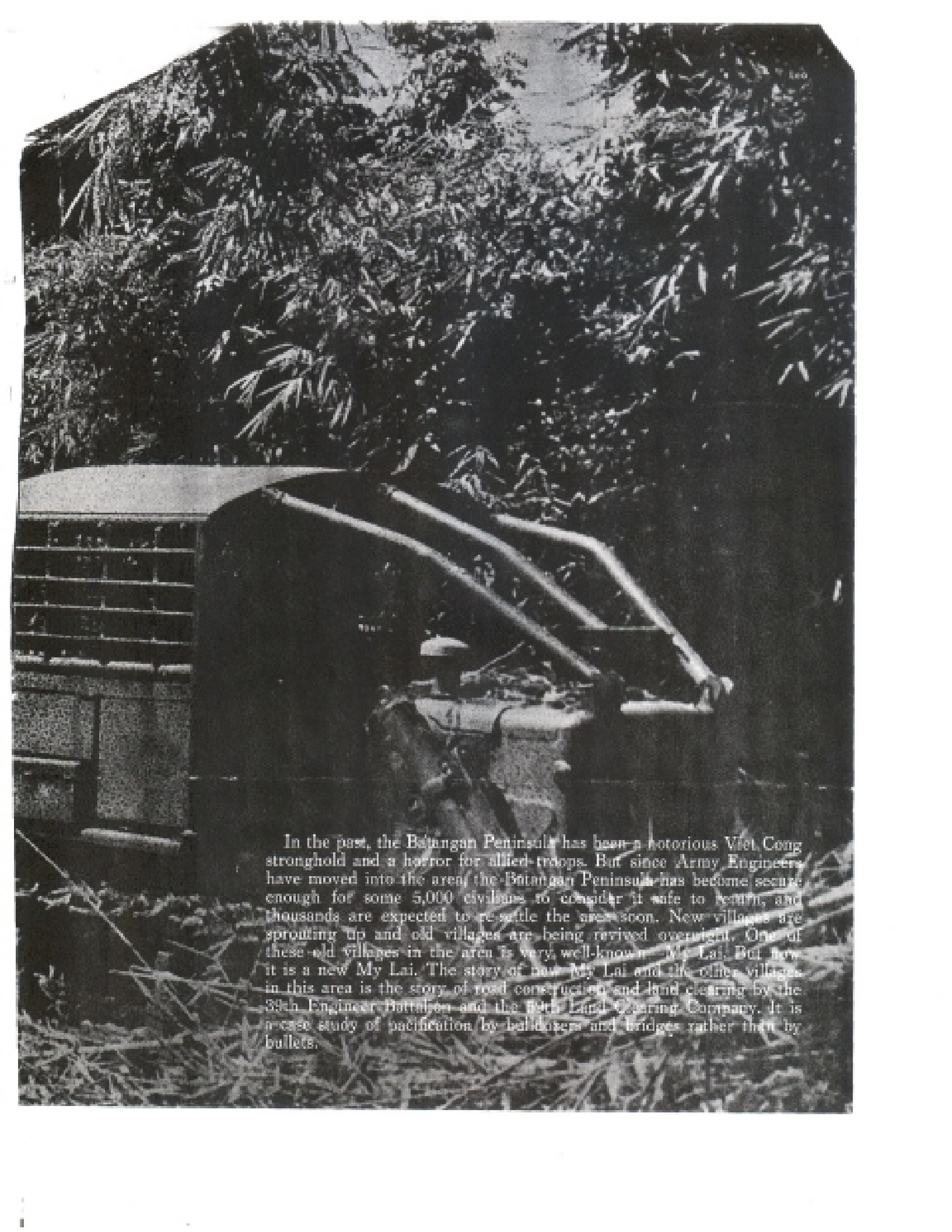


# BACK TO BATANGAN

By SP4 Roger Manning and PFC Daniel McVain



In the past, the Batangan Peninsula has been a notorious Viet Cong stronghold and a horror for allied troops. But since Army Engineers have moved into the area, the Batangan Peninsula has become secure enough for some 5,000 civilians to consider it safe to return, and thousands are expected to resettle the area soon. New villages are sprouting up and old villages are being revived overnight. One of these old villages in the area is very well-known - My Lai. But now it is a new My Lai. The story of how My Lai and the other villages in this area is the story of road construction and land clearing by the 33rd Engineer Battalion and the 36th Land Clearing Company. It is a case study of pacification by bulldozers and bridges rather than by bullets.

