

## **Chester Israel and Calvin Bennett interview summary by Richard Killblane, 8 August 2008**

PV2 Chester Israel and PV2 Calvin Bennett went through 64B AIT together and arrived in Vietnam a day apart, Chester on 20 September 1970 and Calvin arrived the next day. Chester arrived at Ben Hoa and read about the 8<sup>th</sup> Transportation Group in the Stars and Stripes. Other had told him he would have an easy tour unless he went to the 8<sup>th</sup> Group. That day Chester received orders for the 8<sup>th</sup> Group. As luck would have it, Calvin also received orders for 8<sup>th</sup> Group. They flew from Long Binh to Qui Nhon and both were assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon of the 523<sup>rd</sup> TC at Cha Rang Valley. Voightritter came in later as a 1LT and took over as the commander.

Calvin remembered the company had the Eve of Destruction, Ace of Spades, Uncle Meat, King Kong, and the Black Widow. He thought each platoon had two gun trucks. But only remembered the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon had Black Widow.

Calvin rode with Robert Thorne for a couple days who taught him to “drive the Vietnam way,” which meant drive like hell and miss as many of the holes in the road as you can. Chester grew up driving so he drove on his first run and the veteran rode next to him in the right seat. In his first ambush on his first convoy, the enemy shot the hood and windows of his truck up.

They were only issued an M16 and four clips [magazines] of ammunition. After his first convoy ambush, Chester went to his platoon leader, LT “Tom Terrific” Callahan and said, “Lieutenant Callahan, you have two choices. You can either send me home or give me a bigger weapon.” Chester felt he did not have enough ammo. Callahan said, “Red, I hate that you feel that way, but I have an opening on a gun truck if you want to go on it.” He had an opening on the Black Widow.

Chester asked, “Tom [Callahan], what kind of weapons?” They had .50 caliber machineguns on the gun trucks. Chester asked, “How much ammo?” The lieutenant answered, “3,000 rounds and if you run out, I’ll personally bring you more.” So Chester accepted, “If they want to kill me then I want to kill them.”

Chester was assigned as the rear gunner on the Black Widow a couple weeks training on the .50 cal after his arrival. His mission was to “Just drive down the road until you get blown up.” Leon Vance, the right front gunner, trained Chester. “The ammo is free; don’t act like you’re paying for it. Every thing belongs to the government.” He fought in a dozen ambushes prior to the move north.

On 28 October, there was an ambush at VC Village near the ROK bridge on the night shuttle run to Qui Nhon. Matchbox was hit. The other gun trucks raced out the front gate with the Black Widow in the lead. As the first gun truck to reach the kill zone, Black Widow ran straight into the middle of the kill zone. One civilian was killed, so orders were flagged of everyone in the ambush. It turned out the civilian was a captive. The enemy made the villagers stay out in the village to make everything look normal.

The activity or lack of activity of the locals would indicate if there was an ambush nearby. One Vietnamese kid at the base of Mang Giang would wave at the passing convoys. If his baseball cap was pulled to one side it indicated where the ambush was. If he wore the bill straight forward, then the road was safe. The drivers always unloaded C Rations on the kid in gratitude.

The other ambushes were sniper/hit & run, like the drive-bys of gangs today. Black Widow responded to one big ambush to clean up the wreckage and spent eight hours on recovery operations.

Whatever gun truck was available was on recovery detail. There was a dedicated wrecker and the gun trucks would escort it to recover the disabled or broken vehicle.

Another mission gun truck pulled was prisoner escort. While up north they loaded one prisoner on either the Eve or Black Widow for fragging an NCO and shipped him over to Da Nang because the roads were dangerous.

When the convoy pulled in, the trucks went to get serviced, and the gun truck crews cleaned their weapons. They slept at the end of the barracks near their .50s so they could quickly mount them on the gun trucks. The machineguns were locked in a wire cage ready to load up at any time.

