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Front cover photo: Convoy arriving at Khe Sanh.
Courtesy of Michael Lavin.

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When students of war think of heroic battles, truck drivers usually do not come to mind, but the Vietnam War changed that. By 1970, the long drawn-out ground war for the Americans had entered its fifth year. Accumulating intelligence indicated that the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) was building up their logistical bases across the Laotian border. General Creighton Abrams, the new Commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), rightfully anticipated that the NVA was planning a major offensive to coincide with the 1972 United States’ national elections. To do so the enemy had to stockpile supplies early in 1971 before the rainy season slowed down traffic along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Consequently, Abrams wanted to strike first and disrupt this buildup of supplies. Since the U.S. Congress had passed a law after the Cambodian incursion that prevented U.S. ground troops from crossing the border again, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) would have to conduct the cross-border operation alone. Three ARVN divisions would march into Laos just south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to sever the enemy supply line. The 5th Mechanized and 101st Airborne Divisions would reopen and secure Route 9 to the North Vietnamese border. The American artillery would provide the ARVN troops indirect fire support from Khe Sanh and the law did not restrict American combat helicopters from providing support to ground troops across the border. So helicopters and artillery from the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) would directly support the operation. All other American support was to these units. The Americans called this Operation Dewey Canyon II; the Vietnamese named it Lam Son 719. This became one of the great heroic operations by truck drivers during the Vietnam War.
While the enemy frequently ambushed convoys during the Vietnam War, only twice did the enemy make a concerted effort to shut down any main supply routes in Vietnam. The first was along Route (QL) 19 in the Central Highlands as a prelude to the 1968 Tet Offensive and the second was trying to close Route (QL) 9 during Lam Son 719. This latter operation would result in an intense two and half months of convoy ambushes for those who drove the roads in I Corps Tactical Zone.

From previous experience, truck drivers had quickly learned they could not entirely depend upon the combat arms units to keep the roads clear of enemy since the infantry just could not cover every mile of road. Instead, the truck companies needed a form of immediate security to protect their convoys in the event of an ambush until the nearest combat arms unit or gun ships could respond. So starting in late 1967, the truck companies of 8th Transportation Group in the Northern II Corps Tactical Zone began building gun trucks. These were steel boxes on the bed of the cargo trucks loaded with pedestal mounted machineguns. The preferred weapon of choice was the M - 2 .50 caliber machinegun. Drivers generally carried the M-79 40mm grenade launcher. By 1970, the gun truck design and doctrine had reached fruition. Experimentation had ended. Elaborate art work reminiscent of the nose art on World War II bombers decorated the sides of the gun trucks with names that reflected the élan of the crew and only the best drivers crewed the gun trucks. Convoy ambushes had made the truck drivers of Vietnam front line combat soldiers and Military Assistance Command, Vietnam recognized this in 1969 with the awarding of the Line Haul tab. It was the equivalent of the Combat Infantry Badge for an infantryman. The enemy in I Corps Tactical Zone would face some of the most battle-hardened truck drivers of the war.

By 1970, Americans at home; however, saw the war as a lost cause as President Richard Nixon sought an honorable exit through peace negotiations in Paris. The events back home were in complete contradiction to what was about to happen in I Corps Tactical Zone. The anti-war protests coupled with the civil rights movement inspired nationwide civil unrest, which culminated with the Ohio National Guard shooting of unarmed college students at Kent State University on 4 May 1970. The American public was tired of the war and wanted out. All the while, the United States was still sending young men, many still in their teens, to fight a war their national leaders saw as unwinnable. Lam Son 719 would also take place during the third year of the retrograde of American forces from the Republic of Vietnam. Having left the safety of civilian life to go fight a war that few at home supported, arriving in the midst of the downsizing of American forces, the Army would ask these men to risk their lives for one last offensive during war. In spite of all this, these young soldiers would rise to the challenge. Lam Son would take place in Northern I Corps Tactical Zone of Vietnam. The U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam had divided responsibility for the counter-insurgency into four corps tactical zones starting with I Corps in the north and ending with IV Corps in the south. These were merely geographical areas of responsibility not to be confused with Army corps headquarters. The Military...
Assistance Command, Vietnam had created XXIV Corps in August 1968 to assume control over Army divisions that replaced the U.S. Marines in I Corps Tactical Zone.

Since Vietnam was mostly coastline, logistics flowed through the ports. I Corps Tactical Zone had only one deep draft port at Da Nang and the rest were beach ramps at Hue/Phu Bai, Quang Tri and Dong Ha. Logistical support for I Corps Tactical Zone fell under the U.S. Army Support Command, Da Nang. These support commands were multifunctional logistics headquarters built around major supply depots in each corps tactical zone. Responsibility for logistical units in the southern portion of I Corps Tactical Zone belonged to the 80th General Support Group while the logistical units in the north belonged to the 26th General Support Group. On 13 January 1971, BG Arthur Sweeney, Commander of the U.S. Army Support Command, Da Nang, was assigned to provide logistical support up to the Laotian border.¹

The supply route for Lam Son would stretch from beach ramps and supply bases at Da Nang, Hue/Phu Bai, Quang Tri and Dong Ha along the coastal Highway 1 then turn west from Dong Ha along Route 9 to Forward Support Activity 1 at Camp Vandergrift then, finally Forward Support Activity 2 at Khe Sanh. M-52 tractors with M-127 trailers, known to truck drivers as stake and platforms (S&P), would push cargo over the Hai Van Pass to Quang Tri and then to Vandergrift. Negotiating Hai Van Pass required trucks to slow down making this an ideal location for ambushes. During the Tet Offensive, the enemy had tried to sever north-south military traffic there in order to starve the 1st Cavalry Division’s effort to break the siege of Khe Sanh. They would try it again. For Lam Son 719, though, M-54 5-ton cargo trucks would pick up supplies from Vandergrift and then push them to Khe Sanh and, on occasions, the forward fire bases. Because of the extended supply line to the west and increasing need for supplies, I Corps Tactical Zone would need additional truck companies. The Da Nang Support Command only had two truck battalions, the 39th at Gia Le and the 57th at Chu Lai.

The Participants

History of ground warfare is made by soldiers. Collectively the American soldiers formed squads, platoons, companies, battalions and larger organizations to accomplish an assigned mission. In the case of convoy operations during Lam Son 719, the men identified primarily with their truck company. Most of these companies had been activated solely for service in Vietnam and consequently had no oral tradition handed down through decades of continued service. The quality of their leaders and the élan inspired by previous tours of duty in Vietnam shaped the personality of the individual companies. The type of truck, condition of the road and nature of the enemy threat also had as much to do with shaping the character of the truck companies as the men who served in them. They were light truck, medium truck or POL. Some roads like Route 19 in the Central Highlands had bad reputations. The heroes the Army called upon to deliver the goods through the second most intense period of convoy ambushes would drive in I Corps Tactical Zone, which bordered with North Vietnam.

The company grade officers involved in this operation for the most part earned their commissions through the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) or rising up from the ranks through the Officer Candidate School (OCS). At that time, West Point commissioned its graduates into combat arms and combat support, not into the logistics branches. If members of the Transportation Corps, they had attended the Transportation Officer Basic Course at Fort Eustis,
Virginia upon commissioning where they learned basic convoy operations among other transportation management skills. With the downsizing of units in Vietnam, the truck companies began to receive Infantry officers who would learn convoy operations from their non-commissioned officers (NCO). The officers of the U.S. Army generally came from similar low and middle class backgrounds as the enlisted soldiers but were generally separated by four years of college. Because of the need for company commanders, the Army had begun promoting officers rapidly. They would make first lieutenant in one year and captain in another. While a few wanted to make a career out of the Army, the majority wanted to fulfill their military obligation and start another career. Another thing most had in common with the enlisted men was that they had fathers, uncles and grandfathers who had served in the previous wars. The family tradition of military service was the main reason most answered their nation's call to arms.

Many enlisted soldiers were draftees who had not volunteered for the war but did not hesitate to answer their nation's call to arms. Many explained that while they had not volunteered, out of a sense of patriotism or tradition of military service, they were willing to serve if called. Yet their service was a contradiction to the sentiment back home. By 1968, American support for the war began waning as the anti-war protests, especially in the big cities and on the college campuses increased. Still, Middle America was supportive of soldiers. To compound matters, in 1969, President Richard Nixon had announced the incremental withdrawal of American ground troops from Vietnam giving evidence that America was losing the war. When these young men arrived in Vietnam, many others were going home. The music they listened to reflected the rebellious nature of youth and the anti-war sentiment with such chart toppers by the Temptations, “Ball of Confusion” and Edwin Starr’s, “War.” The sentiment back home did not reflect what was going on in Vietnam. These young truck drivers would participate in a major offensive operation while the general populace at home saw the war as a lost cause. Yet, these truck drivers were being asked to risk their lives for one final offensive.

