

54th Transportation Battalion



54th Transportation Battalion unit crest

World War II

Originally constituted as the 54th Quartermaster Truck Battalion on 28 May 1943 and activated by 7 July 1943 with the transfer of personnel, equipment, and history from the 2638th Quartermaster Truck Battalion (Provisional). Before joining the 54th, the 2638th was deployed in Tunisia and operated in conjunction with the 2640th Quartermaster Battalion using 230 2 ½-ton trucks and trailers to move 1,100 tons of ammunition from Tebessa to Tabarka despite difficult road conditions and the strafing runs of German aircraft.

On 3 November 1943 the battalion was redesignated the 54th Quartermaster Battalion, Mobile and reorganized with a Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment. The lettered companies A, B, C, and D were redesignated 3353rd, 3354th, 3355th, and the 3356th Quartermaster Truck Companies and would follow separate lineages. From 9 July 1943 to 17 August 1943 the 54th supported operations in the Sicily Campaign. It continued to support army units on the Italian peninsula up until 9 October 1944 when it was transferred over to the European theater. In Europe, the 54th supported the allied units that landed in Southern France and continued to transport supplies to allied forces through the campaigns of the Ardennes-Alsace, Rhineland, and Central Europe. After performing its functions in Europe, the 54th was inactivated on 31 October 1945.

Fort Story and Amphibious Trucks

By 2 September 1949, the 54th was needed again. This time it was activated and redesignated as the 54th Transportation Battalion at Fort Story, Virginia. HHC, 54th Battalion was evidently the senior headquarters on little Army fort at Cape Henry. Consequently, it provided command and administrative control for all the units assigned to Fort Story to include one port company and three truck battalions and the battalion commander acted as the post commander.

Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 54th Transportation Truck Battalion
105th Transportation Port Company (Type B)

Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 4th Transportation Truck Battalion

5th Transportation Heavy Truck Company

10th Transportation Heavy Truck Company

62nd Transportation Heavy Truck Company

640th Transportation Heavy Truck Company

Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 5th Transportation Truck Battalion

169th Transportation Amphibious Truck Company

206th Transportation Amphibious Truck Company

458th Transportation Amphibious Truck Company

460th Transportation Amphibious Truck Company

461st Transportation Amphibious Truck Company

489th Transportation Amphibious Truck Company

Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 148th Transportation Truck Battalion

165th Transportation Truck Company

721st Transportation Truck Company

3538th Transportation Truck Company

The 9224th TSU-TC Detachment III was activated at Fort Story on 31 October 1951 to provide administrative overhead personnel for the purpose of command all Transportation Corps and Second Army units stationed at Fort Story to include the 54th Battalion. The 54th Transportation Truck Battalion reverted to a cadre training status. Effective 13 May 1952, the recently activated 99th and 285th Port Companies, 605th, 606th, 607th, and 612th TAT Companies were relieved from the command of Headquarters Company 9224th TSU-TC Detachment III and placed under the command of 54th Transportation Truck Battalion. By 1 September 1952, the battalion was redesignated as the 54th Transportation Battalion (Amphibious Truck).

The 54th Battalion participated in Exercise Long Horn at Fort Hood, Texas, on 30 July 1952. In July, the 606th and 607th TAT Companies received their DUKWs and could begin accelerated Military Occupational Skill (MOS) training. The 605th and 612th TAT Companies only received four task vehicles for on-the-job training. The 606th and 607th TAT Companies began their 8-week basic training program for their soldiers on 3 November and 1 December respectively. The 604th conducted bivouac support for the TC School. On 5 December, the 54th Truck Battalion underwent reorganization.

In March 1953, the 612th TAT Company began its 8-week basic training program. On 23 April 1953 due to extreme shortage of personnel and impending operational commitments, the 169th, 461st, 489th and 604th TAT Companies were assigned to the 54th Truck Battalion from the 5th Transportation Battalion. The 5th Battalion was reduced to one officer and one enlisted man and attached to the 54th Battalion. The 54th Battalion participated in a cargo handling problem 1 through 11 December in conjunction with the 117th and 349th Port Companies from Fort Eustis. DUKWs from the 54th Battalion were used for Navy operations training at Little Creek in support of wet embarkation and debarkation with LST and LSD, 9 and 12 December. Evidently no Fort Story units were needed for SUNECS 53.

In June 1954, one officer and 27 enlisted men from the 612th TAT Company formed a Barge Amphibious Resupply Cargo (BARC) platoon to train in BARC operations for participation in Off Shore Discharge Exercise (ODEX)-54 along the coast of Northern France in November. This resupply training exercise resulted from the fear that the Soviet Union, which had recently acquired the nuclear bomb, might to deny the NATO countries use of the fixed deep water ports by bombing them. Beginning with ODEX-54, the US Army rehearsed a Normandy style resupply operation. The BARC latter known as Lighter Amphibious Resupply Cargo-60 ton (LARC-LX) was an experimental craft received in 1953. The companies of the 54th Battalion underwent joint OCT and Second Army inspection designed to inquire into the individual knowledge and training of their soldiers, conditions and availability of equipment, from 3 to 6 May. They earned an overall excellent rating. On 15 September, HHC, 5th Battalion was relieved from attachment to the 54th Battalion and the following companies were attached to it: 169th, 206th, 489th, 606th and 607th TAT Companies. The 5th Battalion with the 169th, 206th and 604th TAT Companies and 870th Port Company conducted US Army Reserve unit training from 18 July to 29 August. The 54th Battalion with the 870th Port Company and 604th and 612th TAT Companies supported ROTC training at Fort Story from 19 to 31 July. On 2 October the 5th and 54th Battalions were reorganized with the following companies: 5th Battalion received the 169th, 206th, 489th, 606th and 607th TAT and 565th Terminal Service Companies. The 54th Battalion received the 461st, 604th, 605th and 612th TAT and 870th Terminal Service Companies. The 5th and 54th Battalions conducted LOTS 4 at Fort Story in November.

The 605th TAT Company was relieved of responsibility for RSI training on 1 March 1955 and the responsibility was given to the 461st TAT Company. 5th Battalion with the 605th TAT and 565th Terminal Service Companies (approximately 276 men) conducted a LOTS exercise, 11-16 April, for participation in SUNEK. Crews from the companies would link up with prepositioned equipment to conduct the LOTS operation. HHC, 5th and 54th Transportation Battalions were inactivated on 27 June, and HHD, 10th and 376th Transportation Battalions were activated and assigned to the 5th Terminal Command. The companies formerly under the 5th Battalion were assigned to the 10th Battalion and the companies of the 54th were assigned to the 376th Battalion.

Helicopter

It was quickly reactivated as the 27 August 1955 at Fort Sill, Oklahoma and redesignated as the 54th Transportation Battalion (Helicopter) (Army) for shipment to Bremerhaven, Germany as a transport aircraft unit using the H-34 helicopter. It was then inactivated again on 21 October 1963.

Viet Nam

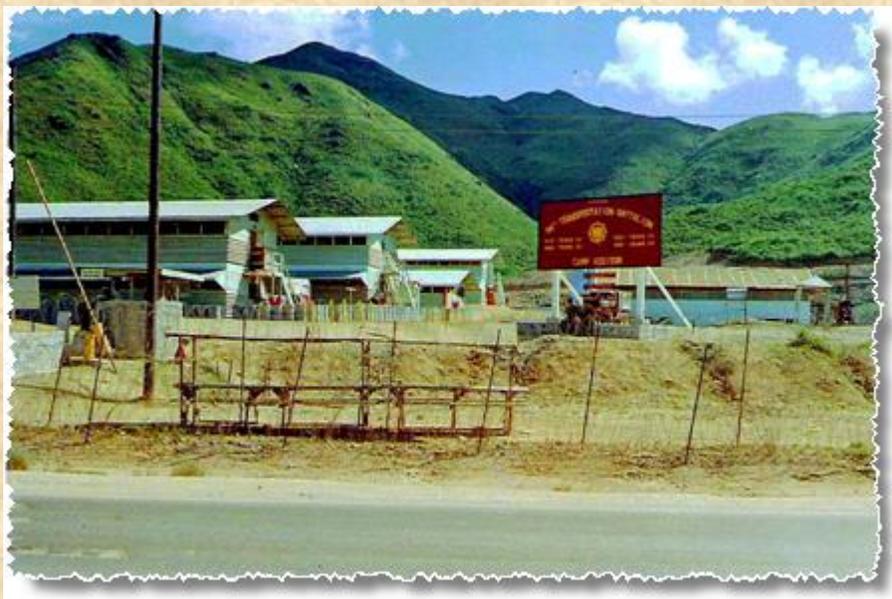
On 1 June 1966, the 54th Battalion was reactivated at Fort Lewis, Washington, for service in Vietnam. It arrived at Qui Nhon, Vietnam as part of the 8th Transportation Group on 23 October 1966. The battalion established its headquarters at Camp Addison in Cha Rang

