned out to be Warrant Officer pilots on their way home. These guys were pretty well tanked and spent most of the night talking about how crappy Vietnam was and how glad they were to be leaving. This did wonders for my morale.

The next morning I got up and shaved and dressed and then went to check on my troops. They had been fed and were scheduled to go to a series of orientations on Vietnam: customs, currency, current military operations, etc. Seeing that they would be taken care of, I decided that I should try to find out where we belonged.

One of the officers at the Repo Depot told me that there was a logistics support command not too far away, and offered to call them for me. He got hold of someone in their Operations Shop and told them who and where we were. They said that they would send someone over to pick me up. Soon a SP5 by the name of Talley? showed up in a ¾-ton truck and drove me to the Pleiku Sub-Area Command headquarters at Camp Holloway. The people there told me that they had been expecting my unit, but then had been told that we were not coming after all and had scratched us off their list.

However they were glad to see us as there was a truck terminal in Pleiku, just adjacent to Camp Holloway, which was being run by two EMs from a truck Battalion in Qui Nhon and it seemed that we would be a welcome addition to the logistical support structure there. So they made arrangements to send a couple of trucks out to the Repo Depot to pick up my Detachment and bring them back to Camp Holloway. They would be housed in tents with members of a Supply and Service Company.

I was to be housed with some staff officers from the SAC who were located in a former French villa in downtown Pleiku. This turned out to be a moderate size house with two or three bedrooms and at least one bathroom with a working toilet and running water. I was put in a large bedroom with two other officers. I had a standard army issue metal bunk with mosquito netting. The only light in the room was an exposed electric bulb hanging on a wire from the middle of the ceiling. Primitive but it beat living in a tent with no indoor toilet.

For meals I ate at the Camp Holloway Officers Club which was in another former French army building. The primary group at Camp Holloway was the 52nd Combat Aviation Battalion and this was their club, which they shared with the Pleiku SAC officers. This club was well supplied with china, silverware, glassware, and all necessary condiments because the helicopter folks could fly all over the country and pick up what they needed. As I was to find out later, they were also very good at trading for what they needed.

We had to purchase a monthly meal card for the club, and we ate very well. They had a good chef and there was lots of variety. This was definitely a good deal, especially having come from Ft. Eustis, where it was tough to get a decent meal on post.

I commuted in to Camp Holloway in an army van or whatever else I could catch a ride on. It was about a ten or fifteen minute trip. The truck terminal, or TTP, was not much to look at. There were no permanent buildings of any kind, just a GP medium tent that served as sleeping quarters for the SP5 and SP4 that were detailed up there; it also served as their office.

These guys were only somewhat glad to see us. They were pretty much left on their own and had a lot of free time when convoys were not coming and going. However, they seemed to accept us and I started to try to get things organized. They had no assigned equipment, only a jeep or a 3/4 ton truck.....there were no repairs done at the TTP. Changing flat tires was the only form of maintenance.

Our unit equipment, which wasn't much either, was coming by ship and we didn't know when to expect it. So, in order to operate somewhat as we were supposed to, I started scrounging around the Camp to see what I could beg, borrow or steal. I ended up being pretty successful in getting a jeep, a couple of M-52 tractors, and some other stuff from units that weren't using them. I remember hand receipting a tractor from a unit whose CO told me that I could use it as long as he didn't need it and as long as we would keep up the maintenance and the log book.

It didn't take more than a week to have the TTP running like it was supposed to. The Pleiku SAC CO, Infantry Colonel Canella, seemed pleased with what we were doing and gave us free rein. This seemed to be working good for the next few weeks, until one day a convoy commander came in and mentioned that he thought our unit was supposed to be located in Qui Nhon. He was followed a few days later by a Major, who was the S-3 or assistant S-3 of the 27th Trans Bn who said that we were definitely in the wrong location.

I was hoping that this new development would go away. However, I decided to fly to Qui Nhon to go to the Support Command HQ to see if I could get it resolved. Orders were cut for me to go and so I flew down in a C-7A, the Army's Caribou. This was shortly before the Caribou's were turned over to the Air Force and disappeared from Vietnam. I caught a ride from the airfield to the HQ and went to talk to the Ops people.

