

## **159<sup>th</sup> Transportation Battalion (Boat) (Terminal)**

The 159<sup>th</sup> Transportation Battalion was activated at Ft Eustis, Virginia, on 1 September 1953. At that time it had lettered boat companies, from A to D, and the 165<sup>th</sup> and 329<sup>th</sup> Heavy Boat Companies. With the end of the Korean War in 1953, the Army disbanded its Engineer Special Brigades and transferred the responsibility for amphibious landings to the Transportation Corps. The 159<sup>th</sup> Transportation Battalion assumed the responsibility for operating landing craft for combat and logistical support during joint amphibious operations and tactical mobility, combat and logistical support in the ship to shore missions. It became the only designated combat battalion in the Transportation Corps. Many of its original members were veterans from the inactivated 2<sup>nd</sup> Engineer Special Brigade.

LTC Michael D. Isrin assumed command of the battalion from January 1954 to February 1957. He was a colorful character who carried a larger-than-normal swagger stick. He loved sports cars and even had his military driver chauffeur him around to training sites in his Jaguar. He also brought his Dachshund, Gretchen, to work with him. His tendency for flare also caused him to improve the moral of this new unit which for the first year had no equipment and very few people.

In 1954, he received authorization for the battalion to blouse their boots, wear the green leadership tabs on their Olive Drab uniform. They also wore red patches on side of their fatigue trousers at knee level to denote shore party. This was a tradition of the amphibious engineers that dated back to World War II. He developed the unit insignia and the motto, "Hit the Beach." The battalion purchased branch insignia for their collars with the numbers "159" above the wheel. All of this made the men proud to belong to a unique organization. They even had two white ducks as mascots, named "Red" and "Patch" that roamed around the battalion area.

"One of Col Isrin's quirks was that he was highly irritated (in a nice way!!) whenever he spotted a member of the his 159th with his hands in his pockets, anywhere and anytime, standing, walking, indoors, outdoors, etc. He would immediately 'fine' that individual ten cents on the spot! I have no idea what ever became of those dimes! Actually, once the word got around about the 'fine', I doubt that the COL was able to collect many dimes! Incidentally, the 'hands in your pockets fine' only applied to those individuals in uniform...not when you were wearing civilian clothes. Nobody ever complained about the 10 cent levy...it was taken in stride with good humor." J.P. Krzenski, HHD, 159<sup>th</sup> Transportation Battalion.

Isrin cared about his men and they knew it. For the first few years, the Army had not authorized a Table of Organization and Equipment (TOE) for the battalion Headquarters and Headquarters Company so no enlisted men could get promoted. They belonged to an organization that did not exist so there were no duty positions requiring any rank. Isrin fought hard with the Department of the Army to get his headquarters personnel promoted to at least one grade during his time there. Even before the equipment arrived, the battalion received its first operational assignment.

The Soviet Union tested their first nuclear device in 1949 which heightened the fear of a war. The shortest distance for Soviet long range bombers to attack the United States with nuclear bombs was across the Arctic Circle. The US Air Force established a line of Distant Early Warning (DEW) stations from Thule, Greenland to the tip of Alaska in 1952. In spring of 1951, landing craft were attached to the 373<sup>rd</sup> Transportation Major Port (TMP) to Thule, Greenland as part of Operation BLUEJAY. In February 1952, the 373<sup>rd</sup> TMP conducted Operation Support of North Atlantic Construction (SUNAC) 52. LCMs and LCUs discharged cargo and equipment for the construction of the radar stations along the DEW Line. The deployment to Thule Greenland to conduct the logistics-over-the-shore (LOTS) operation during SUNEK 54 became the first deployment for the 159<sup>th</sup>. The boats were prepositioned in Greenland and crews of the boat companies sent crews to participate in annual SUNEK LOTS operations every year until 1963.

As the battalion slowly filled up with personnel during that first year, the majority were levied to go to Thule. The remainder trained on the few World War II vintage LCM-6s they received. The new model LCM-8 began arriving in the unit in 1955. The boat companies began to train in LOTS operations at Little Creek Naval Station and Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. They learned how to off load men and equipment from Liberty ships and deliver them over bare beaches.

In October 1958, the 110<sup>th</sup> Transportation Battalion (Harbor Craft and Marine Maintenance) was reorganized and attached to the 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion. This placed all boat and marine operations of Fort Eustis into a single boat organization. The 110<sup>th</sup> Battalion had a Headquarters and Headquarters and Maintenance Company and three lettered companies, A, B and C. Boats included the FS-212, FS-766, FS-790, and Q-612. LTC Gordon A. Goss, the commander of the 110<sup>th</sup>, was named the commander of the 159<sup>th</sup> and Major Harris H. Cathey became the battalion executive officer. The two battalions were subordinate to the 3<sup>rd</sup> TT Group. The 110<sup>th</sup> Battalion was inactivated the next year on 1 September 1959.