Orders came down to move up north. They could only take the minimum issue and sent anything extra home. The company sat at the Ponderosa for two days with no knowledge of what they would do. The Eve led the convoy north with the Black Widow in the rear. It took two days to travel north. When they drove through Hi Van Pass, it reminded them of An Khe and Mang Giang Passes and they knew it was perfect ambush country. It had windy roads, steep grades and fog up in the mountains. The next day they set up at Phu Bai for about a week.

(During Lam Son 719, they escorted a convoy back to Phu Bai and Chester slept in the same bunk as he had slept on the trip north.)

Satan's Lil' Angel was transferred from the 669<sup>th</sup> Trans Company that wasn't involved in the move north to the 523<sup>rd</sup>.

From there, the company moved to Quang Tri where it spent another week. The drivers were never informed of the nature of the upcoming operation to support Lam Son 719. They thought the move was the operation. They thought each time they stopped, that was their new home. However, the further they moved north the more nervous they became because they were approaching the DMZ and North Vietnam. Some thought they were going to invade North Vietnam. When they turned at Dong Ha and drove along QL9, everyone relaxed.

Camp Vandergrift was in an open field where the pavement ended. Drivers did not erect tents, but slept on cots beside their trucks. Gun truck crews slept in the box of the gun trucks with guns ready. The engineers brought in a dozer with a big scoop to dig out a hole and a bunker was built with timber and PSP [perforated steel planking]. 10 to 12 men lived in a bunker.

Chester ran as the rear gunner to Khe Sanh and back on Black Widow. He was never told what the operation was. He had made so many stops, he thought they would make a night move to Khe Sanh and keep on moving.

On 1 February 1971, Chester became the NCOIC of Satan's Lil' Angel, which came from the 669<sup>th</sup> TC. Callahan told Chester to pick his crew, but Callahan's driver, Richard B. Frazier, wanted to be a gunner. Chester then picked Calvin Bennett as a gunner, Robert Walter Thorne as the driver, because he had maintenance experience. They were the only 523<sup>rd</sup> crew on Satan's Lil' Angel till it was destroyed on 20 February.

There were lots of NVA ambushes during Lam Son 719. Michael Hunter was killed when the Ace slid off the road on 16 February 1971. He was the driver. The parts of the Ace were not rebuilt into another gun truck.

They ran convoys day and night, 18 to 20-hour days and slept on the trucks. When they rolled in, to unload about five to six trucks would pull into to the unloading area and the drivers would fall asleep at the wheel, waiting to unload. Each vehicle would take about 30 minutes to unload and after that group was unloaded, the convoy commander or a gun truck crew member would wake the remaining drivers and have them to move into an area to be unloaded or just to move forward. While the trucks unloaded their cargo, the gun truck crews would clean weapons and change tires. If there was no material handling equipment to unload the cargo then it was unloaded by hand at Firebase "tailgate."

When the monsoon hit, the trucks were hauling rain gear to the units, but saw "gooks" out there wearing rain gear, which they bought on the black market, so the drivers brought rain gear back with "two finger requisition."

They took mortar fire at Vandergrift all the time. Gun Trucks were on perimeter all the time with a man on the guns. There were always reports the enemy was going to attack. "June Bugs" was Transportation people that went out at night with a radio and set up claymores outside the perimeter. One night the team went out and reported lots of movement and kept reporting lots of movement and finally blew the claymores. They had killed monkeys.

On 20 February, a convoy escorted by Satan's Lil' Angel had delivered ARVN soldiers to Laos. They had been on the road for 36 hours and pulled into Dong Ha at night. They were going to RON but the convoy could not unload until morning. They were supposed to have a break but LT Baird called on the radio, "Hey Red, I'm a little light on security and expect some movement." They were getting a lot of reports of enemy movement along the route. Chester said he also saw movement on the way down. Baird only had

two gun trucks and his ¾-ton at Dong Ha. He needed some “heavy hitters” in the rear and asked Chester if he would go back with him. Chester asked his crew and they volunteered to go back to Vandergrift.

