

Action at Rod Ruong Canal

By Mr. Richard E. Killblane, Transportation Corps Command Historian

With the disbandment of the Engineer Special Brigades in 1954, the Transportation Corps then owned all Army watercraft and inherited the mission to conduct waterborne combat operations. Vietnam with its extensive coastline, river and canal system would provide the first war where the boats of the Army Transportation Corps would see combat action. The medium boat company that would fight one of the desperate riverine ambushes of the war had a humble beginning.

The 1097th Medium Boat Company "River Raiders" arrived in Vietnam on 30 May 1965 and was based at Cam Ranh Bay. The company conducted routine ship-to-shore operations from Vung Ro Bay to Phan Rang. On 26 June 1967, the company, under the command of then CPT William G. Pagonis, moved to Dong Tam where they were assigned to the 9th Infantry Division. Upon arrival, the 1097th received the mission to transport twelve 105mm howitzers from two artillery batteries of the 3rd Battalion, 34th Artillery in support of the waterborne 2nd Brigade, 9th Infantry Division. Since nothing like this had been done before, the solution challenged Pagonis' imagination.

Captain Pagonis' plan was to mount two 105mm howitzers on barges which would then be pushed by LCM-8s. The barges would allow the howitzers to traverse 360 degrees and fire in any direction. There were six tubes to a battery, so three LCM-8s could haul one battery. The 1097th was authorized 19 LCM-8s, but by 9 July, there were only 16 on hand. Captain Pagonis' operational readiness rate was running about 90 percent, which

meant about two LCMs could be down for maintenance at any one time. He task organized 9 LCMs to the 1st Platoon to maneuver the 2 batteries from the 3rd Battalion, 34th Artillery; and the 2 remaining LCMs hauled ammunition. In the well-decks, he housed two fire direction centers, two battery command posts, one first-aid station, and one battalion command post. The LCM-8, with the fire direction center in its well-deck, also towed a barge used as a helicopter landing zone. Captain Pagonis' 2nd Platoon only had five LCMs. Two maneuvered the two 4.2-inch mortar barges; one had the floating dayroom; another transported a 5,000-gallon fuel tanker; and one LCM maneuvered the maintenance barge. Its well-deck was constructed to house prisoners for interrogation. Another boat was used for test firing a 155mm artillery piece, and the fifth boat was sent on special duty to battalion headquarters.

The maintenance platoon had one LCM; the damage control vessel (DSV), equipped with a welder and water pump, and Captain Pagonis had a Floating Maintenance Facility Barge designed and constructed to perform second, third, and fourth echelon maintenance. Since the entire company maneuvered as a unit, Captain Pagonis moved his headquarters and communications section onto the maintenance barge. Two LCMs maneuvered the maintenance barge, which was usually anchored with the Navy Task Force 117. It had a shower, living quarters, barber shop, and orderly room aboard.

Captain Pagonis left his headquarters platoon behind at Dong Tam under the command of his First Sergeant and designated a Field First Sergeant to work with him in the field. He also left the stevedores, from the 567th Detachment, with one LCM, at Dong Tam to off-load LCUs to maneuver barges in the harbor and for trash runs and APC runs to Dong

Tam and for Task Force Funston. This required all available LCMs, so Captain Pagonis put in a request for three additional LCMs.

Because the crews would live on the boats during combat operations, the maintenance personnel constructed living quarters in the rear of the boats and welded armor plating to the pilot houses. They also constructed a first-aid station in the well-deck of one of the boats. To keep morale high, Captain Pagonis even had a dayroom constructed in the well-deck of another LCM. The 1097th Medium Boat became operational on 1 August 1967, and became the only tactical medium boat company in the Transportation Corps. In a sense, it was fulfilling the combat mission the company had inherited from the Engineer Special Brigades.

As soon as it became operational, the 1097th and its barge artillery went into action. The lowlands bordered by the Rach Nui Canal in eastern Long An Province became the scene of furious fighting following a river assault by the 3rd and 4th Battalions from the 47th Infantry during Operation CORONADO I, on 19 June. The 1097th moved an artillery battery into position with its six boats. Three days later, a sweep of the rice paddies and tropical tree lines by the Mobile Riverine Force battalions, from the 3rd Brigade, ARVN, and other forces, caught the 5th Nha Be Battalion between it and a blocking force from the 3rd Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, resulting in 531 enemy casualties during the 54 days of the operation. The 1097th continued to support subsequent combat operations but its most heroic fight occurred at the beginning of the next year.