Valley and assumed control of the light truck companies at Phu Tai and Cha Rang to include:

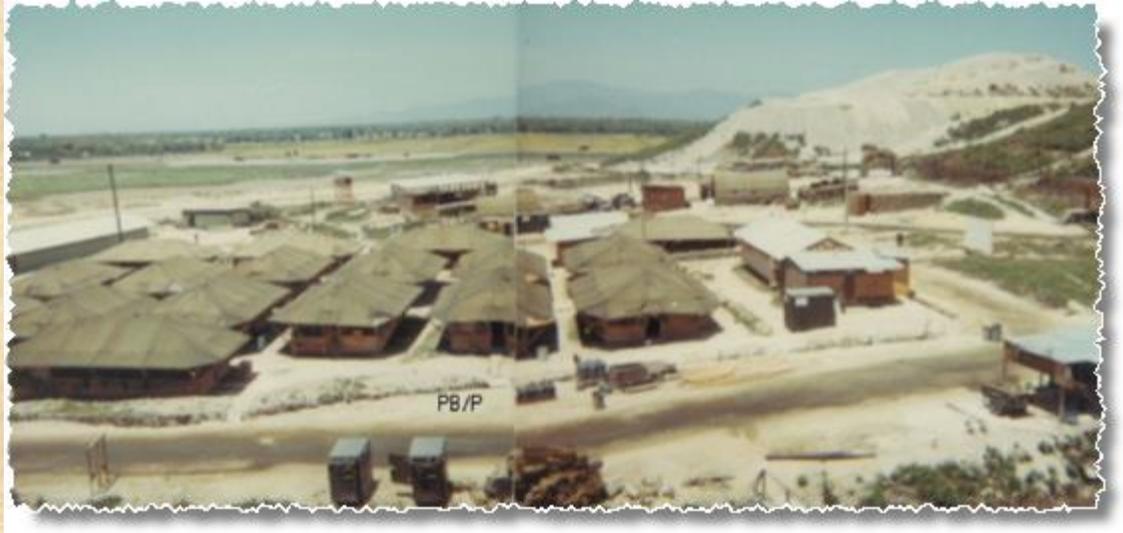
- 57th Transportation Company (Light Truck)
- 512th Transportation Company (Light Truck)
- 523rd Transportation Company (Light Truck)
- 666th Transportation Company (Light Truck)
- 669th Transportation Company (Light Truck)



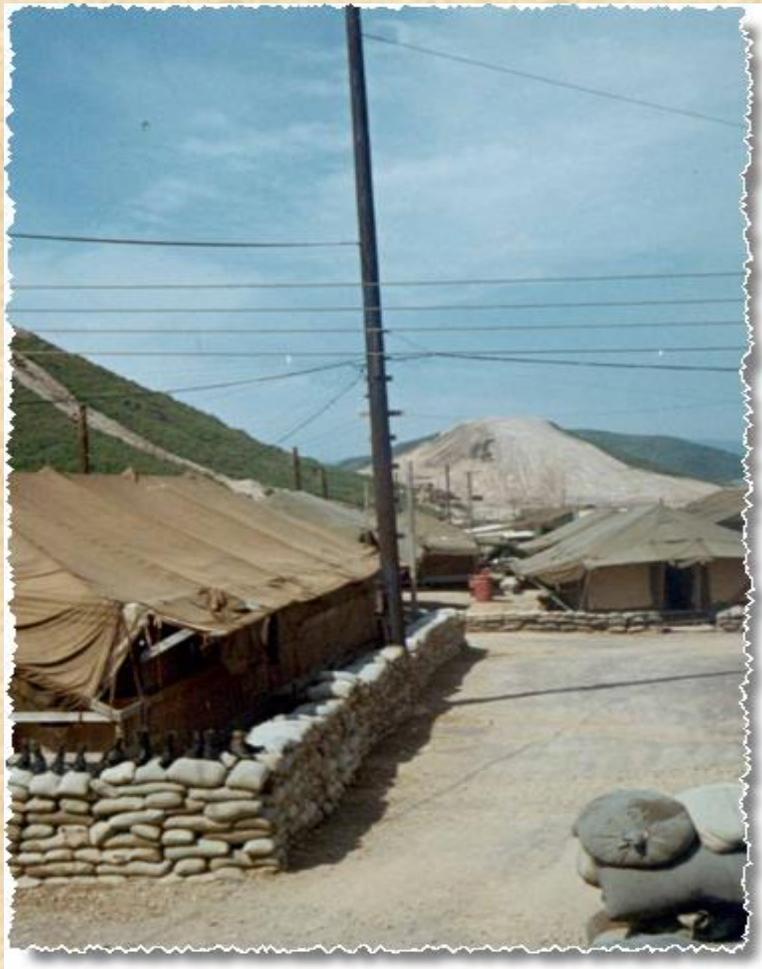
Camp Addison aerial view



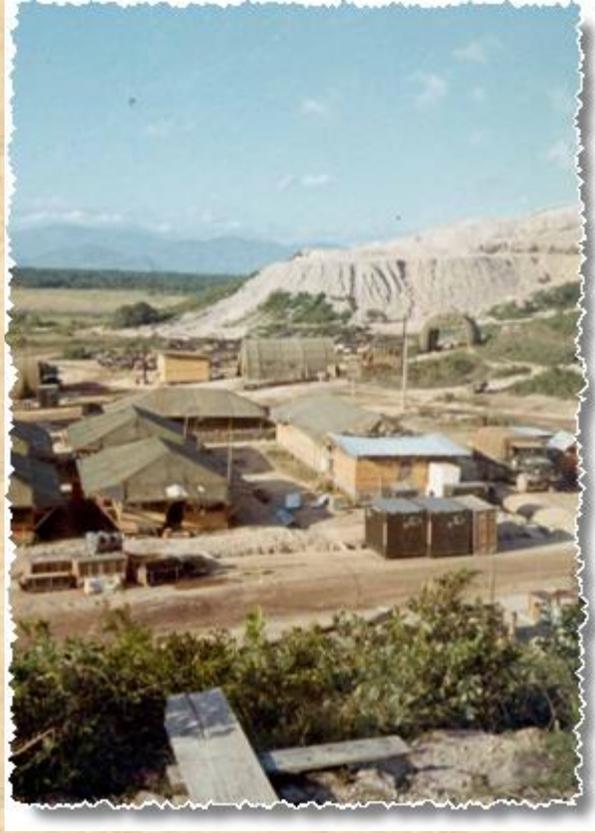
Camp Addison view from road



666th TC Compound 1967



54th Bn and POL, Oct 67 – Photo- JD Calhoun



666th Trans Co Mess Hall Oct 67: photo- JD Calhoun



Ralph Fuller, in Cha Rang Valley, Platoon Leader 523rd TC/54th Bn



M123 10-ton HET (Joaquin 'Marty' Martinez)

http://www.transchool.lee.army.mil/historian/Viet_interviews/Martinez.pdf
read Marty's story here.

The trucks of the battalion hauled supplies daily from the port over 110 miles through the Central Highlands to Pleiku or up the coastal highway (Route 1) to Bong Son or down to Tuy Hoa. Over 200 trucks made the trip each day supplying soldiers in the Central Highlands with JP4, ammunition, food and other commodities. Route 19 snaked its way up two treacherous passes at Mang Yang and Ah Khe.

Up until 2 September 1967, guerilla ambushes mostly took out individual trucks. On that day, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) changed their tactics. Realizing that the helicopters were entirely dependent upon trucks for fuel, the NVA attacked the supply line.

A convoy of 37 vehicles under the control of the 54th Battalion was returning from Pleiku under the protection of only two jeeps armed with M60 machineguns. Because of mechanical problems a 5,000-gallon tanker split the convoy in two as it approached the treacherous An Khe Pass. At that time the jungle grew right up to the road, so close that the driver could reach out and touch the branches. At 6:55 in the evening, an NVA company struck the lead gun jeep with a 57mm recoilless rifle round killing one man and wounding two others. Simultaneously, the enemy sprung a secondary ambush on the other half of the convoy setting the tanker on fire. Drivers were taken by surprise. Many did not know what to expect. They saw the impact of rifle and machinegun fire on the vehicles in front of them but did not know the lethality of the ambush until the trucks came to a halt. The kill zone spread over 700 meters. Drivers climbed out of their vehicles and put up a fight while NVA swarmed over the trucks killing others. In ten minutes the enemy had destroyed or damaged 30 vehicles, killed seven men and wounded 17.