The Major I spoke with was very adamant that my unit, the 505th, was supposed to be in Qui Nhon, and that a similar unit, the 520th, was supposed to be in Pleiku. What made this so unbelievably stupid was that the 520th was already there in QN and was operating the TTP. Following the original plan would mean that both units would have to pack up and trade places. I met with the CO of the 520th, CPT Hovey Cowles, and he was really gung ho to move to Pleiku. I couldn't seem to find anyone who thought this was dumb and had the power to make a decision to change it. Given that I was only a 2LT and in the Army for less than 6 months I guess I figured I was outranked.

I spent the night in the compound of the 27th Trans Bn in the Phu Thanh valley. I remember watching some movie outdoors with the screen being a bed sheet strung between two tent posts. I also remember meeting CPT Robert Archibald who was the CO of the 597th Trans. It may have been his unit that I stayed with.

I got up early the next morning to catch the convoy to Pleiku. I was looking forward to this for two reasons: first, I wanted to see the TTP that my unit was going to run, and second, I had not yet traveled the highway, Route 19, that ran from QN on the coast inland and uphill to An Khe and Pleiku. I met with the convoy commander, who gave me a short briefing on convoy operations and then gave me a ride out to the TTP, from where the convoy would commence.

The TTP was located in Cha Rang, about ten miles out of QN on Route 19. It was situated on some sloping land which had been graded and cleared at the foot of a small hill. There was a small operations shack but no other fixed facilities of any kind. The yard had a capacity of 50 or so trailers.

My first exposure to convoy operations in a war zone was not impressive. I had not really seen this operation in my few weeks at Pleiku because the trucks straggled in to the TTP one by one, but most bypassed the TTP and took their loads directly to their intended destination. If their trailer could not be unloaded on the spot, they dropped the trailer in place and then headed back to the TTP to pick up an empty for the return trip to QN.

What I saw as I walked around the convoy formation area in the early hours at Cha Rang was not encouraging. I remember observing a truck tractor which was missing its canvas

top, its driver's door and its windshield. The poor driver was fortunate enough to have a pair of goggles to keep the dust out of his eyes. It was very evident to me that the operational requirements superceded the maintenance ones.

The trip up to Pleiku included travelling through two passes. The first one was the An Khe Pass up to the city of the same name. This was the location of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, which our units supported. Then on through the famous Mang Giang Pass which led up to the Central Highlands and Pleiku. The Mang Giang Pass had been the scene several years earlier of the famous ambush of the French Mobile Group 100 which had been all but destroyed there. A cemetery further up the hill contained the graves of members of that unit and a marker stood alongside the highway.

Once back in Pleiku I had the unpleasant duty of telling my troops (all 15 of them) that we were going to have to pack up and move down the road to Qui Nhon. This was not received very well because they had settled in to a routine at the TTP, liked what they were doing and saw no good reason to change. However, everyone pitched in and we got ready to move out. This meant that I had to return all of the equipment that I had borrowed. None of our regular equipment had arrived yet, so all we had was our personal possessions along with weapons and TA-50.

We were initially assigned to the 27th Transportation Battalion (Truck) which was located in Phu Thanh Valley. The 27th was a long standing trans unit which had come to Vietnam a couple of years before. The Battalion CO was LTC Leo T. McMahon. Other officers were:

XO - MAJ Philip Smiley

S-1:

S-2:

S-3: MAJ Frank Battle

S-4: CPT Charles A. Gray

Units assigned were the 597th (Medium Truck, Cargo), the 359 (or 61st??) (Medium Truck, Petroleum), the 444th (Light Truck), and the 2nd Trans (Medium Truck, Cargo), and the 64th (Medium Truck, Cargo)

So we set up operations in Cha Rang, soon to be invaded by the 54th Transportation Battalion (Truck) which arrived with the HQ of the 8th Transportation Group (Motor Transport). Things were booming. The 54th set up their HQ in Cha Rang. They had come from Ft. Lewis, WA and had four truck companies assigned: one medium truck cargo company (the 563rd) with 18-ton stake and platform trailers, and three light truck companies with 5 ton cargo trucks. These were the 512th, the 523rd, and the 669th. The Battalion Commander was LTC Melvin M. Wolfe. Other officers were:

SGM: Dockerey (from Bowie, MD)

Executive Officer: MAJ Johnson??