Draftees owed their country two years of their life, as compared to a three-year enlistment of a volunteer, with the first six months spent in Basic Training and Advanced Individual Training in the Light Wheeled Vehicle
Operators’ Course. Soldiers served individual one-year tours in Vietnam rather than deploying with a cohesive unit. While this may not have encouraged cohesion because the older veterans did not want to become friends with the newbies, it did maintain continuity. For every new soldier there were many more experienced veterans, some with almost a full year in Vietnam. During their one-year tours in Vietnam they could attain the rank of E-5 sergeant. Nineteen and 20-year old men would become squad leaders or gun truck non-commissioned officers-in-charge (NCOIC).

At the end of their tours, the draftees would still owe Uncle Sam six more months, but if they extended for three months, the Army would drop their last three months and discharge them upon return to the United States. Quite a few extended.

The men drove nearly every day with few days off. Their day usually began before the sun came up with breakfast and then they received their assigned load to pick up. Depending upon the destination they returned early or late, but had to be off the road before the sun went down. This late in the war, the use of recreational drugs was more common in American and more readily available in Vietnam, so on average close to half of any truck company smoked marijuana and the rest drank beer in their company enlisted clubs to relax at the end of the day. No problems occurred if they left each other alone. Regardless of whether they were drafted or had volunteered, they were there to do their job and go home. Most resented the career soldiers, commonly referred to as “lifers,” trying to enforce what they considered petty discipline. “Fragging” was rare but did happen. The term came from tossing a fragmentary grenade in the “hooch” of an officer or NCO one felt was a threat. The men had great respect for those officers who shared their burden and expected nothing more from them than to do their jobs.

A Transportation Corps truck company consisted of 60 trucks and 120 drivers divided into three platoons each with a lieutenant as a platoon leader and staff sergeant as a platoon sergeant. A captain commanded the company with the help of a first lieutenant as his executive officer and first sergeant as his senior enlisted soldier. A sergeant first class served as the truck master and assigned drivers and trucks to convoys. Convoys were generally organized by load and destination rather than by unit. So there was often no unit integrity in the organization of a convoy except with regard to the escorts. The truck master tried to assign the convoy commander and gun trucks from the same company because they knew how to work together. As many as six truck companies could fall under the control of one truck battalion headquarters. The truck companies were attached to the battalion headquarters instead of being permanently assigned. That way the companies could be moved around and attached where needed. Of the two truck battalions involved in Lam Son, the 57th was stationed in southern I Corps Tactical Zone and the 39th was stationed in the north.

The 57th Transportation Battalion in the southern part of I Corps Tactical Zone had several truck companies attached to it. All but the 363rd “Road Runners” Transportation Company (Medium Truck) ran local haul. The 363rd was a medium truck company with M-52 tractors that hauled 12-ton M-127 trailers, fuel tankers and Sea Land vans stationed at Camp Adenir adjacent to Da Nang just north of the Marble Mountain. Consequently, the 363rd answered directly to the 80th General Support Group for line haul missions up and down the coastal highway – Highway 1.

From April 1970 to May 1971, the 363rd Medium Truck ran the entire line haul mission out of Da Nang earning them the title, “Da Nang Trucking Company.” The company assumed operation of the trailer transfer point in Da Nang and established another in Chu Lai in April 1970. The 363rd routinely hauled ammunition, food, medical supplies, construction materials, clothing and other materials both north and south along Highway 1 and the Da Nang area. The southern destinations were depots near Chu Lai and the northern destinations were Phu Bai and Quang Tri. On the way north, the convoys passed over the Hai Van Pass (an estimated 3,000 feet in elevation) and by the walled city of Hue. After reaching their destinations, the drivers would deliver their “packages” and then pick up a backhaul load. The backhauls usually consisted of retrograde materials (old tires, recyclable metals, wire, etc.) destined for the local “dump” near Marble Mountain where reusable materials were prepared for shipment back to Okinawa for processing. Convoys generally consisted of 30 to 40 vehicles but were sometimes as small as ten. The larger convoys...
The Participants

would have a gun jeep and up to three gun trucks as escorts. The convoy commander, usually a lieutenant, rode in the gun jeep at the head of the convoy. 1LT John Dragavon usually placed trucks hauling food up front followed by ammunition loads and then fuel with the bobtails, tractors without trailers, in the rear. Generally all convoy commanders interspersed the gun trucks throughout the convoy.

CPT Pierre D. Kirk had assumed command of the 363rd Medium Truck on 18 March 1970. CPT Kirk was a very resourceful career Transportation Corps officer who did not always follow the book. 2LT Edward J. “Buzz” Harvey arrived in the company in August 1970 and was assigned to the 1st Platoon. 1LT John A. “Drag” Dragavon arrived in September and was assigned to the 2nd Platoon. Both were Transportation Corps officers but the rest of the lieutenants came from the infantry. This late in the war, infantry divisions were downsizing so U.S. Army, Vietnam (USARV) began sending excess infantry lieutenants to truck companies because the convoy ambushes made them combat units. Devon Brinton was the first infantry lieutenant to arrive in the 363rd. The next infantry officer, Robert “Bob” Mitten, arrived in November 1970, just before Thanksgiving. Christian “Chris” Aichele and Dennis Cook followed later. Whether school trained on convoy operations or not, these lieutenants had to quickly learn how to run convoys in Vietnam.

For his first convoy, Dragavon rode with a senior enlisted man in the command jeep to learn the route. The first time he was shot at, another experienced sergeant was showing him the ropes of the convoy route. When he heard what sounded like gravel hitting the side of his jeep, Dragavon looked down at the holes and then turned to the sergeant, “Hey Sarge! What was that?” He replied, “I think they's shootin’ at us, sir!” Dragavon responded, “No shit!” To which the sergeant answered, “Yeah!” Dragavon then asked, “What do we do now?” thinking they should turn back and engage the enemy. The NCO said, “Too late, sir...we've done gone too far now...” At 40 mph a vehicle could travel about a third of a mile in 30 seconds. So, by the time this well-trained, ready for everything lieutenant had figured out he was being shot at, the convoy was well beyond range. He learned an important lesson – don’t stop.

When 2LT Harvey arrived in the 363rd, the company had three gun trucks but only one was named. The Colonel was an armored personnel carrier (APC) gun truck assigned to the 1st Platoon and CPT Kirk had named The Colonel in honor of the commander of the

![LT Bob Mitten next to his gun jeep. With the retrograde of infantry units, USARV assigned infantry officers to truck companies. Photo by Joe McGinnis.](image-url)
80th General Support Group who had allowed them to acquire the M-113 APC hull to build the gun truck. The top heavy gun truck, however, was hard to keep running as the mountain passes stressed the engine so it was often undergoing maintenance.\(^5\)

The other two gun trucks had steel gun boxes mounted on the beds of M-54 5-ton cargo trucks with mounts for .50 cal. machineguns forward and aft with M-60s in the middle or waist. Harvey had been a disc jockey for three years to help pay his way through undergraduate school and the 3rd Platoon Sergeant had been a professional sign painter back in the world. They wanted to increase esprit de corps by naming the other two gun trucks. So either before or after a card game of Cardinal Puff at the Hillbilly Honker’s Last Chance Saloon, they came up with the names Canned Heat and Iron Butterfly, two 1960s rock bands. The logo for Iron Butterfly was exactly the same as a similarly named gun truck in the 512th since it came from the “In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida” album. They also came up with the idea of painting “Heaven Can Wait” on the rear of the Canned Heat. Canned Heat belonged to the 2nd Platoon and Iron Butterfly was assigned to the 3rd Platoon.\(^6\)

The convoys had two radio networks. The first was between the convoy commander and the net control operator, code name Rio Grande, who turned out to be a U.S. Marine lieutenant. He monitored the progress as the convoys calling in checkpoints along the coastal highway. He could call in air support or artillery support if needed. Going north, the convoys lost Rio Grande going up the Hai Van Pass, and after that, they were on their own. The second network was internal to the convoy. The convoy commander maintained contact with the security vehicles and could use them to monitor progress, intervals and address problems. One day, Dragavon received a call from a gun truck saying there had been some shooting and a man was injured. He raced back to their location and did not find a soldier, but instead a young Vietnamese boy shot through his shoulder. Apparently one of the drivers thought he would have a little fun shooting monkeys out of trees and mistakenly shot the kid. Dragavon performed first aid on the wound and had him taken to a medical facility on Hawk Hill at Camp Adenir.\(^7\)

The company had been short 5-ton tractors and stake and platform (S&P) trailers. So it received new multi-fuel M-52A2 multi-fuel tractors as replacements, but they did not have as much horsepower as the diesel M-52A1s. Thus, they were not as efficient in hauling heavy loads, particularly in reaching and maintaining convoy speed. It was especially detrimental when driving up the Hai Van Pass. Hauling loads up the mountain...
pass caused them to slow down and bunch up in a particularly dangerous area. Sometimes the diesels would violate the convoy interval and push the slower tractors up the hill. The company also drew ten rebuilt tractors from Okinawa. One was turned back on issue, six never lasted more than 10,000 miles and three wore out before they reached 17,000 miles. From then on they tried to replace them with diesels.8

