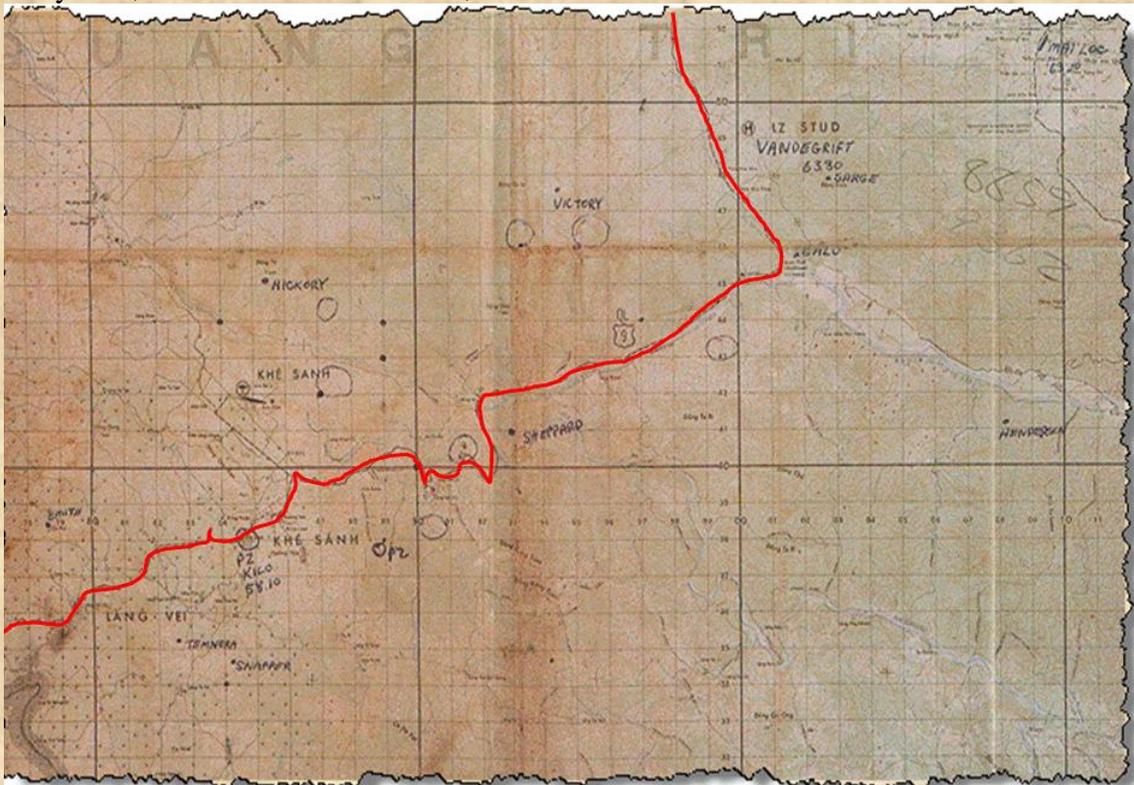


Lam Son 719; the Cargo Must Get Through Richard E. Killblane

Accumulating intelligence indicated that the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) was building up their logistical bases across the Laotian border. General Creighton Abrams, Commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), anticipated that the NVA were planning a large offensive to coincide with the US national elections scheduled in 1972. To do so, the enemy had to stockpile supplies early in 1971 before the rainy season slowed down traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Abrams wanted to strike first and disrupt the buildup. Since US Congress had passed a law after the US Cambodian incursion preventing US ground troops from crossing the border again, the Army of the Republic of Vietnamese (ARVN) would have to conduct the cross-border operations. Three ARVN divisions would attack into Laos just south of the DMZ to sever the enemy supply line south. The 5th Mechanized and 101st Airborne Divisions would reopen and secure Route 9 to the border. The American artillery would be able to provide the ARVN troops indirect fire support from Khe Sanh and the law did not restrict American combat helicopters from providing support to ground troops across the border, so helicopters and artillery from the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) would support the operation. With American aviation and artillery providing direct support to the ARVN, all other American support was to these units. The Americans called this Operation Dewey Canyon II; the Vietnamese named it, Lam Son 719.



This map shows the routes and locations convoys traveled during Lam Son 719.

While convoy ambushes were frequent threats during the Vietnam War, only two times did the enemy make a serious attempt to shut down any main supply route in Vietnam. The first attempt occurred along Route 19 in the Central Highlands as a prelude to the

1968 Tet Offensive and the second was closing down Route 9 during Lam Son 719. This latter operation would result in an intense period of convoy ambushes for anyone who drove the roads of I Corps Tactical Zone.

From previous experience, truck drivers had quickly learned they could not depend upon the combat arms units to keep the route clear of enemy, since the infantry just could not cover every mile of road. Instead, the truck companies needed a form of immediate security to protect their an ambush, until the unit or gun ships could late 1967, the truck Transportation Group Corps Tactical Zone trucks. By 1970, the doctrine had reached



Line Haul RVN-tab

fruition. Experimentation had ended. Convoy ambushes had made the truck drivers of Vietnam front line combat soldiers and Military Assistance Command, Vietnam recognized this in 1969 with the awarding of the Line Haul tab. It was the equivalent of the Combat Infantry Badge for an infantryman.

convoys in the event of nearest combat arms respond. So starting in companies of 8th in the Northern II began building gun gun truck design and

The supply route for Lam Son stretched from beach ramps at Da Nang, Hue/Phu Bai, Quang Tri and Dong Ha along the coastal Highway 1 then west from Dong Ha along Route 9 to Forward Support Activity 1 at Camp Vandergrift then finally Forward Support Activity 2 at Khe Sanh. M52 tractors and M127 trailers, known to truck drivers and stake and platforms (S&P), would push cargo over the Hai Van Pass to Dong Ha then Vandergrift. M54 5-ton cargo trucks would pick up supplies from Vandergrift and Dong Ha and push them to the forward fire bases. Because of the extended supply line to the west and increasing need for supplies, I Corps Tactical Zone would need additional truck companies. The 26th General Support Group only had two truck battalions, the 39th at Gia Le and the 57th at Chu Lai.

The 523rd Transportation Company (Light Truck) at Cha Rang Valley in the Northern II Corps Tactical Zone had five gun trucks; Ace of Spades, Black Widow, Uncle Meat, King Kong and Eve of Destruction.



Uncle Meat and the crew.



The Original Ace of Spades due the lack of design on the Spade symbol.



The Black Widow Gun Truck gunners practicing with the 50s.



Gun Truck King Kong -- 5-ton truck with APC on back, painted black with yellow stripe on nose, hillbilly armor on cab for driver; also made it very hot inside cab. Part of Glory Stomper can be seen to the rear and behind King Kong.

(photo by Danny Cochran)

Most gun trucks were 5-ton cargo trucks with double-walled steel gun boxes on the bed armed with three to four .50 caliber machineguns on pedestal mounts.

Due to a shortage of steel for the gun boxes, Some gun trucks like King Kong were made From M113 Armored Personnel Carrier



Eve of Destruction Gun Truck

had steel plates on the rear box and hillbilly armor on the cab

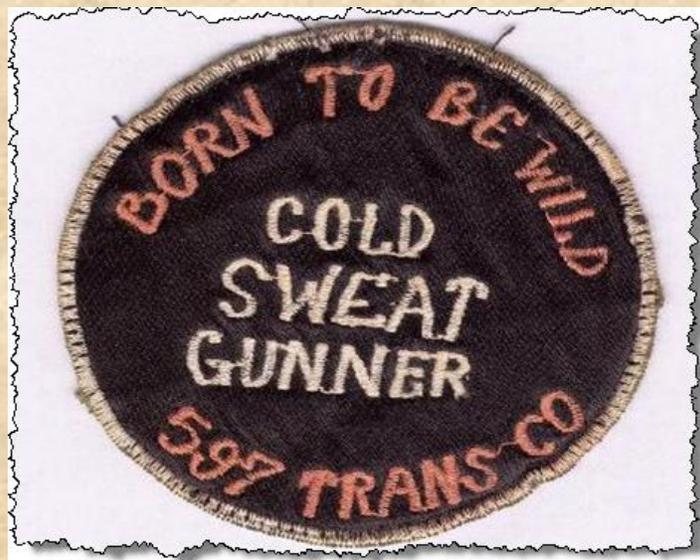
It was painted black with 2 white strips on the air vent. Compare with King Kong above. (photo by Danny Cochran)

(APC) hulls mounted on the bed of a 5-ton cargo truck. Each gun truck was painted black, often with bright color trim, and the names of the gun trucks were painted as elaborate artwork on the side of the trucks. The weapons platforms were designed to stand out and they had gained such a reputation that the enemy placed bounties on destroying the gun trucks. Each of the three platoons had one to two gun trucks. By then, new crewmembers were volunteers selected by consensus of the other crewmembers. The gun truck crews felt elite but the 523rd believed that by assigning two gun trucks to each platoon, rather than to a gun truck platoon, the crews felt more like members of the company. They lived with the drivers who they had to protect. Since they were the best, much was expected of them and if they failed to defend the trucks then they would have to face their brothers when they returned to the barracks at night.



Dual .50s on the rear of the gun box for Eve of Destruction. (photo by Logan Werth)

This late in the war, there was a shortage of Transportation Corps (TC) officers. Second lieutenants made first lieutenant in one year and then captain the next. The rapid promotion and other duties caused a shortage of lieutenants in the truck companies. The burden of leading convoys fell heavily on the sergeants. However, during 1970, the Army assigned three infantry officers to the 523rd. 1LT Ralph Fuller had recently served in the 25th Infantry Division but when it was inactivated, he still had part of his one-year tour to complete, so he was assigned to the 523rd as the 2nd Platoon Leader in September 1970. He had prior enlisted service for a total of 15 years in the Army and was also Ranger qualified. He knew nothing about trucks, but was willing to listen to his men and they loved him for it. 2LTs Tom Callahan and Jim Baird had both graduated from OCS 2-70 and were assigned directly to the 523rd as the 1st and 3rd Platoon Leaders respectively. The only logical reason they could conclude why the Army assigned infantry officers to truck companies were the gun trucks. This hinted that the Army felt that gun trucks were a combat arms mission. For whatever reason they were assigned there, the officers identified with the gun trucks and loved the men who crewed them. As combat arms officers they felt their place was on the road. Most liked to ride in the gun trucks because they admired the crews, which endeared them more with the crews.¹



Most Gun Truck crew members would have a patch with the name of the Gun Truck on it, this is Cold Sweat gunner's patch. (photo by Mark Van Ryzin)

During one convoy, Fuller rode in King Kong when the convoy slowed down to negotiate a hairpin curve in Mang Giang Pass. An RPG hit a fuel tanker up ahead and it blocked the road. King Kong weaved past about 15 trucks while blazing away at the enemy to the high ground on their right. Fuller believed VC had conducted the ambush since they did not stand and fight it out with the gun truck. King Kong's suppressive fire took the fight out of them. SGT Michael Emory was the NCOIC of Kong and had been on it since he helped build it in 1969.²

¹ Ralph Fuller interview by Richard Killblane, 19 June 2004; and Jim Baird interview by Richard Killblane, 2006.

