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ORAL HISTORY OF THE 591ST ENGINEER COMPANY (LE)

SEP 1970 – AUG 1971

This is a report of the activities and personnel of the 591st Engineer Company (Light Equipment) during the period I was in Vietnam, September 20, 1970 until my DEROS, August 8, 1971. This account is dedicated to the 591 alumni who were there, living and deceased, so that we may remember and celebrate our combat service with pride, and share it with family and posterity.

“We were soldiers once. And young.”

I am aided in my report by George Kinsley, Dean Klaus, and Tony Nolan, who each contributed some of their memories, which are distant for all of us after 40 years. I also include some description of the 27th Engineer Battalion, which, together with the 591st, constituted the “Tiger Task Force”, originally organized in 1970 with the move to Camp Eagle in I Corps (SW of the imperial capital, Hue) and the transfer to the 18th Engr Brigade.

I am also aided by the 27th Engr Bn Yearbook (70-71), published I think in July 1971, in placing names with faces after these 40 years, which is probably the hardest part of recounting this history. I apologize in advance for any errors and misidentifications of soldiers and their activities described herein. The lieutenants and sergeants, who I knew best, changed positions and rotated in and out during the course of my 9 months in command, and I may have botched the order of appearance at times.

I also drew from the book "INTO LAOS", 1986, by Keith William Nolan, for background and context to my description of the invasion of Laos, the most historic part of 591st history during this time frame. It is an interesting, if disjointed, account of the two-month operation, written by a journalist instead of an historian. The book gives a very good description of the terrain and physical conditions of the campaign. It is largely a string of chronological anecdotes by infantrymen and aviators who participated, short on maps and the big picture, but worth reading to anyone who participated. Nolan apparently did not interview any engineers, so we don't get the acclaim that we deserved. Nonetheless, it informed me of events and developments of which I was unaware, or not fully informed at the time, and casts us in a more prominent light than I had imagined.

My background prior to arriving in Vietnam was a West Point graduate, Class of 1968; Ranger School; Engineer Basic Course; Airborne School; and then assignment to the 193rd Infantry Brigade in the Canal Zone in February, 1969. While in Panama, I served as a platoon leader and then Executive Officer of the 518th Engineer Company (Cbt) (which was attached to the 193rd Infantry Brigade), until June 1970, when I was promoted to Captain and assigned as the Assistant Supply Officer (S-4) of the Infantry Brigade until my volunteering for Vietnam in August 1970. On a personal note, I "volunteered" for VN because I had decided to enter Law School under the Army's Excess Leave Program, and needed to complete a combat tour before becoming eligible.

After landing in Bien Hoa, I processed through the repo depot and moved up the coast to Long Binh, and then Danang, where I was assigned to the 27th Engr Battalion of the 45th Group of the 18th Engineer Brigade. I'm sure we all remember the disorientation and apprehension we experienced in

moving through the pipeline in an unfamiliar war zone. Mine was considerably enhanced when flying out of Long Binh. Watching out the porthole of the C130, I saw the #4 engine flame out and stop, followed by the #3 engine. The pilot immediately banked into a dive to glide back to the airstrip, where I spent another night before boarding a successful flight to Danang the next day.

I arrived in Phu Bai, from Da Nang, in a steady rain and was delivered to Camp Eagle for an interview with LTC Russell Jorn, CO of the 27th Engr Battalion. After a short interview, he announced that I would be assigned to the position of Battalion Operations Officer (S-3), to replace Capt (P) Joe Larramore, who had been wounded the week before by a land mine. He was recuperating in Japan for an indefinite convalescence, and LTC Jorn said he had no choice but to assign me to battalion S-3, despite my inexperience. He promised that when Joe got back, I would be re-assigned to command of the 591st. Having never been in an Engineer Battalion before, you can imagine my trepidation at being assigned a Major's billet, directing the operations of six companies and over 2000 men. I was all of 23 years old at the time. Fortunately I was too busy to worry about whether I was equal to the task.

September to December 1970 was a busy time for the Tiger Task Force with the ending of the monsoon season and fairly frequent enemy activities affecting our engineering operations. Our Area of Operations was from Phu Loc in the South (halfway to Danang) to Camp Evans (40 miles) North on QL-1, bounded by the South China Sea to the East and the A Shau Valley to the West. For you history buffs, this was the area known as "The Street Without Joy", so named by reporter Bernard Fall in his account of the French Indo-China war in the 1950's. Firebases we supported were Arsenal, Birmingham,



Bastogne,
Vehgel,
Rendezvous,
Geronimo, T-
Bone, Anzio,
Roy, Evans,
and Rakkasan.

Our
operations
generally
consisted of

road improvements and maintenance, rock crushing, and firebase access and support. Elements of the battalion were assigned specific projects and missions, with the 591st supporting all missions with equipment and expertise as required. 591st alone was charged with operating the rock quarry at Phu Loc, which supplied aggregate to road improvements all over I Corps as far north as the DMZ. At one time, I don't remember when in my year there, we worked to reestablish a railroad track and train from Phu Loc going north to carry crushed rock. We had access to an old locomotive, but ultimately were unable to get it up and running, as the train tracks were frequently interdicted.

In October, 1970, several bridges along QL-1 (at An Lo, Lan Co, and Troy) were damaged by enemy explosives. Because QL-1 was the only paved road in I Corps, and its main north-south traffic artery, the 27th worked on an emergency basis to effect repairs, with nighttime operations if required. Usually one line company was assigned to the mission, but usually a crane from the 591st was also involved. As the Bn S-3, I went along on most operations. We encountered sporadic gunfire on a couple of occasions (I remember one at a village I called Ding Dong), but no damage or casualties.

In November 1970, the Viet Cong blew up Bridge 21 on Route 547 between Firebase Birmingham and Bastogne, thus cutting off FB Bastogne, near the A Shau Valley, from ground access/transportation. I received the report first thing in the morning, just after LTC Jorn and the XO, Maj McKenzie, departed by helicopter for a 45th Group meeting in Danang. My Engineer basic training quickly came into play when my operations sergeant, SSG Cashell, remembered that we had Bailey Bridge stock in Camp, which I determined could be effectively used to span the gap. I found a 1st Sergeant from A Co who used to teach Bailey Bridge at Ft Belvoir, and assigned A Co (Cpt Elliott) to install a Bailey Bridge as an emergency remedy. We got all of the stock loaded and out there (about 15 miles west of Camp Eagle) by dark, where I left Capt Elliott to get the job done overnight after arranging site security by an Infantry company from a 101st infantry battalion at Firebase Birmingham.

(As an aside I ran into a veteran last year at the Normandy Cemetery in France who had been a platoon leader in that company, and was surprised at how well he remembered the incident. He had been fascinated watching the Bailey assembly in the dark. Small world. Those infantrymen had a high regard for us engineers.)

LTC Jorn returned around dusk from Danang, received my report, and immediately began organizing a relief column to go to Bridge 21 to serve a "hot meal." I was a bit dismayed at the unnecessary risk and argued vociferously against such a nighttime mission through absolutely unsecured territory. Nonetheless, he insisted that I get clearance from the 101st, and line up a 591st crane and a mess truck to make the trip, with his jeep in front and mine in back. A crane is not needed to assemble a Bailey Bridge, and A Co had perfectly adequate food and security on site. Everything I had ever been taught about

guerilla warfare screamed that it was a classic tactic for the Viet Cong to blow a bridge and then ambush the relief column, and this was a classic situation.