S-1: CPT Harold Moreland

S-3:

S-4:

Chaplain: CPT Feeney

Unit CO's were:

512th.....CPT Jerry Kirsch??

523rd.....CPT Kenneth Wykle (original??)

563rd.....CPT James O'Connell

the 563rd Officers were:

Maint: CWO Denver Stovall

1LT Lief Johnson

2LT David Connolly

2LT John Mulvihill

1SG Donnie Turnbaugh

**From:** [email address removed] Eichenberg

**Sent:** Wednesday, March 24, 2004 1:18 PM

**To:** Killblane, Richard

**Subject:** RE: TTPs in Pleiku

Rich.....We did actually end up switching places with the TTP unit which was already in Qui Nhon. As I recall, the transfer was relatively smooth and not much of a problem. However, shortly after we took over at the Cha Rang TTP the 54th Battalion with its four truck companies established their new base camp adjacent to the TTP and that made life very interesting. This was sometime in October of 1966. Shortly thereafter, in mid or late November, I was transferred to the 563rd Medium Truck Company (part of the 54th) as a platoon leader, switching places with an officer who had just been promoted to Captain.

The irony in all of this is that in May of 1967 (after I had again been transferred, this time to the 64th Medium Truck Company - Jack Horvath's unit) the 64th moved to Pleiku so I ended up back there until I rotated out in March of 1968 (after having extended in RVN for six months). Also, by way of further irony, sometime in the summer of 1967 the 64th took over responsibility for the Pleiku TTP (I think by this time the 520th TTP Detachment had moved down to An Khe) and the company commander then, CPT Juan R. Lopez de la Cruz asked me to be the OIC of that TTP.....again.....

Well, that's all for now.....regards.....Bill

You were there during the major ambushes and the building of gun trucks. As you might understand, the Army is looking for solutions to the ambush problems they are facing in Iraq now. I have been writing a historical monograph on the hardened convoy in Vietnam. I'll include that draft of it. Please review it and make comments. I would like an accurate history of this concept. I would like to ask you some questions about this process if you would send me your phone number. 124th Bn also supported the fighting at Dak To. How did that operation differ from other normal runs along Route 19? Rich

**From:** [email address removed] Eichenberg  
**Sent:** Sunday, March 28, 2004 1:24 PM  
**To:** Killblane, Richard  
**Subject:** RE: DAK TO

Rich.....thanks for sending the monograph....I'd be happy to review it...

As for the Dak To operations I was actively involved in this effort as a convoy commander for the 124th. We ran north up highway 14 through Kontum. I remember it being very intense in terms of the amount of cargo we had to carry and the concerns about enemy activity against the convoys.....altho quite frankly I don't remember any ambushes. I do remember being up close and personal with the combat types as they would start offloading our trucks of ammo and whatever almost before we came to a complete stop.....none of this drop it off at a supply depot stuff. Needless to say our drivers felt very appreciated as our customers were so eager to get our support.

I'll try to see what else I can recall and will be happy to send it on.....regards.....Bill

PS.....I just installed my new Dell PC yesterday (this message is still being done on my MAC with the dial-up service) and am going to be using an AOL e-mail account temporarily until I can sign up for Cable Internet.....so try me at the following e-mail address for the next couple of weeks or so:[email address removed]

**From:** [email address removed] Eichenberg  
**Sent:** Tuesday, March 30, 2004 9:00 PM  
**To:** Killblane, Richard  
**Subject:** RE: DAK TO

How long were your runs in support of Dak To operation? How many did you make each day? Did you organize for convoys any different than before?  
Rich

Best I can recall the run from Pleiku to Dak To took 3 - 4 hours one way and I think we only did one round trip a day. I do recall having tanks from the 4th ID as convoy escorts on several occasions.....and I also remember one of the tank unit commanders being a 2LT Abrams (later 4 star General John Abrams).