² Fuller interview.

The gun trucks were crewed and led by young men often not more 20-years old. They would make risk their lives to save the lives of others. PV2 Chester Israel and PV2 Calvin Bennett went through wheeled vehicle operator (MOS 64B) Advanced Individual Training (AIT) together and arrived in Vietnam a day apart; Chester on 20 September 1970 and Calvin arrived the next day. Chester arrived at Ben Hoa and read about the 8th Transportation Group in the *Stars and Stripes*. Other veterans informed him he would have an easy tour unless he went to the 8th Transportation Group at Qui Nhon. That day Chester received orders for the 8th Group and as luck would have it, Calvin also received orders for 8th Group. They flew from Long Binh to Qui Nhon and both were assigned to the 3rd Platoon of the 523rd Transportation Company at Cha Rang Valley. 1LT Donald Voightritter arrived later and took over as the commander.³



Gun Trucks were built with 5 tons and a gun box put on the back, once the truck was beat up they would just lift the gun box off and place on another 5 ton. (photo by Logan Werth)

1LT Voightritter was a fair and respected officer. His brother Ronald, another TC officer, had already earned the Silver Star Medal for valor. The personality of commanders defines the character of their commands. Voightritter created an atmosphere of mutual respect and camaraderie. This was the strongest asset of the company. The officers would discuss informally with the gun truck crews what they had done during ambushes. No two ambushes were the same and the gun truck crews reacted differently to each one. These discussions inspired confidence with the lieutenants in their crews.⁴

Drivers learned to drive in Vietnam by riding with a veteran. Bennett rode with Robert Walter Thorne for a couple days who taught him to “drive the Vietnam way,” which meant drive like hell and miss as many of the holes in the road as he could. Israel had

³ Chester Israel and Calvin Bennett interview by Richard Killblane, 9 September 2008.

⁴ Israel and Bennett interview.

grown up driving so he drove on his first run and the veteran rode next to him as the passenger. In his first ambush on his first convoy, the enemy shot the hood and windows his truck up.



⁵ The Black Widow is where Chester Israel went after his first ambush since he wanted to fight back with more fire power.

The drivers in 8th Group were only issued an M16 and four “clips” [magazines] of ammunition. After his first convoy ambush, a pissed off PVT Israel went to his platoon leader, LT “Tom Terrific” Callahan and said, “Lieutenant Callahan, you have two choices. You can either send me home or give me a bigger weapon.” Chester felt he did not have enough ammo. Callahan said, “Red, I hate that you feel that way, but I have an opening on a gun truck if you want to go on it.” He had an opening on the Black Widow.⁶

Israel asked, “Tom, what kind of weapons?” He explained they had .50 caliber machineguns on the gun trucks. Israel asked, “How much ammo?” The Lieutenant answered, “3,000 rounds and if you run out, I’ll personally bring you more.” So Chester accepted, “If they want to kill me then I want to kill them.”⁷

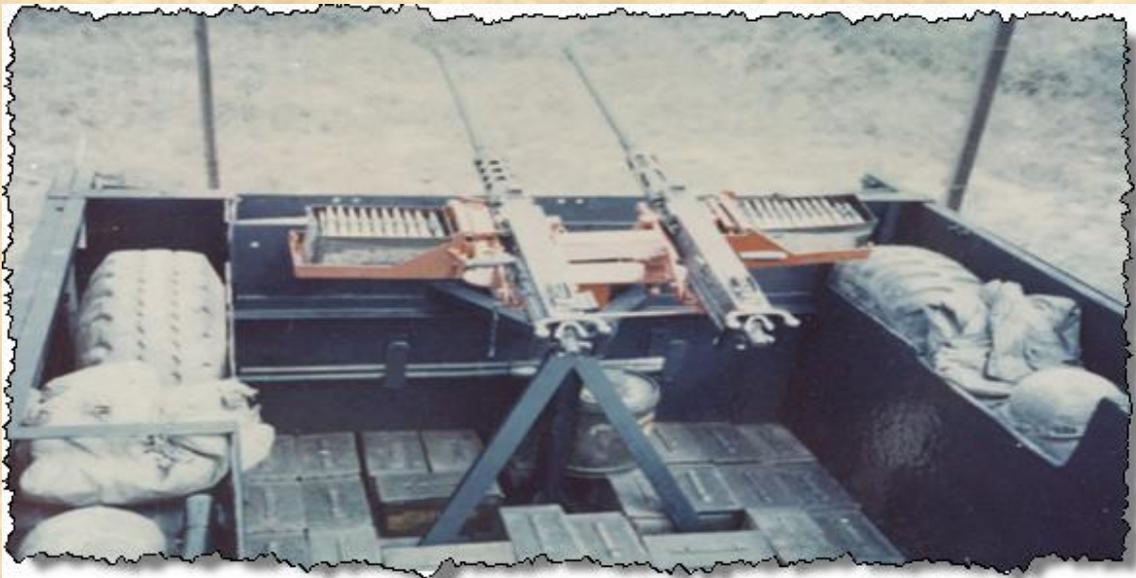
⁵ Israel and Bennett interview.

⁶ Israel and Bennett interview.

⁷ Israel and Bennett interview.



A picture from the rear to the front of a Gun Truck, the floor is just layered with ammo boxes, on the side of the gun box is storage of helmets, M60s, and that dual layered side of the truck helps reduce the impact of RPG during convoys. The marmite contains ice and cold beverages of choice – Coke was .10 and beer was .15 a can.



A view of a gun box from the front to the back before an ambush. This is Eve of Destruction.



During an ambush, there is just a fury of bullets flying and empty ammo boxes thrown all around. 8th group was trained to spray when they fired instead of the normal 3 to 6 round burst due to the fact that they were unable to see where the fire is coming from so they would just spray the area.



*Empty ammo gun boxes and ammo laying all over the place in the Gun Box after an ambush.
(photo by LoganWerth)*



Logan Werth holding an expended RPG launcher after an ambush (photo of Logan Werth)

Israel was assigned as the rear gunner on the Black Widow a couple weeks after his arrival. His mission was to “Just drive down the road until you get blown up.” Leon Vance, the right front gunner, trained Chester. “The ammo is free; don’t act like you’re paying for it. Every thing belongs to the government.” He fought in a dozen ambushes prior to the move north. Most ambushes were just harassment and sniper fire.⁸

On 28 October, there was an ambush at VC Village near the Republic of Korea (ROK) bridge on the night shuttle run to the supply depots at Qui Nhon. A 545th gun truck, Matchbox, was hit. The other gun trucks, like 512th’s Godzilla, Eve of Destruction and King Kong, raced out the front gate with the Black Widow in the lead. As the first gun truck to reach the kill zone, Black Widow ran straight into the middle of the kill zone. One civilian was killed, so orders were flagged of everyone in the ambush. It turned out the civilian was a captive. The enemy had made the villagers stay out in the village to make everything look normal.⁹

In December 1970, the 572nd Medium Truck Company, stationed down at Long Binh, loaded its tractors and trailers on LSTs at Newport for transport to Quang Tri. The men flew from Bien Hoa Air Base on a C-130 a few weeks later. Prior to their departure, they

⁸ Israel and Bennett interview; and Fuller interview.

⁹ Israel and Bennett interview.

ravaged Long Binh and Binh Hoa Air Base. When they arrived at Quang Tri, the MPs found nine more jeeps than authorized for the company. Subsequently, the 572nd acquired the name “Gypsy Bandits” for this reason and because it was relocated all over Vietnam. On 29 January 1971, the Gypsy Bandits were attached to the 39th Battalion for Lam Son 719. Since the 48th Transportation Group at Long Binh did not believe in gun trucks, the 572nd had to borrow the following gun trucks: Highland Animals from the 541st and Set Me Free and LT Calley from the 563rd.¹⁰



C -130 was used to transport troops and cargo. (photo by Teneyck)

In January 1971, the 2nd Medium Truck Company and 523rd Light Truck Company received orders to move north from their home in Cha Rang Valley to Phu Bai along the coastal Highway (QL) 1. The companies were not informed of the reason for the move, but the drivers were instructed they could only take the minimum issue and had to send everything else home. Since the 523rd needed two gun trucks per platoon, it picked up Satan’s Lil’ Angel from the 669th Transportation Company. Once ready, the 523rd sat lined up in the Ponderosa, the marshaling yard, for two days with no knowledge of when they would move. While newly promoted CPT Voightritter closed down the company at Qui Nhon, he sent the trucks north under the responsibility of 1LT Fuller. When he received instructions to lead the convoy north, Fuller had no idea why.¹¹

¹⁰ Bill Hampton, “Gypsy Bandits Move to Quang Tri,” ATAV Web page, <http://academic.uofs.edu/faculty/gramborw/ataw/hampton.htm>.

¹¹ Israel and Bennett interview; Fuller interview.



The 523rd getting lined up to move out. (photo by Danny Cochran)

The convoy consisted of over a hundred trucks and all six gun trucks in the 523rd. On 22 January 1971, the Eve of Destruction led the convoy north with the Black Widow in the rear. It took two days to travel north. When they drove through Hai Van Pass, it reminded the drivers of An Khe and Mang Giang Passes and they knew it was ideal ambush country. It had windy roads, steep grades and fog up in the mountains. The next day they set up at Da Nang/Phu Bai. Fuller told everyone to write home. From there, the company moved to Quang Tri where it spent another week.¹²



Gun Trucks falling in line with the convoy.

¹² Israel and Bennett interview; Fuller interview; and CPT Donald K. Voightritter letter to BG Alton G. Post, Subject: Item Contribution to the Transportation Museum, 31 May 1971.

The 2nd Medium Truck had two APC gun trucks; The Outlaw and Big Kahuna, the latter named by SSG Thomas Lee from Hawaii; and Madam Pele, formerly Tire Boss; and Maverick, both 5-ton maintenance gun trucks.



The Outlaw Gun Truck part of the 2nd Medium Truck Company.