Unfortunately, and despite my protestations, I found myself at the Camp Eagle west gate at 9 pm, ready to shepherd the crane in front of me into an expected ambush. By the grace of God, a Ruff Puff (Regional Forces) patrol triggered the intended ambush before we got to it, at a ideal site where 547 made a 90 degree turn around a Buddhist monastery. The 101st immediately ordered us back to Camp, where we returned without further incident. The bridge was built by dawn and all's well that ends well – but you can tell I am still unhappy about that aborted expedition. A few engineer lives could have been lost that night but for happenstance.

In December, Larramore returned from convalescence and I was reassigned to command the 591st. I wish I could recall the officer (a 1st Lt Bassett?) that I replaced, but he was at the end of his tour so this was a normal rotation. As S-3, I had learned that the 591st was an outstanding company that could be relied upon to accomplish its many missions with a minimum of supervision by Battalion. Very few battalion missions could be accomplished without significant assistance from the men and equipment of the 591st. As we came to accept as a near motto, it was true in my observation, initially as an outsider, that “if you wanted to get a job done, let the 591st do it.”

Our bivouac area was in the southwest sector of Camp



Eagle, western most of the 27th Tiger Task Force. As may be seen from this photo, our area was known as Gia Le, place of the dead (and many gravesites).

We occupied a 10-degree slope, with corrugated steel “hooches” spread around the slope, orderly room and company offices at the top, together with the officers’ hooch. Cold showers came from water tanks, gravity fed midway down the slope to the east. The huge rats and colonies of roaches were a daily encounter in base camp, especially on the way to the showers after dark when one didn’t dare go without wearing jungle boots to squash the roach army.

An assembly area separated the upper area from the platoon hooches at the bottom of the slope. That area and slope allowed us to erect a screen of sorts to show movies in the evening that Spring, after the monsoons. I could not tell you how many times we saw “The Green Berets”, but our soldiers could quote the dialog along with John Wayne, and never failed to hoot when he jumped out of that airplane without hooking up his parachute cord.



Our company area (shown here) was located across the battalion street from the Mess Hall

and Chapel (the good news) but less than 100 yards from a 101st battery of 175mm howitzers (the bad news). The blast of outgoing 175's was almost as loud as incoming shelling, but after a few days, we all learned to tell the difference in our sleep. Our motor pool was to the west near the Eagle perimeter, a little far to walk. We had our own security



perimeter with sandbag fighting positions around our company, and built a fairly substantial TOC (tactical operations center) near the orderly

room to replace a sandbag hut next to the orderly room. We were organized as a ready reaction force for breaches of the perimeter.



591 soldiers were part of a regular rotation to man the southeast portion of the Eagle perimeter and we

supplied a regular officer of the guard.

Our Mess Hall was combined for the whole battalion, but SFC Chaffee, the 591st Mess Sgt, was in charge. I think most people shared my opinion that we ate pretty well for our evening meals in camp, although it did seem that we got roast beef so often that it got the name "Phu Bai Steak." I also recall working a bit of a black market at Camp Eagle to trade any available unused dozer time to 101st units in return for a quid pro quo of steaks and beer, which were enjoyed by our soldiers in the company area at barbecues.

Regular Sunday services were held at the Chapel by the Battalion Chaplain, Capt David Giles. George Kinsley recalls an Easter sermon that was among the best he ever heard. I recall the chaplain's kind support and conduct of a funeral service for a 591 soldier, which was attended by the whole company. Giles and the battalion surgeon, Capt Bill Trice, frequently reached out to indigenous villages and Giles set us up to do some civil affairs projects for worthy charitable activities.

I remember well my first (and only) Christmas away from home and family. It was a rainy day, the only day of 365 that we did not conduct normal combat engineer operations. As I recall, the officers and NCO's hosted a company party that was well received. Seems that only officers and NCO's could buy hard alcohol, and the punch was definitely spiked that night. We did get to march to the Bob Hope show, before Christmas on Dec 23, and I'm sure that those able to attend will never forget the appearance of Johnny Bench and the Gold Diggers on a rare sunny afternoon. The sun may not have appeared for another 3 months.

During the months of December and January 1971, our main mission, other than the Phu Loc quarry, was the upgrading of Route 547 to all-weather classification from Eagle

to FB Bastogne, and the raising of the road to FB Arsenal, which frequently went under water with monsoon rains and flooding. We established a borrow pit from a site southwest of Phu Bai, and delivered tons of fill into the roadway to Arsenal, raising it some 15 feet in elevation as I recall. Pan



Loader/Scrapers and dump trucks, day after day, delivered and spread the fill, while our graders spread it and compacting equipment secured it. We

set up pile driver rigs to anchor the culvert/bridging across that valley. Third Platoon (Lt Tony Nolan, then Kinsley, and SSG Wilson, SSG Hogan, and SFC Arndt) had primary responsibility for Arsenal.

On 547, we spread a lot of aggregate and graded it into the existing roadway, with individual projects

to upgrade culvert and water structures. In addition, we had the messy job of spreading asphalt-based penneprime on



the roadway to cut down on the dust. This was a much longer road than Arsenal, and I think the

first platoon (Lt Floyd Shoemaker and SSG Frank DeLuna, SFC Freelong) had this assignment on a daily basis, as I recall. One



of the fun things we did on 547 was to erect “Burma Shave” signs in an attempt to inject some humor in the admonition that heavy traffic slow down. Speeding of

heavy trucks caused a great deal of laterite dust and exacerbated potholes, our nemesis. “Pot holes begat potholes, begat potholes, begat potholes”, as Joe Larramore famously reminded us.

Second Platoon (Lt Dean Klaus and SSG Jim Young) had responsibility to support the road operations around Camp Evans in the North, but worked into all other missions around Camp Eagle as well.

The Support Platoon spent every day traveling to Phu Loc,



blasting rock out of the quarry, crushing it, and loading it onto transport north.

I recall that production reports were made daily to 45th Group headquarters, and we had a lot of pressure to produce. The crushers were a continuing maintenance problem.



Lt George Kinsley and SFC Harris carried the daily grind, producing tons of aggregate, which no doubt is still in place on secondary

roads throughout northern I Corps. SSG Hires was the blasting expert.



We had some local regional forces to secure the site at night, and at one point

considered keeping the platoon there overnight to increase productivity, but felt that security was not sufficient. There was even an intelligence report of an assassination plot by the local VC, but nothing came of it after we took precautions.

The Maintenance Platoon had a heavy, dirty task of keeping our valuable equipment running in difficult conditions. CW5 Jerry Swader and SFC George Dickert were in charge and every day started with the company at the motor pool with preventive maintenance, inventorying moving stock, and reporting on deadline equipment. George Kinsley tells me that my predecessor required all lieutenants to get underneath trucks every morning to check for leaks and loose bolts. The battalion operations were heavily dependent on the availability of 591st equipment, and my daily after-action operations meeting with the S-3 always started with a report of our deadlined equipment.

