

### **39th Engineer Battalion History Summer 1964 to Oct 1965 and then deployment to Viet Nam Nov. 1965.**

In the summer of 1964 I arrived at Fort Campbell. That is where my knowledge of the history of the 39<sup>th</sup> begins.

#### **The 39<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion Combat.**

At the time it was commanded by a Lt. Col. Johnson. I learned later that he was ultimately promoted to general. About the end of June, Lt. Col. Earnest E. Lane took over the command of the 39<sup>th</sup>. Colonel Lane was a West Point graduate and very professional and also very likable.

The 39<sup>th</sup> was one of 3 combat engineer battalions and 3 separate companies that made up the 937 Engineer Group commanded by a Colonel Loesing (sp). The group had the 27 Engineer Battalion Combat, the 70 Engineer Battalion Combat along with the 39 Engineer Battalion Combat. We also had three individual companies. The 553 Float Bridge, the 511 Foot Bridge and the 597 Engineer Maintenance Company. I do not remember if the 572 Light Equipment Co. was part of the group then or not. The 39<sup>th</sup> was housed in old wooden barracks about one mile from the main gate.

#### **1. Trained our own AIT (summer of 1964).**

The battalion was in the process of training 300 candidates for their advanced individual training (AIT) in June of 1964. I was assigned to C Company commanded by Lt. Bob Greer. This was not a normal event for a line combat engineer battalion, but it was pretty successful I believe considering we were not set up to do this. I went to the field for 3 weeks immediately. All types of training were being conducted mainly by the NCO's from within the 937 Engineer Group and the two bridge companies. The training that went on while I was in the field with them consisted of everything from bridge building to convoy ambush (offense and defense) and night assault defense. They had already been involved with the other parts of AIT training before I got there. The graduates were assigned to the three combat engineer battalions, and the separate companies within the group. The group strength was down somewhat so the boost in troop level was necessary. B Company was TDY to Alaska during all of this. I don't know exactly what their job was while there. They supposedly were providing construction support to the Arctic Test Board. They returned to Ft. Campbell later in the fall of 1964.

#### **2. Deployment to South Carolina for Air Assault II and Hawkblade.**

In August of 1964, the 39<sup>th</sup> was assigned to participate in two maneuver type exercises in North and South Carolina. Supposedly we were to clean up and repair damage from the maneuvers. Hawkblade was a short (3 day) exercise to test the idea that was to be carried out in the several month long Air Assault II exercise. The 11 Air Assault Division, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne and 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division were the main units involved in the maneuvers. The purpose of the maneuver was to test the air mobile concept. If you saw the movie "We Were Soldiers" some years back, you saw that not much was mentioned about the training of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cavalry Div, but this is where some of it was done. The 11<sup>th</sup> Air Assault was set up at McIntyre Air Guard Base just south of Columbia, SC. The 82<sup>nd</sup> stayed at their base at Ft. Bragg and the 101<sup>st</sup> operated from Ft. Campbell partially but also sent units south as needed for the maneuver. After this training the 11<sup>th</sup> Air Assault Division was designated the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cavalry Division and was stationed at Ft. Benning Ga.

C Company was camped in some old barracks on the back side of Ft. Jackson. HQ and A Companies were bivouacked in the woods between Darlington, SC and Hartsville, SC.

I was assigned the job of Drop Zone Engineer Officer and was charged with cutting the power off to the drop zones used for the large jumps in SC. We also had cranes to get the airborne out of trees and off power lines, and navy frogmen to get the paratroopers out of the ponds. This was all assigned to my group. We did this job for two large drops of over 3,000 troops twice near the town of Cheraw, SC and then again near the end of the maneuver on the back side of Ft. Bragg at a place called Camp McCall. We were placed right in the middle of the drop zone. We had troops, kit bags and jeeps falling all around us. One jeep actually fell after breaking loose from its chutes and hit about 50 yards from our troops. One helicopter crashed less than 30 yards from us after hitting power lines. That occurred later in the day while we were cleaning up. The pilot was laughing after it was over. Sort of a nervous laugh though. He knew he was in trouble.

The 39<sup>th</sup> moved to new quarters in the early summer of 1965. They were not new buildings, but were concrete block and pretty good tile floors. They were a little north of where we had been quartered and one more block west.

Another job was to put out fluorescent flags at poultry farms in the Carolinas. If the poultry farmer was afraid the noise would frighten the chickens or affect the egg laying, then we put up flags for pilots to see and fly around the farm. Not sure how that worked at night.