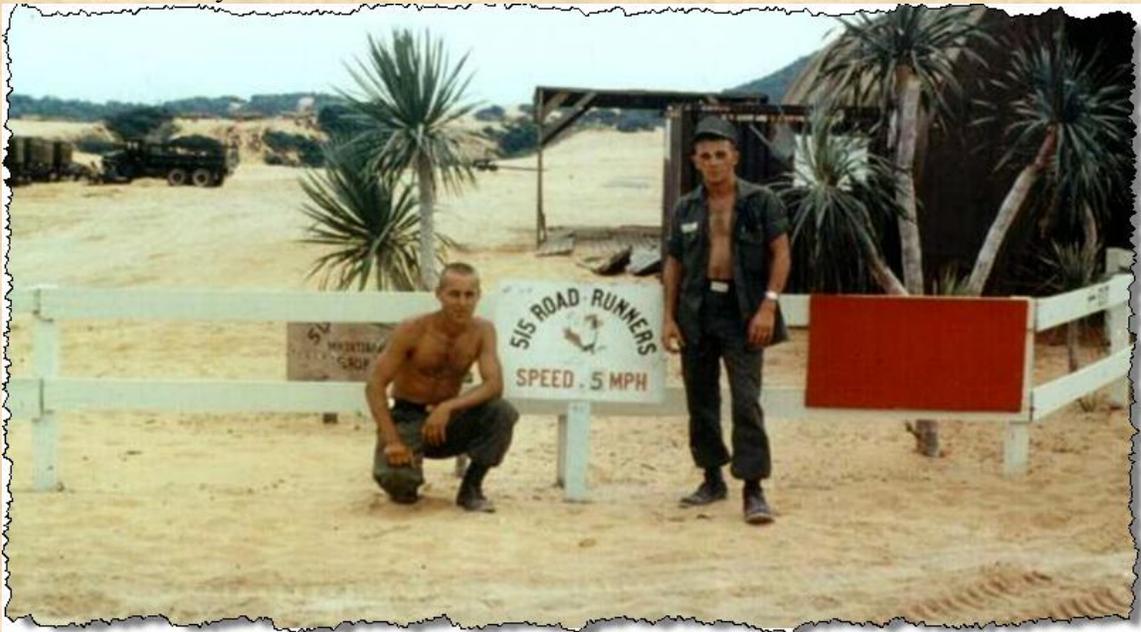
The Big Kahuna, gunners wore vests to protect against enemy fire.



The Maverick Gun Truck which was 5 ton maintenance truck.

David Boyd had become the NCOIC of the Big Kahuna because of his previous experience. While serving with the 101st Airborne Division, he had both his arms and legs broken by a booby-trapped hand-grenade back on 19 December 1968. He then spent an extended stay at Portsmouth Naval Hospital and was put on light duty at Fort Bragg. He refused a medical discharge in 1970 because he would only receive half his base pay. So he returned to Vietnam hoping to rejoin the 101st but his injuries assigned him to the 2nd Medium Truck instead. It did not take his first sergeant or company commander long to figure out he was more of a hazard driving a truck than any help. SSG Lee had an opening in his gun truck platoon and the company commander called Boyd in to ask about his infantry training and background. In asking about his wounds the captain learned the former infantryman had not received a Purple Heart, combat infantryman's badge or any other metals. The CO pushed through the paperwork and awarded Boyd his Purple Heart in a company formation. SSG Lee put Boyd in charge of care and inspection of the machineguns. His company also traveled north, resting overnight at the Sea Bee camp at Da Nang then stopping at Hue.¹³

At Quang Tri, the truck companies were attached to LTC Alvin C. "Big Al" Ellis' 39th Transportation Battalion. There CPT Voightritter joined up with his 523rd. The 2nd and 523rd Truck Companies received instructions to paint over the yellow stripe on the front of their trucks, which identified them as belonging to 8th Group. Ellis' 39th Battalion already had four truck companies: the 515th Transportation Company (Light/Medium Cargo) at Phu Bai, the 585th Transportation Company (Medium Cargo) at Gia Le, the 666th Transportation Company (Light Cargo) at Camp Evans, and the 805th Transportation Company (Light Truck) at Phu Bai. The Battalion became known as "Big Al and his Money Makers."¹⁴



The 515th Light/Medium Cargo Transportation Company sign. (photo by T. J. Broussard)

¹³ David Boyd email to Richard Killblane, August 24, 2004.

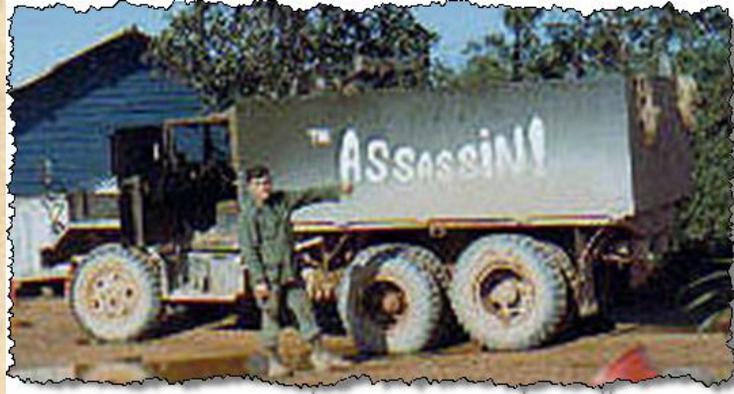
¹⁴ Bill Wullenschneider letter to Wayne Chalker, January 29, 1984.

While the 2nd and 523rd were driving north, other truck companies began to build up the two forward support bases. The 57th Transportation Company (POL) at Quang Tri was attached to the 63rd Maintenance Battalion. The 57th was the only truck company that hauled fuel in I Corps. Barges would bring fuel in on balloon bags to the Tam My Ramps at Dong Ha. The 57th would bring up tankers, fill up and haul the fuel back to the tank farm at Quang Tri. From there the tankers then made daily runs to Camp Carroll, Da Nang and other bases. Heading south convoys received small arms fire going over Hai Van Pass where trucks had to slow down from 15 to 5 mph snaking up and down that mountain. They occasionally lost a couple trucks to enemy fire, but lost many trucks when coming down the mountain which had lost their brakes. The convoys also received small arms fire near Phu Bai, where the 101st Airborne Division was stationed. To cross the single-lane rail bridge converted for road traffic, the trucks sometimes parked on the side of the road for a half an hour until everyone crossed. If hauling a van, the tractor had to hit that bridge perfect or it would get stuck. The truck companies of the 8th Group which ran on QL19 were supposed to have six gun trucks but the truck companies up in I Corps did not have as many. The 57th only had three gun trucks: The Justifier, The Assassins, and The Protector.¹⁵



The Justifer Gun truck and crew.

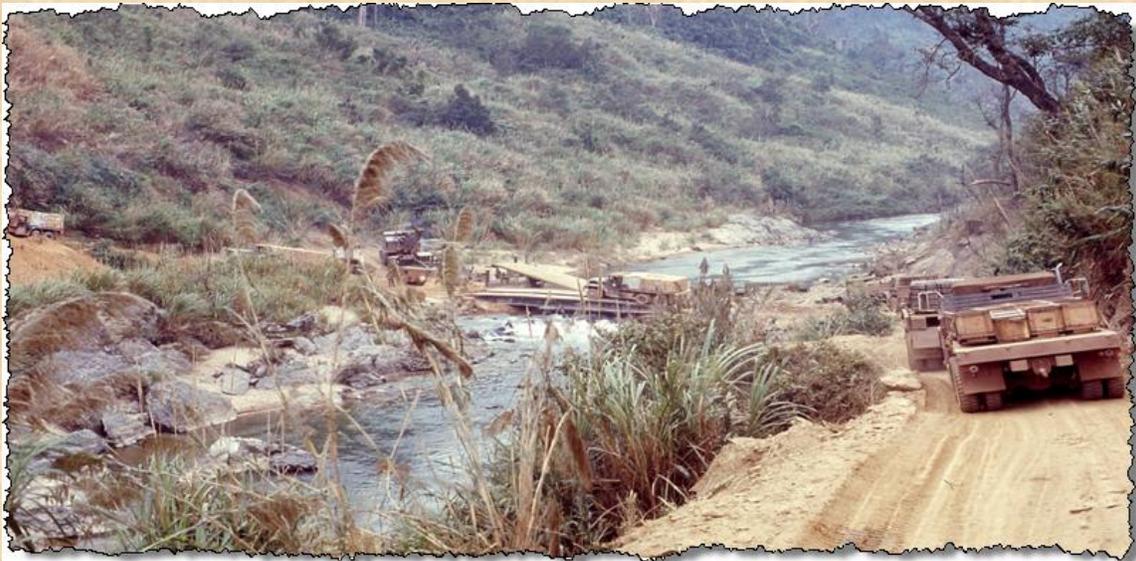
¹⁵ Michael McBride interview by Richard Killblane, 9 July 2004.



The Assassin Gun truck.

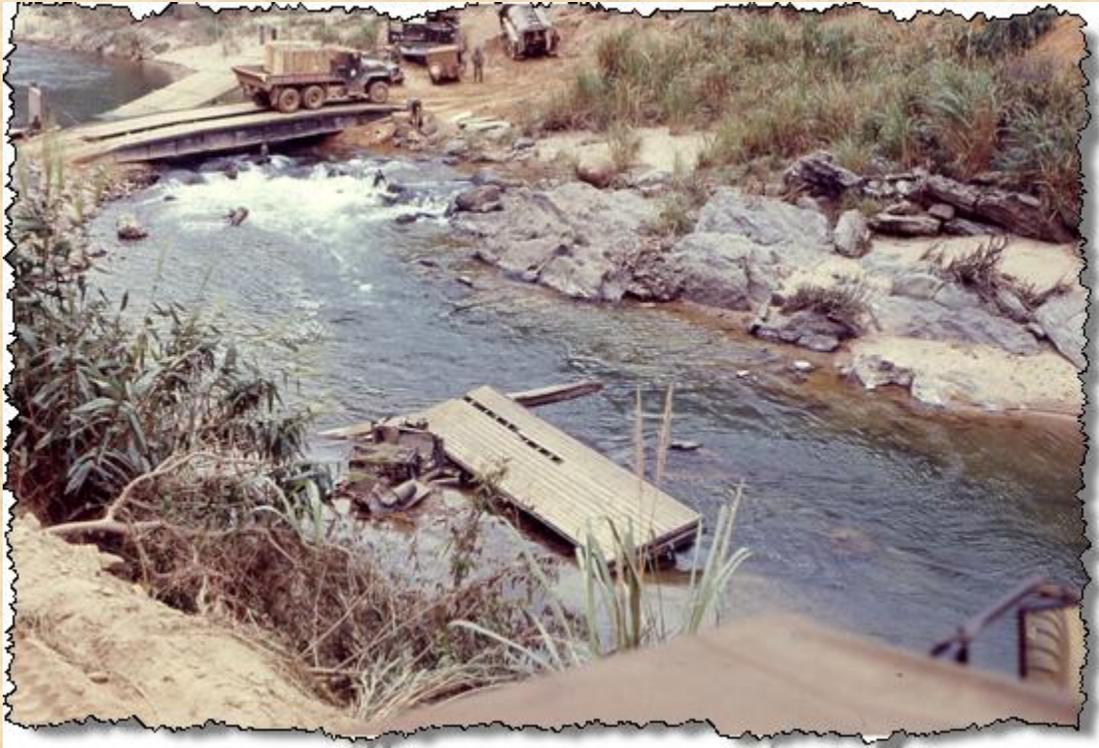


The Protector Gun truck was the third in the 57th.



The ATLV bridge would need to be crossed one at a time to prevent it from collapsing.

