

54th Trans Bn, May 67 - Oct 67 - Qui Nhon

COL (R) Melvin M. Wolfe telephone interview by Richard E. Killblane, 31 March and 14 April 2004. Cdr of the 54th Trans Bn and XO of 8th Group

LTC Wolfe was a plans officer at Fort Monroe when he received orders in May 1967 to report to Fort Lewis, Washington, to activate the 54th Transportation Battalion. He arrived at Fort Lewis in May 1966. There were several other TC units activated at same time. 10th [506th] Transportation Battalion, as commanded by LTC Porter, and 8th Transportation Group, commanded by COL J. P. O'Connor, were also there. Only one of the 54th Battalion's truck companies, 585th TC, was at Fort Lewis with it. The others were organized at other bases. The 54th Battalion did not have its vehicles or equipment so they trained with the 4th ID (M), which was also getting ready to go to Vietnam at the same time. LTG Collins commanded the 4th ID (M). They used their ranges and ran convoys with their vehicles, because the 54th Battalion vehicles were enroute to Vietnam. The 54th and its one company departed for Vietnam in October. The 54th Battalion arrived at Qui Nhon [on 23 October 1966].

The 54th Battalion assumed command of three light truck companies and one medium S&P company. The drivers learned the routes while waiting for their trucks by riding along as right seat drivers with 27th Battalion trucks. It took Wolfe about a month to bring his company commanders up to his standards. The Deputy Commander of the Qui Nhon Support Command, COL Gordon Maybe, inspected the 561st TC and found dirty weapons. Wolfe relieved the company commander. That was the only commander he had to relieve. MAJ Leo McMahan commanded the 27th Battalion. BG McBride was the Qui Nhon Support Commander.

COL O'Conner left right after Thanksgiving in 1966 because of a medical problem a month after he arrived [on 19 October 1966]. The Group XO, LTC Ramsey, assumed command from December 1966 until February 1967 when COL Noble Taylor arrived. COL Taylor ran the transportation element of 1st Log down in Saigon. He came up to take command of 8th Group in March 1966.

An ordinance and an Engineer unit were in the area where the 54th Battalion set up camp. The camp was not officially named while Wolfe was there. The trucks of the two battalions were at different locations. One set of drivers would pick up the cargo at Qui Nhon port and drop off the trucks or cargo at different depots along the road at night then another set of drivers came in the next morning to drive the trucks. The depots were located outside Qui Nhon. The distance from Qui Nhon to the 54th Battalion camp was about 8 miles. All 8th Group trucks marshaled in the 54th area. Convoys consisted of 30 to 50 vehicles. There was about an hour of total confusion every morning. Wolfe and his staff called the camp, "Confusion Alley" or "Camp Confusion."

The 54th Battalion landed at Qui Nhon about the same time that the 4th ID was arriving. The trucks of the 54th helped haul the 4th ID up to Pleiku where they relieved the 1st Bde of the 101st Airborne Division at Dak To. The convoys then carried the 101st back to Qui

Nhon where they moved to Duc Pho. BG Willard Person was 1st Bde Cdr. LTC Wolfe personally knew him from previous assignments. Part of the 1st Log from Ft Bragg was at Pleiku. It was activated as a Logistic Command.

27th Bn did all the supply work until the 54th Battalion had all its trucks. The battalion hauled supplies 100 vehicle convoys every day. The convoys supplied the 1st Cav at An Khe, the 4th ID(M) at Pleiku and an US Air Force unit at Phu Cat.

Wolfe knew about the annihilation of GM100. As a war planner, he had to study the history of VN. He read about the French experience and GM 100. When he saw the marker along Route 19, he realized the significance of it. Surprisingly as planners, they thought most of the enemy activity would take place in Thailand.

Wolfe did not change any SOPs because he thought they were pretty well protected by their document protectors. Route security from Qui Nhon to An Khe was provided by ROK unit. The ROK unit was an artillery brigade. The road from An Khe to Mang Giang Pass was supposed to be protected by 1st Cav. The convoys gathered at the 1st Cav border to determine who was going to stop there and who was supposed to go on. The convoys stopped at An Khe to coordinate with the 1st Cav for artillery support. The 1st Cav was supposed to provide artillery support in case the convoys were hit and they had the call signs to call in air support. From Mang Giang Pass to Pleiku, 4ID(M) was supposed to provide the security. Wolfe said they did not have MP support on convoys.

