

31st Transportation Battalion

The history of the 31st Transportation Battalion was a short-lived unit that had no lineage from World War II, like most of the other battalions. It was one of the few transportation battalions that organized as a product of the Cold War. What made it unique is that its history is tied to a period of significant transformation in Army organizational structure. The history of the 31st Battalion tells the story of role of a transportation battalion in a Pentomic Division.

After 1949, the Army was in the throes of responding to the growing Cold War in Europe and President Dwight Eisenhower's promise to reduce the defense budget after the Korean War. That year the Communist Chinese led by Mao Tse Tung drove the Nationalist Chinese off the mainland. The Soviet Union had also tested their nuclear bomb after having forced the installation of communist governments in its areas of occupation, which isolated the Eastern Bloc countries from the rest of Europe. In 1949, the other European nations formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for mutual defense against Soviet aggression. In 1955, Germany had become America's new ally and the Army of Occupation in Germany had transformed into a first line of defense. The peacetime US Army had an enemy: Communism. For the next three decades the American Army would focus its efforts at stemming the tide of communist expansion throughout the world. Since both the United States and Russia had atomic weapons, the US Army had to rethink its role in a nuclear battlefield.

The US Army instituted radical reorganization to create the Army of the future. The United States could not match the Soviet Army with manpower or tanks, but instead counted more on the use of tactical nuclear weapons with streamlined combat units. Under General Maxwell Taylor's guidance, the Army reduced the strength of its divisions from 18,762 to 13,748. The division organization eliminated the three Regimental Combat Teams and their battalions and replaced them with five battle groups in revised Tables of Organization and Equipment of October 1956. This was called the Pentomic Division because each battle group contained just five companies. Each battle group was essentially a brigade-size headquarters, with no permanently assigned units that could be task-organized for missions. The Division Trains contained a transportation battalion.

On 1 December 1957, the 31st Transportation Battalion was reflagged from the 42nd AAA Battalion as part of the 9th Infantry Division at Fort Carson, Colorado. MAJ Walter C. Piemme had been the commander of the 42nd AAA and became the commander of the 31st Trans Battalion. The 31st Trans as its predecessor the 42nd AAA had the responsibility for Basic Combat Training. On 18 February 1958, MAJ Richard B. Kees, the former S-3 of the 9th Division Artillery, assumed command of the 31st Trans Battalion and MAJ Piemme transferred to the Divarty S-3.¹

In July 1958, the 11th Airborne Division in Augsburg, Germany would be reflagged as the 24th Infantry Division (Pentomic). The 31st Trans Battalion was scheduled to be released from the 9th Infantry Division and be assigned as the organic transportation battalion to the 24th Infantry Division on 1 July 1958. A typical Pentomic transportation battalion had three lettered

¹ 1LT James N. Hale, History of the 31st Transportation Battalion, 1 Dec 57 – 31 Mar 58, HQ 31st Transportation Bn, Fort Carson, Colorado.

companies. A Company had the 2 ½-ton trucks and B and C Companies had the armored personnel carriers (APC).

2LT R.L. Brown was assigned to the 2nd Platoon of C Company with SGT Tom Williams as his platoon sergeant in 1958. Three months prior to the move to Germany, 2LT Brown, LT Clarence Sahm, from B Company, and two NCOs were sent as advance party to Munich. The two lieutenants received all the equipment which included M-59 APCs and securing two barracks on the north side of parade ground of Will Kasern for their companies. At that time, MAJ Gus Peyer commanded the 31st Trans Battalion, with MAJ Casper Bomman as his Executive Officer. CPT Howard Williams commanded A Company and CPT Dick Castle commanded C Company. Peyer was promoted to lieutenant colonel and was aggressive in establishing the two APC companies as “important cogs in the 24th Division.” Although the battalion was a Transportation Battalion, the drivers of the two APC companies supported the infantry and Peyer received permission for the NCOs of the two companies to wear the green leadership tabs worn by combat arms units. He ran a tight ship and was well liked by the men. The Battalion had few disciplinary problems.²