Both A company and B company participated in damage clean up that occurred when the airborne units moved around over fields. C company also was involved in erecting a large hanger for the 11<sup>th</sup> Air Assault on the grounds of McIntyre NG base that could handle two Mohawk aircraft. It consisted of every piece of canvas and rope you could find on Fort Jackson. Some general got behind it and took over the canvas shop at Fort Jackson. It was erected using large telephone poles, cables, and tying the canvas to the poles. There were no plans or anything. We just made it up as we went.

We returned to Ft. Campbell in early December of 1964.

#### **3. Trained at Little Creek Virginia**

In March of 1965, five junior officers were assigned to go to Little Creek Va. to the Marine Amphibious School to learn how to load LST's, LSD's and LCU's. This was a 3 week school and one of the highlights of my time in the army. After the school we returned to Ft. Campbell for a few weeks and then a couple of us returned to Little Creek along with a lot of the equipment from "A" and HQ company. We acted as loading officers for the battalion while each individual company's personnel came to Little Creek and loaded the equipment one company at a time.

We installed snorkel equipment on the vehicles so they could drive off the ships in the surf without flooding out the engines. We ended up with troops driving out in water up to the top of the breathing tubes in some pretty cold April surf. One LST breached as it was coming in and the troops had to sleep in their vehicles that night on the ship. Some of us spent that evening at the officers club. Probably not fair. Little did we know the amphibious training would come in handy in Jan. 1966.

#### **4. Air Strip at Ft. Campbell.**

In mid-summer of 1965 the battalion got word to build an air strip on Fort Campbell back off the main post. We started out with an area that was more clear than most of the post. It consisted of some trees but not really heavy forest like much of the post. This air strip was for testing a new concept for making a fast temporary landing strip. After clearing and grading the land, we installed these large rolls of thick rubber sheets. They were cemented together and had large spikes with washer type heads driven through the mats to hold them in place. These rubber mats were the finished runway surface where in the past it would have been PSP (pierced steel planking).

When the runway was complete, the air force brought in a C-130 and landed it on this new surface. It taxied around on it for a while and then took off again. After a rain it was done again and everything apparently went as planned or hoped it would go. We dismantled the air strip and rolled up the rubber in large rolls again and marked them up with some destination address. There was a lot of laughter about how some poor SCB would get this stuff and have to make something out of it. Again little did we know the poor SCB's would be the 39<sup>th</sup>.

#### **5. Received word to get ready to deploy to Viet Nam**

Summer of 1965, both the 27<sup>th</sup> and 70<sup>th</sup> Battalions were put on notice to deploy. Nothing was said about Viet Nam but it was of course understood that was where they were going. What that meant for the 39<sup>th</sup> was that we lost a lot of our good equipment and a lot of really good people. We were down to really a bare bones outfit. We also lost a few people to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne First Brigade when it was put on alert. All these units deployed that summer.

In late July or early August of 1965, the 39<sup>th</sup> was put on alert to deploy. We were severely under manned and under equipped. Within a few weeks we started to receive new people. We went to the field for a couple of weeks to train. We also did a night motor march with blackout conditions.

In early November we did a night motor march in 3 degree temperatures. We really were not equipped for that type of cold and did not expect anything like that in Kentucky that time of year. All we learned from that was that going to a cold environment was not for us.

#### **6. New Equipment**

We started receiving new equipment all through September and October. We kept our ¾ ton trucks, but got new M151 jeeps, 2 ½ tons, 5 ton dumps, and dozers, American Hoist 20 ton cranes, Cat 12 road graders. I believe the line companies kept their Michigan 210 front end loaders. We also got new air compressors. Unfortunately they had wood slats for vanes. This proved critical once in country. We screwed a lot of them up by not following proper sequence when operating them.

#### **7. Deployment to Viet Nam**

In November of 1965 we had a lot of people on leave and trying to take care of personal items. The equipment had to be readied for rail shipment to the west coast. That was a major undertaking. In HQ Company, the staff was working most nights and had very little time to take care of the vehicles in getting them ready. The line companies did not have this problem. I had to finally put my foot down and have evenings set aside for readying the equipment. In mid-November we loaded the equipment on a train on a Saturday. It went very smoothly considering the size of the undertaking. Most of the troops in the battalion were involved with the loading. There was of course a lot of preparation for that and it took a tremendous amount of coordination. I think the staff did a great job getting us ready.