CPT Earl B. “Rusty” Burch replaced CPT Kirk as commander of the 363rd Medium Truck on 16 December 1970. Roger Rahor then joined the 363rd in January 1971 and was assigned as a driver to the 1st Platoon. He considered CPT Burch a great man who respected the job they were doing. He would ride on convoys, fight alongside them and stand up for the men. They also had a revolving door of first sergeants though, and Rahor considered the last the worst. Typical of draftees, he did not care much for “Lifers.” He respected those officers who shared the burden of their men and had no respect for those who did not.9

Traffic accidents in built-up areas around Da Nang and in villages along the way were a frequent occurrence. The roads were narrow, the vehicles in the convoy were huge, and traffic discipline by the local nationals was non-existent. The trucks ran the risk of running over Vietnamese zigging and sagging in and out of the convoys, those who stepped in front of trucks, or just people who were not watching where they were going and so forth. Dragavon remembered one day they killed seven people that way. In addition, with the Americans pulling out of Vietnam, the local attitude toward Americans was changing. On at least one occasion, some of their drivers were held captive by the local national militia due to a traffic accident. 2LT Brinton stopped to help out victims of an accident and was detained by the Ruff Puffs10 in a bamboo-fenced enclosure for several days. The company was about to take a gun truck and ram the fence with all “guns a blazin’” to pull him out when he was finally released. Needless to say, driving through villages created its own special tension.11

In January 1971, 2LT Mitten was leading a convoy south to Chu Lai and had a new staff sergeant riding with him as a machine gunner to learn the route. They called in checkpoints to the Marine radio network controller and the rule was not to let convoys pass each other in a village. As his convoy entered a small village south of Tam Ky, Mitten looked up and saw an oncoming Marine convoy. He exclaimed, “Oh, No.” His convoy reached the Ruff Puff compound south of the village, which was one of their checkpoints, and then heard small arms fire in the rear of his convoy. He stopped the

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**APC gun truck, The Colonel. The 363rd Transportation Company had three gun trucks.** Courtesy of Bob Mitten.
convoy and was about to turn his jeep around when two of his drivers came running up. One was shaking and Mitten asked him what the matter was. He said, “I hit an old lady.” The old woman had walked between the Marine convoy and stepped right out in front of the oncoming 5-ton tractor. She bounced off the bumper and was barely alive.12

So they went back and Mitten tried to call in a medevac for the injured woman. The villagers would not let them take her. They also wanted to detain the truck and drivers, so Mitten told the staff sergeant, “The convoy’s yours. I’m going to stay with these two guys.” He told him that his driver, Martinez, knew all the checkpoints since Mitten had let him call them in every now and then. He added, “Don’t worry about calling them in. The convoy’s yours. Take it. Go.”

The Ruff Puff confined Mitten and the two drivers in a small fenced-in compound with a hooch in the back and an area where they could sit at a table. Mitten told the other two drivers to face outward so no one would throw a hand grenade in there without their knowledge. Meanwhile, the White Mice13 were trying to calm down the villagers. Some MACV soldiers came down and surrounded the village with an ARVN unit. They brought with them a Vietnamese corporal who spoke excellent English who explained to Mitten they were in serious trouble. By that time the old lady had died. The interpreter pointed to a Vietnamese man yelling and said he was VC. “You don’t want to be here. You’re not going to make it overnight. You’ve got to get out of here before dark.” So Mitten thought to himself, “Oh, good. How’re we going to do that?”

Eventually CPT Rusty Burch came down to check on his soldiers. So Mitten’s captors brought the lieutenant out to meet with his commander. To his surprise, Burch informed him, “You got yourself into this mess. Get yourself out.”

Meanwhile, Roger Rahor remembered a group of drivers had their weapons and trucks ready to attack the ARVN compound. When the convoy came back through the village as it was getting dark, the three detainees knocked down their guard and ran for the jeep as it was passing by. All three jumped on the jeep and escaped, but left their truck.

When Mitten returned to Camp Adenir, he went to his hooch to pick up his spare .45 caliber pistol he had acquired from a Marine. He then walked over to the officers’ club and asked, “Where’s Rusty?” Someone said he was back playing pool. Mitten walked down the two steps. Burch was the only person in the room and when he saw an irritated Mitten approaching with the pistol in his hand, he picked the pool cue up like a baseball bat ready to hit the lieutenant. Mitten pointed the pistol and said, “Oh, good. You do that.” Mitten was walked toward him with the intention of shoving the pistol barrel down his mouth when the battalion executive officer grabbed him from behind. Evidently someone had yelled for him. They confined Mitten to his quarters under an armed guard.

The next day, Mitten and Burch reported to the battalion commander, a West Point graduate and major. He looked at Mitten and said, “Explain yourself.” Mitten then explained the situation and how his commander told him, “You got yourself into this, now get yourself out.” The battalion commander then said, “That will be all, Lieutenant.” Mitten left while the battalion commander talked with CPT Burch. Mitten thought he might receive an Article 15 punishment, but nothing more happened from the incident.

Camp Adenir was located across the road from a
Marine helicopter base, Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 16, a target of nightly rocket attacks. Rockets fired at the Marine Air Station often fell short or rounds were "walked" through the camp and across the road.

Soon after Rahor arrived in January, an RPG damaged the front end of The Colonel. Three gun trucks clearly proved insufficient, so the company built two more. In the spring, the 1st Platoon was tasked with building a new gun truck. Its daily convoys north and south needed help and The Colonel was not always available. So, the drivers scrounged most of what they needed from in and around the Da Nang area. Some of the steel for the box came from the Marines. They worked at night after the daily assigned work and in between guard duty assignments. It was not just 1st Platoon that did the work. It seemed that guys from all over the company pitched in. They painted it black and held a contest to name it. One of the guys from maintenance held out for Mercenary and painted that name in blue on the side of the box. He did a great job, highlighting the name against the black gun box. The truck had blast shields separating the aft from the forward areas. It also had a wooden deck to stop ricochets. They named the other new gun truck, Pallbearers.¹⁴

For Operation Lam Son 719, I Corps Tactical Zone would need additional truck companies and would pull a seasoned company from the most heavily ambushed road in Vietnam. COL Richard Morton, 8th Transportation Group Commander, considered the 523rd Transportation Company (Light Truck) at Cha Rang Valley in the Northern II Corps Tactical Zone one the best in his command. The 523rd Light Truck had five veteran gun trucks; Ace of Spades, Black Widow, Uncle Meat, King Kong and Eve of Destruction. Most gun trucks were 5-ton cargo trucks with double-walled steel gun boxes on the bed armed with three to four .50 caliber machineguns on pedestal mounts. Due to a shortage of steel for the gun boxes, some gun trucks like King Kong were made from M-113 armored personnel carrier (APC) hulls mounted on the bed of a 5-ton cargo truck. Each gun truck was painted black, often with bright color trim, and the names of the gun trucks were painted as elaborate art work on the side of the trucks. These weapons platforms were designed to stand out and they had gained such a reputation that the enemy placed bounties on destroying the gun trucks. Each of the three platoons had one to two gun trucks. By then, new crew

CPT Don Voightritter's jeep and driver, SP4 West. Courtesy of Don Voightritter.
members were volunteers selected by consensus of the other crew members. The gun truck crews felt elite but the 523rd believed that by assigning two gun trucks to each platoon, rather than consolidated into a gun truck platoon, the crews felt more like members of the company. They lived with the drivers who they had to protect. Since they were the best, much was expected of them and if they failed to defend the trucks then they would have to face their brothers in arms when they returned to the barracks at night.

By December 1970, the 25th Infantry Division had closed down on paper and infantrymen with incomplete tours ended up transferred to other units to complete their one-year tours of duty. The rapid promotion and other duties caused a shortage of lieutenants in the truck companies. So the burden of leading convoys fell heavily on the sergeants. Similar to the 363rd Transportation Company, the U.S. Army, Vietnam assigned three infantry officers to the 523rd Transportation Company. 1LT Ralph Fuller had recently served three or four months with the 25th Infantry Division but when it returned to Hawaii, he still had to complete his one-year tour in Vietnam, so he was assigned to the 523rd as the 2nd Platoon Leader in September 1970. He had prior enlisted service for a total of 15 years in the Army and was also airborne and Ranger qualified. He knew nothing about trucks, but was willing to listen to his men and they loved him for it. Second Lieutenants Tom Callahan and Jim Baird had both graduated from OCS 2-70 and were assigned directly to the 523rd as the 1st and 3rd Platoon Leaders respectively. The men called Callahan, “Tom Terrific” after a popular cartoon series on TV, and Baird, “Pig Farmer” because of his passion for breeding pigs. Since Ralph was Ranger qualified, the men called him, “Ranger Fuller.” These officers and the men shared a great mutual respect for each other.