The Batangan Peninsula, located some 75 miles south of Da Nang in the Quang Ngai Province, was for years a rich and productive agricultural region for the South Vietnamese. But since 1963 Viet Cong efforts have converted the Batangan Peninsula, the birthplace of Ho Chi Minh, into the largest enemy held area east of National Highway (QL) 1 in the First Military Region.

As the VC activity increased in the Batangan area, the Vietnamese villagers who lived and worked there were driven away. As a result, these farmers and craftsmen and their families became refugees in their own country, deprived of their homes and their livelihood. The economy in the region slumped, food prices rose, and shortages in consumer goods appeared. Soon the enemy gained a strong foothold in the area and U.S. and ARVN infantry went into the area to try to drive them out.

But the VC were so well entrenched that, without taking huge losses in men and equipment, the Batangan area could not be completely recovered by direct attack. A large percentage of the U.S. casualties in the area initially resulted from booby-traps set in the difficult terrain.

The VC hollowed out the center and moved within like "a subway system under a city", remarked Lieutenant Colonel Fred F. Woerner, commander of 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry, 23rd Infantry Division (AMERICAL). Trenches were dug within some of these hedgerows, making enemy movement within relatively immune to artillery fire. This allowed the VC to approach undetected, fire and displace himself under cover. Allied efforts were hampered by limited movement on the ground and restricted visibility from the air.

Enemy control of most of the region was intolerable and the key to the situation was finally found in land clearing operations coupled with a road development program. Tactically, land clearing is a double edged weapon denying the enemy cover and concealment while increasing allied ground mobility and the more effective use of artillery and air support.

Now the VC had to cross open areas and travel farther to strike. This made him vulnerable to observation and when discovered left him no where to

hide. Five Viet Cong soldiers recently rallied (voluntarily surrendered under the open arms program) to the district chief; their reason--"There was no longer any place to hide."

The Engineers began work in the Batangan area late last summer with the mission of replacing the Viet Cong terrorists with the rightful occupants of the area. This mission is obviously being successfully accomplished and the results are becoming more apparent with each passing day. The 59th Land Clearing Company is destroying the dense thickets and

jungle which have been the enemy operations. More than 100 acres have been cleared, with a total of over 300 enemy bunkers and 800 yards of tunnels and trenches discovered and destroyed. Large quantities of ordnance and food supplies have also been discovered and confiscated from the enemy.

Quang Ngai has been called a "ribbon province" because of the more than one million residents seeking safety along government controlled Highway 1. But some 50,000 people have already returned



... cleared by American  
dozers. They are rebuilding their  
homes and villages in a steady advance  
east from QL-1 toward the sea.

Major Jimmy Kinlam, advisor for  
Son Tinh district in which  
considerable land clearing has taken  
place stated, "Without land clearing,  
resettlement would take much longer.  
It would have taken much more effort  
and cost many more lives to resettle. It  
is very damned important."

Security is vital to resettlement of  
the Batangan. "Land clearing in terms  
of pacification is no good without

security responsive to the people 24  
hours a day," says Major Clarence  
Matzeder, U.S. military advisor for  
Binh Son district. People will not  
move back to their land if they know  
the VC will come in the night to kill  
and steal. Once the land is cleared and  
the roads are secure the Regional  
Forces (RF) and Popular Forces (PF)  
will protect the people from the VC.  
Currently many more RF and PF  
forces are being trained to secure more  
areas as they are resettled.

The importance of this land clearing  
work to the pacification of the area is

Stevens

also brought out in the comments of  
the soldiers most directly concerned  
with the operation. Sergeant David  
Downing, an infantryman with the  
AMERICAL's 1st Battalion, 6th  
Infantry and who is part of the  
security element for the 59th, says,  
"Land clearing should have been  
thought of about five years ago. It  
makes the war effort and the  
infantry's job in this area a lot easier.  
Being shot at is bad enough, but the  
mines and boobytraps are literally  
murder. There is no way to fight them  
and the Engineers are a big help in  
eliminating them."

