

Jul 66 – 67, S3 54<sup>th</sup> Trans Bn, Qui Nhon

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

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CPT (P) Nicholas Collins arrived at Fort Lewis, Washington, in July 1966 and became the S3 for the 54<sup>th</sup> Trans Battalion. He was a captain on the promotion list. LTC Melvin Wolfe, the 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion Commander, and MAJ Jerry Murphy, S3 for 8<sup>th</sup> Group, were also there. Troops were arriving in batches of 40-60 every week. The battalion had no equipment and had to borrow 5 trucks for driver training from main post transportation office. They borrowed two 5-ton trucks and three tractor and trailers. They ran “the pants off of those things” driving 12 hours a day.

Collins’ first tour in Vietnam ran from October 1966 to October 1967, 366 days. He remained the S3 of the 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion during his whole tour in Vietnam.

Collins was promoted to major when he arrived in Vietnam. LTC Wolfe, who had arrived with the advance party, sent word for Collins to be the first person to step off of the landing ramp at Qui Nhon. Wolfe was waiting at the beach ramp ready to pin on Collins’ oak leaves.

The equipment arrived on two different ships starting the second day they were in country. 8<sup>th</sup> Group wanted the 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion to conduct a 100% commitment the next day, their third day in Vietnam. The soldiers worked around the clock to get the trucks ready. They had 92% availability the next day. The second ship arrived before the first one had left. They unloaded everything over a period of three days.

To train drivers, Collins put the drivers who were not busy unloading and readying equipment riding with 27<sup>th</sup> Battalion trucks as assistant drivers for the first three days. As soon as the 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion had trucks ready they drove. The drivers drove more miles in three days than they had all during training.

All trucks had Continental multi-fuel engines and only one made 1,800 miles. They could not put multi-fuel in them. That was not very good since the trucks ran 300 miles a day. That included the night convoys to and from the port at Qui Nhon then the 110 miles to Pleiku and back. They did not even last a month. Within a month the battalion received new Mac diesel engines and a team was sent from the United States to replace them. The cost of engines and shipping was about \$20,000.

Within three months after their arrival, the battalion could not pull half its commitments of trucks. It met its tonnage requirements by overloading the trucks. The tractors and trailers were rated at 12 tons on dirt roads but he loaded them with 18 tons.

The 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion arrived with 600 men and only had a 3-hole latrine and a 2-man shower that worked. The advance party had done some work. They had also erected a headquarters tent. Those drivers not busy unloading trucks were busy building latrines.

They then build their mess tents. Until they erected GP Medium tents, the drivers slept in trucks. This was not more than three days. They then built perimeter. They dug a 16-inch by 12-inch deep trench inside a 3-foot high sand bagged wall around the tents for protection against mortar attacks. They put wooden pallets, not plywood, on the floors of the tents to keep from walking in the mud. To be able to walk at night they had to turn on the light to walk. This was not popular at night when everyone was asleep. They did not see plywood until spring. They later named their camp 3 months after they arrived, Camp Davis after a driver who had been killed.

Collins wrote the "Battalion S-3 Notes," in March 1967. Collins had a young captain as his S-3 training officer, 1LT William Canelos, who wrote the Convoy Commander's Guide," prior to his departure. To write his SOPs, Collins had discussed with the 27<sup>th</sup> Bn and Operations officers with the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav about how to react to an ambush. The 1<sup>st</sup> Cav would investigate the ambush site to determine what size enemy sniped on convoys. If you could keep going you keep going. If stopped by a road block. The only road blocks were caused by mines. If the enemy built a road block then the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav in would see it. Six months after they arrived in Vietnam, Canelos' wife left him and became a go-go dancer. Canelas went home on an emergency leave to get custody of his kids and did not come back. Collins did not receive a replacement for him.

Just prior to that LTC Wolfe had left to become the XO for 8<sup>th</sup> Group. COL Noble Taylor had come up to replace COL O'Connor as the commander of 8<sup>th</sup> Group and would not give Wolfe back. O'Connor had to go home for a torn retina. Major Johnson took temporary command of the 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Johnson was an engineer officer from Qui Nhon. He had headed up an engineer detachment waiting for a battalion to arrive. When the other engineer battalion came in, he was excess. He was moved over to command 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Since he did not know transportation he ran the HQ while Collins ran the operations. The 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion had no XO at that time. He had not been in Vietnam a week when he was moved to a fire base near Cu Chi on Hwy 1 to run a Transportation Control Center.

Some one made the decision to send five LARC Vs up to Pleiku in February 1967 to see if they would work in the mud. All got stuck. Three got stuck so bad that we left them up there. We only brought two back to Qui Nhon in June. Collins did not know who came up with the idea. Murphy, 8<sup>th</sup> Group S-3, did not know who made the decision.

