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# RUNNING HAZARDOUS HIGHWAYS

The B Company "Roadrunners" of the 504th Military Police Battalion faced Viet Cong land mines and ambushes as they patrolled the notorious roads of the Central Highlands.

*By Michael Little*

**F**or the men who patrolled such notorious stretches of road as Route 1 from Nha Trang to Bong Son, Route 19 from Qui Nhon to Pleiku and Route 14 from Pleiku to Kontum, the Central Highlands' dust will forever fill their nostrils and the thick red mud will stubbornly keep pulling them back. Little has been written about these combat highwaymen, but they performed important and often dangerous tasks, such as escorting convoys; keeping a check on military traffic, civilian vehicles and pedestrians; and maintaining route security.

Among the highwaymen on the roads of Vietnam were the "Roadrunners"—the nickname given to the U.S. Army's B Company, 504th Military Police Battalion. The 504th arrived in the Phu Tai Valley, Qui Nhon, on August 31, 1965. While its area of deployment varied during the war, the 504th operated chiefly in the Central Highlands in such areas as Pleiku, Nha Trang, An Khe and Kontum. As it had during World War II, the battalion participated in a large number of campaigns and earned decorations for outstanding service.

The mission of the 504th was to provide direct combat support to the tactical units in I and II Corps Tactical Zones (CTZs), as well as to furnish military police support as directed by the commanding officer of 16th Military Police Group. From 1965 to July 1966, elements of the 504th provided military police support in 12 different locations in I and II CTZs. Supporting the buildup and deployment of three infantry divisions, the battalion was awarded the Meritorious Unit Commendation.

As an Army MP battalion, the 504th gave priority to the support of tactical units, being cited specifically for its efforts during the Dak To fighting in November 1967 and the as-



*Fighting REMFs? MPs conduct a combat drill near the enlisted men's quarters in Saigon on August 19, 1967. The threat of infiltration and attack was real, especially during the Tet Offensive of January 1968, when the MPs became very much involved in the fighting.*

sistance it provided to the 11th Infantry Brigade in December 1967. During the Tet Offensive in 1968, B Company was involved mainly in sealing off the Pleiku area and defending Camp Schmidt, but it also played an important part in the defense of the MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) compound in Kontum. Meanwhile, A Company saw considerable engagement in Nha Trang, and elements of C Company were instrumental in assisting two separate convoys that were ambushed on Highway 19 January 30 and 31.

The 504th MP Battalion moved north to Phu Bai in November 1968, to Da Nang in August 1970, and then to Long Binh in 1972 before finally departing Vietnam on July 31. At its height, the battalion (comprising A, B and C companies and headquarters) had 650 men and 22 combined patrols operating on a daily basis. Specific duties included town patrol, the guarding and evacuating of prisoners of war, and highway patrol. The 504th was the only combat MP battalion (except for infantry MPs) operating in Vietnam, and until early 1967, the highway elements were eligible for the Combat Infantry Badge.

The B Company Roadrunners deployed from Phu Tai Valley, Qui Nhon, to Camp Holloway, Pleiku, in September 1965. In December 1968, the Roadrunners moved to Camp Schmidt on the other side of Pleiku City. In contrast to Camp Holloway, the living conditions at Camp Schmidt were luxurious. New two-story buildings replaced the damp and weathered hooches, and even hot-water showers became the norm. Except for one instance when the camp was shelled by 58 rounds of 122mm rockets, the living conditions for B Company were enviable. Occasionally, armored units that had

spent a long night on Highway 14 with B Company's highwaymen would jump at the chance to bivouac with them at Camp Schmidt. For the MPs, it was an equal trade: hot-water showers for the tank crews and the added security of tanks and APCs (armored personnel carriers) around the camp for the Roadrunners.

Like other units in the battalion, B Company included a Headquarters Platoon, a 1st Platoon (town patrol) and a 2nd Platoon (highway patrol). While town patrol was responsible for law and order in Pleiku City, the highway platoon conducted armed patrols on Highway 14 (Pleiku to Kontum) and Highway 19 (Pleiku to the An Khe Pass). Strong loyalties developed within each group because they lived in separate quarters, had different equipment and outlooks, and also faced different risks. While town patrol was tied to the "spit-n-shine" of working in Pleiku City, those on highway patrol found a totally different kind of war, full of excitement, danger and a sense of freedom.

When the 504th MP Battalion was moved north in the latter part of 1968, B Company was relieved from assignment to the 504th and remained in Pleiku, attached to the 93rd MP Battalion. Highway duty continued, and the Roadrunners also became involved in prisoner-of-war evacuation. Then, on February 20, 1970, B Company was dropped from its attachment to the 93rd and reassigned to its parent battalion, with concurrent transfer to Da Nang.