It seems to me that on these convoys we mostly hauled food and ammo.....just the combat essentials. Also remember hauling a refer van full of fresh oranges from California.....made me homesick.

Sorry I forgot to include my home phone number in the previous transmission.....{phone number removed] call anytime (West Coast, that is)...Bill

**From:** [email address removed] Eichenberg  
**Sent:** Wednesday, March 31, 2004 3:55 PM  
**To:** Killblane, Richard

**Subject:** RE: DAK TO

I just talked to COL (R) John Burke. It seems that he was in command of 8<sup>th</sup> Group from 2 Sep 67 until Bellino arrived later that month. He said that after the ambush, he held a meeting with his battalion and company commanders to decide what to do. It was at that meeting that they decided to harden the trucks and build gun trucks. What do you remember about this? Rich

I don't have any recollection of any discussions regarding hardening the trucks. Probably because I was a 1LT located in Pleiku and running convoys most every day as a truck platoon leader.....and the 8th Group folks were down in Qui Nhon.

I do remember John Burke as he came over to RVN as the CO of the 124<sup>th</sup> Truck Battalion.....they were located in Pleiku. It was about the Sept/Oct 67 time frame that most of the original 54th Bn (and 8th Group HQ) rotated home after their one year in country. I should have gone home too but I was having so much fun that I extended for another six months.

A couple of guys that you might talk to who are in the Eustis area are COL Phil Smiley and LTC Gordon Mabie. Smiley was the CO of the 27th Bn after LTC McMahon and Gordon was the CO of the 563rd Medium Truck in 1966/67 time frame. Also COL Melvin M. Wolfe who was the original CO of the 54th Bn.

Sorry I can't help much on the gun trucks.....Bill

-----Original Message-----

Do you remember obeying the speed limits with convoys in Vietnam or did you drive as fast as you could go? Rich

**From:** [email address removed] Eichenberg  
**Sent:** Tuesday, April 06, 2004 7:50 PM  
**To:** Killblane, Richard  
**Cc:** [email address removed] alternate for Eichenberg  
**Subject:** RE: DAK TO

Rich.....I don't recall that we paid any attention to the speed limits.....it was more a function of the condition of the roadway as to how fast you could go. I also recall that at one point the direct support maintenance guys in Qui Nhon were mightily upset because our drivers were beating the heck out of the trucks and they alleged we were driving too fast for road conditions.

On at least one occasion the maintenance battalion CO came along on a convoy to verify what was happening. A big part of the problem was that the mission took priority over maintenance ..... so "if it ran, it went."

I'll never forget the first convoy I went on.....I was going back to Pleiku from Qui Nhon (I had flown down there)...hitching a ride. It was early in the morning.....still

dark.....convoy forming up on Route 19 next to the Cha Rang TTP.....and I observed tractors missing canvas tops, windshields, fenders, doors, etc. but they ran and they went.

I finally got my cable internet connection installed this morning and so you can now reach me at this new e-mail address: [email address removed] Eichenberg.....at last I will be technologically up to date.....for at least a week or two anyway.....this stuff changes way to fast but I've been lagging for a long time and this is way overdue.....regards.....Bill

**From:** [email address removed] Eichenberg  
**Sent:** Wednesday, January 25, 2006 1:27 PM  
**To:** [Richard.e.killbane@us.army.mil](mailto:Richard.e.killbane@us.army.mil)  
**Subject:** VN Ambush Pictures

Rich.....I am mailing you a CD with pictures I took while cleaning up an ambush site on Hiway 19 involving trucks from the 124th Trans. Bn. This ambush took place circa December 1967. There are 9 photos included; #43 is a picture of a marker along Hiway 19 commemorating the French Mobile Group 100 which was destroyed in this area. Pictures # 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 65 and 66 are of the ambush cleanup. We were assigned to go out and bring back the wrecks. The last photo, # 67 was taken of the MP vehicle (a VT-100??) that they used to patrol the highway....it stopped by while we were working the site.

Hope all is going well.....Bill