The only logical reason they could conclude why the Army assigned infantry officers to truck companies were the gun trucks. This hinted that the Army felt that gun trucks were a combat arms mission and the leaders of the 8th Transportation Group wore the green leadership tabs of the combat arms. The infantry officers identified with the gun trucks and the men who crewed them. As combat arms officers they felt their place was on the road with their men. Most liked to ride in the gun trucks.
Above: 1LT Ralph Fuller still wearing his 25th ID patch in jeep. Courtesy of Don Voightritter.

Top Right: Officers of the 523rd Transportation Company: 1LT Dougherty, LT Jim Baird, 1LT Ralph Fuller, CPT Don Voightritter, LT Tom Callahan. Courtesy of Don Voightritter.

Left: CPT Dan Hill was assigned to ACTIV to conduct a study convoy security in Vietnam. Courtesy of Dan Hill.
because they admired the crews, which endeared them even more with the crews.\textsuperscript{15}

During one convoy, Fuller rode in King Kong when the convoy slowed down to negotiate a hairpin curve in Mang Giang Pass. An RPG hit a fuel tanker up ahead and it blocked the road. King Kong weaved past about 15 trucks while blazing away at the enemy on the high ground to their right. Fuller believed VC had conducted the ambush since they did not stand and fight it out with the gun truck. King Kong’s suppressive fire took the fight out of them. SGT Michael Emory was the NCOIC of Kong and had been on it since he helped built it in 1969.\textsuperscript{16}

The gun trucks were crewed and led by young men often not more 20-years old who would risk their lives to save those of others. PV2 Chester Israel and PV2 Calvin Bennett went through the wheeled vehicle operator (MOS 64B) Advanced Individual Training (AIT) together and arrived in Vietnam a day apart; Chester on 20 September 1970 and Calvin arrived the next day. Chester arrived at Bien Hoa and read about the 8th Transportation Group in the Stars and Stripes. Other veterans warned him he would have an easy tour unless he went to the 8th Transportation Group at Qui Nhon. That very day Chester received orders for the 8th Group and as luck would have it, Calvin also received orders for 8th Group. They flew from Long Binh to Qui Nhon where both were assigned to the 3rd Platoon of the 523rd Transportation Company at Cha Rang Valley.\textsuperscript{17}

Danny Cochran also arrived in the 523rd in September and was a gunner on King Kong. He had dropped out of high school to work full time, but lost his job. So he and a buddy voluntarily enlisted for the infantry and airborne on the “buddy system” so they would go through training together. Danny liked adventure and saw airborne as the answer, but he had broken his arches when young and his feet were swelling up during the runs with boots and road marches with full field pack in the Infantry Advanced Individual Training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. His drill sergeant warned him he would not be able to complete jump school because of the swelling. He had passed all the mechanical tests, so the Army sent him to truck driver school on Fort Jackson instead. Unlike others, Danny wanted to go to Vietnam. Liking the adrenaline rush, he naturally migrated to a gun truck after a month or two in country and ended up as a gunner on the APC gun truck,
The Participants 19

King Kong, after a driver on Kong left Vietnam.18

David Rose, a draftee from California, had been picking up cigarette butts at Cam Ranh Bay for three days when 1LT Fuller drove down to pick up new replacements. Fuller walked in and asked who could drive trucks. He then warned them, “I might have bad news and might have good news. You are all truck drivers. You’re not going up on an LZ.” Instead of flying up to Qui Nhon, the eight or ten drivers went down to the port and picked up brand new cargo trucks off the boat. The gun truck, Uncle Meat, escorted them to Cha Rang Valley where they became drivers of the 523rd Transportation Company.19

Rose drove a cargo truck the next day and upon his return the platoon sergeant told him to report to the commander. David thought, “I had only been in the company one day so how could I get in trouble?” Looking at his personnel file the commander said, “You’re weapons trained.” Rose had gone through a couple of days of sniper training at Fort Ord. So Voightritter assigned him as a driver to Uncle Meat. There he met the crew. Logan Werth had volunteered for the Eve of Destruction a couple of weeks after arriving in country in late August. After a couple of months, Logan joined the crew of Uncle Meat as a gunner on the rear twin .50 caliber machineguns. Cameron was right gunner, and Danny Jones operated the left M-60 machinegun. Before they headed north, they replaced the right and left front M-60s with M-2 .50 caliber machineguns. They carried about 18,000 rounds of .50 caliber ammunition on the floor of the gun box and kept a couple of spare M-60s tucked in the

Logan Werth and Mike Cameric on Eve of Destruction. Courtesy of Logan Werth. Above: Uncle Meat was one of five gun trucks assigned to the 523rd Transportation Company at Cha Rang Valley. Courtesy of Logan Werth.
gun box. The driver carried an M-79 grenade launcher with a box of 40mm grenade rounds, flares and beehive rounds. The crew stored a box of concussion and white phosphorous grenades in the back corner of the gun box. They were ready for nearly any kind of attack.  

1LT Donald Voightritter arrived in the company as a first lieutenant and assumed command. Don Voightritter was a fair and respected officer. His twin brother Ronald, another Transportation Corps officer, had already earned the Silver Star Medal for valor in 8th Group. Unlike many company commanders, Don liked to ride on convoys. The personality of commanders defined the character of their commands and Voightritter created an atmosphere of mutual respect and camaraderie. This was the strongest asset of the company. The officers informally discussed what had happened during ambushes with the gun truck crews to understand what had happened and how the crews reacted. No two ambushes were the same.
so the gun truck crews reacted differently to each one. Consequently, these discussions inspired the lieutenants’ confidence in their crews.²¹

New drivers learned to drive in Vietnam by riding with veterans. Calvin Bennett rode with Robert Walter Thorne for a couple of days who taught him to drive “the Vietnam way,” which meant drive like hell and miss as many of the potholes as possible. Because Chester Israel had grown up driving, he drove on his first run and the veteran rode beside him as the passenger. His red hair earned Chester the nickname, “Red.”²²

The enemy ambushed Chester’s first convoy and shot up the hood and windows of his truck, which really pissed him off. The drivers in 8th Group only defended themselves with an M-16 and four “clips” (magazines) of ammunition. After the ambush, this irate private reported to his platoon leader and demanded, “Lieutenant Callahan, you have two choices. You can either send me
home or give me a bigger weapon." Chester felt he did not have enough ammunition. Callahan replied, "Red, I hate that you feel that way, but I have an opening on a gun truck if you want to go on it." Israel asked, "Tom, what kind of weapons?" The lieutenant explained the gun trucks had .50 caliber machineguns. Israel asked, "How much ammo?" The lieutenant answered, "3,000 rounds and if you run out, I'll personally bring you more." So the young soldier accepted on the logic, "If they want to kill me then I want to kill them."

So Israel was assigned as the rear gunner on the Black Widow just a couple of weeks after his arrival. He described his mission as to "just drive down the road until you get blown up." Leon Vance, the right front gunner, advised Chester, "The ammo is free; don’t act like you’re paying for it. Everything belongs to the government." Israel ended up fighting in a dozen ambushes prior to the move north, most of which had been just harassment and sniper fire, though, but it gave him plenty of experience under fire before Lam Son.

The gun trucks also served as a reaction force in the event the night convoys were ambushed driving between the supply depots at Qui Nhon and the marshalling yard. A 545th gun truck, Matchbox, was ambushed at VC Village near the Republic of Korea (ROK) bridge on the night of 28 October. Eve of Destruction, King Kong and the 512th’s Godzilla raced out the front gate with the Black Widow in the lead. As the first gun truck to reach the kill zone, Black Widow drove straight into the middle of the kill zone. Because one civilian was killed, higher headquarters flagged the redeployment orders of everyone involved in the ambush until the investigation determined if there was a war crime. It turned out the enemy had forced the villagers to remain outside in the village to make everything look normal since drivers looked for changes in local activity as warnings of ambushes. The crews were exonerated of any crime, but this demonstrated the measures the enemy would take to ambush a convoy.