It should be noted that, unlike the popular picture of jungle and rice paddies in Vietnam, our AO in northern I Corps



was more arid and mountainous, (here the view west from FB Arsenal) with sub-tropical forests to the west of the coastal strip where the majority of the population

resided. Rice and fishing were the primary activities of the locals. The weather was hot and not too humid when the sun was out, but got quite chilly during the monsoon season. It didn't help being wet most of the time, but civilians are surprised to hear that there were days when we shivered in our sweaters and fatigue jackets. The predominant soil was a reddish clay called laterite, with a large proportion of iron in it.

It was fairly good for compacting roads and airfields, but when dry kicked up a fine dust that got into everything mechanical, and seemingly, into our skin pores.

I do not remember who the First Sergeant was when I took command, but he was a short-timer. When he rotated home, I moved SFC Dickert from the maintenance platoon to the orderly room, where he and I formed a good team. We even had our very own “Radar”, Sp5 Richard Nelson, as company clerk. Later in the year, 1SG Simon Teasley arrived to take over the orderly room. We never did get a full time Executive Officer. Tony Nolan was senior LT and assumed command at Eagle while I was in Khe Sanh, and George Kinsley also doubled as Executive Officer toward the end of my tour.

We had a “hitching post” in front of the orderly room for parking jeeps. Behind the post was a large mural sign that showed a cartoon pan loader, dozer, and the words “KANT HACK IT KONSTRUCTION KO”. I do not recall whether I ever



got an explanation for the sign, which I believe was erected by my predecessor. I didn't like it, as it seemed a derogatory statement to me, but the

men seemed to like it as a unique signature for 591, and it stayed. In the spring, I called for a distinctive patch for the company to be worn on the right chest pocket, to give identity separate from the battalion. I believe SFC Dickert came up

with the design, and I contributed the motto “WE BUILD ROADS.” We had it sewn locally and distributed to the company. I think we all took pride in that patch and the distinct identity of the 591st.

I will say a word here about the excellent morale of the soldiers in the 591st. This was a time in the war when unpopularity at home, combined with a less than aggressive strategic outlook by the MACV command, led to a malaise among American troops. There was a sense among a primarily draftee fighting force that we were not fighting for victory and that no one wanted to be the last one killed in a useless conflict. Drug use, racial tensions, and resentment of authority became significant issues throughout the in-country units, with fragging of officers and NCOs a not infrequent incident in base camps.

I saw some of this later around Khe Sanh with the Americal Division (Rusty Calley’s division), but never among our engineer troops. Our soldiers were well trained and motivated to accomplish real missions that arose on a daily basis, so there was no idleness for us. Our officers were from ROTC and OCS, and we had many “shake and bake” junior NCOs toward the end of this war, but everyone did their job with professional attention and a sense of duty. I am proud to have served with the men of the 591st, who were as fine a group of officers, NCOs, and soldiers as could be found in any unit, in any war.

As a funny aside, I have told the story many times of how Lt Tony Nolan became an engineer officer. He graduated from Holy Cross University with a Bachelor of Arts degree, major in English. He opted for OCS when his draft number came up. On his enlistment papers, he answered the question “College Degree?” with “Yes”, and filled in the block with “ENG”. Thus

did an ENGLISH major become a combat ENGINEER. But he took to engineering like a duck to water. I wrote a letter of recommendation for his application to law school that Spring, at the same time as I was applying to law school myself. And thus did two engineers move on to careers in law.

Back to our campaign, we were continually reacting to weather and water damage as required. During one of the worst storms when the Spring monsoons resumed, we almost lost the Pohl Bridge across the Perfume River on Route 547,



connecting FB Birmingham and FB Bastogne to Camp Eagle. Torrential rains had loosened tons of wood debris from the creeks and ravines into

the river, where it floated downstream to pile up against a steel pier bridge, originally built by the Seabees (with equipment we didn't have). The bridge was two lanes, about 150 yards long, and would have been very difficult to replace had it been



breached. The span between each steel pier was not long enough to allow the debris to pass the bridge without "clogging" the span.

The debris buildup extended the length of the bridge on the upstream side and reached a crisis early one evening when the pile-up grew to

about 100 yards upstream, almost as though the bridge was a dam. The lateral force was not calculated, but battalion thought the bridge would collapse if the pressure was not relieved. 591 got the call and we got a crane, with clamshell, and searchlights down there just after dark. Winds were very high and dangerous for the crane operator, in addition to the pelting rain and poor visibility. We got security only from the Ruff Puffs guarding the west end of the bridge, but other than a few muzzle flashes that I saw from a distance on the west side of the bridge, I think even the VC declined to venture out into that night, despite the highlighted target we presented. I correctly surmised that an AK-47 could not hit anything at that range, anyway. I spent a long and tiresome night out on that bridge with George Kinsley, SSG Darrel Hogan, and two crane operators, continuously lifting debris from the upstream side to be dropped downstream of the bridge. The bravery and professionalism of the operators saved the day (night), and the bridge was still standing at dawn when the storm abated. I was very grateful that no one had been blown off the bridge, including the crane.

Another monsoon experience occurred later in the Spring of 1971 when the timber trestle bridge just below FB Arsenal was washed out.



We had raised the roadway through that valley by 15 feet, but did not anticipate that the bridge roadway would go underwater. It was about 75 yards long and situated in the mouth of a gorge at the end of the valley. Apparently what happened was that a flood of water raised the river about 15 or 20 feet right at the gorge mouth and put the bridge roadway 10 feet under water one night. Almost like a wine cork, the lateral and buoyant pressure of the water lifted the superstructure right off of its nails and spikes. The whole superstructure floated 50 yards downstream, in tact, to wedge into the gorge. At first glance by the road clearance detail the next morning, the bridge looked to be in place until one noticed that the road was not connected at either end.

Tony Nolan and SSG Wilson rebuilt the bridge with third



platoon and the cranes.

The new span was built

upon the existing pilings, but was raised 15 feet from the earlier road height. It was a bit like Engineer Basic, with the timber bridge being designed at Battalion S-3, and constructed by third platoon and a company of the 27th. Once the materials were gathered, we



had the bridge back in service in about two weeks, and FB Arsenal connected again.

On January 29, 1971, all Tiger Battalion officers and NCOs were called to the Battalion mess hall for a briefing that turned out to be a warning order for the recapture of Khe Sanh and the invasion of Laos, which was to kick off on January 31. This was known as Operation "Lam Son 719" by the ARVN and the more limited "Dewey Canyon II" by the US forces, whose mission was to support the invasion by the ARVN while being prohibited from entering Laos. LTC Jorn briefed us on the mission and informed us there were over 50,000 main force NVA troops, with armor and artillery, in and around Khe Sanh and Laos, and the NVA was expected to provide stiff resistance. He advised us that the rules of engagement were those for a free fire zone, as there were no civilians in the area and anyone encountered not wearing a U.S. or allied uniform was a fair target.



I do not recall having any prior warning, or even an inkling, of the top-secret plans. I thought it was ultra secret until George Kinsley heard from our

hooch mama-san (shown here with Swader, Shoemaker, and Kinsley) that we were going into Laos!

My later research has informed my understanding of this campaign. Much of what follows was not known to us at the time, but since this was the most historic action by the 591st during the war, I will spend some time recounting the overall picture so that those of us who participated will have the context of our operations for posterity.