During the equipment readying time, we received word to order some stuff that gave us cause for concern. First we were to order mountain gear. So we thought highland area of Viet Nam. That was cancelled and we were told we need CEV's (combat engineer vehicles). That really concerned us. A CEV is a tank (M48) body with a flame thrower instead of a gun. It could come with a gun that shoots a 38 pound demolition projectile. Thankfully it was cancelled before we could find out which we needed. About two weeks before we were to leave Ft. Campbell, our advanced party left. They took GP tents to live in once in country. They were traveling in an old C-124 Globemaster. It broke down so many times they did not beat us getting in country by much. Luckily they spent about a week in Hawaii. When they finally were able to take off from Hawaii, they went down the runway and had to abort the takeoff. They ended up having to dump all their tents off the plane before the plane could carry all the weight. There were no seats on the plane. The advanced party had been using the tents to sit on during the long slow flights.

A large part of the battalion left Ft. Campbell by train. I believe it took them 3 or 4 days to get to Oakland, California. They backed the train right up to the ship. They were afraid some of the guys would escape I believe.

The remaining people, about a Boeing 727 plane load, were in Ft. Campbell for Thanksgiving. All the families were invited to HQ Company for Thanksgiving dinner. It was both a fun and a sad time.

The remaining people then flew to Travis Air Force Base. We departed Fort Campbell around midnight on the Sat. after Thanksgiving. We were bused from Oakland to our ship. The later departing people got to the ship about the same time as the troops on the train. Our ship was the USNS General Weigel. It was a WWI troopship that was used primarily in the Korean War. It had been in mothballs since Korea.

#### **8. Trip Over**

We stayed on the General Weigel for a few days docked in Oakland. Finally around the 1<sup>st</sup> of December we departed Oakland. We had two medical battalions and another combat engineer battalion on board. Our battalion commander, Lt. Col. Lane, was the senior officer and therefore was the troop commander. The first day at sea we traveled to San Diego to pick up 800 marines. We spent one night in port there and departed the next morning. No passes were granted except for a few officers.

The first day after San Diego was very calm. In the middle of the night a really large bad storm caught us. The captain said it was the worst he had been in his 40 years at sea. We woke up with everything not tied down sliding across the floor. I imagine at least 2000 of the 2800 on board were seasick. We had waves coming over the bow of the ship and going the full length of the ship. The officers and senior NCO's had small cabins on the upper decks and the troops were down below. Being up on top meant more rocking. Being down below meant no horizon to look at.

I remember a large pot of mashed potatoes going over in the galley. People were sliding across the floor on their back in mashed potatoes. I doubt it made much difference at that point. Not many takers for dinner.

Since the General Weigel was just out of mothballs, the plumbing was not very functional. Toilets flushed on the 3 deck were flowing out on the floor on the 4 deck. With all the sickness going on down below, it was pretty disgusting.

The storm finally left us after over 24 hours of misery. We pretty much had a calm trip the rest of the way.

We docked in Okinawa the day after Christmas. There was a large fenced in area by the docks so Col. Lane decided the troops could get off the ship for a while. Someone forgot to tell the MP's to keep the gates locked on the backside of the fence. The troops took off for the gate at a run. There was a pretty big hill right outside of the gate and it was full of small businesses, etc. Some of the small businesses were houses of ill repute. By the time the NCO's and officers could get up there and get the troops started back down the hill, many had already completed their business and came out putting their uniforms back on.

We had to confiscate any booze that was being taken back on the ship. We could have filled up a pretty good sized truck with what was being carried under shirts and in pants pockets. I am sure we had some pretty harsh things said and thought about us for doing that. The ship captain said we were not leaving until a thorough search was completed.

The officers and senior NCO's were taken by bus over to the main military installation and had a delayed Christmas dinner.

Seemed like rubbing salt in the wounds of the enlisted men.

After departing Okinawa, we sailed between Formosa and China. One night we were lit up by the USS Enterprise. At least that was what we were told by the navy personnel on board. Whatever it was, it was pretty spectacular.

We arrived in Viet Nam around the end of December. Our first stop was in Da Nang where the marines disembarked. The next day we were off the coast of Qui Nhon. We had been told the 39<sup>th</sup> would get off there. The company commanders and staff officers got off the ship onto Larc's and went ashore. We were met by some of our old people that had been transferred to the 937<sup>th</sup> Engineer Group. They were stationed in Qui Nhon. We found out that our ultimate destination was supposed to be Tuy Hoa, but that we could not convoy there from Qui Nhon because it was not safe. We departed Qui Nhon and left for Cam Ranh Bay.

The next day we landed in Cam Ranh Bay. We were greeted by a large explosion that sent a few ducking for cover. Turned out it was blast from a rock quarry on the peninsula. They blasted every day at a certain time so as not to set off any alarms about an attack. We finally got used to it.