Hanging out with the 523rd was CPT Richard Dan Hill, a career Transportation Corps officer assigned to the Army Concept Team in Vietnam (ACTIV) at Long Bien. This office collected lessons of the war and had assigned CPT Hill the duty to record the lessons from convoy ambushes. His office sent him to 8th Group to ride on convoys where COL Morton assigned him to his best truck company. Hill lived with the 523rd and rode in a gun truck on any convoy that anticipated an
ambush. In November, he experienced his first ambush in Mang Giang Pass, better known as “Ambush Ally” to the drivers, that resulted in one American dead and six enemy soldiers killed. The next month, his headquarters called him back based upon the information that a major operation would take place in I Corps Tactical Zone in January and U.S. Army, Vietnam Intelligence anticipated the enemy to try hard to disrupt logistical support.26

Besides the 523rd, the 1st Logistics Command would also assign the 2nd and 572nd Truck Companies to move north for the operation. That December, CPT Patrick I. Peters’ 572nd Transportation Company (Medium Truck), stationed down at Long Binh, loaded its tractors and trailers on Navy Landing Ship Tanks (LST) at Newport for transport to Quang Tri. LT Ernie K. Stafford took his platoon north two to three weeks ahead of the main body. The rest of the company flew from Bien Hoa Air Base north on a C-130 a few weeks later. Prior to their departure, they ravaged Long Binh and Bien Hoa Air Base. Three days after settling into Camp Eagle, the company moved to Quang Tri where the Military Police discovered the truck company had nine more jeeps than it was authorized. Subsequently, the 572nd acquired the name “Gypsy Bandits” because of its reputation for thievery and frequent moves. On 29 January 1971, the Gypsy Bandits became attached to the 39th Battalion for Lam Son 719. Since the 48th Transportation Group at Long Binh had not believed in the need for gun trucks, the 572nd had to borrow Highland Animals from the 541st and Set Me Free and LT Calley from the 563rd. Fortunately, they would primarily push cargo up the coastal highway and as far as Vandergrift.27

In January 1971, the 2nd Medium Truck and 523rd Light Truck Companies finally received orders to move north from their home in Cha Rang Valley to Phu Bai along the coastal highway (QL)1. The companies were not informed of the reason for the move, but the drivers were instructed they could only take the minimum issue and had to send everything else home. Since the 523rd needed a total of six gun trucks, two per platoon, it picked up Satan’s Li’l Angel from the 669th Transportation Company. Once ready, the 523rd waited in the Ponderosa, the marshaling yard, for two days with no knowledge of when it would move. While newly promoted CPT Voightritter closed down the company at Qui Nhon, he sent the trucks north under the responsibility of 1LT Fuller. When he received instructions to lead the convoy north, Fuller had no idea why.28

On 22 January 1971, the Eve of Destruction led the 523rd convoy of over a hundred trucks north with the Black Widow in the rear. When they climbed up over Hai Van Pass, it reminded the drivers of An Khe and Mang Giang Passes and they recognized it as ideal ambush country. It had windy roads, steep grades and the top of the mountain was often “socked in” by low cloud cover. The next day they delayed at Phu Bai and Fuller then told everyone to write home. From there, the company
waited to move to Quang Tri. The 2nd Medium Truck had two APC gun trucks, The Outlaw and Big Kahuna, the latter named by SSG Thomas Lee from Hawaii; and Madam Pele, formerly Tire Boss; and Maverick, both 5-ton maintenance gun trucks. David Boyd had become the NCOIC of the Big Kahuna because of his previous infantry experience. While serving with the 101st Airborne Division, he had both his arms and legs broken by a booby-trapped hand-grenade back on 19 December 1968. He then spent an extended stay at Naval Hospital Portsmouth was assigned to light duty at Fort Bragg. He refused a medical discharge in 1970 because he would only receive half his base pay. So he returned to Vietnam hoping to rejoin the 101st but his injuries had him assigned to the 2nd Medium Truck instead. It did not take his first sergeant and company commander long to realize he was more of a hazard driving a truck than a help. It just so happened that SSG Lee had an opening in his gun truck platoon so the company commander interviewed Boyd about his previous infantry training and experience. In asking about his wounds, the captain learned the former infantryman had not received a Purple Heart Medal, combat infantryman's badge or any other awards. So the
commander pushed through the paperwork and awarded Boyd his Purple Heart during a company formation. Because of his infantry background, SSG Lee put Boyd in charge of the care and inspection of the machineguns. His company also drove north, resting overnight at the Seabee camp at Da Nang then stopping at Hue.30

Up north, the two truck companies from Qui Nhon were attached to LTC Alvin C. “Big Al” Ellis’ 39th Transportation Battalion. There CPT Voightritter joined up with his 523rd Light Truck. Now that they fell under a new command, the 2nd and 523rd Transportation Companies received instructions to paint over the yellow stripe on the front hood of their trucks, which identified them as belonging to 8th Group. Ellis’ 39th Battalion already had four truck companies: the 515th Transportation Company (Light/Medium Cargo) at Phu Bai, the 585th Transportation Company (Medium Cargo) at Gia Le, the 666th Transportation Company (Light Cargo) at Camp Evans, and the 805th Transportation Company (Light Truck) at Phu Bai. This battalion became known as “Big Al and his Money Makers.”31

Ellis selected the 515th Transportation Company (Light/Medium Cargo) to join the 523rd as one of two light truck companies to extend the supply line to Khe Sanh. It was stationed at Camp Eagle near Gia Le along with the 666th Transportation Company. The 515th “Road Runners” drove M-54A1 5-ton cargo trucks and like the 523rd had an interesting assortment of leaders.

1LT Cornelius Roger Maloney correctly anticipated that upon graduating from Gettysburg College he would end up going to Vietnam, so he enrolled in ROTC during his last two years, because he would rather give orders than take them. He ended up the cadet battalion commander at the school and was named Distinguished Military Graduate in 1969. Although he could apply for a Regular Army commission later, he chose a Reserve commission in the Transportation Corps because he
wanted to fly helicopters. While attending the cargo officer’s course at Fort Eustis, he applied for flight school. Sears and Roebuck had granted him four years’ military leave to serve out his military obligation of two years active duty and four in the Reserve. Initially flight school took a year to complete followed with an additional two-year military obligation. While at Fort Eustis, Virginia, the Army increased the active duty commitment to four years, which was one year more than his leave and he was not so certain at that point he wanted to make the military a career. He assumed if he liked the Army and did his job well he could later apply for a Regular Army commission later and attend flight school.

Roger Maloney had arrived in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam in September 1970, during the in-processing he wrote down Cam Ranh Bay as his first choice. As a cargo officer he was trained to work the piers, but was instead assigned to I Corps Tactical Zone, which was not even on his wish list. Roger flew on a C-130 into Da Nang, then rode a helicopter and a jeep to Phu Bai. He began riding on convoys the very next day and the NCOs taught him how to run convoys.

There he ran into Bill Litton with whom he had attended the Transportation Officer Basic Course (TOBC, pronounced Tow-back). Bill showed him around Phu Bai and then Roger received orders to the 515th Transportation Company at Camp Eagle. He did not remember what platoon he was assigned to since the officers rode on convoys regardless of what platoon the drivers came from. Upon his arrival, he was shown the company headquarters, where he would sleep, and then introduced to the platoon sergeants.

In preparation for the upcoming mission, LTC Ellis made several leadership changes in battalion to improve the 515th in December 1970. 1LT Lawrence J. “Larry” Hurley was a Transportation Corps officer who had served a year at Fort Bragg, North Carolina and attended jump school. He had arrived in Vietnam in September 1970 and served as the battalion intelligence officer until assigned as a platoon leader to the 515th on
1 December.\textsuperscript{32} He joined 2LT Don Bartletti who was a short, high energy and high pitched voice, infantry officer from sunny California that had arrived in the company just prior to Thanksgiving.

The lieutenants were made convoy commanders of the larger convoys and those traveling farther than usual. The NCOs ran the shorter convoys. The 515th ran a lot of convoys to Phu Bai and down to Da Nang through the Hai Van Pass. They also picked up cargo at the Tan My Ramp at Hue. They would offload cargo from the LSTs and then haul the cargo out to the fire bases and a lot of ammunition to the ammo dump. When they went down to Da Nang, they hauled mostly frozen food on the big Sea Land refrigeration vans destined for the officer and NCO clubs. The 515th Transportation Company only had one gun truck, Baby Sitters, and Maloney liked to ride in it when he escorted convoys. He considered it an honor to ride in a gun truck. Hurley also liked to ride in the gun truck more because it had radios. SGT Roger Bittner was its NCOIC.