Just prior to the 1968 lunar New Year truce, the 2nd Brigade, 9th Infantry Division launched riverine operations in the marshlands of the Mekong Delta as part of Operation CORONADO X. While the Mobile Riverine Force was conducting searches in the rice paddies of the western Dinh Tuong Province, the Viet Cong attacked the city of My Tho on 31 January heralding the beginning of the 1968 Tet Offensive. At 1730 hours on 31 January, the 2nd Brigade received the order to go to the relief of the city. At that time, elements of the 2nd Brigade were located near Fire Support Bases ALABAMA, FLORIDA, and GEORGIA. Company B, 3rd Battalion, 47th Infantry moved to My Tho by helicopter, while the 3rd Battalions from the 47th and 60th Infantry boarded their armored troop carriers and moved south to the Mekong River. During night movement through narrow, uncharted, and shoal-ridden streams, the riverine force came under several ambushes from small arms, automatic weapons, and rocket fire.

While Captain Pagonis' company was pushing artillery barges through a hazardous portion of the narrow Rod Ruong Canal, in the Dinh Tuong Province, enemy forces opened fire with a barrage from automatic weapons and recoilless rifles. The gunners on the LCMs immediately returned suppressive fire with their .50s. 1LT Terry J. Llewellyn and SSG James L. January rallied their men and directed suppressive fire while the convoy pushed through the kill zone. After receiving word by radio that one of his LCM-8 boats had been hit and was dead in the water, Captain Pagonis immediately turned his command boat around and weaved his way through both friendly and enemy fire to reach the disabled craft. Calmly issuing instructions to his boat crews, he was able to get the column moving again. During the entire action, he remained exposed to hostile fire as he

stood on his quarter deck, directing the gun crews and personally returning fire upon the insurgent force. Captain Pagonis' aggressive action, coolness under fire, and leadership were deciding factors in the successful movement of the column through the enemy attack. Simultaneously, SP4 Raymond J. Pitre, coxswain, maneuvered his boat and barge into position where the two howitzers could fire beehive rounds directly at both sides of the river. From his vantage point at the helm, Specialist Pitre directed both the howitzer fire as well as firing his own .50 into the enemy. PFC James D. Alphin, an amphibious engineer, left the cover of his firing position to direct the last LCM in the column to clear the sandbar after it had run aground. He was credited with saving the craft and the lives of its crew.

After a difficult fight, the two battalions and supporting barge artillery reached the Mekong River and joined up with the afloat base at 0220 hours on 1 February. After a short resupply, the Army and Navy elements steamed for My Tho. Company B, 3-47 Infantry had secured the beach landing sites at My Tho by air assault. The rest of the battalion arrived at 1515 hours and immediately advanced north with three companies abreast through the west side of My Tho. Navy monitors and the barge artillery provided automatic weapon and indirect fire. The 3-60 Infantry, beached to the west of the 3-47 Infantry, and also attacked to the north where it became involved in fierce street fighting with elements of the 261st, 263rd, and 514th Viet Cong Battalions. LTC Ivan C. Bland, Commander of the 3-47, moved his companies slowly and effectively, house to house and street by street. Additional artillery, air strikes, and helicopter gunships were called in to support the attacks. By 2100 hours most of the fighting had ceased and the two

battalions prepared night defensive positions while the enemy began to withdraw. The 3-47 Infantry had killed 58 Viet Cong and captured 4, while only losing 2 of their own. The 3-60 had killed 26 Viet Cong and suffered no losses. The next morning, the two battalions encircled My Tho while ARVN units cut-off the enemy's escape routes. The battalion met only light resistance while they located several enemy soldiers killed in the previous day's fighting. The number of Viet Cong killed by the 2nd Brigade rose to 106. For their heroic action in the battle of My Tho, MG George G. O'Connor, Commander of the 9th Infantry Division, awarded 10 Soldiers from the 2nd Brigade Silver Star Medals on the spot. For the 1097th, Captain Pagonis received the Silver Star Medal and 1LT Llewellyn, SSG January, SP4 Pitre, and PFC Alphin received the Bronze Star Medal for their actions. The 1097th became one of the most decorated boat units of the war and Pagonis went on to become a lieutenant general.