The First Large Scale Convoy Ambush, 2 September 1967

54th Transportation Battalion

On 2 September, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) changed their tactics. They found the weakness to the American air assault concept. Realizing that the mechanized infantry and air cavalry at Pleiku and An Khe were entirely dependent upon trucks for fuel and ammunition, the NVA decided to threaten that supply line.

Daily convoys marshaled along QL1, the coastal highway near the intersection with QL19 for the run to Pleiku every morning. They lined up by type with the 54th Transportation Battalion in charge of light trucks, M54 5-ton and M35 2½-ton cargos, and the 27th Battalion in charge of the M52 5-ton tractors and M126 trailers. The crews consisted of one driver each armed with an M-14 rifle and about four or five 20-round magazines. A few truck companies had the new M-16 with four or five 20-round magazines. The trucks came from any of the companies in each battalion. The two march units would lead out at separate times and would travel the 110 miles to Pleiku by noon. If they could unload before the MPs closed the road, then they were free to return that day, otherwise they had to remain overnight at Pleiku. The trucks returning from Pleiku generally did not travel in convoys, but just as single vehicles. The road from Qui Nhon to An Khe was not dangerous, but the road from An Khe, especially once Mang Giang Pass was cleared, was dangerous and could not be traveled after nightfall. The truck drivers from Qui Nhon had two choices; drive to Pleiku and stay there overnight, or drive to Pleiku and return to Qui Nhon in one day. The one-day trip was the preferred choice but the truck driver had to clear a checkpoint east of Pleiku by a certain time or he could not leave for Qui Nhon. As it got later in the day drivers rushed to unload and take off to clear the checkpoint. This rush produced a high density of trucks late in the day and long line of trucks following each other slowly along QL 19.¹

Lynn Kent, originally of the 57th Transportation Company, drove the lead truck into Pleiku. He had been issued a brand new M-16 rifle in the 57th but because he was on loan to the 669th Transportation Company he carried an M-14 with a basic load of four 20-round magazines. His M54 5-ton cargo truck had 42,000 miles on it. The engine was knocking and Kent feared it would throw a rod. His friend, John Petric, had driven the second truck into Pleiku and had a tow bar across his front bumper. So Kent asked, "Can you tow me back?" Petric said, "Yeah, not a problem." So Kent hooked his truck up to Petric's.²

A Specialist 5 from a supply company had ridden up to Pleiku to pick up his check and asked Kent for a ride back to Qui Nhon on his truck. Kent said he would be better off riding with Petric because his truck had brakes and better control. Kent wanted to keep his truck running as long as he could so he could use his air breaks going down the mountain in case Petric's truck could not hold his. Kent did not have a hammer to drive the pin in the tow bar. His best friend, Robert "Bob" Stebner, also from the 57th, was about six to eight trucks behind so Kent walked back and borrowed his hammer. The convoy had to leave Pleiku by 1400 or it had to remain overnight. While Kent drove the pin in, the convoy started off and three trucks drove past them, which put them fourth and fifth in the convoy.³

¹ Thomas Briggs email to Richard Killblane, July 16, 2009.

² Lynn W. Kent telephone interview by Richard Killblane, 21 October 2015 and 25 August 2016.

³ Kent interview.

An eastbound convoy of 90 trucks from both battalions was returning that afternoon from Pleiku under the protection of only two jeeps with M-60 machine guns. CPT Paul Geise, Commander of the 523rd Transportation Company, was the convoy commander riding in the last vehicle in the convoy.⁴ SGT Leroy Collins rode in the lead gun jeep. The 54th Battalion had control of lead serial of 37 cargo trucks, which consisted of trucks from its different companies. The convoy had just descended the seven kilometers of Mang Giang Pass and picked up speed across the plateau heading toward An Khe. Because of mechanical problems, a 5,000-gallon tanker created a 500-meter gap between it and the lead 29 vehicles as they approached the winding stretch of road between Check Points 96 and 89. At that time, the jungle grew up to about eight or ten feet from the road.⁵

The standard operating procedure (SOP) for the highway patrol from C Company, 504th MP Battalion was to proceed west from An Khe to Check Point (CP) 102 below Mang Giang Pass to link up with highway patrols from B Company each morning. The highway patrol consisted of two gun jeeps, standard jeeps modified with armor and a post for mounting an M-60 machine gun. As they drove west toward CP 102, the gunners would fire into any locations along the road that might harbor enemy ambushers, a technique known as “recon by fire.” Upon arriving at CP 102 and linking up with the B Company highway patrol, C Company would radio back to Qui Nhon that the road was open and trucks could begin their drive to Pleiku. At the end of the day, B Company highway patrol jeeps would wait at the Pleiku checkpoint until the last truck was had passed. The MP jeeps followed the trucks to CP 102 where the highway patrol jeeps of 3rd Platoon, C Company would wait at the end of the day for the last truck and then following them to An Khe. Any trucks that made it past the Pleiku checkpoint were allowed to continue from An Khe to Qui Nhon even after nightfall. 1LT Thomas Briggs’ 3rd Platoon highway patrol’s day ended when it drove into An Khe behind the last truck.⁶

At 1855 hours that evening, as the convoy snaked around a series of curves, an NVA company struck the lead gun jeep with a 57mm recoilless rifle round killing SGT Leroy Collins and a claymore mine mounted on sticks level with the driver’s head detonated on the front of the vehicle wounding the driver and gunner. Simultaneously, disabled the tanker in the convoy and trapped the lead convoy.⁷ The enemy pulled boards across the road with mines on them and detonated them in front of the next three trucks behind Collin’s.⁸ The enemy also sprung a secondary ambush on the other half of the convoy setting the tanker on fire. An estimated 60 to 80 enemy soldiers were dug in about 30 yards up the hill firing down on the trucks.⁹

⁴ LTC (R) Nicholas Collins telephone interview by Richard Killblane on 29 April and 18 June 2004.

⁵ Colonel Joe O. Bellino, “8th Transportation Group; Sep 1967 – Sep 1968.”; and Interview with Phillip C. Brown and J.D. Calhoun by Richard Killblane at Ft Eustis, VA, 13 June 2003.

⁶ Thomas Briggs email to Richard Killblane, July 16, 2009.

⁷ Bellino, “8th Transportation;” Nichols interview; Walter Dan Medley interview by Richard Killblane at Pigeon Forge, TN, 6 August 2009. LTC Nick Collins, the S-3 during the ambush, remembered the claymore mine detonating next to SGT Collins’ jeep and also remembered enemy detonated explosives in a culvert on the 19th vehicle, but Medley heard the mine was in a culvert and the tanker was the 19th vehicle in line of march, but the sketch map in the Bellino Report has it as the 12th vehicle.

⁸ Bellino, “8th Transportation;” and Medley interview.

⁹ Bellino, “8th Transportation;” Wolfe Interview; and Thomas Briggs, After Action Report to Commander C Company, 504th MP Battalion estimated 80 enemy.

Dusk was approaching when Lynn Kent heard gun fire ahead. He did not think much about it since the infantry at the check points often test fired their weapons. As his truck rounded the curve, he saw two trucks sitting close together on the right side of the road. He did not see the third truck or Collin's jeep in front of them. He then heard gun fire and explosions followed by sparks on the hood of his truck where rounds hit and came out the other side. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something. He then heard machinegun fire and felt something like getting hit by a ball bat in the right leg. He then saw an explosion on the right front of Petric's truck that was deafening. The two trucks in tandem then began to slide into the ditch to the left as Petric tried to drive out of it. This left the nose of his truck slightly out of the ditch and Kent's truck in tow was leaning to a 20-degree angle with weeds sticking in the cab.