We were taken to the end of the peninsula where we had some tents and a few tin roofed buildings set up for us. There was really was not much to do since we had no equipment. We were hosted by the 864 Engineer Battalion (Const). They had been there since the summer of 65. A lot of guys went swimming and played cards while we were waiting. Our equipment ship arrived finally and we off loaded everything. Turned out the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne liked some of our jeeps and took them to Phan Rang. My executive officer later found one while traveling in that area. It belonged to some first Sgt. He held up his hands and said nothing when Lt. Ganesini told him he was taking it.

#### **9. In Country**

Immediately after getting our equipment, B Company deployed to Tuy Hoa along with most of the heavy equipment platoon from HQ. We moved most of the equipment on LST's that just happened to be parked right in front of our area. So that training at Little Creek paid off pretty quickly. A and C Companies started working on concrete pads for the hospital at the air base and also some fuel storage tanks right there at Cam Ranh.

"A" Company was involved in building the longest tactical bridge in Viet Nam. The trip from the Cam Ranh peninsula over to the mainland had been done with barges ever since the buildup was started. It was slow and tedious and really kept construction growth to a minimum. The bridge really opened up the traffic to the peninsula. It was over 1100 feet long and was made of M4T6

float bridge material. I believe the float bridge was from a Vietnamese unit with advisors from the 553 Float Bridge Company. It was written up in the Stars and Strips. It only took a few days to complete.

The first weekend we had our equipment, we outfitted a duce and half with a 50 cal. ring mount and took off to Nha Trang for beer. We brought back more than beer. We had three truckloads of troops going with us. Doc McDonald said 85% brought back gonorrhea. Not sure how that happened in that short amount of time while I bought the beer at the air base.

We set up our battalion maintenance tent as a beer hall for the enlisted men. There was a shed on top of a hill that was called the officers club. The mess halls were screened in buildings with metal roofs. We were located right on the beach. It was a beautiful setting.

We got some wing tanks from the air force and filled them with water and pressurized them and used them to feed water to our ice maker we bought back in the states with unit fund money.

We got some tanks the navy used as floats to mark off an area of water and made showers from them. The showers were right on the beach also.

We had a volley ball court and a movie screen on the beach. We had purchased an anamorphic lens (unit fund) for cinematic movies. We used to hit the ships as they came into port to get the best movies we could get. We also had a guard tower like a life guard tower on the beach. We would put an armed guard there to shoot sharks should the need arise. Cam Ranh Bay supposedly was the largest shark breeding ground in Southeast Asia.

The mission in Tuy Hoa was two-fold. We were supposed to support the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade of the 101<sup>st</sup> Division and also work on the initial enlargement of the small civilian airfield there. Air Viet Nam flew some DC-3's out of there. We got a plane load of rolls of rubber one day. It was the same rubber we had used at Ft. Campbell back in the summer. This time we used it to make the tarmac area and used PSP to make the runway larger. Good thing we knew how to use it.

We were told the rush to get Tuy Hoa up and running was to get the area secured. It supposedly had a large rice crop there and they did not want the VC to get it. The 101<sup>st</sup> and one brigade of the Korean Tiger Division were there to hold the area and protect the rice crop. The VC were active at night and would hit the outside perimeter manned by the Koreans pretty regularly. Some of the heavy equipment was lightly damaged on one attack while out with the 101<sup>st</sup> working a road beside a rice paddy. Our guys were told not to bring weapons because the 101<sup>st</sup> would take care of everything. I told my troops not to listen to them anymore. If you go out take a weapon.

On one of the trips to Tuy Hoa, Col. Lane decided to do a little recon on the way back to Cam Ranh. They were flying low in a Huey and took some fire. He was the only one hit. He was taken to Nha Trang immediately where he died from blood loss that night. That was a pretty severe blow to the battalion personnel. Col. Lane was a very popular commander among everyone that worked with him. Major Schultz took over as CO of the 39<sup>th</sup>. I was told he was a battle field promotion back in WWII. He was pretty rough around the edges, but very colorful and pretty sharp.

One of the projects the 39<sup>th</sup> worked on at Tuy Hoa was building a port that could be used to off load small ships to supply the area. It was a few miles south of the main part of Tuy Hoa. The port was named Port Lane after Col. Lane.

I departed Viet Nam and only have spotty information on what happened after that. In 1971 while on a business trip to Atlanta, I boarded a plane for home in Charlotte, NC. I heard a voice I recognized. It was Lt. Coulter the CO of A Company. We got together on that flight and planned an officer reunion. We were able to get about 10 officers together for a reunion in Gatlinburg, Tenn. We said we would do it every 5 years but were not able to keep it going. I have only seen one of the guys since then.

Richard Hill

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39<sup>th</sup> Engineers. June 1964 to March 1966