From 21 August to 23 September 1959, the 11<sup>th</sup> Terminal and 159<sup>th</sup> Boat Battalions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Transportation Terminal Training Group conducted Exercise DARK SKY at Fort Story, Virginia. This LOTS exercise used the new infrared techniques at night. This method had only been tried before once at Camp Wallace, Virginia. A beach reconnaissance team (BRAT) searched and marked the beach, then the security force landed in the first wave of landing craft of the 329<sup>th</sup> Heavy Boat, 1097<sup>th</sup>, 1098<sup>th</sup> and 1099<sup>th</sup> Medium Boat Companies. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Floating Craft Maintenance Company of the 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion also supported the operation. The 11<sup>th</sup> Terminal Battalion provided the 105<sup>th</sup>, 117<sup>th</sup>, 123<sup>rd</sup>, 124<sup>th</sup> and 264<sup>th</sup> Terminal Service Companies to discharge cargo. The training objectives included the use of infrared lights in night ship-to-shore operations, cargo documentation, signal communication, composite battalion command concept, local and rear area security and damage control.

On 25 September 1959, the Battalion was reorganized as HHC, 159<sup>th</sup> Transportation Battalion with Companies A, B, and C reorganized and redesignated as the 1097<sup>th</sup>, 1098<sup>th</sup> and 1099<sup>th</sup> Transportation (Medium Boat) Companies, respectively. The boat companies would follow separate lineages. D Company was disbanded. On 13 December 1965, HHC, 159<sup>th</sup> was redesignated Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment, 159<sup>th</sup> Transportation Battalion (Boat). The 159<sup>th</sup> also picked up another unusual company.

On 1 September 1959, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Transportation Company (Floating Craft Maintenance) was activated and attached to the 159<sup>th</sup>. It received all of its personnel from the 110<sup>th</sup> Floating Craft Company, which was inactivated. This company contained a variety of craft and equipment. It had three freight ships designed for sailing an inter-coastal waters or trans-ocean voyages, several tugs from 45-foot to 100-foot, barges for both dry and liquid cargo, a 100-ton floating crane and several maintenance and repair teams. It also had a dive section attached to it.

In the summer of 1961, the 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion received attachment of the 577<sup>th</sup> Aerial Tramway Company from the 399<sup>th</sup> Terminal Battalion. It was the Army's only active duty aerial tramway company. The 408<sup>th</sup> and 458<sup>th</sup> were in the Reserves. The Aerial Tramway Company gave the 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion, then commanded by LTC Armand J. Silvestri, the capability to conduct offshore discharge where there was no beach on which landing craft or amphibians could land such as steep cliffs. The aerial tramway, developed by John A. Roeblings' Sons, Corp. of Trenton, NJ, consisted of two towers that connected a DeLong floating pier to the shore by an aerial trolley cable.

### **Cuba Missile Crisis**

In late 1961, the Soviet Premier announced that the Allies had to leave Berlin. President John F. Kennedy responded that the Allies would not leave. The 73<sup>rd</sup> FCM was sent to La Rochelle, France, to be ready to run operations if war started. In July 1962, the crisis ended and the 73<sup>rd</sup> returned to Fort Eustis.

On 20 October 1962, while on a Annual Army Training Test at Smith Island, North Carolina, the Battalion was altered for proceed to Kings Bay Army Terminal, Georgia, then Fort Lauderdale, Florida, for the possible invasion of Cuba.

“It was Sept 1962 when the alerts started, and usually were terminated at the Fort Eustis sea buoy. The final alert saw us keep on moving down the James River (entire units of the 1097<sup>th</sup> and 1099<sup>th</sup> Medium Boat Companies, approximately 40 LCM 8's and the ST 2122 (small tug). The remaining units in the Third Port (LT 2088, LT 1956, *BDL John U.D. Page*, and numerous J-boats, Q-boats and other craft) left shortly afterward. The Mike boats continued south in the Intra-coastal waterway operating 24 hours a day in a waterway built mainly for daylight operation. The large tugs and the *U.D. Page* traveled outside due to deeper draft requirements. At that time, I was a PFC aboard the LCM 8142 (1097<sup>th</sup>). The 329<sup>th</sup> Heavy Boat Company (LCU's) traveled mainly on the outside most of the voyage to Kings Bay Ga. (at that time an undeveloped naval property) Charleston S.C Army Terminal was a stop over, where entire engines were changed out

in a matter of hours. To boat crews who were hard pressed to get any spare parts just a month earlier, this sent a message that this was the real thing, and a mood of determination took over the entire operation. Running southbound in the intra-coastal was not without miscues, some laughable. A wrong turn up some tributaries ended up like a long island traffic jam! As the convoy moved southward, there were areas where the banks were lined with people yelling encouragement to the boat crews, they were more aware of the goings on at the time than we were!!” Paul F. Carty, 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Boat) Battalion

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Floating Craft Maintenance Company also deployed to the rendezvous point at Kings’ Bay, Georgia. The company deployed in two segments, the second departing 26 October.

