

LTC (R) Robert Harrison summary of interview by Richard Killblane, 22 July 2004

CPT Harrison went to RVN in June 1966 as an individual replacement with orders specific to command the 670th Transportation Company at Saigon. He flew in to Ton San Nut. He processed through the reception center in a few hours. Some one came in a jeep and took him to a bachelor officers quarters (BOQ) and left him over night. Next day, someone from the unit came and picked him up and drove Harrison to the compound where his company was located.

The 670th TC was based at a compound on the outskirts Ton San Nut Air Base. There were no other units there. The 670th TC had to pull there own security. One platoon was S&P, one platoon was 5,000-gallon tankers and one platoon had 7 ½-ton Reefer vans. The company had two stake and platform (S&P) trailers per tractor but one Reefer van and one 5,000-gallon fuel trailer per tractor. The 670th TC was attached directly to the 48th Transportation Group. It had no battalion headquarters. In July or August, a battalion headquarters finally arrived that served under the 48th Group.

It was Helter Skelter when Harrison arrived. The people who had already been there a year had either left and were getting ready to leave. The previous commander was still there and left three days after Harrison arrived. Their replacements were also arriving at the same time. Before Harrison arrived, the unit had coincidentally received orders to move to Cam Ranh Bay. The Helter Skelter part was trying to get old people out and replacements in and still get the company ready to move within three weeks. At the same time they had to pull their convoy requirements. The company, fortunately, was scaling back on commitments to get ready for the move. The company was pulling trucks off of the road to pull maintenance to get ready for the move north. They only put a few of the replacements on the road. The last few days before the move, there were no commitments at all.

For the move, the company vehicles drove down to Saigon port and loaded up on two or three LSTs. The trucks and equipment loaded on the LSTs with a contingent of the company. The LSTs left about four days before the rest of the company did. The LST took about two days to arrive at Qui Nhon. The remainder of the company flew up to Cam Ranh Bay four days after the trucks left.

When he arrived, Harrison could not believe the amount of sand, acres and acres of sand. The sand was so smooth that they could not use it for concrete. The engineers had to import sand to build the runway at Cam Ranh Bay. The original run way was constructed out of perforated steel planking (PSP). The RMK-BRG civilian engineers built a new concrete runway while the 670th TC was there. Cam Ranh Bay had only a few permanent buildings and two or three DeLong piers. There was a village across the bay from the American compound. There was also a Korean Army unit in the area.

When the company arrived at Cam Ranh Bay, they had a whole new company. Harrison lost his first sergeant and some key NCOs before the company left for Cam Ranh Bay because of their permanent change of station (PCS). Harrison did not get a new first

sergeant right away and had to use his SFC truck master as the acting first sergeant for at least two months. The sergeant pulled double duty as both the first sergeant and truck master. He did a good job because of a lot of help from the other NCOs. The 670th TC was assigned to the 10th Transportation Battalion (Terminal), commanded by LTC George Serbousek.

When the company arrived (NLT 10 July), the company advance party was there to meet them and show them where their acre of sand. They had three or four days before the battalion commander “banged on Harrison’s head” about putting trucks on the road. He initially put around 20 trucks on the road. The company was probably 75% strength in personnel. The company was mostly short drivers but good on maintenance personnel.

The 670th TC’s mission was to clear cargo from the port to the depot. The run was only a couple miles. The 670th TC augmented another cargo company conducting port clearance. The 670th TC was the only S&P company conducting port clearance. The 670th TC was the only company at Cam Ranh Bay with tankers and reefers. Within three weeks the tankers and Reefers were running convoys to Phan Rang Air Base. The tankers and reefers made some runs up to Nha Trang. The S&P platoon only did port clearance. Port clearance was a 24-hour operation. The company worked 12-hour shifts, so the convoys to the depot also ran at night.

The depot was in the sand dunes and there were no paved roads. They had trouble with the trucks getting stuck. They had very low utilization of the S&P because the Terminal Service Companies had very little material handling equipment and the S&P trailers would wait as much as 8 hours to get loaded. They might make one to three turn-arounds per day. That never improved while Harrison was there.

Harrison had to fight with the port people because they wanted to overload the trailers. The trailers were rated for 12-tons for unimproved roads like sands, 18 tons on unimproved roads. Harrison had a long discussion with the terminal battalion commander and the company commanders over this at a regular commanders’ meeting. They wanted to just pike the cargo on the trailers. They did not know there was a limit to how much cargo a trailer could haul. Pulling the heavy loads in soft sand was hard on the tractors.