Lam Son 719 was originally conceived by MACV (General Abrams) in mid-December, 1970, as a spoiler attack to destroy supply dumps and systems being accumulated by the NVA in and around Tchepone, a crossroad of trails about 20 miles inside Laos. This supply build-up was to support an expected major NVA offensive through the A Shau Valley in the Spring of 1971. Eastern Laos was entirely controlled by the NVA, who used it as a sanctuary and highway for running troops, supplies and equipment into South Vietnam. Daily B-52 bombing runs had not been successful in interdicting this supply line.

The overall plan was for U.S. forces to combat assault into Khe Sanh; rebuild the airfield and establish a major supply

base there; and reopen the road from Khe Sanh to the Laotian border, where it continued on to Tchepone, the targeted heart of the invasion and the NVA supply buildup. This first phase was to be completed in 7 days, after which several ARVN divisions and brigades would take the road into Laos, sweeping all before it to Tchepone. After destroying supply dumps and inflicting major casualties and disruption on the NVA, the ARVN units would withdraw back to Khe Sanh and also partially through the A Shau Valley (where there were additional supply dumps to destroy). Thus the objective of the campaign was not to occupy territory, but more in the nature of a spoiling raid which MACV thought would buy time for the ARVN to take over the war while all U.S. ground forces could go home, the central feature of President Nixon's peace plan.

Security was very tight for the planning of this operation, with some involved senior commanders not informed until a week before D-Day, January 31, 1971. The overall command of all allied forces was to be General Sutherland and the XXIV Corps of MACV, which included the main fighting forces of the ARVN. General Berry, CG of the 101st Airmobile Division, was given overall command of the U.S. forces involved, which included the 1st Brigade of the 5th Mechanized Division, out of Quang Tri, and the Americal (26th) Division ferried up from the Central Highlands. Nearly every U.S. aviation unit based in Vietnam (and who were authorized to enter Laotian airspace, including rescuing downed pilots) was tasked with supporting the ARVN in Laos, together with Navy, Marine, and Air Force Tactical Air, and even the U.S. 7th (?) Fleet cruising off the coast of Quang Tri from where it could provide air and fire support.

As may be seen from the description of the U.S. mission, Engineer support was the critical factor to the early success of the invasion. U.S. infantry, artillery, armor, and aviation were to support us through the first week, and thereafter provide

covering security around the road and the airfield, until withdrawal. The 18th Engr Bde (45th Group) provided the 14th Engr Bn, the 27th, the 591st Engr Co and a platoon of the 59th Land Clearing Company for our mission. Also involved was the 326th Engr Bn of the 101st, but its role and limited equipment suited it to little more than clearing minefields and constructing base fortifications. Having shared Camp Eagle with the 326th for almost a year, I never really figured out what they did for a living. We were called upon for any difficult engineering mission, not the 326th. To this day, I have always been a little bit miffed that members of the 326th Engr Bn received CIB's (combat infantryman badges) by virtue of the fact that they wore the Screaming Eagle patch of an infantry division, while our troops, who did all of the heavy engineer lifting in front of the infantry, did not.

In retrospect, it appears that planning was too hasty for so complex an operation. The coordination among U.S. forces during the first phase went amazingly well, considering the hasty planning among units unused to working together. But the plan fell apart when the ARVN entered Laos, where U.S. advisors could not follow. The ARVN air assaulted into selected firebase positions in Laos, instead of walking in with QL-9 as an axis for pushing all before it. Lacking an indigenous military engineer capability, the ARVN never improved the road from the border suitable for wheeled-vehicle use; never secured QL-9 in Laos; and were therefore entirely dependent on air resupply.

ARVN commanders relied too heavily on U.S. advisers to coordinate fire and air support to jump out on their own. Command and Control problems arose immediately among ARVN commanders unused to anything larger than battalion sized actions. They sat on their firebases, and let the NVA take the initiative.

The 27th had the “honor” of being the first Engineer Battalion into Khe Sanh, with a mission to rebuild the former Marine airfield that would be the primary source of resupply for the ARVN troops going into Laos. LTC Jorn directly commanded the effort, with “A” and “C” companies of the 27th, and the first platoon + of the 591st. Their task was to repair numerous bomb craters, re-grade and compact the airstrip, and to place metal planks/matting on the runway to insure all-weather use of the airfield.

I was given command of a task force consisting of 2nd Platoon + from the 591st, a platoon of the 59th Land Clearing Company pulled up from the central highlands, and a support squad from “A” Company of the 27th to clear mine fields and roads. Our mission was to reopen the road, QL-9, from Khe Sanh to the Laotian border, a distance of about 15 miles. The old colonial road was originally built in the 1930’s to connect Vietnam west to Vientianne, the capital of Laos, but had been destroyed during the French Indo-China war. From the border west, it intersected the supply pipeline known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail at Tchepone, which was the target of the invasion. The aerial photos showed about 7 streams (all of which emptied into the Xe Pon River) and bridge crossing along the route, with old steel suspension bridges having been destroyed by combat activity dating back to the French Indochina War.

I was very proud that the 591st was selected to perform this difficult mission, much in keeping with our reputation as a company that could handle any task assigned. We were to be at the very tip of the point of the invasion by allied forces. No one would be in front of us, but we were to meet up with elements of the Americal Division (26th Infantry Div) somewhere west of Khe Sanh to provide security and cover for our little task force.

We were given 7 days to accomplish the mission. I had to sign for an order, signed by President Nixon, that no U.S. forces were to enter into Laos. George Kinsley has reminded me that this was the result of the Cooper/Church Senate Amendment, which Congress had passed after the invasion of Cambodia in 1970. As it turned out I had to pick where the border was, based upon my assessment of the geography, since there were no landmarks or other signs to identify the border. This seemed to me to be the sort of decision that some general would take responsibility for, given the uproar that would have ensued had I been wrong. I guess it would have been easier to blame any error on a mere captain.

The domestic politics of that time were such that any incursion into Laos would have caused a major headache for the Administration. This was not to be like Cambodia, where U.S. troops bore the brunt of the invasion. Once we opened the way to the border, this was to be a strictly ARVN campaign, albeit with U.S. air support, a demonstration of their ability to take over the war as we departed.

When I got back to the company that night, I assembled the officers and NCO's for my warning order. Given only 36 hours to prepare, we had to determine what equipment and personnel were ready to move, and likely not break down during a week to two-month campaign. I chose 1st Platoon (Shoemaker, De Luna, Freelong) to work the airfield and 2nd Platoon (Klaus, Young) to lead the action down QL-9. I cherry picked some others from the rest of the company to fill out full staffing for the platoons going. We also had to get our combat gear ready, as it was expected that we would encounter the NVA in force – steel pots were exchanged for boonie hats and flak vests were distributed to all the men going. I exchanged my .45 for an M-16. My driver, Sp 5 Jack Brandenburg, commandeered the best jeep and revisited the procedure to

mount an M-60 machine gun in back. Sand bags for the floorboards of all moving stock were checked and renewed. C rations were distributed for at least 7 days (and, I imagine, letters written home).

Many of our men who weren't going worked straight through for 36 hours getting our equipment ready. I think we got up at 4 a.m. on January 31 (D-Day) to get a hot breakfast and then assembled into the battalion convoy driving up QL-1 to start at 5:30 a.m. It was an overcast day, but we made good time driving to Quang Tri , where we turned west on QL-9 at Dong Ha to arrive at the "Rockpile", near FB Vandergrift, the jumping off point into Khe Sanh.