Although the mission of a field army MP battalion in the combat zone had remained constant through the years, Vietnam's weather and terrain, as well as the nature of the war, dictated the development of new operational techniques—

specifically in route reconnaissance, convoy escorts and route security. B Company's Roadrunners and the other 504th highwaymen helped write the book on these new techniques.

The distance from An Khe to Pleiku on Route 19 is about 55 miles, and B Company controlled most of that area (C Company operated the stretch of road nearest to An Khe). Typical of the Central Highlands, the terrain was mountainous and beautiful . . . and dangerous.

Convoys "kicked out" daily from Qui Nhon on their way to Pleiku and beyond; trucks from the 8th Transportation Group were loaded with everything from napalm to ice cream, ammo to beer, gasoline to steaks. This supply route was considered to be one of the most crucial and treacherous in Vietnam, perhaps as tough a trip as had ever faced a trucker. Not only did they have to worry about land mines, ambushes and snipers, but the road conditions themselves were a challenge for the most experienced driver.

These morning convoys were most likely to run into trouble in Roadrunner territory, particularly near Mang Yang Pass. The climb through the steep and narrow pass was slow, making convoys an easy target. Although each convoy maintained its own improvised "gun-trucks" (some armed with M-55 quad .50-caliber machine guns) throughout its line of vehicles, Roadrunners would position themselves in the pass, ready to react in case of trouble.

An essential element of escort assistance to these convoys was the liaison and communication capability of the Roadrunners, who could call in air strikes, "Dustoffs" (the nickname for medical evacuation by helicopter), gunships and ground combat reaction (usually armor). They were also tuned to the convoy commander's frequency, providing a vital communications link throughout a convoy, which might occupy up to 3,000 meters of road space. A favorite Viet Cong target was the 5,000-gallon tanker (often carrying JP-4 aviation fuel) that was hauled by the 359th Transportation Company. A well-placed B-40 rocket would result in a thunderous explosion and devastating fire. In a practice that some looked upon as suicidal, Roadrunners would position themselves within these convoys—an example of their confidence and desire to confront the enemy.

For the most part, though, the Roadrunners actively patrolled the road before, during and after convoys to evaluate conditions, assist disabled truckers and generally handle any problem that came up. In addition to the military traffic, the road was also busy with civilian vehicles—such as buses and lambrettas (motor scooters)—and pedestrians. At times, the highwaymen responded to the occasional collision between the war effort and the people's effort to pursue their daily existence.

The basic Roadrunner vehicle was a modified quarter-ton truck (gun-jeep). Tops and windshields were removed (the latter in 1968), and armor plating installed. Sandbags were also used on the floorboards to add some protection against mine blasts. Each jeep mounted an M-60 machine gun that could traverse 360 degrees, and the occupants also carried M-16s, M-79 grenade launchers, .45-caliber pistols and various grenades. Occasionally, something exotic (such as M-72 light anti-tank weapons [LAWs]) was added to the arsenal, but only when available. It seemed as if the ordinance sergeant would rid himself of aging explosives by outfitting the highwaymen with anything, whether they needed it or not.

In 1967, the patrols also used the infamous Cadillac-Gage V-100 Commando armored car, which required a three-man crew. Although C Company was reported to have had success with it (such as protecting the occupants from a mine explosion), B Company patrols never really took to this strange-looking monster. Because of the constant malfunctioning of the twin .30-caliber machine guns and difficulties with the engine starters, the V-100 (nicknamed "coffin on wheels")



TOP: Mine-clearing operations were never completely infallible. A small mine blew this jeep off the road, but it and its crew survived relatively intact thanks to their precaution of having given it additional armor. ABOVE: No, it's not a speeding ticket; just a member of a C Company detachment at Cam Ranh Bay checking a load of supplies en route to the 4th Infantry Division.



*After discovering a Viet Cong tunnel at the top of Mang Yang Pass, Spc. 4 Donald Peyton of B Company prudently uses a fragmentation grenade to check for occupants.*

never gained the confidence of the Roadrunners. By mid-1968, the use of V-100s was discontinued on B Company's section of Route 19.

Flak jackets and helmets were required for road patrol, but during the dry season these were often found missing from the uniform. In their place, Roadrunners might don scarves or sunglasses as they sped down the road. Large goggles were supplied and used to keep dust or rain out of the driver's eyes; they were mandatory if one was to see through a driving rain. Two other unofficial items rounded out the highwayman's basic equipment—the Roadrunner patch and an ever-present paperback book to help relieve the boredom of a long day on the road.

Of course, along Highway 19, there were times when it wasn't safe to be reading a book. Just about everything in the U.S. arsenal was brought to bear at one time or another on this road. Besides the MPs and their firepower, armored units from Black Hawk Firebase (situated between Pleiku and Mang Yang Pass) stationed themselves at key checkpoints.