A little ways behind him, J.D. Calhoun, of the 666th, barely heard the firing of small arms over the roar of his diesel engines. J.D. had only been in country a month. His 2½-ton truck was eighth in line of march. Calhoun did not realize he was in an ambush until he saw the impact of bullets on the truck ahead of him, which came to a halt. He thought, "Oh crap. I can't sit in a truck. I've got to get out and get behind something."¹⁰

A little further back, Larry Lindsay, of the 512th, was approached curve to the left when he heard gun fire ahead and also assumed it was the infantry test firing their weapons since they regularly did that in that area. He assumed the "newbie" drivers would get excited and accelerate their trucks. As his 5-ton cargo truck rounded the curve to the left, the front end lifted up and dropped down from the impact of a short burst of heavy machinegun fire. One armored piercing round drilled clean through his bumper and the burst shot up his super charger and shattered his gas pedal, but his truck kept running. Evidently, the enemy had a heavy machinegun with armored piercing rounds placed in the curve to shooting straight down the road at any truck coming around the bend. Larry continued to drive down the road leaning over to one side peering over the dash board. He saw disabled vehicles pulled over to the left and right. Steve Conns was driving the truck in front of his and Lindsey saw smoke coming out over the bumper. He hoped Conns would not slow down but he did. So Lindsey sped up and pushed Conns' truck. Conns, Lindsey and the truck behind his were the only three trucks to drive out of the kill zone.¹¹

Near the rear of the lead half of the convoy, John Boraski, also of the 512th, drove around a bend in the road when he heard pinging. At first he thought it was the sound his engine made when the rpm was too high, so he reached down and changed to a lower gear. The pinging stopped. Driving around another curve, he saw a 5-ton truck ahead with smoke billowing out of it and thought, "That guy is going to owe someone a beer when he gets back." As he approached the truck, he wanted to read the bumper number to see whose truck it was, but as he came close enough to read it rounds shattered the glass knocking him down to the right. He continued past the smoking truck and did not read the bumper numbers, but asked himself, "What's going on?" He drove around another curve and the wing nuts that opened the windshield flew off and hit him knocking him to the left of the truck. That was when he realized he was in an ambush and asked himself, "Should I turn around?"¹²

¹⁰ Calhoun interview.

¹¹ Larry Lindsay III interview by Richard Killblane at Chattanooga, TN on 13 August 2016.

¹² John W. Boraski telephone interview by Richard Killblane, 27 March 2014.

The drivers were taken completely by surprise. Many did not know what to expect. The kill zone spread out over 700 to 1,000 meters. Later investigation revealed the enemy had dug and camouflaged fighting about 50 positions along the high ground and, from fecal evidence, had occupied them for several days. The drivers did not know the 54th Battalion had a policy at that time for reaction to a convoy ambush. The drivers of the “Triple-6” (666th) had learned to get out of the trucks and return fire, but they had no other choice. The disabled trucks blocked the road ahead of them. Stopping turned out to be a bad idea. Drivers climbed out of their vehicles and returned fire while NVA swarmed down over at least three trucks placing satchel charges on the cabs.¹³

After sliding into the ditch, Kent grabbed his M-14, loaded a magazine and chambered a round. He tried to open the driver’s door but could not, so he then tried to climb up and push open the passenger door but he could not stand on his injured right leg. He began to feel weak and get tunnel vision from the loss of blood, so he wanted to put on a tourniquet on his leg to stop the loss of blood. As he checked the wound, a chunk of flesh fell out, so he poked two fingers in the hole but did not feel bone. The trucks carried CO2 fire extinguishers under the seats. When he reached for the hammer, the fire extinguisher exploded and the temperature in the cab rapidly dropped from 95 to 60 degrees. Lynn wrapped a tourniquet around his leg and tightened it with crow bar. There was no more gun fire ahead of him and the sound of gun fire behind him indicated the ambush was shifting back down the kill zone toward Pleiku. He picked up his M-14 and thought, “I’ll wait for them to come for me before I get them.”¹⁴

A little further behind, Calhoun jumped out and took cover between his truck and the hill side. A convoy halted in the kill zone was exactly what the enemy wanted. Since the drivers were support troops, they did not carry much ammunition and it quickly ran out.¹⁵

From the rear, Boraski kept driving and encountered other trucks stopped all over the road. He dodged six-foot long boards here and there in the road. He continued until his truck wedged between two trucks and could go no further. He then opened his door and looked down. Seeing bullets ripping up the metal, he closed the door and jumped out the passenger’s side door realizing he did not have his M14, helmet or flak jacket. He had stowed them behind his seat, so he risked climbing back into his cab when he saw the canvas dancing as bullets hit it. When Boraski climbed back down on the road, he at first saw no one else around until he saw a driver lying motionless in the road up ahead about 75 yards. He then heard a lot of firing initially coming from the left (north) side of the road and also saw some rounds hit from the right (south) side.¹⁶

CPT Greise had called the 1st Air Cavalry for support. In ten minutes helicopter gunships from A Troop, 1/7th Cavalry arrived and began searching for the enemy. Boraski remembered a helicopter flew overhead and stopped. He climbed out from under the truck and shot at it. It then fired rockets at the enemy. Kent remembered seeing two lines of red tracers hitting the ground followed by constant thunder. After they disappeared, everything went silent.

¹³ Medley interview; and evidence from photos taken of the damaged trucks.

¹⁴ Kent interview.

¹⁵ Brown and Calhoun interview.

¹⁶ Boraski interview.

2LT Burrell Welton was leading a fuel convoy of the 359th Transportation Company that came up and halted a couple miles behind the 8th Group convoy just as it had been ambushed. Helicopter gunships were already shooting up the hill side and it was getting dark. He learned some the drivers had either left their weapons in camp or wrapped them up under seat to keep them from getting dirty. So the enemy had stood on running boards shooting inside the cabs.

The highway patrol from 504th MP Battalion was notified and arrived on the scene while the ambush was still in progress. SGT Buford Cox., Jr., Woodell, Morin, Bledsoe and Phipps found the drivers stopped and milling around, blocking traffic. SGT Cox stopped an officer in a jeep and asked where he was heading. The officer said he was going back to Pleiku for help. Cox told him the best thing he could do was go to the front of the line of trucks and lead them out of the kill zone to An Khe. Cox “forcefully encouraged” the officer to do so and went with him. Cox found that the drivers had dismounted their trucks and were trying to return fire. He ordered every driver he could find to get back in their trucks and drive them through the kill zone. This probably saved a lot of lives. Once the drivers understood they needed to clear the kill zone, Cox and his men began to lay down suppressing fire with the machine guns, M-16s and the M-79 grenade launcher that Cox always carried in his jeep.

At approximately 1930 hours, the 3rd Platoon, C Company sent reinforcements in two gun jeeps with SGT Tomlin, Midolo, Desena, Leclair, Carter and Palumbo. They arrived at the scene and established security and traffic control, and directed recovery vehicle operations. At 1940 hours a second reinforcement of two more gun jeeps with 1LT Thomas Briggs, Melnick, Young and Trumbo performed a recon to the west of the ambush site to determine the position of the last damaged vehicle. When they arrived at kill zone it was dark and the gunships had left. Wrecked trucks were everywhere as well as the bodies of dead. A Transportation Corps officer wanted to know if there were any other vehicles that needed recovered so Briggs took two jeeps and drove down the road. Damaged trucks were arrayed at a variety of angles to a straight line down the middle of the road. Briggs remembered the body of one American soldier, cut in half at the waist, draped over the hood of a truck. Most of the damage was to the lead vehicles in the convoy.¹⁷

The three trucks that escaped the kill zone pulled into the camp outside An Khe and the drivers saw soldiers getting ready to respond to the ambush. They stopped and shut down their trucks. Lindsay’s would not start again. Lindsay and Conns volunteered to guide the infantry back into the kill zone, but the infantry said they did not have to go. Lindsay told them, “You don’t understand. Those are our friends out there.” So Lindsay and Conns led them back into the kill zone. The other driver remained in camp.¹⁸

Further up ahead after things went quiet Kent thought to himself, “I gotta get out of this cab.” So he aimed his M-14 out of the window at the silhouette of a man and was squeezing the trigger when he recognized a helmet. “Thank goodness I did not shoot,” he thought and then hollered, “I’m in the truck and can’t get out.” For a while he heard nothing and then heard something at passenger door. Not sure whether it was friend or

¹⁷ Briggs, After Action Report; and Briggs email.