“Kings Bay Georgia was a rendezvous point for all the units. I was transferred to the LCU 1515 of the 329<sup>th</sup> Heavy Boat as helmsman (among others). We headed south via offshore, and the Mike boats stayed inside in the waterway. After a fuel stop in Ft. Pierce, Florida, we proceeded south to Port Everglades Florida. The sight that awaited us there as we entered from sea was staggering. The harbor was crammed with U.S. Navy LST's, OAS (Organization of American States) LST's and the 1098<sup>th</sup> Medium Boat, which had come across from New Orleans. All of the landing craft were loading the Second Armored Division which came by rail from Ft Hood, Texas. As the days passed, more tugs and diesel powered submarines appeared. The larger naval vessels were anchored in a line stretching from Jupiter Florida to the keys!

“I believe that the Ft. Eustis railroad 777<sup>th</sup> diesels actually hauled train loads to Florida also. There was tension in the air, and all concerned were aware of the gravity of the situation, however we did not know that Soviet missiles were already pointed at American cities. This information we learned later! We also learned that we were to be the first wave by sea other than paratroopers, who obviously would be from the air. It was ironic that the Navy had been caught shorthanded with landing craft, and the Army was to be in the primary assault landing! Eight Navy LSD's were anchored offshore waiting to load the Mike boats for the attack in the event that it came to pass. Fortunately, the situation was resolved, and the most perilous event of the cold war was averted. It took about 70 days for all of the units to return to their home base at Ft. Eustis. When the units we back at home base, the training was changed considerably, and modification of equipment design was put in motion. All was a result of the Cuban Crisis! In my humble opinion, it was a job well done by all concerned.”

Paul F. Carty, 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Boat) Battalion

The 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion returned on 1 December. During the trip the Mike boats ran into a rain storm just inside the outer banks which covered the boats with two to four inches of ice on the unheated portions of the boats, such as the bow and the wheel house.

After CPT Bill Dimon assumed command of 1099<sup>th</sup> Boat in 1964, he had heard the stories about the ice storm during the Cuban Missile Crisis. He went to the Marine Maintenance Facility and asked them to build a prototype roof that would fit over the

wheel house provide cover from the weather when running in open waters and open seas. The wheel house was open on top and the coxswain looked out over the sides of the wheel house. The Marine Maintenance Facility designed a wooden cupola with hand operated wipers on the two windows on each side. It had latches to fasten it to the wheel house and could be removed when required. The coxswains could not use the cupolas when conducting ship discharge operations because they needed to see the cargo hook coming over the side of the ship. This became standard for the LCMs of the 1099<sup>th</sup>.

### **Operation Paperback, Dominican Republic**

In December 1962, the democratically elected president, Juan Bosch, began leftist policies such as land redistribution and nationalization of certain foreign holdings inspired a military coup led by General Elias Wessin y Wessin in September. Wessin turned the government over to a civilian triumvirate, led by Donald Reid y Cabral, who abolished the constitution which inspired civil unrest. By April 1965, a pro-Bosch rebels, known as Constitutionals, revolt broke out and captured Reid. Wessin assumed control of the government again and armed civilians took to the streets by 26 April. Through death and defection, Wessin only commanded 2,400 soldiers and 200 national police out of his original 30,000. Fearing the establishment of another communist state in the Caribbean like Cuba and wanting to evacuate the US citizens and foreign nationals, President Lyndon Johnson deployed US Marines to the Dominican Republic. The Marines established an evacuation point in the Hotel Embajador in Santo Domingo. On 29 April, Johnson launched US Marines and elements of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, around 42,000 troops, into the Dominican Republic as part of an Organization of American States (OAS) to establish stability. On 5 May, the Loyalists and Constitutionals signed a cease fire.

CPT Bill Dimon led an advance party of five of the 159<sup>th</sup> Transportation Battalion and arrived with a ¾-ton truck and light fork lift at the San Isidro airfield at 0200 hours in the morning then made their way to the maintenance hanger to set up shop. An Air Force person came and instructed them to clear the runway in the dark of cargo of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, so other planes could land.<sup>1</sup> On 4 May, the 159<sup>th</sup> Transportation Battalion, commanded by LTC James F. “Big Jim” Smith, deployed from Fort Eustis with the 58 personnel, the 489<sup>th</sup> and 490<sup>th</sup> Transportation Detachments (Movement Control) from the 507<sup>th</sup> Transportation Group (Movement Control), the 491<sup>st</sup> Transportation Detachment (Cargo Documentation), and the 105<sup>th</sup> Transportation Company (Terminal Service) with 329 personnel to provide transportation support for elements of the XVIII Airborne Corps.<sup>2</sup>

The 159<sup>th</sup> Trans Battalion set up operations in a hanger and handled airfield clearance until 8 May, and then it relocated to Puerto De Andres on 9 May where the 105<sup>th</sup> Transportation Company offloaded cargo ships and LSTs. By 23 May, the OAS established the Inter-American Peace Force (IAPF) and deployed troops from Brazil,

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<sup>1</sup> William Dimon interview by Richard Killblane at Fort Eustis, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Emma-Jo L. Davis, History of the US Army Transportation Center and Fort Eustis, 1 January 1965 – 30 June 1966.