Specialist Five George B. Adkins,  
who is assigned to the 59th as a  
bulldozer operator, puts it this way:  
"If we don't clear the area of  
boobytraps, the infantry will certainly  
hit them and it makes their job that  
much harder and less effective if they  
do. My work isn't all that hard."

What keeps them on the job after  
having a mine go off underneath  
them? "We (operators) stand a better  
chance with 26 tons of steel  
protection than an infantryman on  
foot. And if we don't clear this area  
they would have to do it," answered  
SP4 John Felleman.

As the men clear the jungle they  
often come across signs of enemy  
activity. Rice caches, bunkers, tunnels  
and sleeping positions are commonly  
found. Sometimes a cooking fire is  
found still warm indicating the enemy  
has left within hours.

Every operator carries his M-16  
ready to fire. Sniper fire is common.  
Security for the operators is provided  
by armored personnel carriers (APCs),  
and two Sheridan armored  
reconnaissance vehicles, attached to  
the 59th. Each watches the  
surrounding undergrowth carefully  
and an ARVN Regional Force unit  
also provides security night and day.

All vehicles on the land clearing  
operation are tracks. Rain and mud  
render wheeled vehicles useless. Often  
one dozer becomes bogged down and  
must be pulled free with the aid of  
another. In hilly areas where ravines  
are hidden by dense vegetation dozers  
turn over with an irritating regularity,  
but the operators calmly climb out  
and motion for a buddy in a nearby  
dozer to come over and help.

The behemoth Rome plow blades  
are set to move over the ground six  
inches above the surface. This allows  
the vegetation to be cut and crushed



while leaving the root structure to prevent erosion.

As the dozers move out to the cut area each day, the lead dozer operator, who wears a head set connected to a radio, gets instructions from the officer in charge. He outlines an area about half a mile across in the shape of a square with rounded corners. Other operators then fall in behind him in a drawn-out staggered formation, completely ringing the cut and steadily closing in toward the center with each revolution.

Deer, wild pigs, and pheasants are often seen fleeing from the area being cleared as the square shrinks under the relentless bites of the dozers. Snakes up to ten feet long have difficulty running from the dozers and unnerve the operators considerably.

A flock of birds circle the cut, alert for the hordes of insects released by the vegetation as it falls. The smell of damp, freshly turned earth laced with diesel fumes pervades the air. The congestion at the center of the square yields to one or two dozers to finish the job. Then they move on to start the process anew.

"Tactically, there is no doubt about land clearing reducing American casualties and seriously crippling VC activity in the Batangan," said LTC James C. Ton, who as commanding officer of the 39th Engineer Battalion (Cbt) has responsibility for road building and the 59th Land Clearing Company. "In terms of pacification, when you fly over and see the number of new tin roofs far removed from QL-1, you can see progress. The willingness of people to move into newly cleared areas to cut wood and graze livestock are also indications of progress. But since land clearing began late in the summer we will see the real measure of security and resettlement on the Batangan Peninsula by the quantity of next spring's rice harvest," he concluded.

While the 59th is clearing the area, the 39th Battalion is constructing and improving a secondary road network throughout the peninsula. Altogether, about 42 miles of roadway are being built. As the roads are opened the recently returned Vietnamese farmers are able to truck their produce to larger markets and in turn receive more for their goods.

With this combination of better roads and increased acreage, more food is being distributed and the flow

of commerce is on the increase as a result. The economy of the peninsula has consequently turned upwards already and continues to rise as work of pacification through land clearing and road building continues.

"While the overall future of resettlement of the Batangan Peninsula seems good there are still serious problems," stated MAJ Matzeder. "Some materials such as tin for roof

are in short supply. Vietnamization of the war requires that ARVN troops be trained to call in artillery, air strikes, and medevac missions. It takes some five months per platoon to train PF platoons to shoulder the burden of guarding roads, bridges and villages. But MAJ Matzeder added with stern confidence, "They have the will if we give them the means."



An Engineer from a demolition team prepares to blow a dud 105 mm round. Such rounds are used by the VC to set booby-traps and have been a constant harassment to allied troops operating in the Batangan Peninsula.