

Randall Barnett email correspondence

Barbara Bower wrote:
Hi Randy!

I'll bet you're a bit nervous about where your photographs have gone??? Well, I have them, they're safe and I've begun to scan them. They're beautiful and in good shape.

Could you please tell me a little about yourself? When were you in Vietnam? What company? Where were you located in Vietnam? What convoys did you run and what did you carry?

Tell me more about the wooden gunbox. Anything would help. I'm not familiar with the names or places on your photos and need some back ground.

Thanks!

Barbara Bower
Retired museum director
US Army Transportation Museum
(guntrucker at heart!)

From: Randall Barnett
Sent: Wednesday, July 13, 2005 11:21 AM
To: Barbara Bower
Subject: Re: photos
I'll answer both your e-mails at the same time.

No I wasn't really too worried about the pics. I have more I can get to you as soon as I have time to dig them out.

About myself? OK. I joined the Army in November of 1967 because my parents moved from where I grew up (a high school of about 1600 kids) to a little town named Peculiar, MO (a high school of 150). I know, kinda cuttin off my nose to spite my face! Anyway, I went to Basic and AIT at Ft. Leonard Wood and was sent to Karlsruhe, Germany afterward because I was only 17 yrs old. In Germany I drove a truck for the 501st Ordnance Co. In November of 1968 my best friend and I put in 1049s for transfer to Vietnam and our orders came down in time for us to be home for Christmas 1968. We went to Ft Lewis and got split up because I got sent to Oakland to catch a flight.

I arrived in Vietnam, February 14, 1969, and got sent to the 32nd Trans Plt attached to the 670th Trans Co, 36th Trans Bn. When I got there my friend was assigned to the 670th but we talked them into transferring him to the 32nd with me. The 32nd Trans Plt was started when we got there in Feb. 69 just to pull refrigerator vans. I was given an old tractor someone had named "Runaway" because it had a habit of starting back up after

you shut it down. You had to be careful not to park it in gear because if you did it would take off across the motor pool all by itself. After a couple of months we turned it in and got brand new tractors with turbo charged Cummins motors in them. They were great, nothing else could keep up with them. I had watched the guntrucks when we were on convoys and when they authorized us to have a gun truck I jumped on the chance to drive it.

A lot of the guntrucks in Cam Ranh had wooden gun boxes on them. We built 2 boxes out of 2x10s one about 1 ft smaller than the other. We then filled the gap between them with sandbags. Worked great at stopping small arms fire, never saw one hit with a B-40 or RPG. Plus if you got hit there wasn't any spalling on the inside. Spalling is when something hits the outside of a piece of steel and dents or penetrates it, on the inside little pieces of metal break off and start flying around as shrapnel. APCs were real bad about this. These wooden boxes were real easy to work with and repair but their one drawback was the weight. All those sandbags weighed tons, especially during monsoon season. They weighed so much that we constantly had problems with the brakes. We had one guntruck driver killed when the brakes failed and the truck went off the road and into a river.

My gun truck was named "Master of Destruction". I drove it from May of 69 to January of 70 and then was the NCOIC. We had one 50cal mounted in the center of the gunbox and usually had 4 M-60s mounted on the sides. Everyone had their own M-16, the NCOIC a 45cal. and the driver had an M-79. They limited us to smoke grenades and a couple of hundred rounds of ammo per gun but since we hauled food we traded for a good supply of ammo, flares, and every kind of grenade we could get including tear gas.

We ran convoys out of Cam Ranh Bay everyday North to Nha Trang, Ninh Hoa, and South to Phan Rang. These were short up in the morning and back in the afternoon convoys. We usually didn't use the guntrucks on these, just the MPs and gun jeeps.

The longer convoys ran North to Nha Trang and then would cut west across the mountains to Bam Me Thout and assorted places between Bam Me Thout and Cambodia. We also ran south to Phan Range and would either head west across the mountains to Dalat area or continue south to Phan Thiet (where Ho Chi Minh was born). These were the regular destinations. There were convoys to many other places but most of them were just a one or two trip thing. We stayed pretty much in II Corps.

