

Personal comments of the 585<sup>th</sup> Transportation Company (Medium Truck) by Wayne C. Chalker, member of the 585<sup>th</sup> from July 1967 to July 1968, written on 25 September 1985.

After the move up from Cam Ranh Bay, the unit became permanently stationed in a small village about 10 km outside of Qui Nhon called Phu Tai. Our "housing" for much of the time here were tents which slept, I believe, a whole platoon. We had our own perimeter defense, although I don't ever remember being rocketed or mortared the whole time we were there.

Our convoys, which always began at the staging area just outside Phu Tai, ran to An Khe, Pleiku, Duc Pho, Bong Son, and I believe once in a while to Kontum.

The Road to Pleiku was not one of the best in Vietnam, and this showed on the toll it took with trucks and drivers. We were constantly patching up our tractors just to keep them running. Fuel tanks and right fenders which the air filter sat on, were always coming loose. It was not uncommon to see chains bolted from fuel tank to tractor frame, and from one fender, across the hood to the other side, just to keep things together. It was a rare day when you came back from the run to Pleiku and you didn't have to change at least one or two flats.

There was, of course, your occasional sniper to contend with, land mines, and once an ambush by NVA soldiers between An Khe and Pleiku which took our the lead 2 ½-ton trucks of a convoy destroying several and killing a number of drivers. It was at this time that number of drivers began putting ¼-inch steel over each door of the tractor for protection against snipers. This idea was not too popular with most of us because of the additional weight factor and subsequent lose of speed.

Each company provided its own convoy protection, usually with a machine gun jeep front and rear of the convoy and a 2 ½-ton fitted with armor plating and two personnel armed with M-60 machine guns. It was also at this time that I asked for and received permission to issue each driver two fragmentation grenades. This was mainly because during one of the ambushes, the NVA soldiers were able to jump upon the running boards of some of the trucks and fire inside the cab. Even though we each had our weapons with us at all times, they proved useless at times like this.

Road and bridge protection was essential to us for getting through the cargo we carried. Some of this protection, especially between our staging area and An Khe, was provided by members of the Korean Tiger Division which was stationed just over the mountain from our compound in Phu Tai. The Koreans were very friendly toward us and their wasn't enough they could do to prove their friendship. I remember on one afternoon in the company area we started receiving incoming 155mm rounds which, needless to say, had everyone running for the nearest bunker. It was very quickly determined that our friends over the mountain had miscalculated a slight bit. A couple of fast calls and this was taken care of. The next rain we showed close some of us came, when water poured through a hole in my tent and I picked out a 5" piece of shrapnel.

Most of us developed a good rapport with the villagers in Phu Tai. So good, to the point we'd sneak out of the compound at night and into the village for a beer or whatever. I know myself and many others left some good friends back in Phu Tai.

As the report states half of the company moved north in January 1968 on LST 551. I was part of the company which remained behind to be moved at a later time. Morale, in my opinion, was probably at its lowest during this time. I think this was due to the separation of the company, and not really knowing where we were going.

Some time in February 1968, we (rest of the company) were loaded onto an LST in Qui Nhon harbour [sic] and set sail for Da Nang. Three days out at sea was a little too much for many members of the company who spent most of the time running between the head and the bunks. I, and a couple of others, were fortunate and spent a lot of time on the bow of the ship sipping cans of beet from a garbage can with ice.

We arrived in Da Nang Harbour [sic] and had to remain there for a day or two before we could unload. Once on land, we set up camp on or near, I believe, Red Beach. I don't recall exactly how much time we spent camped out here, but it was at least a couple of weeks or so. Most of us were never that close to a large military installation with all the comforts of such, so we all took full advantage of the PX, beach, and "entertainment" in town.

"Time came for us to convoy north to Phu Bai and join the rest of the company. I was machine gunner on a jeep on this particular convoy which took us over the Hai Van Pass north of Da Nang. The view and scenery was spectacular. We made an unscheduled stop near the top of Hai Van because the Marines guarding the pass were getting some sniper fire.

We arrived at Gai Li combat (Camp Eagle) and almost immediately went to work. Most of our hauls were beach clearance in Hue. Hue was just picking itself up from the Tet Offensive and devastation was everywhere. What impressed me most, was the fact that such a beautiful city existed, or did exist, in such a war-torn country. On one occasion Frank and I took a boat ride across the Perfume River in search of some "entertainment." We hopped on a couple of rickshaws, M-14's in hand, and took a tour. Our first stop was a barber shop. The barber, who spoke some English, mentioned that not three weeks before a North Vietnamese Officer sat in the same chair for a hair cut. Having a couple of free hours was definitely the exception there. Ninety five percent of the time it was driving seven days a week, ten to fourteen hours a day.

Not long after we arrived in Phu Bai the "newcomers" (second half of the company) experienced our first 122mm rocket attack. Unfortunately our company compound was located just below a battery of 8" howitzers which NVA were always trying to knock out. The NVA's aim, as we all found out, was not the best, so the battery remained and so did the 122's.