This was about 5 miles south of the DMZ, and was where the improved road ended; the point where we went tactical



and ventured forth into enemy controlled territory. Some airmobile infantry and combat engineers (of the 326th) and a platoon of

"A" Company of the 27th had been airlifted in to hold Khe Sanh at the crack of dawn on D-Day, but the road in (about 25 miles) was unsecured. Elements of our sister 14th Engineer Battalion out of Quang Tri had gone in at dawn to mine sweep and replace a tactical bridge on QL-9 near Khe Sanh at the one point the road had to cross the Xe Pon River. As I recall, it was one of those cantilevered steel bridges on tracks (AVLB), which

the 5th Mech had in inventory. The 27th mission to repair and reopen the airfield was the highest priority to the initial phase of the operation, from which all resupply for the invasion would flow, so we went in blind as soon as that AVLB bridge was in place that afternoon. We were told that the allies were relying on surprise to get into Khe Sanh without resistance, but that we would really be on our own that night without infantry screening or support.

We got to the Rockpile (literally an outcropping and pile of rocks and boulders) just before dusk. The 5th Mechanized Inf Brigade and elements of the 101st were assembled around the Rockpile in temporary defensive positions, ready to follow us into territory that had been abandoned to the NVA since the Marines pulled out of the siege at Khe Sanh in 1968. I was at the rear of the column, together with the S-3, Joe Larramore, as we were tasked with corralling the stragglers, chief among which were the dozers loaded on flatbed 5-ton tractor-trailers. He and I led them into an area to off-load, as the trailers could not make the narrow and winding tactical road into Khe Sanh.

When we got them off loaded, the first glitch in our hastily drawn tactical plan appeared. Larramore and I looked around only to discover that the 27th Battalion task force had already departed down QL-9, leaving us behind. We knew the dozers would have to be “walked” in, but the plan was to put them in the middle of the battalion column so that we had tactical support around them in case of enemy attack.

Larramore raised LTC Jorn on the radio to inform him of the premature departure. Jorn did not know that we were not with his column (the “fog of war” ?) but said he was not waiting and ordered us to proceed with what we had. I shall never forget the rueful grin that Joe gave me when he informed me of the “new” plan. He was senior, so we decided that he would

lead the column with his jeep and trailer and I would bring up the rear with mine. I had Jack Brandenburg and SFC Warren Freelong with me, and the mounted M-60. Each of four dozers (two from 591, and two from HHC) had a crew of two. I don't remember why Freelong was with me as he was the 1st platoon sergeant and SFC Jim Buescher was my operations sergeant, who was with me later in the operation. But I'm sure SFC Freelong wondered how he had been so lucky to find himself manning an M-60 machine gun in the back of my jeep that long night!

QL-9 from the Rockpile to just before Khe Sanh, about 15 miles, was cut into the side of a steep U-shaped valley that was



the riverbed of the Xe Pon River. In many places along the route, the riverside was quite steep, almost a cliff. It was winding in places, following the contour of the

valley wall, and in places was only 12 feet wide. Joe and I decided that we would run the dozers in reverse, which allowed them to move at 5 mph instead of 2 mph, and that we would not use headlights. I'm not sure what tactical advantage we gained by using only running lights, as the noise of the dozers could be heard several miles away anyway, but that's how we set off, everyone locked and loaded. I am sure that I was not the only one who felt like we were inviting the NVA to use the bull's eye painted on our chests. It was a very cool and

foggy night, but I remember shivering more than could be accounted for by just the ambient temperature.

We had made about 3 or 4 miles, encountering no one, friend or foe, when a dozer veered too close to the road edge in the fog and rolled over down the cliff. I'm sure many of the readers well understand that backing a dozer over a long period of time is a difficult task for the operator, constantly looking over his shoulder. Combined with the fog and poor visibility (it was a dark, moonless night), I was not surprised at the accident. We immediately stopped and scrambled down to the stricken dozer, to find the operator seriously injured with a head or back injury. I am not sure at this late date, but I think the injured 591st dozer operator was Nelson Clement (who I see has recently joined the 591 Association). Perhaps he can confirm.

The lights were turned on and we forgot about security as we tended to what looked like a very serious injury, possibly to the spine. We fashioned a stretcher to carefully carry him back up the bank to the road, where we loaded him onto the back of Joe Larramore's jeep trailer. Since Joe's jeep was in front, and there was no room to turn or maneuver, it was decided that Joe would drive on ahead to the nearest place (the site of the AVLB) where we could get a medevac out for the injured soldier. I was left to shepherd the remaining three dozers into Khe Sanh.



I had the headlights turned on, turned the dozers around to drive forward, and I followed the dozers in column.

We didn't encounter anything else during that long night. After reaching the AVLB bridge emplaced by the 14th, and confirming that a medevac had taken our man off, we crawled into Khe Sanh a little before dawn. SFC Freelong broke out a pint of Jack Daniels, and we toasted what we agreed had been the longest night of our lives. It is a night that is still emblazoned in my memory. I found Joe Larramore on the airstrip, where he congratulated me on what he or George Kinsley dubbed "the midnight ride of Raffle 65" (my radio call sign).

LTC Jorn, with a smile, wanted to know where we had been! He immediately put the dozers to work on the airstrip, which had been heavily mined by the departing Marines when they departed in 1968. Unfortunately, the Marines did not make maps of the minefields and the only casualties suffered during the first week of the operation were from U.S. mines.

I slept in the jeep trailer for a couple of hours and then struck out to the west on QL-9 with 2nd platoon with two D7

dozers and two graders. We picked up the 59th LC platoon on the way, which I tasked with clearing a swath fifty yards wide on either side of



QL-9 to reduce ambush potential. It had been lifted into Khe Sanh that morning. After sorting through an ARVN assembly area to the south of Khe Sanh, we began mine clearing and casual reshaping of the unpaved road for most of the first day. Our mission was to open the road to the border within 7 days, and there was no time to waste if the actual invasion was to go off as scheduled on February 8.

At the end of the first day, we pulled into what had formerly been known as Lang Vei, a Special Forces camp that had been overrun in 1968 by the NVA using Soviet tanks. We actually saw an abandoned damaged tank (T-54?) by the side of the road near Lang Vei. We pulled into the position just before dusk, taking a night defensive position at around 9 o'clock in the perimeter. I had the dozers plow some modest depressions and a berm for sleeping and defense, and went to



check out the unit to the north on the perimeter to confirm night defensive positions and fire. This operation had been planned so hastily that I had no idea

or instructions about who else was there nor the commander charged with the overall command/defense of the Lang Vei position, but I knew we would only be there one night.

After wandering around the immediate neighboring unit, a 105mm artillery battery of the 5th Mech, I found the company HQ and was astounded to find that the battery commander was

a roommate of mine from West Point, who I had last seen 2 years before when I acted as an usher at his wedding. We agreed that it truly was a small world, but didn't have any time to reminisce as we were both scrambling to complete defensive arrangements before dark.