Uncle Meat led with King Kong in the middle, Baird in the ¾-ton was in the rear. Satan rolled right in front of Baird’s ¾-ton. At 2311, Satan’s Lil’ Angel was about a half a mile from Vandergrift when it was hit. A RPG fired from the right side of the road hit the gun box of Satan right under Frazier’s gun killing him instantly. Shrapnel and concussion of the blast blew Chester to the side of the wall. The initial blast was followed by small arms fire from both sides of the road. Satan did not stop. Chester checked Frazier but everyone knew he was dead. Chester raised up and looked out at the tracer fire. Calvin was firing to the right side.

A second RPG came through the right front wheel, slammed into the engine and took out a piston. The engine locked up and the truck took a nose dive. Chester was thrown down. He got up and saw small arms fire from both sides of the road. They were right in the middle of the kill zone.

Baird’s ¾-ton had stopped and was taking fire. It was sitting cockeyed with the wheel in the road. Smoke boiled out the hood and cab. Chester could not see any fire coming from Baird’s vehicle. Thorne then climbed into the gun box from the cab and asked, “Chester, are you hit?” “I’m fine. The only hope we got is for you to get this started and get us out of here!” Thorne climbed back into the driver’s seat and started up the engine. It clanged and another RPG hit the right front rear duals and the truck bounced. Thorne kept that truck going and it crawled about 25 yards, enough to clear the kill zone, before the engine shut down. Suddenly King Kong drove by and an RPG hit Kong left rear duals. Then Uncle Meat drove by and the enemy concentrated their fire on the two new gun trucks. This shifted the enemy fire away from Satan.

Chester and Calvin did not remember where Uncle Meat stopped. Calvin fired the .50 until it jammed. Frazier’s .50 was hit by shrapnel and did not work. Chester’s .50 would only fire single shots.

One medic from the ¾-ton came up and stopped in front of Satan. Chester did not want to leave when the dustoff landed. He had been wounded several times in the fight. The medic hit Chester with a shot of Morphine as soon as he got on the ground, then put him on the dustoff.

Calvin remembered the dustoff hovered over the road ahead of their gun truck and threw down a stretcher out one end. Calvin, Thorne and the medic lifted Frazier’s body over the cab onto the hood. Blood was every where in the truck and they were slipping and stumbling, but got Frazier’s body on the stretcher. Thorne and Calvin were not wounded in that ambush.

They left Satan out in the kill zone.

It was a company size NVA ambush. CPT Voightritter took Frazier's bloody helmet and flak jacket to battalion and told them, "Night convoys have got to stop!"

Immediately after the ambush, when they were back in their company area, Calvin and Thorne were called to company orderly room. Capt "V" and LT Callahan were asking them questions and told them to write an after-action-report. During this interview Callahan noticed the blood on Calvin's head and pushed Calvin's head to the left side to wipe blood away, but it was not his. Chester spent three to four months in the hospital after the ambush. Calvin never went back to Satan.

Thorne and Calvin Bennett went back to Vandergrift and salvaged parts from Satan to build the Proud American gun truck. On 12 March the Proud American was involved in another ambush. Robert Thorne was the driver, Calvin Bennett was the rear gunner, McDonald was the right gunner, and Nelson Allen was the NCOIC. Both CPT "V" and LT Baird were onboard the gun truck. Thorne was killed, Lt Jim Baird was badly wounded, and McDonald received a facial wound. Proud American was destroyed. About four or five months later, after Calvin left Vietnam, the Proud American gun box was used to build a second gun truck, renamed the Ace of Spades.

The reason Calvin thought his officers, especially the LTs, were held in such regard was "they "beat the road" like everyone else. They were not REMF's! They were in the mud, dust, blood, and beer like all the cargo drivers & the gun truck crews."