After beach clearance was well under way, we started making more and more line hauls to places up north. Camp Evans (1<sup>st</sup> Air Cav), Quang Tri, and Dong Ha on the DMZ became everyday runs. We receive our first company casualties on such a run to Dong Ha. A few members of our company had to remain overnight up there because night convoys, at this time, were not allowed. During the night the place where they slept was rocketed. One member from the 3<sup>rd</sup> plt. Was killed and a couple wounded. One of those wounded was crazy Micky Eason from Chicago who took a piece of shrapnel in the back. After some rehab in Japan he was back in the company showing off his Purple Heart.

My time in country was slowly coming to an end. Life pretty much remained the same during the early summer of 1968. The rockets kept paying us visits. On one particular attack we all just about got to our respective bunkers when one of our hootches [sic] took a direct hit from a 122 completely destroying it. On another earlier rocket attack, a Marine Capt. Wasn't so lucky and had his head decapitated by a 122 next to our hootch. [sic] It was around this time, according to my friend Frank Koseck, that our company was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation. If I can find our any information on the citation, I'll include it later on.

Some time in may or June, our assistant platoon Sgt. Asked us for volunteers for a convoy whose destination could not be revealed until we were under way. Being young and crazy, Frank, Amos and my hands were up in an instant. The next day I had three 175mm gun barrels in tow and was heading for fire base Bastogne at the mouth of the Ashau Valley. We didn't know it at the time, but we were going to be the first convoy ever to make it in and out of Bastogne.

A short distance before the fire base our convoy was halted, and between each one of our tractors trailers an M-60 tank or APC was placed. It was about this time I started wondering what the hell was I getting into!!

It was obvious that we were not entering the most secure area in Vietnam. Not far ahead, the jungle swallowed up the trail they called a road and the M-60's and APC's opened up with everything they had on the right side of the road. Just before the fire base we encountered a steep incline and, being overloaded as most of us usually were, I just about made it over the top in 1<sup>st</sup> under when I felt my engine start to go. We all made it, but most of us agreed we didn't know how.

Most of us had never been to a fire base before, so it was a sobering experience. The jungle came right to the edge of the perimeter. The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne held the fire base, but it didn't look like by much. We no sooner unloaded our cargo and were told the road was closed and would have to be 're-secured' before we could head back.

As soon as night fell, the mortar platoons circling the perimeter started dropping rounds not more than 50 meters outside the base. This went on all night. That night I think I started realizing what "it" was all about. We had the misfortune of sleeping right under

the 175 battery located in the center of the base, and every time a fire mission came in for them I just held my ears and shook until it stopped.

We had to remain at Bastogne for three or four days. The morning we were told the road was secure, we had about 10 minutes in which to get our trucks lined up, again with a tank or APC in between each of us, and ready to move. So, off we were again with the NVA on one side, the 101<sup>st</sup> on the other, and us in the middle. The recon fire the tanks and APC's provided was right on the edge of the road. The armor pulled out after 10 or 15 minutes, and we pulled over to regroup. Amos, who was in front of me, came walking back to my truck. He didn't seem too concerned about the blood coming out of the hole in his forehead. He had been hit by shrapnel; apparently by friendly fire. I cleaned him up as best I could and asked if he could make it back to base. In no certain terms, he made it clearer, no way was he staying there. So off we were again.

Just when we thought we were home free, with not more than half hour to base camp, two Phantoms paid us a visit by doing an air strike not far to our right. I then started realizing how close the NVA and VC really were, and what sitting ducks we and our trucks were.

After a short stop at the medics for Amos, we were back in base camp. For our endeavors we were given the rest of the afternoon off, and I think it was 'good job fellows.'

The rocket attacks were starting to take their toll, emotionally, on a couple members of the company at base camp. A SP/4 and a SGT. Apparently, couldn't take them any more and went under ground into bunkers. The only time they came out was to use the latrine. There was rumor of charges being brought for dereliction of duty, but, as far as I can remember, nothing was ever done.

On the night of May 28, 1968, just before midnight, all hell broke loose on the southern perimeter of our base camp (Camp Eagle). There was a heavy concentration of mortar, and small arms fire which seemed to grow more intense with each minute. By always sleeping fully dressed, it didn't take me long to grab my helmet, rifle, flak jacket, all the extra magazines I had, and run outside. The other guys in the hootch didn't seem too concerned and remained inside. I took up a position on top of our bunker and waited.

A VC sapper battalion, out of Hue, was trying to get through the perimeter with the idea in mind of getting to the artillery battery and then to the center of the camp.

If it wasn't for some good ears by a member of a forward listening post who detected the first few sappers, the attack may have succeeded. As it turned out, 30 or so were killed (a couple of which who made it into the perimeter), and several captured. I remember, the next day, seeing sand bags over their heads.

It was obvious to many in the company that our relatively safe "haven" down in Phu Tai was taken for granted up until we moved up to Phu Bai. Up there, for many of us, we found out what war was all about.

Even though it was a bastard unit for most of its time in country (six years) we were proud to be members of the best 'Fighting Truckers' company in Nam. Everyone, from the dishwasher to the Company CO., did their job with the thought that every other member of the company was counting on them.

I can say with almost certainty that the thoughts, of every member of the 585<sup>th</sup> from time to time, drift back to those years, and remember.

This concludes my personal experiences and comments for this particular time period in the history of the 585<sup>th</sup>.