The standards for military tires was not adequate for the road. Tires were designed to go 3,000 combat miles. Many times they did not reach 3,000. If a driver made ten 220-mile round trips with the same tires, he was lucky. Every day, 8<sup>th</sup> Group provided ten trucks to shuttle trailers around the port. 27<sup>th</sup> Battalion provided drivers for the day and the 54<sup>th</sup> provided the drivers for the night. They stayed at Qui Nhon in the port to shuttle trailers around. The 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion assumed responsibility for the run to Qui Nhon and back to the marshalling yard. Around the end of June 1967, the 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion received ten single screw commercial International Harvester (IH) tractors painted shiny OD from Okinawa to shuttle trailers around the port. The drivers loved them. They were more comfortable, easier to see out of and easier to drive. Within 24 hours, every one of those trucks had

army tires. Every one of those IH tires ended up on the front of a military tractor. Collins never remembered a problem with any civilian super high mile tires.

Collins had responsibility for repairing the tires. By the time he left Vietnam in October 1967, he had a pile of tires five stories high (60 feet) spread across almost four acres of land. The Ordinance people brought in a special tire repair team. They never tried to even repair the old ones. It was cheaper just to buy new ones.

Accountability of trailers was a problem. Since a stake and platform company had two trailers assigned for each tractor, it could haul a loaded trailer and drop it off at the trailer transfer point (TTP) in Pleiku and pick up an empty to bring back to Qui Nhon. The TTP detachment would load it that night and the tractor would repeat the process the next day. Tractors pulled trailers according to the assigned load not which company it belonged to. The problem arose when some units outside of 8<sup>th</sup> Group “borrowed” the trailers. Within four months of his arrival in country, MAJ Collins borrowed a tool and die set from an Ordinance unit and stamped the trailer numbers into the metal. That way if a unit stole one of his trailers and painted over it, he could still identify it.

Collins saw a Special Force truck pulling a trailer. Since SF units were not issued trailers, he stopped the truck and checked the bumper number. It had an 5SF bumper number but when he checked for the stamp, he found that it was one of his trailers. They called the SF detachment commander. The captain claimed that the trailer was his and pointed to the painted bumper number. Collins then showed him the die cut numbers. The SF captain turned beet red.

On another occasion, one of his drivers said that when he delivered cargo out to an SF camp near the Cambodian border he saw a trailer. Collins drove out to check it out and found that they had used it as a roof and built a hooch under it.

A transportation company has 120 drivers assigned for 60 vehicles. That allows for two drivers per vehicle and transportation companies were supposed to run on a 75% availability. This would allow for down time to maintain vehicles and allow crews to rest. Unfortunately, many non-transportation officers not familiar with this saw the drivers as excess. The 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion had not been in Vietnam three weeks when Qui Nhon Support Command received permission from 1<sup>st</sup> Log Command and directed that 8<sup>th</sup> Group task 30 drivers per company to guard the two ammo dumps. Between that and the requirement to shuttle the trailers at the port and run the night convoy to and from Qui Nhon, this seriously reduced the availability of drivers. Drivers drove trucks every day. The battalion filled every commitment that it had.

The drivers woke up 0330 hours every morning and came in late. Prior to road being paved, it was hard for convoys to get up to 15 miles per hour. The pot holes were unreal, some were one foot deep. The convoys were lucky to reach Pleiku by 1400 hours. It took nine hours just to drive 110 miles. They unloaded, turned around and departed between 1700 and 1730 hours. The convoys returned between 2200 and 2400 hours. LTC Wolfe,

his CSM and S-1 arranged for every driver to rotate them to get guard duty every tenth day. That gave them a break from the road.

The primary destination was An Khe and Pleiku along Highway 19. Sometimes the convoys ran north to Dak To and south to Plei Djereng. It was a steep climb and trucks slowed down to four miles per hour. At the top of the An Khe Pass was a wide open space not very far from the entrance to the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav camp. A trailer transfer point (TTP) was there. They would leave any trailer that was broken and pick it up on the way back. MAJ Collins usually was waiting for his drivers at the top of the pass to provide the drivers cold drinks. Down the West side of An Khe Pass was a bridge. The 1<sup>st</sup> Cav provided a security check point there in the form of a light tank and two APC.

An Engineer detachment lived in the village just down the road from the last bridge before An Khe Pass. The engineers reconnoitered the route every morning. One day during the winter rainy season, they reported that the last bridge was impassable and asked the Group to delay its start time for its convoys. The triple Bailey bridge had come off supports during a flood. Luckily no trucks were on it at the time. It took the engineers 12 to 15 hours to fix it.

Prior to the ambush on 2 September 1967, the enemy threat consisted of mines and sniping. At least an incident every two weeks a sniper would shoot at driver or "dinky" Coke can bomb would blow off a tire of a truck. The engineers would drive the road looking for mines but would overlook something small like a Coke can in the road. The 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion lost a truck hauling JP4 at the hairpin. In July one of those Coke can bombs exploded, blowing off the tire of the truck driving at 10 miles an hour up the Hairpin. The truck went off of the road and the fuel exploded.