Then SP4 Bittner, a 22-year old draftee, had arrived at Cam Ranh Bay in June 1970 and after a couple of days in-processing, flew up to Phu Bai where he was assigned to the 515th. A week later he was promoted to sergeant. The company then assigned him as the NCOIC of Baby Sitters. The crew consisted of Gene Jones as the driver, Walter Crow from Texas was an M-60 gunner, Keith Shed M-60 gunner and Pete Aragon was another gunner. Bittner manned the .50. They carried three and a half pallets of ammunition on the floor. They always took an extra man with them in case a gunner was wounded and also took along a medic. Similar to all gun truck crews, they bonded into a special brotherhood. Day and night they always hung out together.\textsuperscript{33}

Like his predecessors, Bittner learned the job by doing it, and fortunately he was a quick learner. If in contact, the gunners would respond to the enemy fire first. They would stop and lay down suppressive fire. They carried three and a half pallets of ammo on the floor of the truck, probably 50,000 rounds and there were many times they only had a few hundred rounds left after an ambush. They shot at anything and everything. Eighty percent of the time they could not see the enemy, but at night they could see the muzzle flashes. If anyone was hurt, they would quickly assess his injuries and then call in the medevac helicopter to get them out of danger as fast as they could.\textsuperscript{34}

Since the 515th only had one gun truck, Baby Sitters escorted convoys over the most dangerous route. The enemy liked to set up ambushes along Hai Van Pass because the switchbacks slowed down the convoys making them easier targets. So 90 percent of the missions run by Baby Sitters were to Da Nang over the Hai Van Pass. Not only was the enemy a danger but many of the drivers would not properly tie their loads down, which would shift and fall off. The gun

truck would then have to stay and provide security while the truck recovered the cargo. This would cause a late return.\footnote{35}

Returning at night was extremely dangerous because the ARVN strung concertina wire across the bridges at night, which required them to stop. There were an estimated 20 bridges going into Phu Bai. Whenever Brittner returned late, he would fire his .50 caliber in the air warning the ARVN bridge guards his convoy was approaching. That way they would have the bridge open by the time he arrived. He had no intention of waiting for the Vietnamese soldiers to open the bridge after dark, but intended to keep on driving.\footnote{36}

Although there was a requirement for a lieutenant to ride on the gun trucks, Brittner did not have much use for officers. The new ones, called “Cherry Boys," did not know much more than he did, and if they did something stupid in combat, they were a hazard to everyone else. Sometimes while staging, he would just leave without the lieutenants because he did not want them on the convoy. What he wanted in an officer was someone who would work with the men without adhering to strict military rules. Brittner, however, hit it off with Maloney from the beginning. He also considered CPT Mike Lavin and some of the other lieutenants very good, but some unfortunately came over with the attitude that this was their war.\footnote{37}

The most important change to the company leadership came when LTC Ellis relieved the commander of the 515th after the company had failed its Command Maintenance Management Inspection (CMMI), an Inspector General (IG) Inspection and placed an Ordnance officer, CPT John M."Mike" Lavin, in command on 1 December. Mike Lavin descended from veterans of the American Revolution and Civil War and had always wanted to serve in the military. With such a demand for captains, the Army automatically promoted officers to captain after only two years of service. Lavin was 25 years old when he assumed command of the 515th. Two years did not provide much military experience and the 515th had problems.

Lavin first needed to quickly gain the support of his senior NCOs – staff sergeants and sergeants first class. So he called the company together and explained the rules. To show he meant business, he would issue an Article-15 punishment within 24 hours of any infraction or not at all. While on battalion staff, Lavin had worked on the plan for Lam Son and knew they did not have the luxury of time to resolve minor issues. By Christmas, he had issued about 20 Article-15s and no longer had any disciplinary issues. This won the trust of the senior NCOs. If a soldier refused to follow instructions, the NCO would threaten to take the soldier to the commanding officer. Knowing they would lose $40 of their meager 125 to 140 dollars a month encouraged them to obey orders.\footnote{38}

This did not endear him with everyone and one day Lavin received a phone call from an anonymous person who said he did not like what was going on and if the captain did not watch his back he would be “fragged.”\footnote{39} Lavin did not worry about it, since he had to focus on getting the job done.\footnote{40}

After assuming command, CPT Mike Lavin liked to walk around his company area every night to see what was going on. One night he walked up the hill when a screen door of the NCO barracks swung open in his face and the man holding the door open yelled to four soldiers sitting under the water tower, “Who’s next?” None of them answered but pointed with their fingers toward the captain behind the screen door. The soldier did not see Lavin, but asked again, “Come on, who’s next.” They just kept pointing. The man finally

\begin{figure}[h]
    \centering
    \includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
    \caption{CPT Mike Lavin, Commander of the 515th Transportation Company, aka SP4 Smith on right. Courtesy of Michael Lavin.}
\end{figure}
figured out they were not responding. He turned around, recognized the captain, saluted and said, “Oh, good evening, sir.” As Lavin stepped past the door, he saw to his left rear a Vietnamese prostitute cleaning herself. He then asked, “Well, who’s next?” and walked away. After that he put prostitutes off limits in the company, since he felt Vietnamese running around loose in the camp at night was a security risk. 

Lavin was not without humor though. While he was the adjutant on the 39th Transportation Battalion staff, the battalion held a Halloween party and MAJ William Beane dressed as Nero. So CPT Lavin wore red shorts with a cardboard “S” logo on his T-shirt. He was also the staff duty officer and performed his duties in the makeshift superman costume rather than change. Someone later gave him a blue T-shirt with the superman logo, so he occasionally wore it under his jungle fatigues while in command of the 515th. For that reason the men remembered him as “Superman,” and many did not remember his real name. They described him as having a heart of gold because they knew he cared about them. When he took command, Lavin placed a roster of the company dated 1 December 1970 in his duffel bag with the goal to keep everyone on it alive.

Lavin was fond of his soldiers and by January 1971 was earning their respect. If one was having a “short timer” party, he might enter the orderly room and ask the first sergeant, “Could Spec-4 Smith come to my short timer party?” The first sergeant would say he would ask SP4 Smith if he could attend. SP4 Smith was CPT Lavin’s alter ego. He had a jungle fatigue shirt with SP4 rank on it. If there was an enlisted party he wanted to attend, he would slip into the enlisted club about 2000 hours. Someone would ask, “Would Spec-4 Smith like a beer or does he want a soda?” Lavin would drink his one token beer and then remove himself. He had done this three or four times and believed a mutual respect between officers and enlisted would later pay dividends in combat.

Vietnam would once again prove that war was a young man’s business. Men barely out of their teens would risk their lives to deliver the goods needed to sustain the push into Laos. Men only a few years older at most would lead them. Fortunately for this final offensive, the truck companies had the right caliber of drivers, NCOs and junior officers to confront the enemy’s desperate effort to shut down this vital supply line.
Memo, 363rd Transportation Company (Medium Truck) Subject: National Defense Transportation Award, 19 May 1971. The NDTA Award claimed the company ran all the line haul missions, but the veterans admitted the other companies also hauled missions.


Rahor email to Richard Killblane, 18 August 2004; and Harvey email to Killblane, May 29, 2015.


Fuller interview.

Chester Israel and Calvin Bennett interview by Richard Killblaine at Pigeon Forge, TN, 9 September 2008.


David Rose telephone interview by Richard Killblaine, 23 July 2013.


Vietnamese Police were called White Mice because of their white uniforms.

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Preparations

-D-Day for the operation would kick off on 30 January 1971 with everything - combat units with their support in tow - pushing down Route 9 toward Khe Sanh, which would serve as the Forward Support Activity 2. So as the day approached everyone rushed to get into place. This required a number of final preparatory measures and unit moves. Additional supplies had to be prepositioned and units involved in the offensive had to stage as far forward as possible. As early as two days prior (D -2), the 39th Transportation Battalion began convoy line haul operations from Quang Tri Combat Support Base (CSB) to the Forward Support Activity 1 at Camp Vandergrift. Quang Tri, therefore, became the staging point for the American units involved in the offensive.

Although the medium truck companies could haul cargo up and down the coastal highway, Route 9 could not support the weight of tractors and trailers past Camp Vandergrift. Route 9 was a two-lane paved road all the way to Vandergrift. It cut through a valley of tall elephant grass up past the Rock Pile, a rocky outcrop that rose 210 meters above the surrounding terrain. From Vandergrift, a narrow, single lane, unimproved dirt road snaked along the ridge with a river anywhere from 50 to 100 feet below. The heavy tropical rains could cause the red clay road to cave way down the steep embankment below it. The demand for supplies, however, would require the two light truck companies to deliver cargo around the clock, day and night. To prevent driving off the road at night, the trucks would have to drive with their lights on giving the enemy ample warning of their approach. The steep slopes with thick jungle vegetation growing right up to the road made this ideal ambush country. With the commencement of Lam Son 719, the guerrillas
would step up the frequency and ferocity of their ambushes hoping to cut off the American support.

While the 2nd and 523rd were driving north, other truck companies had begun to build up the two forward support bases. The 57th Transportation Company (Light Truck) at Quang Tri was attached to the 63rd Maintenance Battalion. The 1st and 2nd Platoons had 5-ton cargo trucks and the 3rd platoon had M-49C 5,000-gallon fuel trailers. The company had acquired the fuel tankers back in October 1969. The 57th was the only dedicated truck company that hauled fuel in Corps Tactical Zone. Barges would bring fuel in balloon bags to the Tam My Ramps at Dong Ha. The 57th would bring up tankers, fill up and haul the fuel back to the tank farm at Quang Tri. From there the tankers then made daily runs to Camp Carroll, Da Nang and other bases. When heading south the convoys received small arms fire going over Hai Van Pass where trucks had to slow down from 15 to 5 mph snaking up and down that mountain. They occasionally lost a couple of trucks to enemy fire, but lost many more when trucks hauling 5,000 gallons of fuel coming down the mountain lost their brakes. The convoys also received small arms fire near Phu Bai, where the 101st Airborne Division was stationed. To cross the single-lane railroad bridge converted for road traffic, the trucks sometimes parked on the side of the road for a half an hour until all the oncoming traffic had crossed. If hauling a van, the tractor had to cross that bridge perfectly or it would get stuck. Hauling fuel was the most difficult job for any truck driver.