Honduras, Paraguay, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. By 26 May, US forces began to redeploy to their home station. During that month at Puerto De Andres, the 159<sup>th</sup> offloaded five cargo ships and ten LSTs and a total of 721.2 tons and 371 personnel were backloaded of four LSTs. On 9 June, the 159<sup>th</sup> Trans Battalion and its subordinate units then moved to Puerto De Hainia, just 13 miles from Santo Domingo, and again established port operations. From 10 June through 30 June, the battalion discharged three cargo ships and five LSTs consisting of 2367.8 long tons and four LSTs consisting of 698.6 long tons and 147 personnel were backloaded. From 1 July until 16 August, the battalion supervised the unloading of seven cargo ships and eight LSTs consisting of 3,919.3 long tons and 41 personnel, and backloaded two cargo ships and eight LSTs consisting of 1,584.6 long tons and 420 military personnel.<sup>3</sup>

The situation in Dominican Republic stabilized enough for the 159<sup>th</sup> Transportation Battalion Headquarters to return to Fort Eustis on 17 August where it assumed responsibility for the operation of Third Port. The Battalion left the 105<sup>th</sup> Terminal Service Company, the two LC teams of the 507<sup>th</sup> Trans Group, and the 491<sup>st</sup> Transportation Detachment, a total of 206 personnel, to continue the terminal service mission until 30 September. The detachment supervised the unloading of four cargo vessels and two LSTs consisting of 3,604.2 long tons and backloaded 440.3 long tons and 117 personnel onto three LSTs. In November 1965, the stay behind elements were extended beyond their 180 day TDY status and were put on permanent change of station status on 1 February 1966.<sup>4</sup> The 105<sup>th</sup> Transportation Company received the mission to redeploy all OAS forces aboard cargo vessels within 90 days. During the last 60 days, the company backloaded 35 vessels and the remaining US elements in the Dominican Republic redeployed aboard the last vessel outloaded in the Dominican Republic on 22 September.<sup>5</sup> The 159<sup>th</sup> Boat Battalion was then redesignated a terminal battalion and alerted for Vietnam.

## **Vietnam**

The personnel in full combat gear with weapons flew across the United States during an air strike to catch their ship in Seattle. The trip lasted 18 days with a stop at Okinawa. The main body of the 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion headquarters arrived at Qui Nhon, Vietnam on 10 August 1966. Its boat companies had already preceded it to Vietnam. The 1097<sup>th</sup> Medium Boat Company had arrived at Cam Ranh Bay in May 1965, the 1098<sup>th</sup> was waiting for it at Qui Nhon in April 1965, 1099<sup>th</sup> was assigned to the 4<sup>th</sup> Transportation Command in the Saigon area in September 1965, and the 329<sup>th</sup> Heavy Boat arrived at Da Nang in May 1966. From this time onward, the boat companies would follow their own paths in history.

To offload cargo, the 159<sup>th</sup> received the 285<sup>th</sup> and 854<sup>th</sup> Terminal Service Companies from the 394<sup>th</sup> Terminal Battalion, which had been operating the port up to that time. The 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion assumed responsibility for lighterage at the LST Beach and outer

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<sup>3</sup> Davis, History 1965 –1966.

<sup>4</sup> Davis, History 1965 –1966.

<sup>5</sup> Davis, istory of the US Army Transportation Center and Fort Eustis, FY 67, 1968.

harbor discharge where it primarily offloaded ammunition. The DeLong Piers arrived shortly after the 159<sup>th</sup> and the 394<sup>th</sup> assumed responsibility for offloading cargo at the Pier. The 159<sup>th</sup> became the LOTS battalion. To conduct the ship-to-shore mission, the 159<sup>th</sup> received a BARC company and the 544<sup>th</sup> Boat Company. All logistical battalions fell under the command of the Qui Nhon Support Command. When the 5<sup>th</sup> Terminal Command arrived, it assumed command and control of the two terminal battalions.

The Battalion took control of the harbor and established its harbor master in a shack on the beach. A storm later washed it away and it moved into a communication trailer until they moved into the tower on the LST Beach. The harbor master instructed the ships where to anchor and logged in the boats, time of arrival and departure. For a while the harbor master controlled the lighterage but later turned it over to the companies.

The four BARC detachments with four Barge Amphibious Resupply Cargo vehicles per detachment deployed from Fort Story, Virginia and arrived at Cam Ranh Bay and Qui Nhon in late November 1966. Each BARC had a 60 ton capacity and could deliver cargo right up to the depot rather than stop at the water's edge. After a few months the two detachments in Cam Ranh Bay moved to Qui Nhon to combine into the Provisional BARC Company.