SP5 Michael McBride began his second tour with the 57th Truck Company in Vietnam in September 1970 and had served as a truck driver for the 25th Infantry Division down south at Cu Chi. When a member of the gun truck, Protector, end of tour neared, Mike was asked if he wanted to go on the gun truck because of his previous experience and rank. Mike accepted and learned the job while riding with the man he was going to replace. He became the NCOIC and manned the front gun and radio. Leroy Sherrill, Jr. was another gunner on the Protector.¹⁶



The Armored Vehicle Launched Bridge (AVLB) in the upper left side; in the center a truck that slipped down the hill approaching the bridge.

During the latter part of January, the 57th was informed it would be the first transportation company to run a convoy to Khe Sanh, since the Marines had abandoned it back in 1968. McBride's company was supposed to go up with the engineers and fill up the fuel bladders but stopped short of Khe Sanh because the engineers had not opened the road. The convoy had to turn around and return to Vandergrift where they ran daily convoys back and forth to Quang Tri to build up a marshalling area.¹⁷

As the other truck companies settled into place, the combat arms began their operations. In the early morning hours of 30 January 1971, a task force organized around the 1st Brigade, 5th Mechanized Infantry Division from Quang Tri launched a combination of air and ground assault along Route 9 and by the end of the day, they occupied Khe Sanh. The 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry "Rakkasans," of the 101st Airborne Division air assaulted

¹⁶ McBride interview.

¹⁷ McBride interview.

into Khe Sanh, while the 3rd Air Cavalry Squadron; 1st Battalion, 77th Armor; 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry; and 4th Battalion 3rd Infantry linked up with them. The 5th Battalion, 4th Field Artillery and 1st Battalion, 82nd Field Artillery then set up their fire base at the former Marine camp. The 1st Brigade, 5th Mech had responsibility to keep Route 9 open while the Army engineers worked to improve the road for vehicular traffic and clear it of mines and other obstacles.¹⁸



This is a convoy going to Vandergrift and we know this because semi tractor trailers could only as far north as Vandergrift because beyond Vandergrift only light/medium truck companies could track the roads north of Vandergrift. (photo by Logan Werth)

Meanwhile, the drivers of the 523rd Light Truck had still not been informed of the nature of the upcoming operation to support Lam Son 719. They just thought the move was the operation. Each time they stopped at a camp, they thought that was their new home. However, the further they moved north the more nervous they became because they were approaching the DMZ that separated North and South Vietnam. At about 10:00 in the morning of 31 January, the convoy left Quang Tri for Camp Vandergrift. Some feared they were going to invade North Vietnam, so when they turned west at Dong Ha and drove along QL9, everyone relaxed.¹⁹

¹⁸ Robert Cody Phillips, Operation Lamson 719; The Laotian Incursion During the War in Vietnam, Masters Thesis, May 1979.

¹⁹ Israel and Bennett interview.



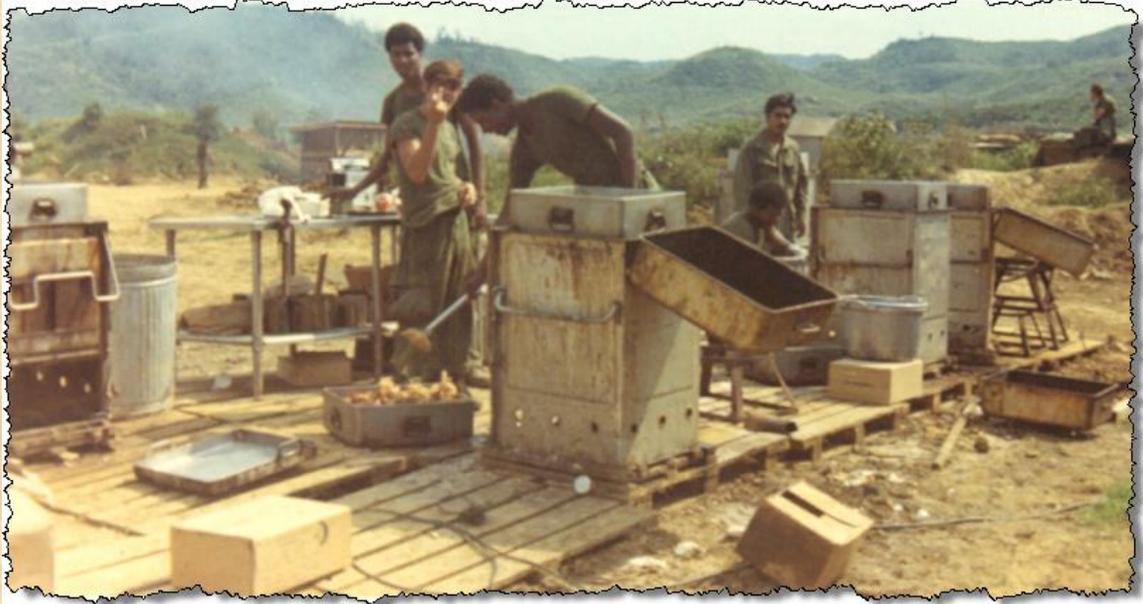
Camp Vandergrift quarters were above ground so soldiers protected themselves as best they could. (photo by Logan Werth)



Another shot of Camp Vandergrift's living arrangements. (photo by Logan Werth)

The 515th and 523rd Light Truck Companies arrived at Vandergrift where they would pick up the cargo from Camp Eagle and haul it back to Vandergrift. LTC Al Ellis relieved the commander of the 515th "Road Runners" and placed a Quartermaster officer, CPT Mike Lavin, in command. Because the company had only one gun truck, it received on loan one M113 which CPT Lavin liked to drive to Khe Sanh. On 1 February, the two truck battalions commenced line haul operations between Quang Tri Combat Support Base (CSB) and Vandergrift. On the next day, the battalion extended the line haul mission to at Khe Sanh and the 506th Transportation Detachment established a Trailer Transfer Point at Vandergrift.²⁰

²⁰ Mike Lavin interview by Richard Killblane, 17 June 2005.



The cooks in the makeshift kitchen preparing meals for the soldiers. (Photo by Logan Werth)



The 506th Field depot was so large the depot had its own short line rail road to move cargo. (photo by Jim Donelan)

Camp Vandergrift was an open field where the pavement ended. There the drivers could at least erect tents and sleep above ground. The 523rd did not erect tents, but slept on cots beside their trucks. The engineers brought in a dozer with a big scoop to dig out a hole and the drivers constructed a bunker with sandbags covering timber and perforated steel planking (PSP), used to build runways. 10 to 12 men lived in the bunker. The 515th set up a GP Large tent for its headquarters but most of its drivers slept in the "Bedrock Hotel," a

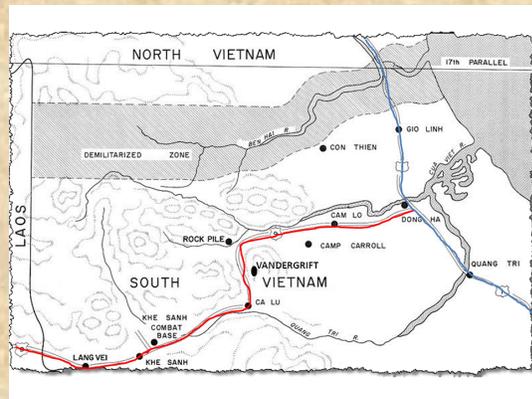
bunker also built with a PSP, timber and sandbags. Other than that, there were few amenities that they had become accustomed to at their original base camps.²¹



Camp Vandergrift. (photo by Danny Cochran)

The road from Dong Ha to Vandergrift was a two-lane paved road through a valley of tall elephant grass. A conical jungle covered hill rose out of the plain north of the road was known as the “Rock Pile.”

From Vandergrift, a narrow, single lane, unimproved dirt road snaked along the ridge with a river 50 to 100 feet below. The road could only support 2 ½ and 5-ton cargo trucks, so the demand for supplies required the two light truck companies to deliver cargo around the clock, day and night. To prevent driving off the road at night, the trucks rolled with their lights on giving the enemy ample warning of their arrival. The steep slopes with thick jungle vegetation growing right up to the road made this ideal ambush terrain. During Lam Son, the guerrillas stepped up the frequency and ferocity of their ambushes hoping to starve off the American support. The 1st Brigade, 5th Mechanized Infantry Division had responsibility for the security of that section of the road from Vandergrift to Khe Sanh.



Blue – Rt 1; Red Rt 9; Grey - DMZ

The 515th and 523rd pushed cargo to Khe Sanh, an eerie place. There were no remnants of any structures left as the engineers had bulldozed the entire camp down when the Marines

²¹ Lavin interview; and Israel and Bennett interview.

had evacuated. Only tall grass and thick red dust covered the area. Lots of little parachutes from flares hung in dead trees like little ghosts. The trucks off loaded their cargo on the PSP. C-130 aircraft began to land on the once again operational air strip. Khe Sanh became the forward logistic base for operations. The living conditions were very austere at the camps. At Khe Sanh, the men simply dug holes and lived like moles when they remained over night.²²

The 515th and 523rd ran convoys day and night, 18 to 20-hour days and slept on the trucks. When they rolled in to unload, about five to six trucks would pull into to the unloading area and the drivers would fall asleep at the wheel, waiting to unload. Each vehicle would take about 30 minutes to unload and after that group was unloaded, the convoy commander or a gun truck crew member would wake the remaining drivers and have them to move into an area to be unloaded or just to move forward. While the trucks unloaded their cargo, the gun truck crews would clean weapons and change tires. If there was no material handling equipment (MHE) to unload the cargo then it was unloaded by hand at Firebase "tailgate."²³

Chester Israel ran back and forth to Khe Sanh for one week and was never told what the operation was. The 523rd had made so many moves, the drivers assumed they would make a night move to Khe Sanh and then keep moving west. That was the last move for the 515th and 523rd until that operation was over.²⁴



Truck moving the latrine. (photo by Danny Cochran)

Command and control of the truck companies fell under two truck battalions. The 39th Transportation Battalion assumed responsibility to supply the forward deployed troops.

²² Lavin interview; and Fuller interview.

²³ Israel interview.

²⁴ Israel interview.

The east-west, Route (QL) 9 was the supply route and the battalion would station two 5-ton cargo truck companies at Camp Vandergrift. The 57th Battalion would move its headquarters from Chu Lai north to Phu Bai where it would pick up cargo and POL from Tan My Ramp at Phu Bai and push to Camp Vandergrift, from where the 39th Battalion would push to Khe Sanh. Because of the size and complexity of the line haul operation, the 8th Transportation Group would move its headquarters from Qui Nhon to trailer vans in an empty field at Quang Tri and assume command of the 39th and 57th Transportation Battalions from the 26th General Support Group, in addition to the 8th Group's three battalions still in Northern II Corps.