¹⁸ Lindsay interview.

foe, he pointed his M-14 at door and when the door opened, it was another American. Kent was pointing his weapon at him and he was pointing his back.¹⁹

Two soldiers formed a cradle with their arms and carried Kent to side of road. One asked, "Where are you hit?" Kent said in the leg, the soldier told him, "You're still bleeding like a stuck pig." So he cut the trouser leg open and told Kent he was hit three times in the leg. The soldier then took his own first aid packet and bound Kent's leg wound.²⁰

About four or five of them were waiting in the ditch when a jeep a pedestal mounted M-60 with gunner finally drove up without its lights on. There were two wounded in the back. The sergeant in the jeep asked if anyone was seriously injured. Someone said, "Yeah, we have a guy bleeding pretty bad and we can't get the blood to stop." Kent was feeling very weak and his vision was deteriorating. So the sergeant climbed out of the passenger seat and said, "Bring him over here." So they carried Kent over and sat him in the passenger seat of the jeep. The sergeant then sat on the radio in back and said, "Let's start for An Khe."²¹

They drove very slowly down the road with the lights out for about a mile and then turned lights on. When they arrived at An Khe the lights of the camp were out. Apparently it was under rocket attack. The MP at the gate stopped them and asked what had happened. They explained they had wounded and needed to get them to the hospital. The MP asked if they knew where the hospital was. They did not so the MP said the hospital would turn the lights on for 60 seconds. When the lights came on the jeep took off and reached the hospital just as the lights went off.²²

The AC-47 gun ship, "Spooky," arrived at 2020 hours.²³ The infantry with Lindsey and Conns reached the kill zone in time to hear the buzzing sound made by its electric powered Gatling-guns. Lindsey climbed up to look in the cab of a truck and saw the driver lying still with no sign of wounds. He thought it was Arthur Reinhardt. His flak jacket was unzipped and when Lindsey pulled the flak jacket back he saw three bullet holes in the man's chest along the line where the zipper was. He assumed the enemy had jumped on the running board and shot a burst at Reinhardt, hitting him in the chest where the flak jacket was unzipped.²⁴

After the firing quieted down Boraski, further back, saw three NVA soldiers walk down the slope so he shot at them and missed. Enemy rounds then began popping around him. He only had 100 rounds of ammunition and did not want to run out, so he quit firing. He then saw two more NVA soldiers walking from the right (south) side of the road. One pulled guard while the other rifled through the dead driver's pockets. He was taking things off the driver and putting them in his pockets. This pissed Boraski off and he aimed but his vision was blurry so he switched from sighting with his right eye to his left and hit the NVA soldier going through the American's pockets in the head. The other looked around and Boraski popped off a second round and hit that NVA in the shoulder and spun him around. He then ran away and Boraski's third round hit him in the rib cage

¹⁹ Lindsay interview.

²⁰ Lindsay interview.

²¹ Lindsay interview.

²² Lindsay interview.

²³ Bellino, "8th Transportation."

²⁴ Lindsay interview.

because he saw pieces of flesh blow out. He fired again but the NVA soldier dropped to the ground, so he did not know if he hit him a second time.²⁵

Afterwards, Boraski heard enemy talking and then he saw a banana leaf roll down the hill from the south side of the road. He then saw the burning fuse and backed up behind the front of the rear axle. The blast hurt his ears.²⁶

Fortunately, someone drove along the line of damaged trucks and picked up wounded drivers.²⁷ A black soldier then came over and Boraski told him, "You take care of the back and I'll take care of the front." So they faced outward from behind the truck. As it grew darker, Boraski fired at the muzzle flashes. The other guy said he would go look for someone. He then heard the sound of engines and then came back and said, "The convoy's coming." Boraski told him, "Wait here and see what happens."²⁸

They saw a jeep and truck behind it coming down the road. The two jumped up and then someone fired a .45 at them most likely MPs sweeping the road. They then backed up under the truck until a tractor pulling a lowboy trailer drove by. They jumped on the trailer yelling, "We are Americans!"²⁹

Boraski then saw wounded guys lying around and told the other driver, "We can't leave these guys," and jumped off. The other guy said, "I'll see you when they bring you out in a body bag." But he jumped off too and helped load wounded in the truck. Boraski had managed to get his truck free and loaded five or six wounded in the bed. He was later told the bed of his truck was full of blood when they brought it in. He then saw a guy under a truck with his right leg and arm almost shredded. So he put a tourniquet on it. He and the black guy were lifting the wounded man on the back of his truck when a hand grenade exploded. He saw a big yellow flash of light and then flew through the air. After lying in the road for a while an oriental soldier came up to him. Recognizing the oriental eyes, Boraski grabbed his rifle and the other soldier pointed his rifle at him. Boraski then recognized he was a Korean soldier. He put down his rifle and the Korean also put down his then helped Boraski walk to a check point where he climbed into a jeep for medical evacuation.³⁰

Another driver, Eugene Curry, assisted a wounded driver to a medevac helicopter and after taking care of the wounded driver someone then told Curry, "You're bleeding." Curry opened his flak jacket and saw he was covered with blood. He had been shot in the chest and did not know it. He was also medevaced.³¹

LTC William K. Hunzeker, Commander of the 34th Supply and Service (S&S) Battalion, took charge of the recovery operations.³² The 359th convoy drove through the kill zone while the 34th S&S Battalion was cleaning up the mess. The trucks were stopped bumper to bumper. Either they had too tight an interval going into the kill zone or had

²⁵ Boraski interview.

²⁶ Boraski interview.

²⁷ Medley heard it was a soldier in the 523rd named Jarmilio, but Thomas Briggs claimed MP SGT Cox did the same thing.

²⁸ Boraski interview.

²⁹ Boraski interview.

³⁰ Boraski interview.

³¹ Lindsay interview.

³² Briggs, After Action Report.

bunched up when trucks stopped ahead of them, because many drivers would not drive in the dirt around the damaged truck for fear of driving over buried mines.³³

All Military Police remained on the scene until 0130 hours, when all vehicles except one were either removed to Camp Radcliff or to a position adjacent to an artillery firebase near CP 89. Afterwards, 1LT Briggs received approval from LTC Hunzeker to send all MPs except two armored jeeps back to An Khe, since the 70th Engineer Battalion was on the scene with wreckers and gun jeeps. The last highway patrol remained until 0300 hours when the last vehicle was hauled to the artillery firebase. The 1st Cav pursued the enemy for about a week estimating their strength was around 60.³⁴

The enemy had destroyed or damaged 30 vehicles, killing seven men and wounding 17. Three of the killed, SSG Claude L. Collins, SP4 Ronald W. Simmons and PFC Arthur W. Reinhardt, were from the 512th Light Truck. PFC Roy L. Greenage and PVT Lloyd R. Hughey were from the 669th, PFC William A. Gunter was from the 523rd, PFC Robert L. Stebner was from the 57th Transportation Companies.³⁵

Six of the 17 wounded came from the 669th and only one returned to duty. The others were evacuated to the United States for further treatment. The doctor wanted to amputate Lynn Kent's leg, but Lynn said, "No way in hell." He did not want to be a cripple. They operated on his leg and he spent the next day in recovery. They flew him and other wounded to a hospital in Qui Nhon in C7 Caribou where they operated some more. He remained there for a week until he began his journey through hospitals in Okinawa, the Philippines and finally the United States. He finished out his enlistment at Fort Meade. Maryland.

John Boraski, of the 512th, was hit in the left leg, had grenade fragments in both arms and shrapnel and glass in the face. They medevaced him back to the hospital at An Khe where he remained for two days. He was then transferred to Qui Nhon for a week and then Cam Ranh Bay until he recovered.

This ambush sent shock waves throughout the 8th Group. For the truck drivers the nature of the war had changed significantly. They had become the primary objective of the enemy offensive and from then on when they drove out the gate the drivers expected that they could be killed.

NVA Lessons

The NVA tactics had worked. Hitting an empty convoy returning from Pleiku did not shut down the supply line but only reduced the number of vehicles and drivers available for line haul. This had apparently been a rehearsal, as the NVA had deliberately planned the ambush for late that evening so they could escape under the cover of darkness. From their success and the US reaction, they developed their plans for future ambushes. For two years the NVA had sparred with the air cavalry only to learn to avoid American tactical air power. The speedy response of this tactical air power made the difference between the outcome of this ambush and the annihilation of French Mobile Group 100. The NVA would limit the duration of their ambushes to about ten minutes

³³ Burrell Welton telephone interview by Richard Killblane, 23 April 2013.

³⁴ Briggs, After Action Report.

³⁵ The list of names came from the 512th TC Historical Supplement, 1967, and Memorial Service, 54th Transportation Battalion, Camp Addison, Republic of Vietnam, 6 September 1967.

which was short of the arrival of helicopters or the AC-47. The NVA would take two months to plan, rehearse and execute their next convoy ambush.

US Lessons

There was nothing obvious to predict that the enemy would change his tactics and target the convoys. An analyst might have drawn that conclusion by looking at the big picture. The insurgents had not any successes on the battlefield against the air assault units. He therefore had to find another weakness. The dependency on fuel hauled by trucks was a weakness. It was clearly known that this enemy was proficient at ambush tactics and had targeted convoys.

Surprise gave the enemy the advantage in the initiation of the ambush and after that it became a contest of the employment of fire power but the drivers were outgunned. LTC Melvin M. Wolfe, 8th Group XO and former Commander of the 54th Battalion, came up with the idea in the summer of 1967 to experiment with gun trucks and LTC Philip N. Smiley, Commander of the 27th Battalion, built sandbag pill boxes on the back of two 2½-ton, which unfortunately were not in this convoy when it was hit. The only alternative to gun trucks was training the drivers to fight as infantry.