In May 1967, 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division formed part of Task Force Oregon and conducted operations with their forward supply base at Duc Pho, further north in I Corps Tactical Zone. The 540<sup>th</sup> Detachment sent two BARCs along with two LCMs to establish a LOTS operation at the nearby fishing village of Sau Hugynh. The BARCs mostly provided a stable platform to hold the LCMs in place in the rough surf when they discharged cargo. One BARC caught fire and burned when the ammunition dump exploded. The amphibious operation continued until a typhoon shut it down in September. This was the 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion's first LOTS operation outside of the LST beach.

Two companies lived in a tropical two-story barracks at Kien Tan and the other three lived in tents somewhere else. The officers lived in "hooches" along the beach and later Major Bill Dimon traded with the Navy on Market Garden for two flush toilets. Dimon tasked Captain Clay Lewis, the night operations officer, to install the toilets with 55-gallon drums of water for gravity flow. For men used to sitting upon a sheet of plywood to take care of personal business, a flushing toilet was a reminder of home and a luxury. They threw a celebration when the toilets were installed. Because the toilets flushed into the bay along with the refuse of the locals, the officers took to calling the area where they lived, "Latrine Beach."

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Sunder assumed command of the battalion from Dave Thatcher in July 1967. Sunder was a very tall and people oriented commander. He genuinely cared about the welfare of his men and the men felt comfortable around him. He inherited the battalion at a time that his name would make its mark in history.

The battalion had a few incidents occur that made him realize that it had a moral problem. The 854<sup>th</sup> Terminal Service Company had arrived in Vietnam in September 1966. Arriving from Fort Story, it was a cohesive unit that took pride in its work. Because of the one year rotation, replacements came in with an entirely different attitude about the war. In fact the entire battalion personnel had changed over within four to six weeks. The new soldiers trashed their mess hall and burned down the canteen that the others had built. Their attitude carried over into their duty performance.

While offloading bombs from a ship, the pallet of two bombs slipped out of the sling and fell into the well deck of an LCM and went off. The coxswain of the LCM was either killed or knocked unconscious by the first explosion. The first explosion alongside the ship was considered a low level explosion but strong enough to either kill or knock the coxswain unconscious, injure the two cargo handlers, "Jumpers." The jumpers positioned cargo in the hold. When the bombs fell they either jumped or were knocked overboard. The explosion started the wooden pallets of the ammo, already on board, to burn. A fourth crewman behind the wheelhouse escaped unharmed. LTC Sunder was told he jumped overboard and climbed up the ships anchor chain to safety. The two stevedores were badly burned but were rescued. One may have died later. The LCM drifted pilotless, passed the ship and on out to a location some distance away from all the ships at anchor. There the rest of the bombs exploded and the LCM with the coxswain aboard was destroyed and sunk. Parts of his dismembered body were recovered several days later.

LTC Sunder sat down with his staff to come up with some idea of how to "buck up" morale. They were good soldiers, but the leaders felt that they needed something to make them feel proud. They recommended that the battalion adopt the name "Sunder's Wunders." At first Sunder did not like the idea but he gave in. They started by painting that name on their jeeps. Sunder's driver painted, "Sunder Himself," on his the next day. It worked. It gave them an identity to rally around. Morale started to improve at a time when the battalion received some special missions.

In August 1967, the 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion had received the task to conduct another small LOTS operation at Sau Huynh in support of in support of 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division at Duc Pho during Operation MALHEUR. Sau Huynh had been a peaceful fishing village with a salt flat where the Viet Cong collected and preserved their fish. Major William Dimon, the battalion operations officer, conducted the reconnaissance in an LCU from the 329<sup>th</sup> Heavy Boat and an LARC V. He selected the beach site that was suitable for medium and heavy landing craft and LARCs. The 159<sup>th</sup> went in and set up headquarters with two BARC platoons and a couple LCMs and enough stevedores to offload the cargo. The 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion operations officer, Bill Dimon, supervised the operation. The 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been identified as the LOTS battalion in Vietnam. The LOTS operation was still going on in March 1968 after the battalion received the mission to conduct the largest LOTS operation in the war.

On 29 January 1968, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) broke the prearranged seven-day cease-fire and launched their Tet Offensive to overthrow the

Government of the Republic of South Vietnam. This unprecedented enemy offensive achieved significant gains at its outset. The following counter-offensive would rank as the most significant US military campaign of the war. As in any military operation, the transportation of supplies played a key role in its success.

Military Assistance Command (Vietnam) (MACV) had divided the country into four different Corps Tactical Zones from the Demilitarized Zone in the north to the Mekong Delta in the south. The NVA had three main objectives in the northern I Corps Zone: to seize control of the provincial capital of Hue, take Quang Tri and defeat the Marines at Khe Sanh. To support this, the NVA severed the US lines of communication from Quang Tri south to Hai Vang Pass by destroying bridges and ambushing any trucks that traveled up the coastal highway. Similarly, they destroyed the POL storage tanks at Tan My and the eight-inch diameter POL pipeline that also ran up the coastline. Guerrillas also ambushed any LCUs of the 329<sup>th</sup> Company transporting supplies up the Perfume River to Hue and up the Cua Viet River to Dong Ha. With its supply line severed, I Corps units could barely defend sustain a strong defensive position.

