

My tour of Duty with the 666th Transportation Company.

by

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IN MEMORY OF

Joseph Lopez Bedolla, killed in an ambush on Highway 19 near Pleiku on January 25, 1968.

Anthony Simoes, killed in action near An Khe on April 01, 1968.

John Raymond Crouse, killed in an ambush near Kontum on May 05, 1968.

My tour of duty with the 666th Transportation Company began in 1966 and continued through 1968. We were stationed at Fort Benning, GA and spent most of our time TDY at the ranger training camps at Dahlonga, GA and at Fort Walton Beach, FL. In 1967 we went to the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, to assist in the training of a class of cadets. I then had a 14-day leave from July 1 through July 14 before going to Vietnam.

On July 22, 1967 we flew from Ft. Benning, GA to Tacoma, WA to be shipped to Vietnam. On July 23, we departed Tacoma on the USS Upshure. We landed in Qui Nhon, Vietnam on August 13, 1967. We hit the beach in amphibious craft because there were no docks at Qui Nhon at that time. We carried our duffle bags, footlockers and rifles from the beach to buses that took us to the 666th Transportation Motor Pool site just west of the 54th Battalion Headquarters.



Camp Addison
54th Bn HQ and Motor Pools
Home of HQ, 512th, 523rd, and 669th TC
Late 1967

Photo by JD Calhoun

The 54th Battalion already had three or four companies (HQ, 512th, 523rd, 669th) inside their perimeter to share the responsibility of security and had no space for us. The 666th was sent about a 1/2-mile west and behind a mountain from the 54th compound to an unsecured, open field. Our building program as well as all security was totally up to us. We began putting up platoon- sized tents and reassembling trucks. Within a week our tents were up, our company perimeter secured and our company vehicles were operational. Since the 666th was accustomed to working independently, we were able to achieve our objectives.



Around August 20, 1967, along with other companies from the 54th Battalion, we began moving supplies on Highway 19 from Qui Nhon to Pleiku. The roads were dirt then and narrow. Often the empty trucks would need to pull off the road to let the loaded trucks pass. The only protection the convoys had at this time was a gun jeep at each end of the convoy. On September 2, 1967 “a convoy of 39 vehicles was about 6 miles west of An Khe, when it was suddenly and savagely attacked by a company-sized enemy unit. More than 30 Americans were killed or wounded and 34 trucks were destroyed or damaged.” [From notes by Dennis Belcastro]

Within days of this attack, members of the 666th Transportation Company built some of the first gun trucks. Other companies in the 54th Battalion were building gun trucks at the same time. The 666th built three gun trucks, one for each platoon. Our gun trucks consisted of a deuce and a half covered on the outside with a 1/4” armor plating. The floors were sandbagged. Each gun truck had a four-man crew consisting of an NCOIC, a driver, and two gunners. The weaponry was two M-60 machine guns. The NCOIC had an M-79 grenade launcher and a .45 and the crewmembers had M-16s, simple but effective.



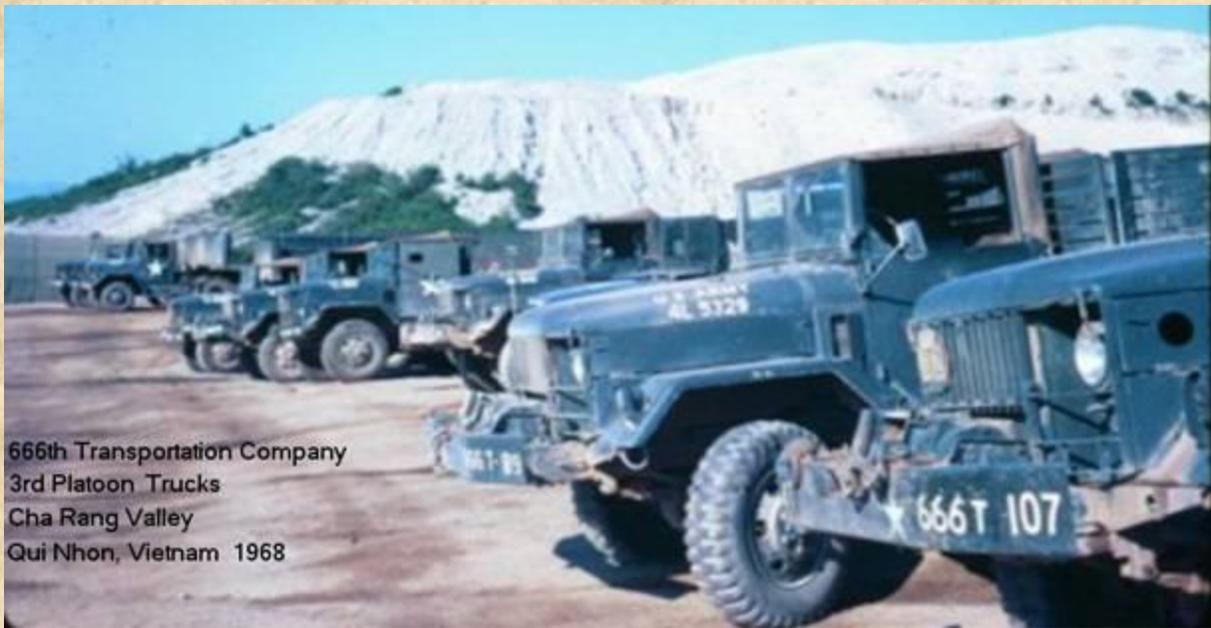
The first Guntruck built after the ambush on 2 Sept '67 near An Khe. Built by 8th Group 54th Bn 666th Transportation Co. 3rd Platoon. Approximate date 7 Sept '67. This Guntruck was later named "GUNTRUCK."