The truck companies of the 8th Group, which ran on Route 19, were supposed to have six gun trucks but the truck companies up in I Corps did not have as many. The 57th only had three gun trucks: 1st Platoon had The Assassins, 2nd Platoon had The Protector, and 3rd Platoon had The Justifier. When Claude “Robby” Roberson arrived in the 57th in January 1971,
the gun trucks impressed him. Robby had been an armored scout (MOS 11D) assigned to Germany. At the age of 17, the judge had given him the choice of enlisting or going to jail. Shortly after turning 18 he was levied for Vietnam and assigned to LT Gardner’s 3rd Platoon. The platoon sergeant assigned him to a truck and Robby explained he was an infantry scout and had never driven a truck before. The platoon sergeant said, “A convoy is leaving in an hour and you’ve got 45 minutes to learn.”

The men respected their platoon leader and affectionately referred to Gardner as “LT.” He instructed his men, “Unless we’re around the order room or parade field, don’t salute me. When in the field I’m just like the rest of you guys.” The LT liked to ride in gun trucks. Prior to the move to Vandergrift, LT told his men, “We’re getting ready to go into an operation. I don’t know much about it, but I want my guys to stay alive.”

SP5 Michael “Mike” McBride began his second tour with the 57th Light Truck Company in Vietnam in September 1970 and had served as a truck driver for the 25th Infantry Division down south at Cu Chi. He had been burned from his burning tanker during an ambush and during his recovery was offered an assignment to Fort Hood, Texas. Having heard bad things about Fort Hood, he preferred a second tour in Vietnam, but fortunately they sent him to sunny Fort Ord, California. He had earned a Bronze Star Medal for his performance in that ambush and began his tour with the 57th in September 1970. When the end of tour neared for a member of the gun truck, Protector, Mike was asked if he wanted to go on the gun truck because of his previous experience and rank. Mike accepted and learned the job while riding with the man he was going to replace. He became the NCOIC and manned the front gun and radio. Leroy Sherrill, Jr. was another gunner on the Protector.

Meanwhile, the two light truck companies destined
to occupy Vandergrift staged for the move. CPT Lavin had gone on rest and recuperation (R&R) in late January when the 515th finally received orders to stage at Quang Tri. The company did not have an executive officer; but since Maloney was senior, he would serve as the acting company commander for the move north. He already knew they would participate in the upcoming operation since CPT Lavin had worked on the plan, but the date was secret. So LTC Ellis called him into his office and instructed the lieutenant to move three-quarters of the company and all their equipment from Camp Eagle to Quang Tri by the next evening. So Maloney assembled the NCOs to decide on who to take and who to leave behind, what trucks they would take and what they needed for maintenance. He left the decision of who remained behind to the platoon sergeants since they knew who they could count on and relied on their judgement on what they needed to make their operation work. Maloney trusted and depended on the judgement of his NCOs.

The company then staged at Quang Tri and when CPT Lavin returned, he found only eight of his men left at Camp Eagle. Surprised, he asked his first sergeant, “Where to hell did the company go?” Lavin then caught up the company at Quang Tri and instructed Hurley to go reconnoiter Vandergrift. When the reconnoitering
At about 1000 hours in the morning of 31 January, the massive truck convoy finally left Quang Tri. The 515th and 523rd Light Truck Companies traveled as one large convoy to Vandergrift with everything they needed to sustain operations. The drivers of the 523rd still had no idea of the nature of the upcoming operation. They assumed the move was

Convoy of the 57th Transportation Company heading to Camp Vandergrift. Courtesy of Paul Bader.

the operation. Each time they stopped at a camp, they thought that might be their new home. However, the further they moved north the more nervous they became because they were approaching the demilitarized zone (DMZ) that separated North and South Vietnam. Some in the 523rd feared they were going to invade North Vietnam, so when the convoy turned west at Dong Ha and drove along Route 9, they finally relaxed.

The Army Concept Team down in Long Bien rightly anticipated that Lam Son 719 would provide an excellent opportunity to study convoy security. The day after New Year’s, CPT Dan Hill flew up to Quang Tri City to attend the XXIV Corps briefing on the operation. He had been warned the Corps was conducting a major offensive operation with a high probability of convoy ambushes.

The road to Camp Vandergrift was opened by mid-January and to Khe Sanh on 30 January. On the morning of 31 January, the two-lane road heading west to Vandergrift became a complete gridlock with vehicles of the 5th Mechanized Infantry Division, Americal Division and 101st Airborne Division interspersed with trucks of the 515th and 523rd Transportation Companies.

The massive convoy finally arrived at Vandergrift

Right Top: Bunker of the 523rd Transportation Company at Camp Vandergrift. Courtesy of Don Voightritter.

Right Middle: Mess tent of the 523rd Transportation Company at Camp Vandergrift. Courtesy of Don Voightritter.

Right Bottom: Captain Voightritter’s hooche at Camp Vandergrift. Courtesy of Don Voightritter.

Far Right Top: Truck drivers of the 515th Transportation Company unloading their trucks at Camp Vandergrift. Courtesy of Michael Lavin.

where the paved road ended and the truck drivers found a wide open field cleared of vegetation by Agent Orange. There the drivers could at least erect tents and sleep above ground. The 523rd did not erect tents, but slept on cots beside their trucks. Gun truck crews slept in their gun boxes with their machineguns ready. The engineers brought in a dozer with a big scoop to dig out a hole and the drivers constructed bunkers with sandbags covering timber and perforated steel planking (PSP), used to build runways. Ten to 12 men lived in each bunker. The 515th set up a general purpose (GP) large tent for its headquarters but most of its drivers slept in the “Bedrock Hotel,” a large bunker also built with perforated steel planking (PSP), timber and sandbags. Lieutenants Hurley and Maloney dug a “Rat Hole” about four feet deep, big enough for two cots. They found some steel culvert material and covered it with sandbags. They lived there for the duration. Camp Vandergrift offered few amenities that previous camps had offered. In addition, the battalion felt that the engineer support failed to construct enough bunkers to protect the drivers against an enemy ground attack or heavy rocket barrage.\textsuperscript{12}

The 57th Transportation Company also took up residence at Vandergrift where the drivers lived either in and under their trucks or in bunkers. Roberson liked to sleep on the canvas top of his truck when not under a mortar or rocket attack. The 57th learned it would run the first convoy to Khe Sanh since the Marines had abandoned it back in 1969. The fuel convoy was supposed to accompany the engineers and fill up the fuel bladders but stopped short of Khe Sanh because the engineers had not yet opened the road. Consequently, the convoy had to turn back to Vandergrift where the company would run daily convoys back and forth from Quang Tri to build up a marshalling area.\textsuperscript{13}

The arrival at Vandergrift resulted in one immediate change in personnel assignment. On 1 February, SGT Chester Israel became the NCOIC of Satin’s Li’l Angel and Callahan told Chester to select his crew. Callahan’s driver, Richard B. Frazier, wanted to be a gunner. Frazier liked to call himself the “Montana Roughneck.” As the NCOIC, Chester would man the left .50 near the radio and picked Calvin Bennett to man the rear .50. He also recruited Robert W. Thorne as his driver, because he also had maintenance experience.\textsuperscript{14}

The austerity of Vandergrift offered few amenities
other than what the drivers brought with them. LTC Ellis
told CPT Lavin he did not want any trucks returning to
their home base at Camp Eagle. So Lavin just did not tell
Ellis his company sent one truck back to Camp Eagle for
soda, beer and other sundries to fill a refrigerator they
had buried in the ground. The field mess needed ice, and
the 515th kept half of any ice it delivered. The men then
used this ice to cool the beer and soda, which they sold to
raise money for the party at the end of the operation.15

As miserable as the living conditions would be, the
soldiers surprisingly enjoyed one aspect of their stay
at Vandergrift; they were left alone to do their job. They
had no time for any kind of disciplinary infractions that
disrupted the normal routine of camp life. There were
no distractions from work and survival. Drivers were
told where and when to pick up their loads and then
take their place in the convoy. Life had become
reduced to its simplest terms and in simplicity
men found a form of bliss.