By coincidence, MACV had deployed the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division into I Corps just a few days prior to *Tet*. The commander of MACV, General William C. Westmoreland, also deployed the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division there on 13 February further strained the supply lines. His deputy, Lieutenant General Creighton W. Abrams, established a MACV Forward Command Post to control Army operations in this former Marine exclusive zone. This increased the consumption of supplies to 2,600 tons per day excluding bulk petroleum products. Colonel Daniel F. Munster, the logistics officer for MACV, then estimated that I Corps would need an additional 1,000 tons per day for any counter-offensive.

Westmoreland did not want the United States to suffer a defeat at Khe Sanh as had the French at Dien Binh Phu. While the Marine garrison did not pose the same strategic importance as Hue or Da Nang, it had become a test of wills. Abrams set about planning for the relief of Khe Sanh (Operation PEGASUS) to begin on 1 April. General William B. Rosson would command the Provisional Corps made up of the two Army divisions and III Marine Amphibious Force. MACV decided that only food, fuel and ammunition would be delivered to I Corps during the crisis. BG McBride, the commander of US Army Qui Nhon Support Command in II Corps Zone, traveled north to organize the US Army Da Nang Support Command in support the Army operations.

The wonderful feature about Vietnam was that it was almost entirely coastline. To establish a new line of communication, the Da Nang Support Command had to conduct a logistics-over-the-shore (LOTS) operation within the vicinity of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division's base at Camp Evans. This honor fell on the 159<sup>th</sup> Transportation Battalion (Terminal).

McBride knew the 159<sup>th</sup> had experience at LOTS operations and the original plan for the 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to support 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division operations through a beach as it had at Sau Huynh and Duc Pho. The Support Command pulled Task Force Sunder together

from different units so as not to hinder any one port's capability. It would take the 71<sup>st</sup> Terminal Service Company at Qui Nhon, 403<sup>rd</sup> Terminal Transfer Company out of Da Nang and 625<sup>th</sup> Supply and Service Company.

The 403<sup>rd</sup> Terminal Transfer Company at Cam Ranh Bay. They would deliver the cargo on shore to the storage depot and operated ammunition supply depot. At that time, they worked for Graves Registration helping with KIAs, a very demoralizing job. They were very grateful to learn of their new mission. They took pride in that they would become the most forward deployed support units. They left that month on an LST bound for Da Nang.

Sunder had to go home on emergency leave in January 1968 not aware that the Tet Offensive would expedite the execution of the LOTS operation. His Operations Officer, Bill Dimon, conducted the site reconnaissance with the Navy. Fortunately, Dimon was a helicopter pilot who had plenty of friends in Vietnam. They site survey team flew up to the Quan Tri area in a CH47. Navy hydrographic teams had surveyed ten to twenty miles of coastline and found none completely satisfactory because of off-shore sandbars and shallow gradients that prevented dry ramp landings of landing craft. Dimon not only needed a workable beach, but he needed one with a road connecting it to Highway 1. The Navy finally located a desolate sandy beach at Thon My Thuy with an old French-built road in disrepair leading to the highway. The beach was nothing more than a sand dune 2500 meters wide and 2000 meters deep. The Navy Seabees immediately set about refurbishing the road by rebuilding several bridges and filled in the washouts and widened it to a two lane road. The Tet Offensive broke out while they rested at Da Nang. Bill Dimon rushed back to Qui Nhon to check on his battalion.

The 403<sup>rd</sup> stopped at Da Nang for three days then drove by truck up to the supply base at Dong Ha, where Highway 1 and 9 intersect, to offload cargo. Task Force Sunder was finally activated on 25 February, with its mission to specifically support Operation PEGASUS. Around 27 February, a truck dropped Private Danial E. Elwood off at a bare stretch of beach to wait for the LST with the equipment of his 403<sup>rd</sup> Company in case it arrived before his company did. The two Seabees, who were also there, informed Dan, "Over there is an NVA R&R Center. Don't worry, if you don't mess with them, they won't mess with you." The three men waited for three days on a beach. A few hours before dark on 1 March, a naval vessel arrived and softened up the beach with about 12 to 15 rounds. They informed the Seabees that the LST would arrive 11 hours later.

The 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion Headquarters, 71<sup>st</sup> Transportation Service Company and six fully loaded BARCs of the Provisional BARC Company had boarded a Navy LSD *Comostock* at Qui Nhon and sailed up the coast. Because the beach had too shallow of a gradient, landing craft could not get close enough to the beach to drop ramp on dry land. The entire operation would have to be conducted with amphibians. For this reason they took the BARC Company.