We always had at least two helicopter gunships with us. Because of fuel they couldn't stay in the air all the time so they would leapfrog the convoy, flying a few miles ahead of us, waiting until we were ahead of them a few miles then they would fly a few miles ahead of us again. We also had a bird dog FAC flying over us all the time, to call in arty or air strikes if needed. When we would go to Phan Thiet or any place along the coast there would be a Navy destroyer escorting us for fire support. There was always a commo jeep with us that we heard could talk to everyone including clear back to the states.

As you can tell by all of the assets dedicated to protecting them that these convoys were very important.

Most of the convoys were made up of trucks from all the companies in the battalion. These included the 32nd Trans Plt, 670th, 442nd, 566th, 360th, and for a while the 172nd. The 172nd was a reserve unit that was sent home shortly after I got there. The 360th pulled tankers only.

We hauled everything you can think of. A lot of 175mm & 155mm ammo and barrels. Food, concrete, clothing, bunker building materials, PX supplies, everything it took to keep those base camps going. And on the return trips we would haul back all the stuff that had been wrecked, blown up or some how destroyed. We hauled in all the stuff when the 11th Armored Cav stood down

After the brakes failed on that one guntruck they decided maybe it was better to save the weight and started replacing the wooden gun boxes with steel boxes and by the summer of 1970 most of the old trucks were gone. New people took over the 1st Log and they made rules about how big and how much artwork could be painted on them. Just before I left in Sept of 70 they banned names altogether. If that ever changed I don't know.

I really appreciate you scanning these pictures. I have better pictures including good ones of my guntruck but my 1st wife has them. I have been trying to get these from her for about 30 years but she feels she needs them for some reason. Maybe some day she will give in.

If you have any other questions, let me know. Thanks again!

Randy

From: Killblane, Richard
Sent: Tuesday, July 19, 2005 3:12 PM
To: Randall Barnett
Cc: Barbara Bower
Subject: 32nd Reefer Plt

Randy, Barbara shared your email with me. I'm the TC Historian. I have a few questions. How many gun trucks did your platoon build? What type of trucks were they built on? How were you and the other crew members selected for the gun truck? What type of training did the gun truck crew members go through?

How many gun trucks do you remember the rest of the 670th having?
What type of tractors did the rest of the platoon drive and where did they come from, since the platoon was recently activated?

CPT Michael Brown became your CO at the end of the year. Similarly, LTC Ed Honor was your battalion commander. What were they like?

Were you involved in any ambushes? Could you describe what happened and how the gun trucks responded? I am working on building convoy ambush case studies for soldiers today to learn from.

Why did you extend for 6 months in RVN?

By the way, here is a history that I wrote on the development of gun trucks in Vietnam. I did not have much information on gun trucks at Cam Ranh Bay when I wrote it. The Army plans to publish it as a monograph for soldiers deploying to Iraq. Rich

From: Randall Barnett
Date: Sunday, July 31, 2005 11:38 pm
Subject: Re: 32nd Reefer Plt

Sorry it's taken so long for me to get back to you. I'll see if I can answer all your questions.

The 32nd only had one guntruck. When we built mine, it was the first. After I became an NCO, they pulled off the gunboxes and built new ones from steel to save on the weight. They were built on 5-ton cargoes. The drivers and NCOICs volunteered. For awhile the gunners were guys in the platoon who's trucks were down for maintenance then we started getting people from Administration Companies who never got to leave Cam Ranh. The only training they got was the night before a convoy we took them out to the range and taught them how to fire an M-60. Other than that they were instructed on what to do by the NCOIC on the guntruck. We had to watch them real close to keep them from firing every time they heard something that sounded like a gunshot or saw somebody in the jungle with a weapon.