The other truck companies and battalions began to shift northward in support of Lam Son. CPT Walter Anderson's 563rd Medium Truck Company moved its 57th Battalion headquarters from Chu Lai up to Phu Bai to assume control truck units there. Anderson's company had six gun trucks: The Preacher, The Lifer, War Monger, Peace Maker, The Private and Smiling Death. All his platoon leaders were TC officers but due to the downsizing in Vietnam, the Army had an excess of combat arms officers and sent them to truck companies. Anderson had one Engineer officer and several Infantry officers, who he made commanders of gun trucks. The infantry officers definitely liked riding on the hardened trucks better than walking on the ground.²⁵



The front left fuel tank of the Peace Maker was hit by an RPG as seen here crew members are salvaging what they can. (photo by Danny Cochran)

The 563rd's first night at Phu Bai the perimeter was probed by the enemy. They were very glad to have gun trucks on the perimeter. That first night the 39th Battalion also asked for volunteers to lead a night convoy from Phu Bai to Camp Vandergrift. CPT Anderson and LT Al Jones volunteered. As their first night convoy, it was a frightening

²⁵ COL (R) Walter Anderson interview by Richard Killblane, 26 July 2006.

experience. For one, Anderson did not know the road. He did not know where the obstacles and trouble spots were.²⁶



A convoy driving through rough terrain and unforgiving steep edges.

Anderson's 563rd Medium Truck Company remained at Phu Bai for a week and a half. Each night the battalion sent out one convoy. Each serial was no larger than 20 vehicles to include gun trucks with a 15 minute interval. None of the officers of the 563rd Medium Truck were made convoy commanders, but they were allowed to ride in the gun trucks though. During the first week and a half, the convoys only ran into two ambushes. It was short, quick then they drove out of there. The enemy opened up with RPGs and .51 cal. They destroyed the lead fuel tanker then left.²⁷

The 363rd Medium Truck Company "Road Runners" left Da Nang and moved north with other companies of the 57th Transportation Battalion to Red Beach, Camp Haskins. When Roger Rahor joined the 363rd in January 1971, the company had three gun trucks, one assigned to each platoon. They included The Colonel, Pallbearers, and Canned Heat. An RPG had just damaged the front end of the 1st Platoon's, The Colonel, and taken it out of action. The Colonel, an APC gun truck, had been named for a long gone Colonel who had treated the men well. It was very hard to keep it running as the mountain passes stressed the engine and she was repaired often. Because The Colonel was not always available, the 1st Platoon built another gun truck named Mercenary. After a week and a half, the 563rd Medium Truck returned with its three gun trucks, but left some tractors and trailers at Phu Bai. The 363rd Medium Truck resumed its normal runs in support of the Americal.²⁸

²⁶ Anderson interview.

²⁷ Anderson interview.

²⁸ Roger Rahor email to Richard Killblane, 18 August 2004.

While many of the truck companies like the 523rd had officers and NCOs who led by example and inspired their men, some companies like the 363rd were not so blessed. Roger Rahor saw a rift between the senior NCO “lifers” and the lower enlisted. The platoon leaders and squad leaders ran the convoys, but many of the other NCOs would find any excuse to get out of going on convoys. Rahor’s truck was abandoned by West Point lieutenant when it broke down near Hoi An on a convoy to Chu Lai. The lieutenant claimed he radioed for help but took off in a gun truck. Fortunately, a southbound convoy picked him up and towed his truck to Chu Lai for repair. The company commander was relieved for refusing to ride in a convoy through Hai Van Pass during the period of heavy enemy activity.²⁹



A look from the back of a convoy with steep cliffs (right) and dirt roads. Some NCOs would avoid convoys all together knowing risk of ambush. (photo by Logan Werth).

On 1 February 1971, SGT Chester Israel became the NCOIC of Satin’s Lil’ Angel up at Vandergrift. Lieutenant Callahan told Chester to pick his crew, but Callahan’s driver, Richard B. Frazier, wanted to be a gunner. Frazier liked to call himself the “Montana Roughneck.” Chester would man the left .50 and picked Calvin Bennett to man the rear .50. He also picked Robert W. Thorne as the driver, because he had maintenance experience.³⁰

120mm rockets and mortar rounds hit Vandergrift nearly every night knocking out a few bunkers and killing Americans. When not out escorting convoys, gun trucks provided perimeter security with a man on the guns at all times. There were always reports the enemy was going to attack. “June Bugs” were Transportation soldiers that went out at night with a radio and set up claymores outside the perimeter. One night the team went out and reported lots of movement and kept reporting lots of movement and finally blew the claymores. They had killed monkeys.³¹

Because the 57th POL only had three gun trucks, the 1/5th Mech loaned it an M113 armored personnel carrier (APC) with a ring-mounted .50 on front and two left and right M60s in the back. SGT Mike McBride was assigned to it, and he picked Leroy Sherrill and another kid named, Spears, as his gunners. Since the convoys ran at about 25 mph

²⁹ Rahor email, 21 August 2004.

³⁰ Israel interview.

³¹ Israel and Bennett interview; McBride interview.

due to the condition of the road so the APC had no problem keeping up. Besides the normal pot holes, the road was scarred with B-52 craters.



B-52H dropping its payload of bombs over South Vietnam

The B-52s did a lot of bombing in the area. One morning while Mike and his men were cleaning the weapons, the ground started shaking and they looked up to see the bombs falling out of B-52s. The biggest problem of APCs running with convoys everyday was maintenance. Mike was lucky his APC never threw a track because his crew were truck drivers and did not know how to repair a track.³²

One night, an M-88 tracked recovery vehicle had thrown a track by a bridge 8 to 10 kilometers from Khe Sanh. The commander of the 57th POL sent Mike's APC out to secure the M-88 alone at night. McBride called back on the radio to let the CO know they had arrived. It was pitch black and he and his crew was scared. On the hill side, they saw a flashlight blinking, then another flashlight blinking. He called in that there were people out there signaling back and forth. The captain told Mike to wait and he would check to see if those were other Americans out there. Mike called again and told him they had a lot more movement around there to which they were finally told to turn around and "beat feet" out of there. The APC had traveled half a kilometer when someone opened up on it with small arms fire. The crew of the APC returned fire and continued to Vandergrift. Mike was more scared waiting than during the ambush. His crew went to bed in the track but was awoken by mortar fire, which destroyed another bunker.³³

On 3 February, ARVN units finally arrived at Khe Sanh and the next day, American infantry and artillery occupied the abandoned border village of Tabat. On 8 February, ARVN troops crossed the border and invaded Laos. Their objective was to advance in a series of air assaults by the 1st ARVN Airborne Division and three ARVN Ranger battalions and ground pushes by the 1st ARVN Armored Division to the Tchepone with Route 9 as their supply route. To stall the offensive, the NVA stepped up their attacks on the American convoys on QL9.³⁴

³² McBride interview.

³³ McBride interview.

³⁴ Phillips, "Lam Son 719."



Hueys preparing to take off (photo by Danny Cochran)

On 7 February, three gun trucks and Hueys escorted a convoy of 24 fuel tankers and numerous flat beds to Vandergrift. The convoy departed Quang Tri at dusk and reached



the Rockpile at dark.

The Rockpile as seen from the south on Route 9. 690 feet above the surrounding terrain and oversees 5 major infiltration routes. Accessible by helicopter or 6 hour, exhausting climb up granite cliffs.

SGT Healy, Sam Bass, and Charles H. Soule crewed the Protector McBride's former gun truck. LT Sam Hoskins was riding as the officer in charge of the gun truck and LT Stafford, of the 572nd "Gypsy Bandits," was just hitching a ride. At 0115 hours on 8 February, an RPG slammed into the driver's door of the Protector killing Soule, wounding the others and blinding the lieutenant in back. The enemy poured small arms, rockets and mortars into three different parts of the convoy wounding a total of nine drivers. McBride's APC was not damaged. The rest of the trucks picked up drivers from the five damaged trucks and drove in reverse back to Quang Tri. Cobras and Huey gun

ships came in firing up the area and one Huey was blown out of the sky. The 57th never tried to go back to Khe Sanh. From then on the 57th POL ran day convoys from Quang Tri to Da Nang. The Protector was repaired and renamed the Executioner.³⁵



The name Gypsy Bandits was painted on the front of every vehicle. They got the “Gypsy” from the fact that the tractor trailer would move where ever they were needed and they become very good at “combat procurement” (stealing what was need) and thus, that is where “bandits” came from. (photos by Bill Hampton)

On 10 February, the bad weather cleared and ARVN airborne forces landed at Objective Aluoi and the armored forces linked up with them. The NVA began committing more divisions against the ARVN and the incursion ground to a halt. The NVA began to surround and overwhelm the Ranger landing zones. Meanwhile, the enemy stepped up attacks to shut down Route 9.

With the Laotian incursion in full swing, the enemy increased their attacks in order to shut down the flow of supplies to this operation. The VC stepped up the number of attacks in the Hai Van Pass. There was rarely a day that did not go by that the VC did not fire on the convoys traveling through the Pass. Slowing down to negotiate the switchbacks the trucks made better targets to mortar, rocket and small arms fire. The VC would often wait until the convoys were driving up the northern side of the mountain from Phu Bai. Observation helicopters and “Birddogs” observation aircraft usually accompanied the convoys through the Pass and called in Cobra attack helicopters when enemy contact was made. Anderson’s 563rd Medium Truck Company had to modify their gun trucks because the enemy in Hai Van Pass might hide in the culverts just five feet below the road, so the gunners needed to be able to depress their machineguns down. They moved the machineguns from pedestals in the middle of the gun box to pedestals welded on the sides.³⁶

³⁵ McBride interview; Hampton, “Gypsy Bandits;” and James Lyles, *The Hard Ride, Vietnam Gun Trucks*, Quezon City, Philippines: Planet Art, 2002.

³⁶ Rahor email; Anderson interview.



Cobra helicopter taking off, the Cobra was a valuable asset in assisting convoys when ambushes emerged. (photo by Teneyck)

In the beginning, enemy attacks on convoys were small but frequent. Any time a convoy drove by the Rock Pile from Dong Ha to Vandergrift, it was shot at and usually the convoys just sped up. One afternoon, Fuller rode on Uncle Meat in the rear of the convoy heading toward Vandergrift. They received fire and Meat's left front tire was hit and went flat, so Fuller radioed ahead for the convoy to continue on, and informed whoever was in the convoy to take charge. Uncle Meat stopped with an open field to its right and an embankment to its left. The driver, David Rose, and one of the crew members were changing the tire while Fuller and the rest manned the guns. David was a draftee from California and said something to Fuller who lifted his helmet when a B-40 rocket flew past the Lieutenant, struck the hillside, causing everybody to instinctively drop down. Fuller received a small piece of shrapnel in the back of his head, and one crew member joked, "Oh, hey, sir, you get a slow reaction badge [Purple Heart Medal] now." Fuller responded, "No way, and don't tell anybody about it."³⁷

They then started receiving heavier contact and a Forward Air Controller (FAC) flying overhead, came on station and asked, "Do you need anything down there." Fuller replied, "Yeah. We'd like a little support. What've you got?" He said, "I've got the world up here. I've got all kinds of radios. What would you like?" To which Fuller said, "Well, I'd like to light up this tree line over here because we're receiving fire from it." The Lieutenant popped a smoke, relayed the grid coordinates, and the pilot asked, "Would you like a little napalm?" "I would just love it," answered Fuller and he called in a napalm strike. The crew of Meat changed the tire unmolested now and then caught up with the convoy.³⁸

³⁷ Fuller interview.