About that time Sunder returned from leave. He secured a helicopter at Da Nang on 29 February to meet with the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division staff at Camp Evans. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade,

101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division under the operational control of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav would provide security for the beach. He learned that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade may move from the area and turn the security over to another unit. Sunder then flew up to make an aerial reconnaissance of the beach. The next day, he learned that the *Comostock* would not land until the next morning. Sunder flew to visit with the 403<sup>rd</sup> Terminal Transfer Company at Dong Ha. He landed on the *USS Iwo Jima* to meet Captain Harbert and the staff of the Navy Amphibious Task Force. He again flew out to reconnoiter the beach site. Upon his return he learned that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment of 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 1<sup>st</sup> Cav would provide the beach security. His helicopter finally caught up the *Comostock* and touched down, hovering with one wheel on a CONEX so he could jump off.

After three days sailing, the LSD arrived on 2 March at its destination, flooded its compartment, opened its doors, and the BARCs drove off. The Army assumed control of the operation from the Navy once ashore. The BARCs returned for more cargo, but rough seas caused damage to the doors of the LSD and it returned to Da Nang for repair. Other units began to arrive.

That same day, the 2/5<sup>th</sup> Cavalry secured the beach. The cavalry immediately set up a defensive perimeter beyond the sand berm. The enemy would realize the importance of this logistics base and make a concerted effort to shut it down. Mortar rounds, however, caused little damage when they landed in the soft sand. The fighting continued in earnest mostly beyond the berm.

The 57<sup>th</sup> Truck Battalion had moved north in support of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division in December 1967. It had the 57<sup>th</sup>, 63<sup>rd</sup>, 363<sup>rd</sup>, and 863<sup>rd</sup> Truck Companies along with the GOER Company. These trucks ran the gauntlet of enemy fire from the berm to the relative safety of Highway 1.

Although the line haul trucks did not fall under Task Force Sunder, the planning for the truck and helicopter delivery of all supplies to the forward supply bases fell upon the 625<sup>th</sup> Supply and Service Company. The 129<sup>th</sup> Maintenance Detachment had the task of keeping everything running. Engineers arrived from the 14<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineer Battalion 14 days later to take over the road repair from the Navy. The Seabees then revetted the Ammunition Supply Point, the POL storage area, provided by the Marine Fuel Detachment, and places for the BARCs. Sunder wanted to reduce their vulnerability to enemy rocket attack, a threat that materialized sometime later. The Seabees also laid a POL pipeline from the beach to Dong Ha, but enemy interdiction limited its usefulness.

On 17 March LST-1165 and 1167 delivered an 800-foot pontoon causeway, which the Navy installed so the LSTs could marry to it and discharge cargo. The Rough Terrain Forklift could then move non-rolling cargo directly onto the beach clearing trucks or onshore storage without going through surf. Instead the six BARCs were the primary means of discharging cargo from deep draft ships. Soon six more BARCs arrived. That March, a company of 35 LARC Vs of the 165<sup>th</sup> Transportation Company also arrived out of Thailand.

The battalion lost only one BARC during the operation. It had been overloaded with lumber, sank and capsized in the surf beyond the perimeter of the LOTS site. In an effort to recover it, the cable snapped as the BARC cleared the water. The recovery crew left it overnight. When they returned the next day, they found enemy soldiers had used it for shelter. The cavalry force providing security for the work detail fired some rockets into the hull of the BARC ridding it of enemy but rendering it useless except for spare parts.

For the first month, while the engineers worked on the road, movement through the sand was extremely difficult. Yet in spite of that, the task force exceeded their expected daily discharge of 350 tons. In fact, that first month they averaged 1,000 tons per day with a peak of 1,862 tons on 21 March which was over half the daily I Corps requirement. Originally designated Utah Beach, but the men of 159<sup>th</sup> put up a sign, "Welcome to Wunder Beach: the home of Sunder's Wonders" and the name stuck.

The battalion operations center acted as the beach control and harbor master. It maintained close communications with ships being discharged and through a meeting each day planned the daily off-loading operation. Battalion committed the BARCs but left the control of their movements to the companies. Sunder felt that this centralized allocation of assets, through daily meetings, contributed to the success of the operation. His men also worked with a great sense of commitment knowing the importance of their mission.

By mid-March it became apparent that Wunder Beach could discharge an average of 1,000 tons per day, the amount needed for the counter-offensive. To support Operation PEGASUS, Rosson established his forward supply base along Highway 9 at Ca Lu on 21 March. For the rest of the month, truck convoys pushed supplies forward.

On April 1<sup>st</sup> as planned, the Army, Marine and Vietnamese forces fought their way up Highway 9 eventually driving the enemy away from Khe Sanh and opened up the lines of communication to that base. They accomplished the relief of the Marines at Khe Sanh by 8 April then fought their way through the A Shau Valley, driving the NVA out of I Corps Tactical Zone. Operations at the beach continued until the expected start of the monsoon season in August.

