

Vernon Hood interview by Richard Killblane, Pigeon Forge, TN, 6 August 2009
523rd TC, Oct 66 – Sep 67 Qui Nhon/Pleiku

Vernon Hood was drafted on 15 December 1965. He was originally assigned to the radio operator school at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri but did not achieve the required speed with Morse code and was the course. He was then assigned to the truck drivers' school on the post. After completion of truck driver school around May 1966, he was put on a bus with a number of other brand new truck drivers and bussed to Fort Campbell, Kentucky where they joined the newly formed 523rd Transportation Company.

While at Fort Campbell, the 523rd did not have any trucks so the drivers conducted infantry training in the field and went through escape and evasion training. They also conducted marksmanship training.

The drivers were then bussed to the factory in Indiana where they picked up their brand new 5-ton trucks and drove them back to Fort Campbell. Less than 10 miles outside the gate, they had an accident. They were supposed to have convoy clearance that allowed them to run straight and not stop for traffic lights, but a car cut into the formation at an intersection and caused seven trucks to wreck. Once at Fort Campbell, they prepared the trucks for rail shipment overseas. They never trained on their trucks.

The soldiers then flew to Oakland, California where they boarded a transport for Vietnam. The different companies aboard the ship had different duties. The 523rd had responsibility to mop the deck and Hood mopped the deck one time. Most of the time they just played cards to pass the time. Hood was sea sick the first three days but was fine after that. Sometimes big waves came over the ship and the passengers became sea sick.

The company arrived at Qui Nhon and the company was discharged onto beach by a LARC LX. While standing on the beach waiting for buses, trucks drove by the beach and the drivers yelled out "Short!" and announced how many days they had left in country. Vernon felt bad enough for being in Vietnam without anyone reminded him that he was on his first day of a 365-day tour.

Around November 1966, Vernon was in country one month when someone came in and told him to go to Pleiku. He did not remember any of the details about what he was told and why. He was sent with three or four others from his company to Pleiku. Frank Franklin, II, was one of the others. Hood did not like leaving his friends in the 523rd.

At Pleiku, they joined the GOER Platoon. GOER stood for Government Operational Experimental Research and was built by Caterpillar. The GOER Platoon had 12-15 cargo GOERs; maybe 7 fuel GOERs, 2 hauled gas, 4 hauled JP4 helicopter fuel and at least one hauled diesel; and 1 GOER wrecker. Hood was assigned as an assistant driver to the diesel GOER. The driver was SP4 Pope. Pope, from Winston-Salem, NC had been in the Army for 16 years but had been busted.

Caterpillar sent two representatives to Pleiku at a time and they stayed for three months. They taught the drivers how to drive the GOER. They warned the drivers about the danger of it bouncing and told them if it felt like it was about to downshift. There was a lake nearby and the Caterpillar representatives had the men drive their GOERs through it to see how well it swam. One GOER bounced and flipped over right after their arrival killing both drivers. This scared Hood. He had driven down the same road and his GOER had started bouncing but he downshifted in time.

The training lasted four weeks before they went out on the road. It took Hood three months to get used to driving a GOER. When trying to turn the GOER, it felt as if it was going to roll over. One could tell when it was going to bounce and Hood learned that if he wiggled the steering wheel that would also stop the bounce. During their first three months on the road, wheels were falling off. One time, Hood saw little black things coming off a tire on a GOER in front of him and then the wheel rolled off. The nuts had come off. The reps discovered the drivers were putting the nuts on too tight and stretched the bolts. When the wheels would roll, the nuts would spin off.

GOERs ran to the same destinations as the 5-ton cargo trucks. The problem was that GOERs could not travel much faster than 45 mph, slower than 5-ton trucks. The first time the GOERs hauled to Kontum, they ran in a convoy, but after that the GOERs ran alone. They also had a destination to the border but Hood did not remember where it was. One time the VC had overrun the camp and the unit had to retake it. The GOERs did not unload in time to return so they remained overnight (RON) there. Hood worried that night the VC might try to overrun the camp again.

It was the dry season when Hood arrived and the temperature was 110 on Christmas Day. The monsoon season in the Central Highlands began in January or February.

One time the GOERs ran in a convoy to a remote camp past "Titty Mountain." Hood's GOER was the last vehicle in the convoy. On the way back, the GOER in front of Hood's just quit running so Hood stopped next to it. The other GOERs just took off and left them. The driver of the broken down GOER told Hood he had a tow bar. He hooked up the tow bar and Hood pulled the other GOER, but the hook broke off. Hood said, "I don't know what we will do." This was a jungle trail with vegetation growing up on both sides. A tank surprisingly drove up and the crew said they would stay with the GOER. Hood left but did not catch up with the convoy. It became dark and he saw something moving in his head lights. Thinking it was VC, he opened the throttle on his vehicle to full speed thinking it enemy would have a harder time stopping it. He then grabbed his M14 but as he neared the object the shadow in the night turned out to be a water buffalo.

Another time Pope let Hood drive, he opened up the throttle because the convoy took off. Pope was bounced up and landed on the engine compartment. He had kidney problems before that and upon impact told Hood, "I tasted blood on that one." Hood asked, "You want me to slow down?" Pope replied, "No, keep up! Keep up with the convoy."

Hood spent the remainder of his tour with the GOERs. He did not remember any replacements. The first lieutenant was the commander and may have been promoted to captain during his tour. Hood rotated back to the US on 27 September 1967.