³⁸ Fuller interview.

On another ambush, King Kong and Uncle Meat escorted a convoy to Khe Sanh and the enemy hit a cargo truck and set a fuel tanker on fire. The next driver stopped his truck and got out of his vehicle. King Kong turned back and raced into the kill zone. They made the driver climb back into his truck and



Uncle Meat gunners firing off rounds. (photo by Teneyck)

lead the rest of the convoy through the kill zone because there was no place to turn around. Someone radioed that they thought a driver was left in the kill zone, so Kong drove back into the kill zone. They could not find a driver since he had already been picked up, so Kong turned around, but about that time mortar rounds began to fall in the kill zone behind Kong. They landed close to Uncle Meat that was bringing up the rear and splashed mud on its armor.³⁹

Southerly convoys to Chu Lai also ran into trouble. The VC would incite the local civilians to cause trouble. They might have someone in a crowded town push an old lady or small child into the path of an approaching 5-ton. We had enough trouble with 19-20 year olds driving huge overloaded trucks through crowded towns and cities. Kids would drop fragmentation grenades with the handles taped and the pins pulled into the fuel tanks of the trucks when they stopped near populated areas. The fuel would dissolve the tape and the grenade would explode. Fortunate drivers would find these in fuel tank filters at night while topping off their tanks.⁴⁰

On 15 February, the Gypsy Bandits were attached to the 57th Transportation Battalion and on 16 February, the 57th Battalion assumed the line haul mission to Vandergrift as well as other missions of the 39th Battalion. From Quang Tri, the 572nd delivered cargo to Vandergrift along with the 363rd. Although not a part of the Battalion, the 528th Quartermaster Petroleum Supply Company delivered fuel to the forward base camps under the escort of 39th Battalion gun trucks. Many of the new drivers of the 572nd could not handle the Hai Van Pass and the company lost too many trucks to accidents. Soon the 363rd Road Runners had the Phu Bai run for themselves since the level road to Chu Lai was better for new guys.⁴¹

³⁹ Cochran interview.

⁴⁰ Rahor email.

⁴¹ Rahor email.



One of the Gypsy Bandits tractor trailers. (photo by Bill Hampton)

The 585th Medium Truck Company moved from at Gia Le north to Tan My Ramp and the 39th Transportation Battalion headquarters moved to Vandergrift on 16 February. The 585th Medium Truck Company would pick up cargo at Tan My Ramp and deliver it to Camp Eagle near Quang Tri. The 39th Battalion kept C Company 23rd Supply and Transportation (S&T) Company with its 5-ton cargo trucks; the 666th Light Truck Company, which continued its direct and general support mission to the 101st Airborne Division; XXIV Corps Company (Provisional); FLC Light Truck (USMC); and the 57th Medium Truck Company. It also had the 506th Transportation Detachment, which ran the Terminal Transfer Point at Vandergrift.

The Ace of Spades was escorting a 523rd convoy to Khe Sanh on 16 February, when the dirt road collapsed under it and the gun truck rolled down into the river bed. SP4 Michael R. Hunter was killed in the wreck. The truck gun box was destroyed beyond repair.⁴²



Ace of Spades at the bottom of the riverbed as troops try to salvage material. (photo by Danny Cochran)

⁴² Israel interview; Seay and Cochran interview.



The gun box was damaged beyond repair. (photo by Danny Cochran)



The gun box completely detached from the chassis. (photo by Danny Cochran)



The Ace of Spades was rebuilt several times. (photo by Danny Cochran)

Four days later, 2LT Baird went back to Phu Bai to pick up 17 brand new 5-ton trucks. His convoy would return after dark. The convoy doctrine at the time was to limit convoys to no more than 30 trucks with a gun truck ratio of 1:10. Uncle Meat led the convoy with King Kong in the middle and Satan's Lil' Angel in the rear. All gun trucks had three M2 .50 caliber machineguns. The M2 .50 was the most successful design in American weapons and had seen very little change in its design since its original issue in 1919. This time Baird rode close to the rear in a ¾-ton gun jeep with twin M60 machineguns. He noticed that some Transportation Corps officers preferred to ride up front. He knew that if there was trouble it would invariably occur in the rear and that is where the key decisions would have to be made. If an ambush split the convoy, by doctrine the trucks out of the kill zone would continue to role to the next security check point or camp. If the convoy commander was in the lead, then the commander would be unable to make the key decisions for the rest of the convoy either trapped in the kill zone or behind.⁴³



King Kong would be in the middle of the convoy as they were placed every 10 trucks with no more than 30 trucks at time.

Satan's Lil' Angel had escorted a convoy that had delivered ARVN soldiers to Laos. They had been on the road for 36 hours when they pulled into Dong Ha that night. They planned to RON because their convoy could not unload until morning, then 1LT Baird called them on the radio, "Hey Red, I'm a little light on security and expect some movement." They had received a lot of reports of enemy movement along the route and SGT Chester Israel had seen movement on the way down. Baird only had two gun trucks and his ¾-ton at Dong Ha. He needed some "heavy hitters" in the rear and asked Chester if he would go back with him. Chester asked his crew and they volunteered to go back to Vandergrift.⁴⁴

⁴³ Baird interview and Danny Cochran interview by Richard Killblane, 18 June 2005.

⁴⁴ Israel interview.



Another bridge that needs to be crossed during convoys.

Uncle Meat led with King Kong in the middle, with Satan's Lil' Angel followed by Baird's $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton in the rear. It was dark on 20 February as the convoy neared Camp Vandergrift. The road turned south and the mountain ridge to the east came within yards of Highway 9 and a valley of tall elephant grass covered the valley to the ridge line to the west. At 2311 a mile and a half from their destination, Baird heard an explosion followed by an intense volume of small arms fire from the jungle on the ridge to his left.⁴⁵

An RPG fired from the right (west) side of the road struck Satan's Lil' Angel's gun box right under SP4 Richard B. Frazier's gun killing him instantly. The same explosion blew Israel to the side of the left wall then knocked him down. Shrapnel had peppered his back and left a hole in his right calf. The initial blast was followed by small arms fire from both sides of the road, but Satan did not stop. Israel climbed over to check Frazier but already knew he was dead. He then rose up and looked out at the tracer fire. Calvin Bennett was firing to the right side with the rear .50. Israel stood up to return fire. Shrapnel rendered Frazier's .50 inoperable and Israel's .50 would only fire single shots.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ The 504th MP Bn Forward Log recorded the ambush at 0015 hours on 21 February 1971, but Baird and Israel remember it at 2355 or midnight.

⁴⁶ Israel interview.



Shows where RPG hit right side and killed SPC Frazier -- the point of impact is about 20 inches below the mount for the .50 cal. The point of impact appears like a meteor impact with spalling radiating outward from the point of impact. (photo by Danny Cochran)

A second RPG came through the right front wheel, slammed into the engine and took out a piston. The engine locked up and the truck lurched into a nose dive, then smoke boiled out the hood and cab. SGT Israel was again thrown down.



Where the second RPG hit Satan's Lil Angel, blowing a hole in the tire and going through the engine block. (photo by Logan Werth)



An overall view of Satan's Li'l Angel and the damage the Gun Truck received. (photo by Logan Werth) He stood back up and saw small arms fire from both sides of the road. They were right in the middle of the kill zone. Bennett fired his left rear .50 until it jammed. Small arms fire shot out the tires of the gun truck. The NVA had learned to take out the gun trucks first before they went after the rest of the trucks and concentrated their fire on Satan. Israel was shot in the shoulder and side.⁴⁷



Tire shot up from small arms fire. (photo by Danny Cochran)

Baird's $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton raced ahead and passed a disabled 5-ton cargo truck in the ditch. He ordered his driver to stop so they could check on the driver. They came to a halt a hundred feet ahead of the truck. He did not want to leave the disabled truck until he was sure that its driver was safe. To do so required him to wait in the middle of the kill zone. As soon as his gunner, SGT Richard Downard, tried to return fire, both M60s failed to fire. Evidently, he had put the gas plugs in backwards when he reassembled them. The three men only had one M79 grenade launcher and their M16s to defend against an NVA company. Baird immediately radioed the two lead gun trucks and told them to come back. The one thing that Baird could depend on was the loyalty of his gun truck to rescue him or any other truck in trouble.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Israel interview.

⁴⁸ Baird interview.

SGT Israel looked back at Baird's ¾-ton and saw it had stopped and was taking fire. It was sitting cockeyed with the wheel in the road. Chester could not see any fire coming from Baird's vehicle. Thorne then climbed into the gun box from the cab and asked, "Chester, are you hit?" Israel answered, "I'm fine. The only hope we got is for you to get this started and get us out of here!" Thorne climbed back into the driver's seat and started up the engine. It clanged and another RPG hit the right front rear duals and the truck bounced. Thorne kept that truck going and it crawled about 25 yards, enough to clear the kill zone, before the engine shut down. They continued to return fire.⁴⁹

Neither the crew of Uncle Meat nor King Kong had heard the gun fire behind them. The majority of the convoy had continued to Vandergrift as though nothing had happened. Uncle Meat had already entered the compound and King Kong had just made the right hand turn into Vandergrift when they heard Baird's call for help. Both gun trucks immediately backed up, turned around and raced as fast as their trucks would let them back to the kill zone.⁵⁰

Baird knew his gun truck crews and had confidence in their judgment. He also knew that too much jabber on the radio would cause confusion and tie up the radio net. He quickly and precisely informed the gun trucks of the situation. Satan's Lil' Angel had been hit, his gun jeep and one 5-ton were still in the kill zone. The crews asked which side of the road the enemy was on and Baird informed them that he was taking small arms fire from the ridge to his south and the field of elephant grass to his north. The enemy was close enough to throw hand grenades at his vehicle. He then quit talking. He would count on their judgment as what to do.⁵¹



A set up for a gun jeep, some had twin M-60s, this particular jeep only has 1. (photo by Fred Pobst)

Ten minutes of steady small arms fire had elapsed since the beginning of the ambush. By then Baird was taking fire from both sides of the road. Enemy was closing in from the elephant grass while others fired down on them from the ridge to the south. His gunner, Downer, tapped him on the shoulder and said, "I see one. What do I do?" Baird turned, looked back down the road and saw an enemy soldier about 15 meters away on a berm alongside the road loading an RPG. He told his gunner to shoot him. The gunner fired his M79 grenade launcher at him. The enemy soldier was too close for the 40mm grenade to

⁴⁹ Israel interview.