Satisfied with dispositions, I returned to the 591st position to set the watch schedule and break out some C-



rations. SFC Buescher (who was now with me) informed me that a General had been asking for me, and told me where to find him. Turned out to be

Brigadier General Hill of the 1st Bde of the 5th Mech out of Quang Tri, which was tasked with securing QL-9 from Dong Ha to the border. When we found each other, he asked me if he could "borrow" our dozers to dig in his CP bunker in Lang Vei. It didn't take me long to say "no." Some of our men had not slept in two days and I was on a time deadline mission that trumped his. What had been an underground arrangement in and around base camp to trade dozer work for steaks and beer for the troops, was not relevant in Lang Vei. I was surprised that he accepted my decision without seeking to go over my head, although I suspect he would have had trouble getting a hold of my commander, Jorn, who was back at Khe Sanh.

We spent a relatively quiet night, although there was a probe against the perimeter on the north side with suitable



fireworks and small arms fire. I had hoped to leave Lang Vei soon after dawn, heading west to the border. But we were to link up with our security force at Lang

Vei, a mechanized infantry battalion, the 1/1 Cav of the Americal Division, which came out of the Central Highlands (a sea movement) to cover our advance. They were late getting to Lang Vei and we didn't get out until mid-morning. The 1/1 Cav had Sheridan light tanks and APC's, as this was one of the few areas of Vietnam that permitted armored maneuvers. Their support was most welcome, as there was literally no one but the NVA between Lang Vei and the border, about 12 miles away. I wasn't going to leave without them, so had breakfast while we waited.

The next three days consisted of road clearing and building culvert bypasses to the blown bridges crossing 7 creeks in our path.





We definitely felt like we were at the point of the invasion spear, as even the Cav was behind us instead of riding point. As we reached each creek crossing, I started the dozers cutting a path to the creek into the banks on the north side of each bridge while coordinating the delivery of 6 foot

corrugated steel tubes. They were airlifted into the bridge site by Chinook helicopters of the 101st. The tubes were swayed down by cables, unhooked, and our men

rolled and pushed them into place in the creek.



Dozers then covered them as culverts, with hand improvements to the approaches and compacting of the cut and fill by trucks and dozers. The creeks had flowing water in them, but were easily forded as we did our

work.

I still marvel at the ease with which we coordinated the various support services, none of whom we had previously worked with, as needed to complete our mission. In addition to the airlift of culvert tubes, we also got resupply by air of fuel and water in rubber pods (blivets), as needed. Quite by



chance, I ran into a high school classmate, at a reunion many years later, who remembered driving Chinooks to us laden with culvert tubes.

His memory is that he was glad he didn't have to land in what he regarded as very hostile territory.

LTC Jorn did not visit during the mission, but I kept in daily touch with him by radio. We did receive a visit from Col McIntyre, CO of our 45th Engr Group out of Danang. He did not get out of his Huey, but called me over for a few words and a pat on the back. My enduring memory of that visit is that the hovering helicopter set down on my foot for a moment while I leaned in to speak to McIntyre.

I would like to say that our construction of culvert bypasses was a scientific/engineering exercise, but must confess that we eyeballed it. Essentially Klaus, Young, and I conferred and if we all nodded, it was a "good enough" standard, and then we moved on. We were past the worst of the monsoon season, and I am told that the culverts held up pretty well during the two-month invasion operation when QL-

9 was used for supply by the ARVN, and then withdrawal. That is saying a lot, because the road was used by main battle tanks and SP heavy artillery in combat, especially during the retreat.

We were fortunate to have very benign weather during this expedition. When the sun was out, it was hot, but mostly it was overcast and foggy. As some of the pictures may demonstrate, the dank atmosphere projected a version of Hades. But it didn't rain, which would have complicated our task almost tenfold.



We bridged one or two creeks a day while clearing the road of mines and brush, and minor shaping of the roadbed. The landscape looked almost like the surface of the moon with broken tree stumps and denuded forestation, the product of artillery fire and Agent Orange, as this was one of the two most heavily sprayed areas in Vietnam. Each day around dusk I, and the company commander for the 1/1 Cav troop, selected an NDP in a suitable area, usually higher ground near the road on the north side. Our 591 soldiers gathered our equipment in the center of the position and dug modest sleeping holes, before dark set in. The Cav then circled around us with tanks and APC's, like a wagon train, to establish the perimeter.



They set out concertina wire, claymores, and trip flares, and we were set for the night.

It's odd that I only remember two of the four NDP's we set up during the mission – Lang Vei and the one nearest the border. I suppose that is because I didn't sleep too much at the other two.

I was pleased to have them there to mount the guard each night, as our troops were tired from a hard day's work. More importantly, I was glad for their support, day and night, as our 591 soldiers were not practiced in conducting the tactical operations that would have been required had we been attacked by the NVA in our exposed situation. It is one thing to have the training of a professional soldier, and quite another to employ that training on the fly for the first time under the duress of combat. I had call signs and frequencies to call in fire support from nearby artillery batteries, tactical air support from jets and helicopters, and even for a battleship (the New Jersey?) off the coast of Quang Tri, but I had never done it before in earnest. In some ways I have always thought that our mission was foolhardy to expect us to perform in a combat scenario that we had no time to rehearse in the mere 36 hours

we had before jump-off. But we were Engineers, capable of operating in any environment, and I suspect that we would have learned quickly had we needed to.



But we were lucky. By the second night, I began to feel that Dewey Canyon II had totally surprised the enemy, and that they had pulled back to organize reinforcements and await developments rather than contest our probe to the border. After the first night at Lang Vei, the only sign I saw of the enemy was on what we called “Hard Rock Candy Mountain”, a high monolith (officially “Go Roc”) across the river in Laos that dominated the approach to Laos from the southwest. In binocular inspection, the 1/1 Cav Troop commander and I



and called in an airstrike with napalm. I have no idea whether the strike was successful, or even justified. But we had all these weapons, and thought we were justified

in using one. The daily and nightly B-52 bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos was a relatively constant quake and boom. I would not have liked to be under that awesome downpour!

I have read that senior American commanders concluded, in retrospect, that the NVA was incapable of reacting to a rapidly changing situation and had therefore pulled back from the area between Lang Vei and the border. Whatever the reason, we did our best to get in and out before the reaction could be forthcoming.

The portion of QL-9 that we opened from Lang Vei to the border became known as “ambush alley” during the withdrawal in March. The Xe Pon river ran parallel to the road,



about a half a mile to the south (although I never actually saw it). It marked the border at that point, and provided refuge for NVA forces

attacking U.S. forces, who could not pursue or patrol to deter rockets and mortars from across the river.

This section of the road became the scene of some of the heaviest fixed fighting in the war. A battalion of main battle tanks, M-48's, were deployed in March to keep the road open to allow some artillery batteries to escape their firebases near the border and to escort some ARVN units back through the gauntlet of fire that was set up by the NVA from both sides of the river to the south. We were very lucky to avoid this fierce resistance going in to the border.



On February 5, 1971, one day ahead of schedule, we bridged the last creek and were within sight of the Laotian border. Obviously

there were no signs or other demarcation, so I estimated the location from my study of my topographic map. I remember well at the time thinking that this decision was a bit above my pay grade, but no higher authority flew in to help me or ratify my decision.

We did take a metal, bullet riddled sign "Lao Bao" as a souvenir, but it definitely was not sited on the actual border. I still bear a scar on my pinkie finger from an foolish attempt to brush off the mud caked sign with my bare hand. No purple heart, but a series of tetanus shots. I have often wondered whether this sign is still in the Company archive somewhere at



Ft. Campbell.

