

## **Ron Bruce summary of interview by Richard Killblane, 13 January 2005**

SGT Ron Bruce was a marine engineer (MOS 56510). He returned from Okinawa on 29 May 1965 with orders assigned to the 554<sup>th</sup> BARC Detachment at Fort Story. The 551<sup>st</sup> and 522<sup>nd</sup> BARC Detachments were also at Fort Story. The 522<sup>nd</sup> BARC Det had 2 platoons and the 554<sup>th</sup> BARC Det only had one platoon of four BARCs.

The 554<sup>th</sup> BARC Detachment had orders for Vietnam when Ron arrived. They had to wait to build up their full TOE. CPT McBernie was the CO and 1SG Hammit was the first sergeant.

The det shipped out of San Francisco on *USNS Gordon* on 17 August 1965. The ship was over crowded. As soon as you went through the chow line and ate, you got back in line. That was how long it took to get to eat.

The ship stopped at Hawaii then at White Beach, Okinawa. While at anchor, five guys from the det got in trouble and were confined to the brig. They set fire to the mattresses thinking that someone would let them out, but the guard with the key went on liberty at Okinawa and did not leave the key with anyone else. The prisoners were burned.

It took 27 days to arrive at Qui Nhon. BARCs #12-15 arrived from Okinawa ten days later on the *USNS Brastom*. The ship had the heavy lift capability to load and unload the BARCs.

At the time they arrived, there were no other BARC detachments at Qui Nhon. They borrowed a jeep from a stevedore unit that unloaded cargo to go downtown to get some ice. They dug a pit lined it with a poncho, dumped 20 cases of Hams beer then dumped the ice on it. The soldiers lived in pup tents right on the beach.

They first unloaded the dunnage from the ships on cargo runs. They had to get the dunnage off before they could unload the cargo. The soldiers used the dunnage to frame their GP Medium tents and used the boards off pallets for flooring. Left cracks so sand could filter out. They framed the walls and put gables on top. They strung lights in every tent. They also built a screened-in, six-seater latrine. They cut down 55 gallon barrels and put rings on them to make them easier to pull out. They hired locals to burn the crap with gasoline. They had enough cut down barrels to burn the crap in one and have another in use.

The ships anchored about a mile out in the bay. The 554<sup>th</sup> BARC had enough men to run two crews on each BARC. Shifts went from 0600 to 1800 then from 1800 to 0600. Ron worked on the night shift. He had been in an auto accident before he came over and still had glass in head. He had to work at night to keep from squinting in the sun.

The company had a policy that anyone who hauled the most cargo in a day earned a three day pass. The LARC LX was rated at hauling 100 tons. In one haul, Ron hauled 166 tons of perforated steel planking (PSP). That was the most anyone hauled.

The cargo dump was a quarter mile down the road guarded by MPs. The water collected in the seals in the wheel wells and the drives could purge them. Ron waited until he drove by the MP guard shack to purge his valves. This started a trend as the other BARC drivers liked to purge the water and blow away the guard shack. After that the MPs would stand outside the shack when the BARCs came up. One day Ron was drinking next to an MP who asked, "What did you have against the MPs?" Ron answered, "Nothing, it was just good target practice."

The 522<sup>nd</sup> BARC Det arrived from Ft Story a month after 554<sup>th</sup>. The 554<sup>th</sup> knew the men of the 522<sup>nd</sup> from when they served together.

Six months at Qui Nhon the 540<sup>th</sup> BARC Det came up along with another det from Cam Ranh Bay. They formed the 1<sup>st</sup> Prov BARC Company. Doug Rogers became the first sergeant and CPT McBernie was the first company commander. Ron had a total of three company commanders while he was there.

The company later built a night club right on the beach for the 71<sup>st</sup> Terminal Service Co and 1<sup>st</sup> Provisional BARC Company. They sunk sixty telephone poles in the sand surround each one with 3 cut down barrels and poured concrete in them. They then cut the poles off with chain saw at four feet. These pylons provided the foundation. This would allow the structure to withstand the pounding of the waves. They laid 6"X6" beams for floor then built the bar on top of it. One could just walk down the boardwalk right into the bar. The bar could seat 100 people. It had a stage and dressing room for entertainers.

Ron was up for promotion to staff sergeant, but his crew stole a pallet of beer off the BARC. He had the stevedores mark the load in his BARC for 53 pallets of beer when it actually had 54. He told his men that there was one pallet of beer not marked. The whole company went over and split up the beer. Word got out that Ron was responsible for the missing pallet of beer. The CO busted Ron to SP4 and fined him \$100. The platoon chipped in and paid Ron \$100. Ron took the money up to the bar and paid for everyone's drinks.

2 LCUs from Da Nang were attached to the 1<sup>st</sup> Provisional BARC Co. Ron had been in country for about 7 to 8 months. The BARC CO wanted a BARC to haul sugar cane factory material to the factory up a river between Qui Nhon and Da Nang. It was an 8-hour run. Joe Sear was the crew chief on a BARC and refused to sail up the river because the area was not secure. Ron was the crew chief of BARC 14. He said that he would sail up there if the CO would put him on an LCU.