⁵⁰ Baird and Cochran interview.

⁵¹ Baird and Cochran interview.

arm in flight. It struck him with enough velocity to either kill or incapacitate him, because he did not fire his rocket.⁵²



With elephant grass on both sides of convoys, the enemy had the advantage when running ambushes.

Around ten minutes after the initiation of the ambush, King Kong raced past Satan and up to their convoy commander's $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton, parking right in front of it at an angle facing to the north. Uncle Meat similarly parked near Satan's Lil' Angel. Baird was never as glad as when he saw the tracers of those .50s. There was a reassurance that everything would turn out all right. He knew his gun truck crews knew what to do. Baird called on the radio, "They're in the ditches. They're in the ditches." The gunners on the Kong swung their .50s around and sprayed the ditches. Kong and Uncle Meat took the pressure off Satan as the enemy concentrated their fire on the two new gun trucks.⁵³

The success of an ambush depended upon surprise and extreme violence. The gun truck crews had learned to turn the fight back on the enemy as fast as they could with even more violence. This would take the psychological advantage away from the enemy forcing them to break contact. The .50s blazed away in four to six round bursts at the muzzle flashes to their left and right. The gunners poured 30-weight oil from plastic canteens to help cool the barrels and ensure the smooth function of their breaches after firing off about three to four boxes of ammunition.⁵⁴

⁵² Baird and Cochran interview.

⁵³ Baird and Cochran interview.

⁵⁴ Cochran interview.



The oil residue poured on the barrels during the ambush to cool the barrels down and keep .50s from jamming leaves darkened streaks on the side of King Kong. (photo by Danny Cochran)

An RPG hit the rear duals right and exploded in all the colors of the rainbow under left rear gunner, Danny Cochran, knocking him backwards on Larson manning the right .50. Cochran then jumped back up, grabbed his .50 and went back to work. King Kong was an APC gun truck. Large chunks of hot shrapnel had come up through the aluminum floor of the hull and lodged in the top of the box right under his machinegun. One piece of shrapnel had burnt a hole in the charging handle and others had left five or six holes in the barrel, but it still fired.⁵⁵

The barrels turned red and as soon as the gunners saw the rounds curve after they left the barrel they knew it was time to change them. Each time Emery, manning the turret gun, swung his barrel toward Cochran, Cochran grabbed the asbestos glove, spun the barrel off then picked up a new barrel and spun it on tight, counting three clicks back by feel and let go. Gunners had different methods of setting the headspace and timing and none used the timing gage during an ambush. They knew their guns. Some memorized the number of clicks for each breach. Others wrote the number of clicks needed on each barrel. Cochran did it by feel. He backed off the three clicks and depending upon the rate of fire of his .50 he added more clicks. He knew his .50. He changed three barrels for the TC and a similar number for himself that night.⁵⁶

The one advantage to fighting at night, the gunners fired in the direction of the enemy muzzle flashes, which betrayed their positions. There was no concealment in the dark once someone fired his weapon.

The tactic worked. After about ten minutes of firing, Uncle Meat and King Kong had turned the fight back on the enemy and they broke contact. During the fight, the driver of the disabled 5-ton had run to his convoy commander's vehicle.

⁵⁵ Cochran interview.

⁵⁶ Cochran interview.



King Kong after an ambush with a flat tire.

The medic from Baird's ¾-ton ran up and stopped in front of Satan. Bennett remembered the dustoff hovered over the road ahead of their gun truck and threw down a stretcher out one end. Bennett, Thorne and the medic lifted Frazier's body over the cab onto the hood. Blood was every where in the truck and they were slipping and stumbling, but got Frazier's body on the stretcher. Israel had several wounds and did not want to leave when the dustoff helicopter landed. The medic hit Chester with a shot of Morphine as soon as he got on the ground, and then put him on the dustoff.⁵⁷

That close to Vandergrift, Uncle Meat loaded the rest of the crew from Satan's Lil' Angel into their gun truck then drove off the road and backed up to Baird's vehicle. The drive shaft had broken and the vehicle could not drive. The crew of Uncle Meat hooked up the ¾-ton to Uncle Meat, which towed it into Vandergrift. The two gun trucks that came to the rescue also received damage but could roll under their own power. After the initial volley of fire, no other casualties were taken. King Kong limped back to Vandergrift on its rims.

The 2nd Platoon, C Troop, 3rd Squadron, 5th Cavalry swept the area the next day and no enemy dead on the east side of the road but two fighting positions 30 meters from the west side of the road with an RPD machinegun and one empty rucksack. There were plenty of tracks running away from the road. While waiting for a tracker dog team from the cavalry platoon, an NVA soldier armed with an RPG approached and tried to throw a hand grenade but was shot and killed in the process. The grenade exploded in his hand. The infantry were then engaged by small arms fire and the fight resulted in two NVA killed. They found another dead NVA from the contact and large amount of weapons and ammunition. The enemy usually made great effort to recover their dead and conceal their losses, so no one could accurately determine the total enemy losses.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Israel interview.

⁵⁸ The Fifth Infantry Division, Vietnam, Lam Son 719 CAAR, <http://www.societyofthefifthdivision.com/vietnam/significantevents.htm>.

CPT Voightritter took Frazier's bloody helmet and flak jacket to battalion and told them, "Night convoys have got to stop!"

With Frazier killed and Israel in the hospital, Thorne and Calvin Bennett went back to Vandergrift and salvaged parts from Satan to build their gun truck. Thinking that the name Satan's Lil' Angel might be jinxed, the crew renamed the gun truck, Proud American, but had not time to paint the new art work on the side, which they planned would be the head of a bald eagle.⁵⁹

After three weeks of fighting across the border, one ARVN Ranger Battalion was badly mauled, two had withdrawn from the area of operations. Two positions were overrun, six abandoned and the ground assault halted half-way to Tchepone. Beginning 3 March, the ARVN launched a series of air assaults leading to Tchepone. On 6 March, the ARVN launched their largest air assault yet and the next day, took the NVA supply base at Tchepone. On 10 March, the ARVN forces abandoned Tchepone and began their withdrawal back to the border. On 12 March, two ARVN airborne companies landed by helicopter north of Tabat to clear the route of withdrawal of enemy. The enemy counter-attacked not only in Laos but also in South Vietnam. Enemy artillery even began to hit Khe Sanh. Two NVA sapper attacks on a fire base east of Khe Sanh destroyed 8,200 rounds of ammunition and 36,000 gallons of aviation fuel.⁶⁰



A truck in a convoy that was hit by enemy fire, this is exactly why Gun Trucks were so important to protecting the trucks and make sure the supply lines were always open.

The 363rd pulled mostly fuel tankers but on one convoy drove all the way to Khe Sanh to back haul dead ARVN soldiers loaded on pallets in Sea Land refrigeration vans. They backed the Reefer vans directly onto LCUs and then picked up empty vans and drove

⁵⁹ Will Abshire, untitled article on gun trucks in I Corps, *1st Log News*, April 15, 1971.

⁶⁰ Phillips, "Lam Son 719."

back to Khe Sanh for another load. They did this for two or three days. The stench of death was so bad that they washed their bodies with diesel and burned their uniforms.⁶¹

On 12 March, Callahan had returned on a convoy from Khe Sanh and informed LTC Ellis his convoy had received enemy fire and thought that it was not safe to take another convoy up there especially since it was going to be dark by the time they returned to Khe Sanh. Regardless, the convoy kicked out from Vandergrift to Khe Sanh with 2LT Jim Baird as the convoy commander. Just in case the enemy tried to ambush a convoy, the detail left behind kept a reaction force. 1LT Ralph Fuller had all the remaining gun trucks lined up ready to go while he monitored the radio for contact.⁶²

On the Proud American, Robert Thorne was the driver, Calvin Bennett was the rear gunner, McDonald was the right gunner, and Nelson Allen was the NCOIC. Both CPT "V" and LT Baird were onboard the gun truck. A B-40 rocket hit the gun truck, Proud America, between the cab and the gun box on the driver's side mortally wounding the driver, SP4 Thorne. Thorne steered Proud American into the hillside instead of down the steep cliff into the creek. This saved the rest of the crew.



Road with hillside on one side and steep drop-off on the other. (photo by Danny Cochran)

Unfortunately, Baird had been kneeling by the radio mounted in the left front corner of the box when the rocket hit and received multiple fragmentary wounds to his left arm. McDonald, the right front gunner, McDonald, received a facial wound. Two tankers were immobilized.⁶³

Fuller heard the call, "Contact, contact, contact," on the radio and led his convoy of gun trucks. Riding in Daughter of Darkness, an engineer stopped Fuller, "Don't go up there! They're having an ambush! They're having an ambush!" To which Fuller replied, "That's what we're going up there for." About six gun trucks rolled in and laid down suppressive fire which ended the enemy fire. Fuller saw that Baird was badly wounded and that

⁶¹ Rahor email, 18 August 2004.

⁶² Fuller interview, and Baird interview.

⁶³ Fuller interview, Bennett interview, and Baird interview.

Thorne was dead. Callahan laid Baird on a stretcher and Fuller called for a medevac then looked around for a good place for the dustoff helicopter to land. He found an opening by a bridge and Meat drove Baird to the bridge. The helicopter arrived but was afraid to land, instead, the men lifted the stretcher up to the bird. Fuller told the medevac crew, "Take care of him. He was a good one." They placed Thorne's body in the Black Widow and took it back to Vandergrift. A squad from the 4th Battalion, 3rd Infantry went out to block the enemy but found no enemy killed or wounded.⁶⁴



From left to right Dougherty, Baird, Fuller, Callahan, Capt V of the 523rd Transportation Co.

The day after the ambush, Fuller left on his scheduled R&R. He and Thorne were both from Denver, Colorado, so after Fuller met his wife at the airport, he told her he had to visit Thorne's parents. His wife waited in the car while he went inside and told the parents how their son died. They thanked him profusely. Bennett left Proud American and in spite of having lost three crew members, he filled in on Black Widow for a while.⁶⁵



What the bed of the Gun Truck looks like after an ambush with empty shells and links laying everywhere. (photo by Danny Cochran)

⁶⁴ Fuller interview.

⁶⁵ Fuller interview; Fifth Division, CAAR.

Across the border, the 1st ARVN Armored Division abandoned Objective Alouian and the NVA attacked with a fury. The ARVN paratroopers then panicked and the orderly withdrawal turned into a rout. On 23 March, 40 NVA soldiers with the support of mortars and rockets penetrated the perimeter Khe Sanh destroying two helicopters, damaged four, and inflicted 22 casualties. In the latter half of March, as many as 20 rounds of mortar, rockets and artillery fire poured down daily on American fire support bases along the border. For two days, Route 9 could not be secured. As ARVN troops neared the border, US infantry and armored forces attacked west of Khe Sanh to clear Route 9. When it was reopened, convoys could only travel it “with acceptable risk.”⁶⁶

Toward the end of Lam Son, Fuller was tasked to lead a convoy loaded with crates of artillery projectiles farther west from Khe Sanh than any previous convoy. He was told if they did not arrive by 6:00 pm, the artillery troops would be defenseless.