4th ID(M) placed tanks and APCs on the road after the ambush of 2 September 1967, not before. Wolfe made regular recon flights along the road two to three times a week. An aviation unit moved right in behind the 54th area at Lane 14. The unit had CH47s. The 54th Battalion provided security for them. In turn, the aviation unit provided helicopter support for the 54th Battalion. While Wolfe was doing recon flights, he ever saw anything in the way of APCs or tanks along the roads.

54th Battalion was hardening trucks long before 2 September 1967. His men were being sniped at constantly on the night convoys to Qui Nhon. They ran into mines on the road in support of 1st Cav operations to Bong Son. It was not safe any more. At night, they would also receive a lot of sniper activity around the camp.

In June, six months after Wolfe had arrived in country, he became the executive officer of 8th Group. They did not have a replacement for him, so MAJ Johnson took temporary command of the 54th Battalion. He was still in command when Wolfe left on 1 October 1967. Wolfe directed the establishment of the trailer transfer point (TTP) at An Khe for line haul relay.

While working in 8th Group, he came up with a solution for the sniping. During WWII, Wolfe had run ring mounts training. In Qui Nhon, he went to the Ordnance unit to request ring mounts for his trucks. They did not know what he was talking about. Because he could not receive ring mounts, he had his men build the first gun trucks. "I had started the gun truck and others developed it." WO Nichols was the supply officer of

the group and in charge of the maintenance. He came up with the idea of adding armor plating to the sides of the trucks. It had been discussed before he came up with idea. Nichols had a buddy in an ordinance unit and found steel plates at the engineer depot and had enough to armor plate the doors of three or four trucks driving in the night convoys. They requisitioned more armor plating.

Maybe in July or August 1967, the 54th Battalion put one M60 on the bed of a truck and sand bagged the walls. Wolfe recommended one gun truck per 30 vehicle convoy and one officer in charge of each segment of the convoy. That amounted to one gun truck per company. He requisitioned ring mounts but they did not arrive in time. He also requested M59s, APC [half tracks] with machineguns on them, but did not get them.

LTC Phil Smiley started out as S4 of the 8th Group then commanded the 27th Battalion at the same time Wolfe commanded. The 27th Battalion also built some of the early gun trucks.

On 2 September a convoy was hit coming back. Wolfe was on the scene the next morning. The enemy had dug embankments on the uphill side of the road about 30 yards from the road. Trucks were mainly hit by RPGs. He estimated that the kill zone was about 500 yards long. It had around 14 trucks with SGT Collins in charge. No LT was the convoy commander. Collins was killed. Wolfe did not know why the convoy did not have gun truck.

They knew COL Taylor was scheduled to DROS in August. Wolfe had to take over command of the 8th Group until LTC John Burke arrived. Burke came down from Pleiku and took command of the 8th Group because he was senior in date of rank.

A week after the ambush Wolfe had to defend the ambush to LTG Stanley R. Larson, Commander of III CTZ. The meeting at An Khe consisted mostly of staff officers from all combat units with the representatives from the 8th Group. No decisions were made. They tried to determine what each unit was doing. It was an "off the cuff" or informal meeting. Lines had previously been drawn between responsibilities but people had forgotten them as one person replaced another with normal rotations.

After the ambush everyone tried to work faster and harder to get more machineguns in the convoys. They added more machineguns on the gun trucks and added more gun trucks to the convoy. The drivers test fired their weapons even before 2 Sep. Some of the steel plates that they had ordered before had begun to arrive even before the 2 September ambush. By SOP the convoy interval was 50 yards. There had been no assistant drives or shotguns because of the requirement to fill night convoys. They increased it afterwards. The drivers became more security conscious.

Wolfe left Vietnam on 1 October 1967. By then there was a lot of security along the road. By then the MPs escorted the convoys. Bellino arrived after Wolfe left. Bellino was a bellicose individual. He was a nice guy personally. Wolfe was friends with him. Bellino

fortified the vehicles more. He embellished everything that had been started. The ring mounts arrived after Wolfe left Vietnam.

MAJ Jerry Murphy was the S3 for 8th Group and MAJ Nicholas Collins was the S3 for 54th Bn.