Mindful of the President's order, I decided to stop on a rise from the west

bank of the last creek, which left about 100 yards across a slopped meadow to the border. I had the prepared sign "WARNING: NO U.S. PERSONNEL BEYOND THIS POINT" erected at the top of the rise, and after pictures, returned to complete the last culvert. As we were finishing, another Chinook landed with about 20 reporters from various news agencies to swarm the site and talk to our soldiers, anxious to scoop the story of U.S. personnel crossing the border.

for



There seemed to be more reporters than 591 soldiers a while (see the

reporter/photographer on the right). Some weeks later an old friend of mine in Panama sent me a front-page article of the Stars and Stripes, overseas edition, wherein I was quoted as saying that we were given seven days to build the road to Laos, but "we finished it in five." It was accompanied by a photo of the sign, with SSG Hogan and Lt Dean Klaus standing beside it, with the scrawled "591st" barely visible at the upper left corner of the sign.



We got so much press that I thought we had been mistaken for Marines! Our nighttime convoy was described as "daring", and

one higher commander described our engineer effort on the road and airfield as “the most critical of any tendered throughout the Vietnam War.” But, like many newspaper accounts, the stories were also marked by inaccuracies that were hard to explain by the supposedly seasoned reporters along for the ride.

We pulled back from the border to the previous night’s defensive position, and then rolled all the way back to Khe Sanh on February 6. As we left QL-9 to turn left to the Khe Sanh airstrip, we were picking through a growing force of ARVN troops heading west. At that juncture, we erected



another sign that said “THIS ROAD OPENED COURTESY OF 27th ENGR BN and 591st ENGR CO (LE).

On February 6, a gunship squadron shot up a formation of NVA near the border about a half mile from our border sign. The 1/1 Cav stayed to patrol both sides of the road from Lang Vei to the border and encountered fairly constant contact with the NVA beginning about a week later. I had conferred on two occasions with its commander, LTC Burnett, who was shot down when his C&C Huey wandered into Laotian airspace about a week later, and became MIA (and then KIA).

Back at Khe Sanh, the work at the airstrip had proceeded round the clock on 12-hour shifts since we left on the morning



of Feb 1. 591st graders, a dozer, and compacting equipment, had done stalwart work under the supervision of Lt Floyd Shoemaker, SSG DeLuna,

and SFC Freelong. It was opened for its first landing of C-130's on February 4, and began receiving constant air traffic to supply XXIV Corps in staging for the invasion. It continued for nearly two months, building an auxiliary airstrip; placing and repairing landing planks and artillery damage; and enlarging the airfield for better turnaround and multiple takeoffs.



The 27th was one of the first units into the Khe Sanh plateau, and had set up camp 200 yards south of the airstrip. Dozers had dug out below ground level

slots for

tents and sleeping areas, so we had some protection from mortar attack.

That was a fortuitous choice as it turned out. Once the ARVN invasion actually



started, NVA rocket and artillery attacks became a daily feature of life around the airfield. It was hazardous for work on the airstrip itself, but was never really directed to the 27th bivouac area. The 27th did suffer some casualties (none by the 591st personnel, as I recall), and famously the Bn XO, Maj McKenzie, got a shrapnel wound in his butt while diving for cover during one attack – a least painful Purple Heart!

After de-briefing LTC Jorn on the road mission to the border, the 591st personnel with me (minus the dozers and graders) convoyed out of Khe Sanh back to Camp Eagle. The 59th Land Clearing platoon remained in the Lang Vei area clearing brush west of Khe Sanh for the infantry. I heard later that it had been caught in a mortar attack and suffered 3 KIA, including the platoon leader, a lieutenant who received news of the birth of his first child while with us on the border. Later, on March 21, during the retreat, B Troop of the 1/1 Cav mutinied rather than go back to rescue a platoon that had been surrounded by the enemy. I was told that this occurred on an open plain, about two miles from the border, that we had used as our final NDP on the way in (see picture, p. 36). I sensed that the 1/1 Cav did not have high morale when we were with

them, but this became a cause célèbre' in the press, who jumped on any negative to heighten the American public's disaffection for the war.

As we all know, what started as a most promising invasion by the ARVN grew static and ended badly for the Allied XXIV Corps. Lam Son 719 was a success in the sense that it accomplished the mission of destroying major stocks of supplies, inflicting huge losses on the NVA, and spoiling a Spring invasion by the NVA, which never happened. American aviators, who were permitted to enter Laos and sometimes flew 2 or 3 sorties a day for medevac, resupply, and firepower, bore the brunt of the battle in Laos. They suffered 102 KIA, and lost 106 helicopters, flying against fixed anti-aircraft defenses, often aided by enemy radar.

But the press portrayed it as a debacle due to a less than orderly, bordering on panic, withdrawal from Laos. It was a planned retreat, not forced, but the press seemed not to understand that distinction. In the final, ubiquitous body count, U.S. forces lost 219 KIA; ARVN lost 1,529 KIA; and the NVA lost a horrific 19,326 KIA, nearly half their force committed to battle in Laos. American air and artillery firepower had telling effect on the North Vietnamese when they were forced to stand and hold ground in defense of their supply lines.

I visited Khe Sanh by air a couple of times after my return to Eagle, but Floyd Shoemaker and SSG's De Luna and Freelong ran the show and, together with our troops, reflected great credit on the 591st. The 27th and our 1st platoon endured the whole two months at Khe Sanh. It was the last engineer formation to leave, after taking up the runway matting beginning on March 25, but got out at the end (April 1, 1971) with few casualties and the loss of some equipment. Our

parent 45th Engr Group suffered 6 KIA (mostly the 59th LC) and 11 WIA. Many of our soldiers received recognition for courageous work under hazardous conditions around Khe Sanh by the award of Bronze Stars and Army Commendation Medals for Valor.

What we did was remarkable. I think that we received some type of a unit citation for this campaign, although I am not certain. Regardless, the 591st participation in Lam Son 719 was a considerable achievement and epitomized the Engineer motto – “ESSAYONS.” Those who were there might want to check out the 1986 book, “INTO LAOS,” by Keith William Nolan which describes the whole campaign from an infantryman’s point of view. Engineers are nameless but mentioned throughout as critical to the early success of the mission. I would be remiss if I didn’t share the book’s quote by LTG Sutherland, CG of the XXIV Corps, who was “most impressed by the combat engineer effort along Route 9 which made the whole operation possible:”

“One of the many parts of Dewey Canyon II and Lam Son 719 which I continue to recall with professional pride and admiration,” Sutherland said, “was the performance of the 45th Engineer Group with its two battalions, the 14th and the 27th. Other than I, there is probably no person who participated in the operation who can really appreciate the contribution of those engineers. It was the most outstanding performance that I observed in my thirty-four year of service the sight on D day was magnificent to behold – a steady stream of helicopters (and convoys) moving engineer equipment, culvert and bridge sections from the rear areas to the front.”