Since the enemy had begun targeting the convoys, they needed protection. The question was whether the protection was the responsibility of the combat unit which had responsibility for the area or the truck companies themselves. Complacency had set in. It was not a question of whether the SOP for reaction to an ambush was adequate as none of the drivers knew it. They had never had a need to. The 8th Transportation Group would have to look at both active and passive measures to protect the convoys.



Buffalo/elephant grass growing right up to edge of road – note height of grass – tall enough to hide a water buffalo or elephant (or a company of Viet Cong waiting in ambush)

The response by Colonel Joe Bellino, commander of 8th Group, was immediate. Since the local infantry and tactical units would not escort his convoys, he authorized the companies to build gun trucks. Initially, the units fielded quad .50 gun trucks but they required a crew of six to drive the truck, man and reload the guns. The best solution was to put steel planking on the bed of a 5-ton cargo truck and arm the “box” with machineguns. The first gun trucks were painted olive green like the rest of the trucks in the convoys so they blended in.



COL Joe Bellino, 8th Trans Group Commander

<http://www.transchool.lee.army.mil/historian/documents/bellino.pdf>



Gun trucks painted to blend in with rest of convoy -- no special art work (yet)

Initially, the units fielded Quad .50 gun trucks but they required a crew of six to drive the truck, man and reload the guns. The best solution was to put steel planking on the bed of a 5-ton cargo truck and arm the “box” with machineguns. By the next major ambush in December, the gun trucks were ready. The guerrillas were unable to destroy as many trucks as before and paid a high price in return. In time the gun trucks received pedestal mounted machineguns and were painted black with distinctive names painted on the sides. Each company had two gun trucks. By September 1968, the gun trucks combined with helicopter escorts made large scale ambushes a rarity. The gun trucks had gained a reputation.



Walter Medley, 523rd TC with “Superior Driver Award”



the “Vietnam Superior Driver Award”

The next ambush was on a 27th Battalion convoy but was small in size and only damaged one of the last vehicles. It drove out under its own power. It took the enemy time to plan and rehearse large scale ambushes. The NVA launched its next large scale ambush on a 54th Battalion convoy on 24 November. The convoy consisted of 43 5-ton cargo trucks, 15 2 ½-ton trucks and a maintenance truck under the protection of six gun trucks and three gun jeeps. The fired on the lead gun truck and detonated a mine under the lead 5-ton cargo truck. The truck rolled to the side of the road and the other trucks tried to run through the ambush, but only one truck was successful. The remaining trucks were stopped by mines and small arms fire. One truck loaded with ammunition in the next serial exploded destroying the gun truck next to it. Enemy fire hit the gun truck in the third serial and damaged it and a grenade damaged the gun truck in the fourth serial. The enemy damaged 14 trucks to include four gun trucks, killed two drivers and wounded 17 at a loss of 41 of their own killed and four captured wounded. The price of ambushing convoys had gone up.



***Lead Gun Truck: PVT Harry Cummings – KIA, driver
NCO SGT Dennis Belcastro, Machine gunner Frank Giroux, Machine Gunner Joe
Foster, all WIA, 4 Dec 67***

Another eastbound convoy under the control of the 54th Battalion was ambushed by Viet Cong guerrillas at 8:15 in the morning on 4 December. This convoy of 58 5-ton trucks, 11 2 ½-ton trucks was escorted by six gun trucks and four gun jeeps. The lead gun truck stopped when the crew noticed a board with three mines pulled across the road in front of it. The gun truck then received small arms and recoilless rocket fire killing the driver. The lead jeep, with 1LT Todd, behind the gun truck was also stopped by small arms fire. Both vehicles immediately returned fire. Four cargo trucks received flat tires but the drivers returned fire. The remaining five gun trucks drove into the 3,000 meter long kill zone to render assistance. One was disabled by a rocket wounding three gunners. The helicopter gun ships arrived at 8:27, 12 minutes after the call, “ambush, ambush, ambush” went out and the reaction force arrived at 8:30. By that time the gun trucks had broken up the enemy ambush, killing 13 enemy and capturing one wounded at a loss of only one killed and six wounded. The loss of vehicles was one gun truck destroyed and one jeep and four trucks slightly damaged.



aftermath of an attack on a vehicle in a convoy

It became clear from the prisoners that the enemy wanted to completely destroy a convoy as the Viet Minh had annihilated French Mobile Group 100 on 15 Apr 54 near Mang Yang Pass. The Americans were determined to keep the supply line open.

It was learned that the enemy liked to take out the lead vehicles with mines and small arms fire. The order came down that the gun trucks should not lead the convoys but vary their position throughout the convoy on a daily basis so the enemy would not be able to anticipate where the gun truck was. Quad .50 gun trucks required too many crew members and could not depress their guns to shoot down hill or fire through the cab of the truck. They were slowly discontinued in use as more box style gun truck were built. In time the gun trucks received pedestal mounted machineguns and were painted black with distinctive names painted on the sides. Each company had two gun trucks. After the December ambush the convoys started having fixed wing aircraft or helicopter gun ships escort them. They would fly so low that the drivers could reach up and touch the skids.



Low flying Huey escort

At approximately 6:15 on the morning of 21 January 1968, a convoy under the control of the 54th Battalion consisting of four gun trucks, four gun jeeps and 60 task vehicles departed Qui Nhon for Pleiku. The convoy was halted at check point 96 east for 30 minutes while the road was cleared. At 10:00 approximately 500 yards east of check point 102, the lead element of the convoy came upon a 5-ton tractor which was attempting to hook up to a POL trailer. Because this operation was blocking the flow of traffic, the convoy commander moved to the front and directed the clearance of the road. He then directed his convoy to continue. At this time, a large volume of automatic and small arms fire was received from the south side of the road. Convoy security personnel immediately returned fire in the direction of the hostile fire. The convoy continued to move through the area. Within five to ten minutes APCs from the road security element at check point 102 arrived and engaged the hostile element followed by tanks from CP 98 within ten minutes. Rear elements of the convoy approaching the area received approximately 40 to 50 rounds of automatic fire. Both APCs and tanks at the site of the incident fired in the direction of the hostile fire. Number of enemy involved were unknown.

At 6:00 in the morning of 25 January, another 54th Battalion convoy consisting of 95 task vehicles for Pleiku and 23 for An Khe, departed the unit marshalling area located at Cha Rang Valley on Route 19. The 95 vehicles bound for Pleiku consisted of 65 5-ton cargo trucks, 19 2 ½-ton trucks, 5 armored 2 ½-ton trucks, 4 radio jeeps and 2 5-ton maintenance trucks. At approximately 10:15, the convoy received automatic and small

arms fire from both sides of the road. The gun trucks and convoy personnel returned fire and within ten minutes elements of 2/1 Cavalry were on the site with APCs and tanks. After all firing stopped the convoy proceeded west for approximately 500 yards when enemy fire was again received from both sides of the road. The NVA opened fire on the second and third vehicles in the convoy. The enemy fire consisted of rockets, heavy machine guns, grenades and small arms. A machine gun position was later discovered approximately 25 yards on the right side of the road. The reaction force arrived on the scene from the previous ambush site immediately. The ground distance covered by the ambush was approximately 1,000 meters. Approximately 60 convoy personnel were involved in the ambush. Plus the reaction force. The number of enemy involved was unknown. Two drivers were killed and one wounded. One 2 ½-ton gun truck and one 2 1/-ton cargo truck were damaged, with minor damage to the cargo. One civilian tractor from Pacific Architects and Engineers (PAE) was destroyed. Three armed helicopters arrived at approximately 10:45 and two medevacs arrived ten minutes after the request. Two officers, members of the engineer team, were wounded, one fatally, while clearing explosive ordnance from the site.



convoy line up at Ponderosa

On 30 January, a convoy under the control of the 54th Battalion departed for Pleiku at approximately 6:00 that morning. The convoy consisted of 80 task vehicles, 7 gun trucks, 8 gun jeeps and 3 Quad .50s. Upon arrival in An Khe, the convoy was joined by 3 PACs and one tank from the security force of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. The additional security element was dispersed toward the front of the convoy. Since the convoy was about to pass out of the area of operation of the 173rd, the additional security element pulled out of the convoy and stopped at CP 102. Approximately one mile west of CP

102, the convoy came under fire initially by mortars and followed by small arms and automatic fire from a platoon size enemy. The convoy personnel immediately returned heavy fire. In addition, the 173rd security element advanced from CP 102 and an element for the 4th ID security element moved west to engage the enemy. F111As, F104s and gun ships made air strikes. Two US personnel were slightly injured, one 5-ton tractor and reefer were damaged. No enemy dead or wounded were found.