Photo by JD Calhoun

I was on the first gun truck to hit the road after that Sept '67 ambush. The first few trips we had no mount for our weapons and no radio. We would lay the weapons on the floor of the gun truck. During the first trips the convoy commander would place the gun truck close to the rear of the convoy. In the event of an ambush the control jeep could pull up alongside us and direct us toward the action. I remember that we had no idea how much ammo to carry and I started out carrying 12 rounds for my M-79. I soon found that those 12 rounds were gone the first couple of minutes

of a firefight. I then carried at least two cases and we increased the M60 ammo. Later I was given a radio that had a telephone like receiver that was very hard to hold to your ear for ten or twelve hours while riding on those rough roads.

During this same time, the 666th also built a Quad-50. It was a turret-mounted, four barreled, .50 caliber machine gun mounted on a deuce and a half. We stopped using it within the first few months or so because it always ended up being under-manned. It took six men to fully man a quad 50. We would send it to the convoy staging area with 6 men. As soon as the convoy commanders saw that many men on one truck they would pull some of them off to drive the loaded cargo trucks that had no drivers thus leaving at times only a driver and the one man in the turret. This action rendered the quad 50 useless after the one box per gun of ammo was fired. When it was fully manned it left the men loading the weapon standing out in the open without protection.



Later we named each of our gun trucks. Everyone was trying to come up with unusual names but mine was just plain “GUNTRUCK.” When I left in July of 1968, they changed GUNTRUCK’s name because a new crew was taking it over.

Our area of supply was expanded to include An Khe, Pleiku, Kontum, Dak To and Duc Pho. Between September and October, the company moved supplies, encountered a few snipers and some mines but had no more major attacks. The mines were a daily thing as the contractor was just starting to pave Highway 19. Sometimes it would take most of the day to clear the road of these mines. There were times when it took all day to get from Qui Nhon to Pleiku. We would lay over and return the next morning. The engineers were clearing trees and brush from 1000 feet on each side of Highway 19 and aircraft was spraying the cleared area with what would be later called Agent Orange.

In November, another convoy was ambushed. This was the first chance we had to use our gun trucks to defend a convoy. We had some casualties but all in all it worked well. From December, 1967 through June, 1968, it seemed like the convoys were attacked every week. We lost lots of good men but the gun trucks continued to cut the casualties and defend the convoys making it possible for the supplies to get through. As time went on the gun trucks were not only something the Viet Cong feared but they also became the VC’s primary targets.

Around late December 1967, some of the higher-ups realized that since we came over as a company, we all had the same DEROS [Date of Return Over Seas] date. We received orders to send two or three of our people to another company each week and in return we would get two or three of their people. This was the beginning of the downfall of the 666th, as I knew it. We would get their worst potheads, dopers and just plain duds while they got our highly trained and

motivated specialists. We did get some very good men as replacements but they were few and far between, "rare birds," to quote one Chief Warrant Officer.

For years, the 666th was one of the Army's BEST trucking companies. It now became a company of individuals who had little sense of comradeship, work ethics or loyalty. The 666th was now a mere shadow of the company that came to Vietnam one year earlier. However, there cannot be enough praise for the "rare birds." Those guys had the same load we carried but with a much lesser team. To those, my hat is off to you.

Our company commander, Captain James R Copeland, offered me a field commission but I felt this downward slide was where the army was headed in 1968. Therefore, I did not want to extend my time in the service for another 14 months. In July 1968, I borrowed an earthmover from an engineering outfit and began building motor pools for the 666th TC and the 54th Battalion; thus keeping me off the road until my rotation date (July 23) to the States.

All things considered I feel I was lucky to have had the honor of serving my tour of duty with the 666th Transportation Company.



(Chief), Phillip Brown (author). Photo taken beside 'Eve of Destruction' Guntruck exhibit at Ft Eustis, Transportation Corps Museum.

Left to right -- JD Calhoun, Chief Rodney J Getschman, Phillip Brown .