LTC Thomas E. Vincent, Commander of the 39th Truck Battalion, arrived about three or four weeks [31 July] after the 670th TC had arrived at Cam Ranh Bay. He was a West Point grad with an advance degree in nuclear science. He went around checking on things. They called him the “White Knight” because he had white seats in his jeep and most of the time he stood up in his jeep when he drove around. He talked to the truck companies and let them know that he would assume control of them when the rest of his battalion headquarters arrived. The main body of the battalion headquarters arrived a couple weeks later by ship. Vincent had flown in.

After the main body of the battalion arrived, then the 670th TC and the other truck companies were transferred to the control of the 39th Battalion. There was no change in the way the 670th TC did business after they went under the 39th Battalion.

The company lost one driver of a tanker pulling a 5,000-gallon tanker to Phan Rang. He tried to pass a broken down vehicle and did not see a culvert. The left front wheel of the tractor went off the road and the momentum pushed the truck out in the rice paddy and the truck turned over. He was pinned under the truck and drowned.

In November 1966, the 39th Trans Battalion received orders to move to Thuy Hoa. Thuy Hoa had an Air Force Base and needed support. Just south of Thuy Hoa was Vung Rho Bay, which had one DeLong pier and one tie up for petroleum tanker that pumped fuel into a pipeline that ran along an old abandoned railroad track right of way that ran to the air port. CPT Harrison was pulled up to become the battalion S-4 and a lieutenant took over the company.

The 360th TC remained at Cam Ranh Bay. The 360th TC did not rotate the drivers with other companies while Harrison was there.

The 39th Battalion took two truck companies with it to Thuy Hoa. The 39th Battalion just supported the air base. It hauled cargo and ammo to the Air Force base. They did night convoys from the beach to the air base. One night, a convoy was attacked when it drove through a village. It involved small arms fire and someone threw a hand grenade in a jeep and killed two or three men. The battalion stopped running night convoys for a while. Then they started running night convoys later.

In the Spring of 1967, the battalion moved back to Cam Ranh Bay and its companies were reassigned to the 28th General Support Group (GSG) at Thuy Hoa. CPT Harrison was assigned to the 28th GSG as the Transportation Officer. He left Vietnam in June 1967.

MAJ Harrison's second tour began on the day after Thanksgiving, November 1968 and ended on Thanksgiving Eve, November 1969. He missed two Thanksgivings. He was assigned to the 507th Transportation Management Agency at Saigon. MAJ Harrison became the XO of the 3rd Traffic Region at Long Binh. 3rd Region ran the passenger terminal at Ben Hoa. It also handled the documentation of cargo and scheduled its movement through Saigon port. The 3rd Region also arranged with Sealand the movement of containers through their port in the Saigon area. They also coordinated with the Vietnamese to run a small rail operation to move people from Saigon to Long Binh.

MAJ Harrison was later assigned to the US Support Activity Group, Thailand, from 1974 to 1975. It was organized after MACV left Vietnam 1972. It supported the operations in Cambodia in their fight against communist insurgents. This organization brought military cargo in by truck from Thailand and drove into western part of Cambodia. Air dropped supplies into the enclaves, villages that could not be reached by road. Tugs

towed barges up the Mekong River. The State Department and US AID contracted vessels to run up the river at the same time. This organization was disbanded after the Khmer Rouge overthrew the government. Munitions bound for Cambodia were offloaded break bulk at Vung Tau in stream onto barges. Then the barges were towed down the coast of south Vietnam to the mouth of the Mekong and up the Mekong to a staging area short of the Cambodian border. There the tankers, barges, tugs inter-coastal freighters hauling rice convoyed up the river for a shooting gallery.

The cargo barge had a wall of sand bags surrounded with cyclone wire. That barge had two barges on each side of it with three rows of cyclone wire to stop rockets. Tugs had layers of sandbags around the hull and pilot house.

After the fall of Cambodia, Harrison was assigned to Military Assistance Command, Thailand (MACThai) Support Group. After the new prime minister was elected, he kicked US troops out of Thailand. Everything had to leave fast and loaded out through the one deep water military port.

Other contacts: COL (R) Albert H. Cote came over with the 39th Battalion Headquarters. COL (R) John G. Larkins was one of the company commanders. COL (R) George W. Neal was a company commander of the terminal service company at the beach.