On 7 February, a convoy under the control of the 54th Battalion departed for Pleiku at approximately 6:30. The convoy consisted of 67 task vehicles, one maintenance truck, six gun trucks and four gun jeeps. At approximately 10:10, after passing CP 92 West, the convoy came under fire from small arms and automatic fire of an estimated 50 to 60 NVA from the tree line south of the road. In addition, two rockets were fired at the convoy from a mound halfway between the road and the tree line. Convoy security personnel immediately opened fire killing two NVA at the rocket position. The enemy force began to move forward from the tree line but were driven back by the fire power of the convoy personnel. Gun trucks which cleared the kill zone, which was estimated at 200 meters, returned to fire upon the enemy positions. Within 15 minutes, 6 to 8 APCs and two to three tanks arrived at the scene and began to engage the enemy. Four US personnel were slightly wounded. Six dead and one enemy wounded were discovered. A 5-ton cargo hauling class V was hit by a rocket and destroyed. A gas tank of another 5-ton cargo was damaged. Also several other vehicles, including two gun trucks, received flat tires from enemy fire. The gun ships arrived within 15 to 20 minutes of request.

On 21 February, a convoy under the control of the 27th Battalion departed at approximately 7:15 for Pleiku. The convoy consisted of 54 task vehicles, four gun trucks, four gun jeeps and a Quad .50. At approximately 9:50 the convoy came under fire from automatic and small arms fire and B40 rockets between CP 89 and CP 96. The convoy personnel returned fire in the direction of an estimated 10 to 12 NVA south of the highway. The Quad .50 move into the kill zone, which was estimated at approximately 300 meters, and was credited with one NVA killed. APCs from the 173rd Airborne Brigade arrived in approximately five to ten minutes and engaged the enemy force. Artillery was also called in by the tactical force. Three vehicles including a task vehicle and the Quad .50 were damaged and three personnel were wounded. One killed and one wounded enemy were recovered along with numerous foxholes.

On 4 March, a convoy under the control of the 54th Battalion departed for Pleiku at approximately 6:00. The convoy consisted of 104 task vehicles, 8 gun trucks and 4 gun jeeps. At approximately 9:00 the convoy was held up at CP 89 by the tactical security force due to enemy activity in Mang Yang Pass. The convoy was allowed to proceed at approximately 11:30 with the escort of one tank and two APCs from the 173rd Airborne Brigade. At approximately 11:45, the convoy came under fire from mortars and heavy small arms and automatic fire. Convoy security immediately opened fire in the direction of the enemy which was well entrenched in the tree line on the north side of the road. The convoy also received sporadic fire from the south side of the road. The enemy force was estimated at about 50 personnel. Two Quad .50s from the 4/60th Artillery, which were traveling with the convoy, and one from the 27th Transportation Battalion convoy,

which was behind the 54th convoy, fired upon the enemy positions throughout the kill zone, estimated to be between 500 and a 1,000 meters long. A reaction force of one tank, four APCs and four gun ships arrived within five minutes. There were eight convoy personnel wounded, two from the artillery unit. One wounded died on 6 March, from wounds received in the battle. Five of the vehicles and two trailers were damaged. The convoy remained in place on the highway until 2:30, at which time they turned around under the escort of MPs and returned to An Khe.

On 8 March, another 54th Battalion convoy had departed for Pleiku at approximately 6:00. The convoy consisted of 79 task vehicles, four gun jeeps and five gun trucks. At approximately 8:30 the third gun truck of the first serial was hit with a claymore mine damaging the front tires. The explosion was followed by heavy small arms and automatic fire from both sides of the road. Three Quad .50s from the 4/60th Artillery travelling with the convoy joined by a company of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, which was in the area, encasing the enemy. The company commander of the 173rd was killed in the engagement. The enemy force attempted to repel the flanking action of the tactical security force but was driven back after 15 minutes of heavy contact. One gun truck and one task vehicle were damaged. Two US personnel were wounded and one killed. One of the wounded was a driver and the other two were in the 173rd. The convoy was allowed to proceed after a twenty minute delay. At approximately 9:15, two kilometers west of CP102, a task vehicle in the first serial hit a mine then small arms fire hit the cab of the disabled vehicle wounding the driver. B40 rockets then ignited the JP4 that the truck hauled. Small arms and automatic fire and rocket fire opened up on the convoy. The convoy security element fired in the direction of the enemy positions as the convoy maneuvered around the burning vehicle. Tactical security forces from the 173rd and the 4th ID arrived within five minutes and engaged the enemy. The enemy force of undetermined size established a kill zone of approximately 300-500 meters. Only one soldier was wounded with one truck damaged and another destroyed. No enemy dead or wounded were recovered.

On 23 March, a night shuttle convoy from the port of Qui Nhon was proceeding west on Highway 1 toward loading sites in Cha Rang Valley. At approximately 12:15, the convoy consisting of five task vehicles, one gun truck and one gun jeep, approached the bridge guarded by the Koreans. The convoy commander, 1LT Paul J. Stegmayer, observed a pipe line fire in the vicinity of Tuy Phovc. After reporting the same, 1LT Stegmayer proceeded with his column. As the convoy reached the site of the fire, an explosion occurred on the north side of the road near 1LT Stegmayer's jeep, followed by heavy small arms and automatic weapons fire. Although both 1LT Stegmayer and his driver received wounds from flying glass and shrapnel, they were able to cross over the bridge at the site of the pipe line fire. Due to the intense enemy fire, only the jeep and one task vehicle were able to clear the kill zone. Despite great personal danger, 1LT Stegmayer, braving a withering hail of bullets, crossed back over to bridge on foot to take control of the drivers and insure that they could clear the scene. Moving from vehicle to vehicle, Stegmayer assured himself that all drivers were out of their vehicles and had taken up positions to engage the enemy. He crossed back to his jeep to radio reports to Battalion and adjust illuminating artillery rounds. With arrival of a reaction force of

three gun trucks, one gun jeep and a Quad .50, 1LT Stegmayer again crossed over the bridge to direct flanking fire into the suspected enemy positions. The enemy force estimated at 15 broke contact and fled the area. All six vehicles in the convoy received small arms and automatic weapons fire. Four personnel were wounded. Intelligence reports indicated that the enemy's mission was to destroy the dual bridges (railroad and highway) at the site of the pipe line fire thus cutting a vital link on the only main highway between Qui Nhon and major tactical forces to the north and west. With the arrival of the shuttle convoy, the enemy, for reasons unknown, fired on the column. It has been recommended that the enemy may have mistaken the convoy as a reaction force investigating the pipe line fire. The action by 1LT Stegmayer and his men contributed to the failure of the enemy to accomplish their mission of interdiction of lines of communication to the north and west.

At 10:00 on 12 May, two 8th Group convoys were involved in convoy ambushes on Highway 1. A southbound convoy consisting of 14 task vehicles plus security, under the supervision of the 27th Battalion, received enemy fire 200 meters south of Bridge 329. A north bound convoy consisting of 31 task vehicles plus security, under the supervision of the 54th Battalion, was approaching the same location when an enemy force, estimated at a reinforced squad, opened fire with automatic weapons and M-79 fire. The primary force was in a tree-line 150 to 200 meters from the west side of the road. The kill zone was estimated to be about 200 meters long. In this action, the 240th Quartermaster Battalion sustained one wounded POL driver. Several vehicles were damaged by enemy fire. Both convoys increased speed and moved through the kill zone. A 54th Battalion driver was killed and his 2 ½-ton cargo truck ran off of the road onto a small bank. A gun jeep and two gun trucks rendered immediate assistance while directing the convoy through the kill zone. The casualties were evacuated and the convoy continued north without further incident.

The 27th Battalion convoy cleared the kill zone with only minor damage to vehicles and continued south. As the convoy reached the vicinity of Bridge 376, at approximately 10:10, enemy fire was again encountered, this time from the east side of the road, from a distance of 200 meters. An estimated platoon size enemy force fired M-79 rounds and automatic weapons. Upon receiving enemy fire, the lead gun truck pulled over and engaged the enemy while allowing the convoy to pass through the kill zone. One driver was wounded. Four 27th Battalion vehicles were lightly damaged as a result of both encounters.

At approximately 12:15, 14 August, a convoy under the control of 54th Battalion departed Qui Nhon on Route 19 for a line haul trip to Pleiku. The convoy consisted of 68 task vehicles, 7 gun trucks, five gun jeeps armed with M-60 machine guns, and one Quad .50 gun truck. At 3:45, as the first serial of the convoy proceeded west past an area approximately two miles west of Bridge 34, an enemy force dressed in ARVN Marine uniforms attacked the convoy with small arms and B-40 rocket fire. The enemy force was estimated at between a platoon and a company. Four gun trucks, one Quad .50 gun truck and one gun jeep immediately returned fire within the estimated 3000 yard kill zone. A reaction force of six APCs and three helicopter gun ships arrived within five

minutes after contact. All task vehicles made it out of the kill zone. However, five of those vehicles suffered damage; and one of the five was heavily damaged. The convoy had four men wounded and one soldier from the 1/69th Armored Battalion was killed. The convoy commander reported 12 enemy troops hit by return fire. After the security forces swept the area of contact, they discovered four enemy dead. The five wounded US soldiers were medevaced to the 71st Medical Evacuation Hospital. Of these, two were treated and released.