Wunder Beach was the most significant LOTS operations conducted during the Vietnam War. Critical to the success of the enemy's offensive operations was its severing of the lines of communication into I Corps Tactical Zone. Had they achieved this, the NVA victory would have been all but assured had the Army not been able to reestablish an alternate supply line. The LOTS operation at Wunder Beach fortunately provided MACV with the additional tonnage needed to conduct its counter-offensive to relieve Khe Sanh and drive the NVA out of I Corps Zone. This was only possible due to the skill and efficiency with which the men at Wunder Beach moved cargo from ship-to-shore and inland. They far exceeded the expectations of MACV skeptics and delivered the means for victory.

LTC Duane H. Smith assumed command of the battalion in June 1968. The 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion continued until the monsoon rains began in September. A typhoon finally shut down operations.

On 29 August 1968, HHD, 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion then deployed to Vung Tau, at the mouth of the Saigon River, where it assumed responsibility for the 5<sup>th</sup> Heavy Boat, 1099<sup>th</sup> Medium Boat and 124<sup>th</sup> Terminal Service Companies. It became a part of the 4<sup>th</sup> Transportation Command. In September the 231<sup>st</sup> Medium Boat Company was activated from the Reserves in Florida and arrived in Vung Tau. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon was sent to Binh Tuy on the southern most river in the Mekong Delta to deliver cargo and equipment to engineers in the Mekong Delta. The other platoons of the 231<sup>st</sup> Medium Boat Company delivered cargo from Vung Tau up river to the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. In October, the 329<sup>th</sup> Heavy Boat and 544<sup>th</sup> Medium Boat Companies also arrived at Vung Tau as part of the massive buildup in the Delta. These missions usually took four to six days to complete.

The river and canal system in the Delta was more developed than any road network throughout the country. The 565<sup>th</sup> and later 440<sup>th</sup> Terminal Transfer Companies delivered thousands of tons of cargo over the beaches in the Delta. The 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion had responsibility for delivery of military supplies throughout the Mekong Delta. It developed the sup-ports of Dong Tam, Vinh Long and Bien Thuy.

In an effort to pacify the Dinh Tuong Province, IV Corps Tactical Zone ordered the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division to conduct offensive operations as soon as the dry weather season began on 1 December 1968. The Operation SPEEDY EXPRESS was designed to take the war to the enemy in the Delta and sever his supply lines from Cambodia.

In preparation for the operation, the boats of the 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion had to transport hundreds of tons of construction equipment and thousands of tons of construction materials to the engineer units in remote areas of the Delta over canals which had not been previously used by the US troops. Convoys from the boat companies of the 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion ran from Dong Tam and Vung Tau up the Vam Co Tay River to Moc Hea under escort from Navy Escort Vessels. Prior to that, neither the Army nor Navy had operated boats in that river, which was considered "Charlie Country." They literally opened the Tam Co Tay for river traffic.

The 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division committed seven battalions to this search and destroy operation in the Dong Tam area. This operation was designed to sever the enemy supply lines from Cambodia and deny them the use of base areas. In 1969, the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division continued the operation in Dinh Tuong Province, using its highly successful night ambush tactics while the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade continued its mission with the Mobile Riverine Force. The boats of the 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion out of Vung Tau provided support for this operation.

In January 1969, LTC Tom Collins assumed command of the Battalion. SPEEDY EXPRESS ended on 31 May 1969 and the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division claimed 10,899 known enemy casualties compared to a loss of only 40 Americans killed in action and 312

wounded. However, the operation only uncovered 748 captured enemy weapons. Consequently, the operation later came under criticism by Kevin Buckley writing for *Newsweek* on 19 June 1972 as one of the worst atrocities of the war. He claimed that one US official admitted that the operation killed as many as 5,000 civilians in the Kien Hoa Province.

As part of Operation SWITCH 231, the 231<sup>st</sup> Medium Boat Company transferred 19 of its LCM8s to the 203<sup>rd</sup> Medium Boat Company (ARVN) on 19 August 1969. This was part of the Vietnamization Program to turn the war over to the Vietnamese Army. The 231<sup>st</sup> Medium Boat Company completed 14 months of combat duty without the loss of one man and was released on 30 August 1969 to return to Florida. The company received the National Defense Transportation Association Annual Award for 1969.

After Vung Tau was phased down in January 1970, the 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion relocated to Cat Lai where it assumed responsibility for mission of the 11<sup>th</sup> Terminal Battalion which was about to be inactivated. As MACV began to turn logistical operations over to the ARVN, units began to turn over their LCMs and LCUs to Vietnamese soldiers and boat companies left. The 1099<sup>th</sup> Medium Boat Company was inactivated in January 1971. With little need for a terminal battalion, the 159<sup>th</sup> Battalion was inactivated in Vietnam on 29 June 1971. The 544<sup>th</sup> Medium Boat Company was inactivated in March 1972. The 5<sup>th</sup> and 329<sup>th</sup> Heavy Boat Company left in April 1972.