The Advance party spent the first few months training the officers and men of their respective companies on the operation of the M-59s, and then spent much of their time at Hohenfels training area supporting the Infantry Battle Groups training for their mission on the Czechoslovakian border. The US Army was new to mechanized infantry so the infantry squad and platoon leaders had to learn the new tactics. Consequently, the APC companies averaged three to four weeks in the field for every two to three weeks at Munich. At first they slept in tents or their M-59s during freezing weather at Hohenfels eating C Rations, but eventually moved into the old barracks heated by coal stoves. The M-59s suffered maintenance problems early on. The highlight of LT Brown’s tour was a successful night blackout tactical crossing of the Danube River as part of NATO winter exercise WINTERSHIELD.³

As of December 1960, the 31st Transportation Battalion consisted of the following:

HHD, 31st Transportation Battalion at Will Kasern

A Company at Munich

B Company at Munich

C Company at Munich

396th Transportation Company (Light Truck) at Augsburg

518th Transportation Company (Light Truck) at Augsburg

533rd Transportation Company (Light Truck) at Augsburg

596th Transportation Company (Light Truck) at Augsburg

The 518th Light Truck had been serving in Germany since World War II. The 533rd had been activated in Germany on 28 January 1955 and the 396th Light Truck on 1 June 1957.

LT George O. Smith arrived in Germany in September 1961 and assumed command of B

² R. H. Brown email to US Army Germany web master, “31st Transportation Battalion,” http://www.usarmygermany.com/Sont.htm?http&&www.usarmygermany.com/Units/Transportation/USAREUR_31stTransBn.htm.

³ Ibid.

Company. When he arrived in the 31st Trans Battalion, the company was training drivers from the 1st Battle Group, 21st Infantry in preparation for the transition of the 24th Infantry Division from a Pentomic to a Mechanized Division.⁴ Recognizing the failure of the Pentomic structure, the US Army reorganized divisions into the Reorganization Objective Army Division (ROAD) structure with three combat brigades each with three combat battalions. The APCs of the transportation battalion would be issued to the battalions eliminating the need for consolidated APC transportation companies.

The 57 M-59 APCs of the B Company, 31st Trans Battalion enabled the 1st Battle Group, 21st Infantry to operate as an Armored Rifle Battalion. When not attached to the Battle Group, the APCs of B Company provided armored protection for the forward movement of cargo and personnel. In February 1962, the new M-113 APCs arrived and Division Ordnance issued the APCs to B Company in increments of ten. B Company prepared the carriers for service, trained a driver from the Battle Group and then transferred each APC to the Battle Group with two qualified drivers, one from B Company and one detailed from the Battle Group for training. As the number of M-113s increased the strength of the Company gradually with each driver sent to the Battle Group. During this process, the Company had to maintain a high state of readiness in support of the 24th Infantry Division mission.⁵

By early May 1962, B Company had completed the transfer of M-113 to the Battle Group thus reducing the company strength to a half of its authorized strength. By then the Company began working off all 1st and 2nd Echelon Maintenance deficiencies of the old M-59 APCs, inventorying and packaging all OEM for turn in to Division Ordnance for either placement in the Theater Pre-positioned War Material Inventory or transfer to allied armies. By mid June 1962, the company strength had been reduced to less than 25 personnel who were engaged in closing out all records, supply requirements and preparing for inactivation. The 31st Transportation Battalion, then commanded by LTC Virgil Brown, held its inactivation ceremony at Will Kaserne on 30 June 1962. In January 1963, the 24th Infantry Division completed its reorganization to a mechanized infantry division under the ROAD.⁶

The 396th, 518th, and 533rd Transportation Companies were transferred to the 24th Supply and Transportation Battalion at Augsburg.

Between January and the inactivation in June 1962, the Battalion Officer's Wives club and the Battalion NCO Wives club held bake sales, benefit card parties and other fund raising efforts to purchase and install a stained glass window with the 31st Transportation Battalion crest in the Transportation Memorial Chapel at Fort Eustis, Virginia, the home of the Transportation Corps.

⁴ George O. Smith email to the US Army Europe Web Master, "31st Transportation Battalion."

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.