For protection the drivers put sand bags on the floor of the trucks, on the hood in front of the windshield and even on the fenders. The heat and vibration made the latter a bad idea. The 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion did not put sand bag pill boxes with machineguns in the back of the trucks until after ambush.

Prior to ambush they put sand bags on jeeps. They discussed why could they not use a half track or armored car. The new V-100 did not make sense to them. Collins tried unsuccessfully to get two half tracks from the property disposal officer (PDO) lot in Saigon. The PDO had mounted cranes on the half tracks to move vehicles around. Collins had lead a mortar platoon in Germany in 1956-57. The mortars had been mounted in half tracks and he felt they would be perfect for convoys escort. Collins offered to trade the PDO two new trucks but he would not trade.

The convoy interval was supposed to be 150 yards apart but there was an accordion effect of the trucks bunching up most of the time. Plus, no one wanted to follow a JP4 or ammo truck when driving 4 miles an hour. Commanders flying overhead would call to the battalion operations complaining about the convoy interval. Collins put posts on the road every 150 yards as a reference for the drivers, but the next day they would be gone. Collins was more concerned about the safety of his drivers and did not worry too much

about the complaints. Until the engineers improved that road it was impossible to maintain the proper interval.

When the big convoy ambush occurred on 2 September 1967, Collins was in his office monitoring the radio. The convoy consisted of 90 trucks from both battalions. CPT Paul Geise was the convoy commander riding in the last vehicle in the convoy. A claymore mine mounted on the sticks went off level with the drivers' heads in the lead jeep. It killed SGT Leroy Collins, his driver and gunner. 19 vehicles back the NVA had explosives hidden in a culvert. It blew up the 19<sup>th</sup> truck and trapped all the vehicles in between. The NVA then worked over the rest of the trucks. Every truck was hit by small arms fire. 19 drivers were killed. 1<sup>st</sup> Cav estimated that the enemy had about 60 soldiers in the ambush and claimed to have chased them for a week.

The convoys never had any MP jeep escort. It was agreed that the road between Qui Nhon and Pleiku belonged to 8<sup>th</sup> Group. Because of other taskings there were no assistant drivers riding "shotgun."

A lot of discussion took place between the commanding general of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav, 8<sup>th</sup> Transportation Group and MAJ Collins about this incident and what to do. The 1<sup>st</sup> Cav "had egg on their face" because this happened in their tactical area of responsibility. They said that the trucks should not be driving on the road after dark. 8<sup>th</sup> Group should make an effort to be south of the An Khe Pass before it got dark at 2000 hours.

8<sup>th</sup> Group had to move departure time up an hour to 0300 hours. 8<sup>th</sup> Group told Pleiku Support Command that they would just drive to the TTP. Sometimes the tractors delivered the trailers right to the units. Instead 8<sup>th</sup> Group would leave 12 tractors at Pleiku to handle the trailers. Convoys could then make it back at Qui Nhon by 2100 hours. The biggest problem was the condition of the road. Highway 19 was an unimproved dirt road with pot holes as deep as a foot. Drivers could not safely drive faster than 15 miles per hour.

RMK [Raymond International, Morrison-Knudsen Construction] paved Highway 19 all the way to Pleiku. They had started around June after the end of the rainy season. They first had to fill in the pot holes. They then had to put down a rough base and completed that by the end of September. They had the road paved to Pleiku. A rock quarry had been built to construct the An Khe air base and was also used to pave the road. Once the road was complete, the drivers could drive faster and return to their camps earlier.

Collins left at the end of October, the day before COL Bellino arrived. Collins only saw one gun truck. It was built out of sand bags lined up the side rails and on the floor of the bed. After the ambush they placed sand bags on the floor in the back of the trucks, then build a box around the wall of sand bags to protect machine gunners. 1X6-inch boards filled in the space between the side rails and the sandbags were tied to the side rails to keep them from falling over. The 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion did not have any .50 caliber machineguns while he was there.

Collins did a second tour in Vietnam from December 1970 to December 1971. He arrived the day after Thanksgiving and was assigned to Nha Bay south of Saigon, original location of 4<sup>th</sup> Trans Group. He was an advisor to the ARVN Saigon Transportation Terminal Command. Besides terminal company it had two truck companies to do port clearance.

When LTC Collins was the director of combat development in 1982, he was directed to sign the order to produce the HMMV. Collins did not like the HMMV. He felt the M38 jeep was a better vehicle with improvements. The M151 Mutt was dangerous. The 7<sup>th</sup> ID in Korea was the first division to get the M151 in late 1961. Collins sent 20 drivers down to pick them up and they had 16 accidents by the time they came back. M151 had killed ten people in testing before it even came off of the production line. The M38 did not need replacement. Most mechanics had more ways to keep a M38 running.