I think the 670th had one guntruck per platoon. Our platoon got the castoffs from the rest of the battalion. Every company had extra trucks. How they got them, I don't know but we got all the junk from everybody else. After a few months, we started turning in the junk and getting some new trucks. Same with the reefers. They were junk when we got them. We had at least three guys who worked on them constantly to keep them going, with one of them even going on convoys with us. They started keeping one reefer in off convoy, rebuilding the refrigeration unit and scrubbing out the inside until we finally had a pretty good fleet.

As far as Capt Brown, he was OK. I just have a few memories of him. You have to remember the 32nd was kind of the bastard stepchild, at times we were treated like the fifth platoon and at times like outsiders.

One day we traded enough steaks (remember we pulled reefers) to the Air Force for enough plywood and A/C units to air condition our barracks. When the Air Force truck and lowboy trailer loaded with plywood followed by an Air Force forktruck pulled into the company area, Capt Brown just happened to be standing outside the orderly room.

He came running up the boardwalk trying to figure out just what the heck was going on. After much discussion he decided it wasn't fair for us to air condition only our barracks and not the whole company so instead they built a movie screen, stage and bleachers out behind the barracks. I heard they sent the A/C units to battalion in return for them allowing us to wear a pocket patch (I'll send you a scan of it).

He seemed to be a fair professional leader. Did his job and expected us to do ours. We did have a run-in before just before I came home....My replacement was already there and so I was just killing time before I came home. One day one of the girls who used to come around at night was in the barracks during the day. She was looking for her "boyfriend" but he was out on convoy. I knew if she got caught in the barracks there would be trouble for everyone so since I was an NCO and had my own room, I had her come in to wait. We were passing the time playing cards (TRUTH!) when someone knocked on my door. I ask who it was and someone shouted my last name and it sounded just like a friend of mine. Well, I jump up and open the door and there's the First Sergeant and 2 Sergeant Majors. Top asks if they could come into my room, I guess he was showing the Sergeant Majors around, and I told him he wasn't going to like what he would find. Of course he came in anyway so I ended up with an Article 15. Capt Brown was very fair and because I had a good record he wasn't too hard on me.

As far as Col Honor, goes I really wasn't around him much. One evening just after we finished building my guntruck, we came in from the range straight to a convoy briefing in the battalion area. I guess the CO had been bragging about our truck so the Col came out after the briefing and climbed aboard to check it out. We had gotten ahold of some bucket seats out of an earthmover and installed them in the cab. Great seats. They were mounted on shocks so that they would move and dampen the bumps. We had permanently installed an extension to the transfer lever so we could split shift easier (which was a big no-no). In the back, we had gotten seat cushions out of a bus and had them for the gunners to sit on going down the road. We had a big cooler for sodas and beer and had tried to make things as comfortable as possible. Col Honor just looked around, shook his head, made some comment about primadonnas and climbed down. I think the only other time I talked to him directly was when he presented me with my Army Commendation Medal.

We were never involved in any big ambushes. We got a lot of harassment fire, a few shots and it was over. We mainly provided security when there were accidents, delays and when we would RON. Some places we would spend the night weren't very secure so the guntrucks had to pull guard duty all night.

I extended in Vietnam for three reasons: 1st, I would have had 9 months to serve after I left Vietnam and I didn't want to put up with all the BS that came with serving in the US or Germany. 2nd, my wife was fooling around and I was coming home to divorce her. 3rd, I wanted to be home for Christmas. The whole time I was in the service, I always managed to get home for Christmas. Christmas 1967, I was in Basic and they closed Ft Leonard Wood down during Christmas and sent us home for 17 days. Christmas 1968, I was on leave from Germany heading to Vietnam. Christmas 1969, I took leave from

Vietnam and made it home. So I lucked out and never had to spend Christmas away from my family.

I hope this answers your questions.

I read your included article about guntrucks and think it does a great job of telling the story. You would have thought after Vietnam that guntrucks would have been a permanent part of transportation units. They could have had the boxes made up and when they were needed just mounted them. Even in Europe there would have been ambushes on supply convoys.

I hope the military has learned their lessons now.