An artillery piece that would be used during the assault. (photo by Danny Cochran)

The artillery battery was going to shoot off everything it had. During the convoy brief, Fuller explained the importance of the mission and told his drivers how important it was that everybody understood the route. The convoy needed to make the two right turns. He reminded them, “Be sure when you come to an intersection that you take a right.” It was the quietest briefing Fuller had ever held. Fuller would ride in the rear as usual, this time in *Eve of Destruction*. Fuller’s convoy ranged between 50 and 100 vehicles and he placed a gun truck between every ten cargo trucks. The lead cargo truck had a PRC25 radio. The convoy took off in the dark with head lights on.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Phillips, “Lamson 719.”

⁶⁷ Fuller interview.



Eve of Destruction Gun Truck crew.

They had been on the road for a couple of hours, when one of the gun trucks radioed back, “Hey, 26.” (Fuller’s call sign) “Be advised. I think the cargo truck behind me took a left when we came to the juncture.” So Fuller replied, “Thank you very much.” The Eve kicked out and raced to the front. Sure enough, when it reached the intersection trucks had turned to the left. As the Eve came up beside a cargo truck, the crew told the driver to turn around, go back to the intersection any way they could and make a left to catch up with the rest of the convoy. Fuller then radioed another gun truck to look for them. The Eve then caught up with one cargo truck that had crossed a bridge and was starting up a steep to the right. They stopped the driver and he said he was going to back the truck down in the dark. Backing over a bridge and turning at the same time, part of the truck went off the left side of the bridge and the driver bailed out. He escaped injury and the Eve put him on another cargo truck. Their destination was just a few hundred meters from the Laotian border and the truck that crossed the bridge had run off Fuller’s map sheet, which was the end of South Vietnam.⁶⁸

They finally had everybody turned around, heading in the right direction and reached their destination just before first light. Upon arrival, the truck unloaded their ammunition while the artillery fired volley after volley. The convoy headed back with Meat in the lead and Eve in the rear. As soon as the convoy left, Fuller heard an explosion. Uncle Meat had run over a small land mine. It blew the left two rear wheels and none of the five men in the gun box were injured other than some scrapes or bruises. Rose, the driver, assessed the situation. The axle was down in the dirt and Fuller could not see how they could possibly drive the Meat, so he said, “Take the guns, and ammunition and everything off, and we were going to leave.” But they replied, “Give us a minute, sir.” And they took a chain and tied the axle up to the frame, and said, “We can make it.” To which Fuller said, “If that’s all it takes.”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Fuller interview.

⁶⁹ Fuller interview.



Uncle Meat Gun Truck without the 50s on it. (photo by Teneyck)

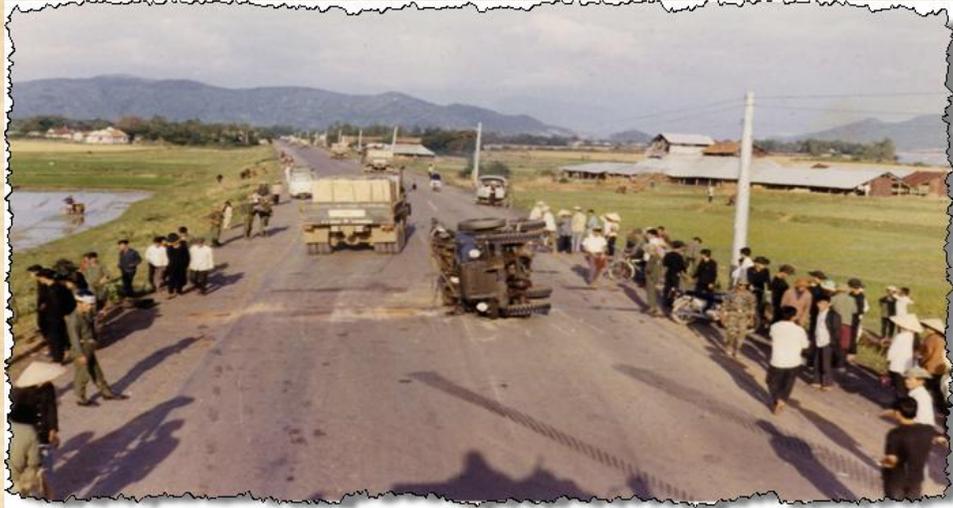
While they were securing the axel, Fuller walked around and discovered the tire tread sandal tracks of one individual, who had planted the mine and gone back the same way. So Fuller knew from his Ranger training the guy was not NVA. He would not have gone back the same way, or would not have been wearing sandals. The crew rigged the axel so they could drive back to Khe Sanh. The convoy passed the rusted hulks of enemy tanks along the road from the attack on Khe Sanh during 1968. Upon reaching Khe Sanh, they then took Meat on down to Vandergrift, where they picked up new 5-ton truck and put Meat's gun box on that vehicle.⁷⁰

An average of 80 sorties ran from Vandergrift to Khe Sanh a day and some days the number reached as high as 265. The gun trucks made the daily runs several times. The 5th Mechanized Division had a difficult time keeping the enemy away from the convoys. The convoys of the 39th Battalion were ambushed 23 times along Route 9. On one occasion, the battalion commander of the security force personally assured Ellis that the road between Quang Tri and Vandergrift was so secure that one could walk along it with his wife. Two hours later the enemy ambushed a convoy two kilometers east of Vandergrift. The gun trucks ensured the convoys got through. The 39th Battalion had also received four M113 armored personnel carriers (APC) for escort. The 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) assumed responsibility for the security of Route 9 on 28 March. The Division provided constant aerial support to locate the enemy and strategically located armored vehicles to provide instant reaction. This minimized the attacks on convoys.

Activity even increased on convoys heading south to Chu Lai. While driving through crowded streets of cities, someone would push an old lady in front of a 5-ton truck. Kids took hand grenades with the pins pulled and spoon taped and dropped them in the gas tanks so that when the petroleum dissolved the tape it would explode. In some cases, the

⁷⁰ Fuller interview.

convoys ran into firefights. After the Lam Son 719, ambushes fell to an irregular pattern of once every two to four weeks.



This is a picture of a vehicle turned over while trying avoid a pedestrian, the vehicle hit and killed the person. (photo by Danny Cochran)

Lam Son 719 ended on 4 April 1971 with mixed results. They had reached their objective at Tchepone but failed to expand beyond and withdrew under serious pressure. The ARVN attacks became bogged down claiming the lack of American helicopter support as the reason.

CPT Lavin drove his APC to Khe Sanh to monitor vehicle spacing as they abandoned the camp. The Americans abandoned everything and 600 trucks left with empty loads. Lavin's M113 was the last vehicle to leave Khe Sanh. The 515th remained at Vandergrift for three to five days waiting for clearance to leave. Lavin was instructed to clean out the CONEX bunker, burn the latrine and get rid of any 155m projectiles. He rolled the projectiles in puddles, made a deal with a local Vietnamese to trade the metal in the bunker for soda then set the latrine on fire.

Although the ARVN offensive failed to disrupt the NVA buildup, the truck drivers overcame tremendous odds to deliver the cargo to the forward camps. The drivers lived in austere conditions, drove around the clock and encountered 23 ambushes. The two truck battalions lost 40 vehicles damaged or destroyed, 12 men killed and 35 wounded. As a testament to their heroism, the 39th Transportation Battalion awarded 4 Silver Star Medals, 20 Bronze Star Medals with V, 37 Bronze Star Medals, 10 ARCOMs with V, 108 ARCOMs and 36 Purple Heart Medals during this two and a half month operation. The gun trucks took a beating. King Kong was damaged by an RPG. Ace of Spades was destroyed early in the operation and The Protector, Satan's Lil' Angel, and Proud American were damaged, repaired and renamed. Hardcore took an RPG in the driver's compartment.



Ace of Spades patch.

After Lam Son, the 515th and 523rd drove down to Phu Bai and moved into an engineer compound. Upon return, the men found time to relax and celebrate. There the soldiers took delight in simple things like hearing a toilet flush. They had stage shows with Korean dancers. CPT Lavin had created a company slush fund selling beer and sodas. With the \$1,000 profit, the 515th hired a band with women, bought a pig to roast, had the engineers build picnic tables and had a big party.

The 572nd “Gypsy Bandits” only had a handful of tractors running out of 60 and those were virtually worn out. From early April until Bill Hampton left on 5 June, they were primarily regrouping and rebuilding.⁷¹

Not long after Lam Son, King Kong was sent to the 173rd Airborne Brigade and SGT Emory remained as its NCOIC. He remained on Kong until the 173rd left Vietnam in August 1971 and then the hull was removed. Emory had served with the same gun truck from its construction to its end for a total of two years.⁷²

Danny Cochran left King Kong and joined up with SGT Richard Downard as the NCOIC to form the new crew of Proud American. They restored the gun box to its original design and renamed the gun truck, Ace of Spades.

⁷¹ Hampton, “Gypsy Bandits.”

⁷² Larry Fiantt conversation with Richard Killblane, 17 October 2008.



Ace of Spades gun truck rebuilt. (photo by Teneyck)

The enemy could not close down the flow of supplies because of the fire power of the gun trucks and the heroism of their crews. The 5-ton gun trucks had proven themselves the best deterrent against a convoy ambush. CPT Voightritter realized that with the war coming to a close, the Army needed to preserve an example of the 5-ton gun truck and the company concluded that the Eve of Destruction be preserved in the Army Transportation Museum at Fort Eustis, Virginia.⁷³

8th Group Headquarters later convoyed south to a place north of Da Nang, possibly Phu Ni. HHD, 8th Transportation Group was scheduled to inactivate on 28 April 1971. The soldiers of the headquarters were sent home or to the other two truck battalions. Three NCOs (an E8 and two E7s), who had come over with 8th Group in 1967, wanted to bid their farewell to the unit. They drove down in a jeep from Quang Tri and wanted to return that very night. On the return trip, they were killed. Only CPT Jess Perez, the HHD Commander and COL Mortenson remained. They reported to Da Nang Airport with individual travel orders and were told that one had to stay since they did not have unit movement orders. Since Perez commanded the HHD, he had responsibility for the 8th Group colors and had to stay. COL Mortensen got on the plane and left. Perez returned to Da Nang and spent the next three weeks getting an accounting classification for unit movement orders. He finally brought the 8th Group colors to Fort Lewis, Washington. They were uncased in a ceremony that resembled a change of command ceremony. He handed the colors over and they were recased and sent for storage.⁷⁴



Eve of Destruction – only gun truck to return to the World during/after Vietnam. It is on display in the Transportation Museum, Ft Eustis, VA.

⁷³ Voightritter letter.

⁷⁴ Jesse Perez interview by Richard Killblane, 7 August 2008.



*These crossbows were significant mementos for soldiers coming back to the States.
(photo by Logan Werth)*