While sailing up river someone asked on the radio, "You that big thing out in the water? You here for that ball game?" Evidently, there no one had warned them that the BARC was delivering a load. The voice then said, "The area is unsecure. Now, I've got to call in some air support." They sailed further up the river, and then the BARC hit silt and could not move. The VC walked four mortar rounds toward the stationary BARC. Ron

took pictures of it. About that time Sky Raiders flew in and strafed the area. They put a company of ARVN troops around them on the banks to secure the area. The BARC drew had to rest over night (RON) in the river. The next morning 2 Hueys flew up in the area at first light. They started shooting then one of the pilots said that the enemy was coming out of their holes. There were too many so they had to call for Puff [AC-47]. Puff arrived quickly, about a half hour after daylight. It made three passes spraying the area, then the pilot said the area was all clear. Another LARC LX came up and tossed Ron's crew a tow cable and together they pulled Ron's BARC off the silt.

LCU 1522 and LCU 1559 were the only Army boats at Da Nang. The rest were Navy LCUs. Ron joined the crew of LCU 1522. The LCUs, based out of Da Nang, hauled ammo up Qua Viet River to the Marines at Dong Ha. CWO Gamage was the skipper. Ron was just supposed to be the engineer. Gamage showed Ron and his replacement the route. It took 26 hours to sail from Da Nang to the mouth of the Qua Viet River. They would anchor at the mouth and sail up the river at first light. The river had 3 phases (bays where estuaries entered). It would have been easy to take the wrong turn and get stuck. They made four trips then Gamage. Gamage knew Ron from Okinawa. He told CPT Bell, the CO, not to order another skipper that Ron could sail the LCU.

First time the replacement skipper had to sail up to Dong Ha, he refused because the left main engine was non op and the port generator did not work. Two captains came and hauled him off to jail. The officers looked at Ron and asked if he refused to sail. Ron said no but had them sign the log book to take responsibility for making him sail.

They made two trips to Dong Ha. One time, they missed the mouth and were on their way to the DMZ. Fortunately, the Gray Ghost, a [Navy Market Time] speed boat, stopped their LCU. Their spot light lit the LCU up. They asked, "Do you know celestial navigation?" Ron answered, "No, would you tell that to my CO." The Navy told Ron to anchor off and not to turn on any lights. The next day they led the LCU to the mouth of the Qua Viet and Perfume Rivers.

While sitting at the ramp at Dong Ha off loading, kids would come up and ask for food. Sappers would swim up breathing through a tube alongside the boats and place magnetic mines on the boats. One time a VC sapper blew the ramp off of the LCU 1559. After that, the company started issuing concussion grenades to kill sappers and M79 grenade launchers to blow the fishing nets out of the way. The crews were told to throw cans of food over the side every now and then, since they looked like grenades. This would save on grenades.

They sailed to Hue several times but made short runs to other areas because of engine problems. In November 1966, Ron had completed his first tour in Vietnam. Because this was a long war, Ron knew that he would end up back in Vietnam. Since he knew and liked this unit he extended for a second tour.

Ron took a 30-day leave around December 1966. When Gamage left, the cook also rotated home. During leave, Ron bought an Italian cook book and gave it to his engineer.

The engineer was the only one who volunteered to cook. He loved to cook. That first night he cooked chicken cacciatore. From then on, his engineer cooked spicy Italian meals. Ron later had to take the cook book away because of heart burn.

During the Tet Offensive of 1968, an LCU had to pick 200 refugees from Hue and haul them down to Da Nang. One Navy vessel would not start. LCU 1522 would start but did not have power, so they received the mission. The well deck was full of women and kids. That was the only time they went to Hue during the Tet Offensive. They just did not have the power.

Ron's boat received Dicky Schwarz as its engineman just a week before they left for Cam Ranh Bay for repairs. Dicky did some overhaul work on the boat. Toward end of Ron's tour, the company finally put LCU 1522 on order to go to Cam Ranh Bay for overhaul. They stopped at Qui Nhon for rations. Ron had not sailed to Cam Ranh Bay before and was not sure how to get there. The CO would not spare anyone who knew celestial navigation.

Mitchell told Ron, "I knew Cam Ranh Bay like the back of my hand." They put out to sea. Mitchell put them on a heading for Cam Ranh Bay. Ron told his deck crew to maintain that heading then went to bed. The next morning they saw no land anywhere. Ron told them to steer toward shore. It usually took 16 hours to sail from Qui Nhon to Cam Ranh Bay. It was way past 16 hours. They ran into LCU 1525, skippered by Jerry Gaskel, which was sailing north. Ron called them on the radio and asked where they were going. They said Cam Ranh Bay. He told his crew to follow that boat.

Ron returned from Vietnam around August 1968. He was assigned to the 503<sup>rd</sup> BARC Det at Ft Story and started up the 331<sup>st</sup> LARC XV.