By September, 1968, the gun trucks combined with helicopter escorts made large scale ambushes a rarity. The gun trucks had gained a reputation.

In time the crews of the gun trucks began to paint their vehicles black with red, orange, yellow or white trim and paint brightly colored names on them. The following companies built these gun trucks:

512th Transportation company had the Devil Woman.

523rd Transportation Company had the Matchbox, Uncle Meat, Ace of Spades, Black Widow, Eve of Destruction.

669th Transportation Company had Bad Hombre.



512th TC Gun Truck 'Devil Woman'



523rd TC Gun Truck 'Black Widow'



523rd TC Gun Truck 'Uncle Meat'



669th TC Gun Truck 'The Bad Hombre'



523rd TC Gun Truck 'Eye of Destruction'



523rd TC Gun Truck 'Ace of Spades'



523rd TC Gun Truck 'Match Box'

On 1 April 1970, a convoy under the control of the 54th Battalion left for Pleiku and ran into an ambush just short of the Hairpin below An Khe Pass. A rocket propelled grenade hit the hood of the lead gun truck. The enemy opened fire with small arms, automatic and mortar fire disabling six cargo vehicles. The lead vehicles out of the kill zone

continued to drive to An Khe. The crew of the gun truck, Matchbox, saw the gun truck get hit and the smoke of the ambush. Larry Fiandt, the driver, instinctively drove in the direction of the kill zone. The task vehicles that had not entered the kill zone turned around to head back down Route 19. Many of the 5-ton cargo trucks had 105mm howitzers on them. As the trucks backed up they backed into the side of the mountain and several flipped over. One driver jumped out of his vehicle and ran away but later returned to his truck. This made it difficult for the Matchbox to get to the kill zone. By the time it arrived, it rendered assistance to the other gun trucks ammunition. The crew of the damaged gun truck did not want to leave their disabled truck so the Matchbox passed on ammunition and proceeded up the road and found a wounded driver. They had him medevaced out at the top of the pass then went down and cleaned up the ambush trucks. Uncle Meat also arrived with a reaction force of infantry walking behind it.

On 25 April 1970, the enemy ambushed a convoy from Qui Nhon. They destroyed the gun truck, Black Widow, and killed John Maddox. They also destroyed Gun Heap, killing Mason Raglan and throwing Whitie from the truck. His body was not found during the search. White hid in the weeds that night after the convoy left then the VC searched for him.

There were rarely any ambushes going to Chu Lai or Tuy Lai in 1970. Larry Fiandt, 523rd Transportation Company, returned to day convoys as the driver of the ¾-ton gun truck, Wild Thing. He did not like the name and renamed it "Malfunction," after a friend's street racer back home.

In 1969, the US Army started drawing back on the forces in country. With the reduction of forces, this reduced the daily tonnage requirements. So the number of truck companies were reduced. It was then inactivated on 13 August 1970. For its performance in Vietnam, the unit received the Meritorious Unit Commendation and Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry.

Germany

The 54th was reactivated in Germany as the 54th Support Battalion (Forward) on 1 May 1987 and assigned to the Division Support Command (DISCOM) of the 3rd Armored Division. It was stationed at Ray Barracks, Friedberg. The battalion had three lettered companies.

HHD

A Company (Supply)

B Company (Maintenance)

C Company (Medical)

Desert Shield/Storm

In 1990, the Iraqi Army invaded the country of Kuwait. The United States deployed several divisions into Saudi Arabia as part of Operation Desert Shield to preempt any further aggression as it was believed that Saddam Hussein wanted control of the oil fields

in the desert. With a mandate from the United Nations, President George Bush then decided to increase the number of forces in Saudi Arabia and liberate Kuwait. The 3rd Armored Division received orders to deploy to Saudi Arabia on 8 November and the equipment deployed by rail to Rotterdam and Antwerp on 24 November. The equipment then deployed by 48 ships to Jubayl and Damman on 14 December. The personnel deployed from Rhein-Main, Ramstein and Nuernberg airports to King Fahd and Dharan airports from 14 December 1990 through 14 January 1991. Because of some logistical problems, the 3rd Armored did not receive much needed parts until it was almost too late to participate in the advance. On 24 February of 1991, the 3rd Armored moved into Southern Iraq to hold the line and defend against any Iraqi counter-attack. When the war was over, the 3rd Armored Division pulled back and took up defensive positions in Kuwait. They held those positions for the next 3 months when they were relieved by Kuwaiti and United Nations forces. In March 1991, the first units of the 3rd Armored Division returned to their bases in Germany. The 54th Battalion was awarded the Meritorious Unit Commendation for its service between 31 January and 19 June 1991.

With the downsizing following the end of the Cold War, the 3rd Armored Division received orders to inactivate. Its subordinate units were either transferred to other units or inactivated. The 54th Battalion inactivated on 15 April 1992. The 3rd Armored Division was inactivated on 17 October 1992.

The battalion was again reactivated as the 54th Support Battalion (Base), 80th Area Support Group, on 16 September 1994. The 80th ASG stationed at Chievres, Belgium provides support for NATO and SHAPE.

CAMPAIGN PARTICIPATION CREDIT

World War II

Tunisia
Sicily
Rome-Arno
Southern France
Rhineland
Ardennes-Alsace
Central Europe

Vietnam

Counteroffensive, Phase II
Counteroffensive, Phase III
Tet Counteroffensive
Counteroffensive, Phase IV
Counteroffensive, Phase V
Counteroffensive, Phase VI
Tet 69/Counteroffensive
Summer-Fall 1969
Winter-Spring 1970
Sanctuary Counteroffensive
Counteroffensive, Phase VII

Southwest Asia

Defense of Saudi Arabia
Liberation and Defense of Kuwait
Cease-Fire

DECORATIONS

Meritorious Unit Commendation (Army), Streamer embroidered VIETNAM 1967-1968
Meritorious Unit Commendation (Army), Streamer embroidered SOUTHWEST ASIA
(31 Jan 91 - 19 June 91, DAGO 14, 11 Apr 97)
Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Gilt Star, Streamer embroidered VIETNAM
1966-1970

DISTINCTIVE UNIT INSIGNIA

(Unit Crest)

Approved: 29 March 1967 for the 54th Transportation Battalion, redesignated to the 54th Support Battalion on 1 May 1987.

Description: A gold color medal and enamel device 1 1/8 inches in height consisting of a brick red disc-wheel with a gold rim and a blue hub from which emits upwardly a gold broad arrow overall, and on the lower half radially six gold spokes . The rim is inscribed in black letters with the unit's motto, "Resolutely for Freedom".

Symbolism: Brick red and gold are the colors used for transportation, the predecessor organization, and the wheel alludes to the Quartermaster Corps, from which the organization descended, and also to mobility. The board arrow and blue hub refer to the air carrier aspects of the predecessor unit and implies speed. The six arrow spokes refer to the battle honors awarded the unit during World War II for the campaigns of Tunisia,

Sicily, Rome-Arno, Ardennes-Alsace, Rhineland and Southern France; the broad arrow is for the seventh one, Central Europe.

COAT OF ARMS

(Displayed on the Battalion Flag)

Approved: 1 May 1987

SHIELD:

Description: Gules (brick red), a wheel or the spokes formed by ten arrows of the like radiating from a hub azure, in chief a broad arrow of the second.

Symbolism: Brick red and golden yellow are the colors used for Transportation, the predecessor organization, and the wheel alludes to the Quartermaster Corps from which the organization descended, and also to mobility. The broad arrow and blue hub refer to the air carrier aspects of the predecessor unit and implies speed. The arrow spokes refer to defense and support. The broad arrow is symbolic of the unit's war service during World War II.

CREST:

Description: On a wreath of the colors or and gules (brick red) a cross patty of the first entwined with two palm branches proper tied with a ribbon of the second.

Symbolism: Brick red and golden yellow are the colors traditionally associated with transportation. The cross patty is adapted from the Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry Award and represents that award. The palm branches are indicative of victory and achievement and allude to the unit's campaign service in Vietnam. They are tied with a red ribbon, suggesting the award of the Meritorious Unit Commendation.

MOTTO: *Resolutely for Freedom.*