The road was like a giant snake, winding its way through the red soil of the Highlands, for it seemed to have a life of its own and was constantly changing. Built during the French regime, Colonial Route 19 had seen many historical battles and was the site where the Viet Minh had savagely attacked Mobile Group 100 in June of 1954. Now, involved in yet another war, the road took on a different look. As they had done on Highway 14 from Pleiku to Kontum (a stretch of road also

patrolled by Roadrunners), engineers used specially equipped Rome plows to clear the jungle for 100 yards on both sides of the road. And, in almost a year's time, the two-lane dirt road of Highway 19 was paved.

Both of these improvements contributed to the well-being of the Roadrunners and truckers by making mining and ambushing more difficult for the Viet Cong. The part of the road at Mang Yang Pass had earned the foreboding name "Ambush Alley," and the defoliant Agent Orange was sprayed there in 1968 to make life more difficult for enemy snipers. Unfortunately, during one of these aerial sprayings, a Roadrunner patrol was also given a dose of the defoliant.

Perhaps the most imaginative change along Highway 19 was the construction of an above-ground pipeline that was being water-tested in July 1968. By September, petroleum products were being pumped more than 100 miles from Qui Nhon to the storage tanks in the Pleiku tank farm. Even though the VC sabotaged these pipes quite often, the success of the pipeline lessened the necessity to line-haul with the 5,000-gallon tankers. It also gave birth to new bases, called pump stations, that were spread out along the road.

The typical patrol (usually eight jeeps) on Highway 19 pulled out of the camp gate each morning at 7:00. Checkpoint 36A was the kickoff point from Pleiku onto Highway 19. The Roadrunners grouped there, waiting for the "big boys" (the tanks and APCs) to clear the road of mines; then, with the words "Highway one niner Echo is now open," all the gun-jeeps (except for one that remained

at the CP to coordinate the convoys) sped off into the fate of another day. Responsibility on the road was divided: one patrol (two gun-jeeps) took one half of the road, while another patrolled the other half. In charge of everything was another patrol that included the leader (usually a buck sergeant) of all the Roadrunners in the field that day. This patrol would roam over the entire area, reacting to events and assisting where needed. Usually four convoys would make the hazardous trip down Highway 19 (two in each direction) each day.

At the end of each day came a mandatory operation known as "the sweep." After the last westbound convoy of the day had passed, a Roadrunner patrol would begin the sweep at Checkpoint 27 (the farthest point of responsibility for the Roadrunners) and double back west, over the Mang Yang Pass. At CP 30A (midway point), this patrol would join the rest of the highway patrols and together they would sweep back to Pleiku. If any allied vehicles were found stranded, the returning patrols stayed with them until the problem was fixed, and then escorted them to safety.

While a typical day of patrolling might be long and boring, the danger was always there. Death on the road could come suddenly in the shape of a mine explosion, a sniper's bullet or a B-40 rocket. Accidents also took a heavy toll and were a constant frustration for the highwaymen. Roadrunners tried to convince themselves that the real targets for NVA (North Vietnamese Army) and VC gunners were the American convoys, and not the men in jeeps. As it turned



*"A" Company MPs and two South Vietnamese policemen question men from a long-range reconnaissance patrol (LRRP) who arrived in Hue just after the Tet Offensive and the devastating battle to retake the city from North Vietnamese regulars in 1968.*

out, this philosophy was probably correct; in any event, it helped control the fear of being so exposed and relatively small in number.

Although an ambush could involve an intense battle, the most dreaded enemy tactic was the land mine. Even with the daily road clearing operation, Roadrunners had all day to test their luck with mines. The VC used two types, pressure-detonated mines and command-detonated mines. Pressure-detonated mines—those that exploded when enough weight was applied—were most common. The Roadrunners had a philosophy that "if you drove fast enough [good drivers could hit 60-plus mph], the mines would blow behind you." With the more dangerous command-detonated mines, which had a wire running from the mine to a hiding spot in the jungle, a lone VC could pick his target at will. After destroying his prey, he would vanish, leaving a mess on the road for the highwaymen. Usually first to arrive at any scene, the Roadrunner patrol would radio for a medevac chopper (when someone was still alive) and the "big boys" to help secure the area. The wire would be followed, but the odds of finding anyone home were slim. These types of mines could also be employed to trigger large ambushes, as a way of jamming and isolating a certain section of a convoy column.

The Roadrunners were involved in two major ambushes on Highway 19, one near the end of 1967, the other in late August of 1968. Both were bloody affairs and would forever take their place as central chapters in Roadrunner history.