Activity back at Camp Eagle during Lam Son 719 was primarily road maintenance and rock crushing, with a modest effort to improve Route 547 past Bastogne for a threatened feint toward the A Shau Valley or as an exit route from Laos. I think 3rd plt supported B Co of the 27th in that push toward FB

Rendezvous. While I was gone, the acting CO, Lt Tony Nolan, reports that a water truck (used to reduce dust) was MIA at the



end of one day of work on the road. He organized a search mission after dark, only to thankfully learn that the 591st truck had broken down and found refuge

at an infantry firebase (Vehgel or Rendezvous) for the night.

I remember hiring Montagnards to work on some culverts and crossings on Rt 547. I also remember arriving to inspect a culvert repair near Bastogne only to discover some native women performing services of a private nature inside a culvert tube, which services were not part of the mission.

After the Battalion got back from Khe Sanh in late March, 1971, I do not remember any significant projects during April through July, although some of those earlier described may have been during this time period. Floyd Shoemaker and Tony Nolan rotated home and were replaced by Cordell Chapman and Michael Casey, respectively.

It seemed as though the U.S. command and administration were determined to call Lam Son 719 a success, proof that we could hand over the war to the ARVN, and became intent on winding down our war effort. Fragging and discipline in the 101st continued to be a problem, and it did

seem that offensive operations by the 101st were curtailed while waiting to go home. Not coincidentally, the NVA seemed content to wait us out, knowing that there was no point to pressing when their objectives would be achieved in the end after we were gone. The Viet Cong were never a significant offensive threat during my year there, as their infrastructure in northern I Corps had been destroyed during Tet 68.

Bits and pieces of 591 activities during this period are all that remain for my memory:

- The battalion chaplain put me in touch with an American family in Hue that was building a Protestant orphanage and school. Several soldiers volunteered during some off time to perform earth moving at the site and we spent several days (over a period of weeks) at the site with a dozer



and grader to prepare the construction site (shown here). The day included a home cooked lunch at the pastor's house by his wife and children. After the first expedition, I

had no trouble getting volunteers for the project, as our soldiers greatly enjoyed the kids and home like atmosphere. I have often wondered what happened to the family after the fall of Saigon in 1975.

- I am told that another civil affairs project was performed by the 591st in the fall of 1970, working to prepare and build a Catholic orphanage in Hue. The Nuns were reported to have served rice wine to our soldiers.

- The Commanding General of the 18th Engr Brigade out of Saigon made a much-anticipated inspection visit in May. I knew BG Seaman when he was a Major, working as Executive Officer to my father who commanded the American Battle Monuments Commission in Paris, France in 1958. I wondered whether he would recognize me when I met him at a job site inspection, but was not surprised when he asked after my father (my family name is uncommon). It was not the occasion to reminisce, but I have often wondered what he thought of having what he had known as a bratty 11 year old as one of his company commanders in Vietnam.

- For some reason that I don't recall now, I had to drive down to Danang for a meeting at 45th Group. Jack Brandenburg and I drove down (about a 6 hour drive) through the area known as "the Bowling Alley", which was an extremely straight section of QL-1 south of Phu Loc and just before entering the Hai Van pass. The road was notorious for mortar attacks (one could be seen from miles away), but all I remember is how beautiful the drive was along the coast, past a picturesque fishing village, Lang Co,



and over the winding pass with its spectacular view of Danang and China Beach. The view from the Hai Van pass of the DaNang Bay and

surrounding mountains is spectacular, and rivals some of



those seen on the Mediterranean Riviera.

- In June, as I recall, Camp Eagle had a rabies case from a stray dog. Consequently the knee jerk order went out that no one could have dogs in Camp. 591st had one soldier, I think maybe a grader operator named McCollaugh, with a pet dog that was much loved in the unit. A medium sized mutt whose name I do not recall, the dog had a gold coat and was a very friendly dog. I thought it was a morale booster for the

company, a touch of home and normalcy in this strange and unpopular war. I was bound to pass along the order, but told McCollough to keep it out of sight whenever LTC Jorn, or anyone else from battalion, was around. Unfortunately, Jorn saw it about two weeks later on a job site and severely chastised me for not complying with his order. I reluctantly had to give McCollough the order to destroy the dog, which was shot outside the perimeter. 40 years later, I still feel badly about that order, and that poor dog.

- Also in June, the 591st was given a mission to re-open the road from Camp Evans into an old French firebase due west of Hue, near the Perfume River. A company of infantry from the 1st ARVN Div, supposedly their top unit, was to secure our movement and the firebase after we entered for the night. I think I got a squad from a line company of the 27th to sweep the road in front of us as we did minor road maintenance on the way in. Mostly I remember a long, hot, dusty day sitting in my jeep as we crawled along the route. We got into the firebase, really just a square of raised earthen berm, around dusk. Our troops dug in sleeping positions and the ARVN company manned the perimeter for defense. They seemed to know what they were doing, setting up fields of fire and trip flares. I was awakened in the middle of the night by a trip flare going off, only to observe the ARVN company leaving. I was unable to communicate effectively with the company commander and never got an explanation for why they left. We spent an uncomfortable rest of the night, without automatic weapons, but fortunately had no contact. We left at dawn, from whence we came. My consternation at the perfidy of our allies was compounded when I learned several weeks later that no one ever occupied the FB, so our expedition was a dangerous waste of time.

- On another mission, in May, we were required to cut a 25' path through an abandoned Marine minefield. SSG Darrell Hogan masterfully and valiantly performed this task single-handedly by probing with his bayonet to locate each buried mine, and blowing each with C-4. As a final check, a D-7 dozer, blade down, confirmed that all of the mines had been found and neutralized. On the rest of the route, Hogan walked out front with the minesweepers. I believe George Kinsley was the OIC of the 3rd platoon at that time.

- On July 4, 1971, I declared a half-day holiday for the 591st. We organized a barbecue of steaks and beer at a sandy beach site on the Perfume River between Birmingham and Bastogne. It was a regular picnic with swimming in the river, although we took side arms and mounted M-60's with us.



The inner tubes for the 290-M scrapers were put to good use. A good time was had by all.

A couple of other vignettes might strike a chord with our veterans:

- Nuac Mam. The Phu Loc platoon participated in a Tet celebration at Phu Loc in January. The fish sauce nuac mam was the abiding feature of the feast. Was there ever any alleged foodstuff that smelled as bad as nuac mam?

- I attended a Tet feast with Major McKenzie at a village near Hue. Roast dog was the centerpiece, fur and all. As the head dignitary, he was presented with the delicacy of the day – one of the two doggie eyeballs. Better him than me.

- George Kinsley reminded me of an armed robbery at the mess hall. The thieves made off with ham!

- We used MPC (military payment currency) in lieu of greenbacks. The day when we all had to exchange old MPC for a new form (to discourage black marketeering) was one of the most closely guarded secrets of the war.



That is about all I remember. I turned over command of the 591st to Capt William Green in mid-July and went home in August after spending about 3 weeks as an assistant S-3 at the

27th. I am informed that the 591st stood down in November, 1971, to be reactivated at Fort Campbell, KY some twenty years later, still linked to the 101st, for service in the Middle East.

It was an honor and a privilege to command the 591st, one of my proudest accomplishments in a full life.

Anyone is welcome and invited to supplement this account with events I forgot, or didn't get right. I hope this provokes fond and proud memories for the men who served.

May 27, 2013 at Monterey, California.

Willard P. McCrone

Former Commander

591st Engineer Company (LE)

THEN



AND NOW



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