The ambushers had concealed themselves very close to the road and had allowed many vehicles, including highwaymen, to pass before springing their 1967 ambush. When the violence erupted, the convoy came to a halt and NVA troops swarmed over the stranded trucks. A gun-truck (with a quad .50-caliber machine gun) was on hand, and although the gunner was eventually killed, he burned out all four barrels firing on the attackers before dying. His efforts, along with those of attacking armor and Roadrunners, succeeded in driving the enemy force away, but with severe losses to both sides.

Fortunately for one truck driver, a highwayman had brought his pet dog with him on this day's patrol. Skeeter, the Roadrunner mascot, was used to loud noise and not afraid to accompany his friend on the road. During the mop-up operations following the '67 ambush, Skeeter found his way to a driver who was pinned under a destroyed truck and presumed dead. Skeeter licked the soldier's face, slowly reviving him, and the soldier's moans eventually alerted Skeeter's master. For saving that trucker's life, Skeeter gained a reputation that kept him with B Company despite regulations prohibiting it.

The August 1968 ambush took place at Pump Station Eight, located at the base of the pass on the eastern side (not far from Checkpoint 27) and the area of many earlier attacks. "Roadrunner 3" and "3 Alpha" were eastbound, escorting a military policeman to CP 27. Also in the patrol was an ARVN counterpart, who was working with B Company. A west-



TOP: A typical convoy for the 504th MPs to escort moves out along Hong Dui Street in Pleiku. ABOVE: Members of B Company's 1st Platoon (the "Town Platoon")—with Staff Sgt. "Champy" Pasquale, the platoon sergeant, modeling the steel pot—pose for posterity in December 1967.

bound convoy was making its way toward Pleiku, while an NVA force of about 40 men prepared for the attack. The convoy, the NVA and the Roadrunners met simultaneously.

The attack began with mortars and B-40 rockets, creating a kill zone within the convoy. The lead gun-jeep was too far ahead to provide firepower, but the second Roadrunner jeep was in the thick of the action. As the enemy swarmed over the damaged trucks, the gunner in 3 Alpha opened up with his M-60 and was a vital force in keeping the NVA at bay. When his gun jammed, he grabbed his driver's M-16 and shot an enemy soldier off a nearby truck.

With the combined firepower of the convoy gun-trucks and the Roadrunners' gun-jeeps, the attack was finally beaten back. The Americans suffered one killed in action, while the NVA lost eight men (five credited to the Roadrunners), and 12 blood trails were also found. For their actions, the highwaymen were awarded Army Commendation Medals.

B Company was fortunate to suffer as few losses as it did. The Tet Offensive in January 1968 saw the first serious Roadrunner casualty, when an MP from town patrol was wounded by a grenade. Also during Tet, a B Company MP

stationed in Kontum survived being hit in the chest by a .50-caliber bullet. The darkest day for B Company came late in '68 when two men from Headquarters Platoon decided to take their jeep for a joy ride down Highway 19. They came unarmed, and at Checkpoint 30A were ordered to turn around and return to Pleiku. They never made it. A mistake on the road was costly and the two men ran head-on into a civilian bus, dying instantly. Overall, however, Roadrunner casualties were kept to a minimum through skill and a great deal of unexplainable luck.

For many Roadrunners, their faith was severely tested on Highway 19; for some, it was lost altogether. Still others had their faith restored or reaffirmed by contact with children of the Montagnards, sometimes called the "Indians of Vietnam." The Montagnard villages along Highway 19 belonged to the Bahnar tribe. Dressed in loin cloths and carrying crossbows, the Montagnards sometimes went about their daily business as if the war was nothing more than a nuisance. There was no real reason for Roadrunners to enter these villages, and contact never would have been made if it hadn't been for the children.

Checkpoint 30A was a gathering point, not only for MPs but also for Montagnard children from the nearby village. The children (ages 3 to 10) hung around the soldiers, waiting to beg for leftover C-rations that could help feed their families. Friendships grew between the Roadrunners and the children; some of the MPs made strong efforts to learn Bahnar. It was more than just a simple sharing of food. Both the Roadrunners and the children experienced love and trust, elements missing from the war environment.

It soon became evident that sharing Bahnar village life wasn't enough... the Roadrunners wanted the Montagnard children to get a taste of American life

as well. Children were brought back to Camp Schmidt to experience, for the first time, such things as hot water, television and electric lights. After completing their tours and returning Stateside, many highwaymen organized clothes drives and shipped hundreds of pounds of clothing back to the Highlands. With boxes strapped to the gun-jeeps, patrols would deliver their cargo to a village chief, who was quite fair in distributing the garments. The village would soon have the best-dressed Montagnards in Vietnam. Not all the Roadrunners were caught up in this relationship, of course, but for those Roadrunners who did experience friendship and trust with the Montagnards, the names "Vietnam" and "Highway 19" sometimes conjure up other memories besides those of frustration, fear and failure. □

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