Roberson remembered there was no “Mickey
Mouse” army stuff at Vandergrift. The drivers just did
their duty. Nobody bothered them. Half the company
was “pot heads” and the other half “juicers,” but at
Vandergrift everyone did their job and watched each
other’s backs.16

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1 Claude Roberson telephone interview by Richard Killblane, 22 July 2013.
2 Roberson interview.
3 Michael McBride interview by Richard Killblane at Ft Eustis, Va,
9 July 2004.
4 Maloney interview.
5 Mike Lavin and others remembered their experiences before the Vietnam
veteran reunion of the 515th at Kirkwood, Mo, 29 June 2013.
6 Hurley interview.
7 Ibid.
8 Robert Cody Phillips, Operation Lamson 719; The Laotian Incursion
During the War in Vietnam, Masters Thesis, May 1979; and Ellis,
39th ORL.
9 Nolan, Into Laos.
10 Israel and Bennett interview.
11 Hill, A Soldier.
12 Lavin interview; Werth interview; Israel and Bennett interview, Ellis,
39th ORL.
13 McBride interview, and Roberson interview.
14 Israel interview.
15 Mike Lavin and others remembered their experiences at the Vietnam
veteran reunion of the 515th at Kirkwood, Mo, 29 June 2013.
16 Claude Roberson telephone interview by Richard Killblane, 22 July 2013.
Once the operation began, the enemy very quickly recognized the vulnerability of the narrow life line and the importance of logistics to operational success. All troop movements and supplies had to drive down this narrow, unimproved jungle road. If the enemy could shut it down then the whole operation would come to a standstill. So while the ARVN troops advanced toward the NVA logistical bases so vital to next year’s enemy offensive, the NVA conversely tried to sever the American and ARVN supply line.

A two-lane paved road wound through a valley of tall elephant grass from Dong Ha to Vandergrift. Where Route 9 turned south, a jungle covered rocky hill rose 210 meters (or 690 feet) out of the open plain north of the end in the road known to the soldiers as the “Rock Pile.” From Vandergrift, the narrow, single lane, clay road snaked along the ridge with a river 50 to 100 feet below. This unimproved road could only support 2 ½ and 5-ton cargo trucks, so the demand for supplies required the two light truck companies to deliver cargo around the clock, both day and night. The conditions of the road only permitted tractors and trailers to deliver as far as Vandergrift.

![Ambushes 1971 - Lam Son](image)
Consequently, the tractors and trailers of the medium truck companies would push from Da Nang, Phu Bai and Quang Tri to Vandergrift where the two light truck companies would push it the rest of the way. On 1 February, the two truck battalions commenced line haul operations between Da Nang and Vandergrift. The next day, the 39th Transportation Battalion extended the line haul mission to Khe Sanh and the 506th Transportation Detachment established a trailer transfer point at Forward Support Activity 2 at Khe Sanh. There the cargo handlers would expeditiously unload and load trucks with regular monotony in order to speed the flow of traffic. Meanwhile, the other truck companies of the 39th Transportation Battalion continued convoy operations from Phu Bai to Da Nang, clearing cargo from the Tan My Ramp and delivering it to Phu Bai and Quang.
Tri, clearing cargo from the Phu Bai railhead, and clearing cargo from the Dong Ha Ramp to Quang Tri.¹

On 3 February, ARVN units finally arrived at Khe Sanh and the next day, American infantry and artillery occupied the abandoned border village of Tabat. On 8 February, ARVN troops crossed the border and invaded Laos. Their objective was to advance in a series of air assaults by the 1st ARVN Airborne Division and three ARVN Ranger battalions and ground pushes by the 1st ARVN Armored Division to the Tchepone with Route 9 as their supply route.²

CPT Hill remembered riding on the first logistical convoy to enter Khe Sanh on 5 February. Khe Sanh was an eerie place. No previous structures remained since the engineers had bulldozed the entire camp when the...
Marines evacuated it years before. Only tall grass and thick red dust covered the area. Lots of little white parachutes from burnt out flares hung eerily in defoliated trees like ghostly reminders of previous battles. For this operation the engineers had cleared an area and C-130 aircraft began to land on the once again operational air strip. Because of the unexploded ordnance left behind by the Marines, the engineers warned the truck drivers to stay within the designated cleared areas. The trucks off loaded their cargo onto the perforated steel planking (PSP) linked together to provide a hardstand for supplies. In spite of the warning, PFC Eugene Callahan decided to wander off several hundred yards from the defined area to relieve himself when he accidentally stepped on some ordnance that exploded, killing him. He was the first casualty among the truck drivers, but not the last. With the commencement of the ground phase of the operation, the sheer volume of traffic demanded the need for some kind of movement control.
Since the road from Vandergrift westward was only one lane, the XXIV Corps G-4 established a Joint Movement Control Center (JMCC) to coordinate the movement schedule of US and ARVN forces on the road. The JMCC scheduled convoys and coordinated with the Military Police as far in advance as possible. The JMCC permitted individual vehicles, however, to infiltrate on the road during daylight hours depending upon the level of security.5

To control traffic at the two forward logistical nodes, the Joint Movements Control Center needed a Transportation Corps officer at both Vandergrift and Khe Sanh, so the tasking was sent to the 24th Transportation Battalion down at Cam Ranh Bay. The battalion commander selected 2LT Don Malmstrom and 1LT John Doyle. Malmstrom had been in country since August 1970, and Doyle had transferred in from the 1st Brigade, 5th Mechanized Infantry Division after extending his tour for an early drop on his active duty commitment. He had hoped to finish out his tour in Vietnam in the relative safety of Cam Ranh Bay, so returning to I Corps Tactical Zone did not make him happy. Malmstrom was picked because he was the only unmarried officer in the battalion. Both flew up to Da Nang where they met with MAJ Butler, a transportation officer from Saigon who would be their commander during the operation.
The next day they rode north in a jeep to Quang Tri. MAJ Butler continued on to Khe Sanh while the two lieutenants waited at Quang Tri. They then hitched a ride to Dong Ha where they spent the night with the 5th Mech. They asked around and no one seemed to know exactly what they were supposed to do, so they returned to Quang Tri. There they were told to go down the road and returned to Dong Ha where a colonel told them to “get your asses down that road.” MAJ Butler met them on the road outside Vandergrift and informed them that one would set up a convoy control point at Vandergrift and the other at Khe Sanh. Doyle wanted to stay at Vandergrift and Malmstrom wanted to see Khe Sanh since a friend had fought in the 1968 siege of the base.²

Malmstrom was assigned two Military Police specialists and a jeep with a radio. The lieutenant would report by radio directly to MAJ Butler at Vandergrift. Initially Khe Sanh did not have an area cleared for a staging yard, so convoys had to pull over to the side of the road and wait their turn to unload. Malmstrom complained to no avail, so he borrowed...
the jeep and found engineers on the way to Vandergrift widening the road with dozers. Malmstrom explained to the engineer lieutenant that he needed three dozers to clear a 300 by 100-foot staging area. The engineer officer said one Caterpillar dozer could clear that much area in one hour. A young engineer followed Malmstrom back and cleared the area in the northwest corner of the check point intersection. It turned out to be too small so the next day, Malmstrom returned and the engineer lieutenant sent another dozer to expand a second staging area. An ARVN infantry battalion landed by helicopter in one of his staging areas and claimed it was given to them as their base camp. This created friction between the ARVN soldiers and the truck drivers and one ARVN officer was beaten after snooping around the trucks. The truck drivers loved their trucks and had little regard for the ARVN soldiers. The ARVN battalion commander and his American advisor consequently tried to hold Malmstrom responsible for the discipline of the truck drivers while in the staging area, but Malmstrom explained the drivers answered to their own chain of command.7

The 515th and 523rd ran convoys both day and night, 18 to 20-hour days and many drivers just slept
on their trucks. When they rolled in to unload, about five to six trucks would pull into to the unloading area and the drivers would fall asleep at the wheel of their trucks. Each vehicle would take about 30 minutes to unload and after that group was unloaded, the convoy commander or a gun truck crew member would wake the remaining drivers and have the next group pull into an area to be unloaded and the rest move forward. While the trucks were unloaded, the gun truck crews would pass the time cleaning weapons and changing tires. If there was no material handling equipment to unload the cargo then it was unloaded by hand at Firebase “Tailgate.”

Khe Sanh became the forward-most logistic base for operations and over the next couple weeks it rapidly grew into a major supply dump, but the living conditions remained very austere. Since it was only a turnaround point for convoys, living conditions were not an improvement over those at Vandergrift. At Khe Sanh, the men simply dug holes and lived like moles when they remained overnight.

Chester Israel drove back and forth to Khe Sanh for a week never knowing they supported an offensive operation. The 523rd had made so many moves, the drivers naturally assumed they would make a night move to Khe Sanh and then keep moving west. Fortunately Vandergrift was the last move for the 515th and 523rd until that operation was over.

While the 39th Transportation Battalion extended its route westward, the 57th Battalion likewise extended its route northward. This required a couple of its truck companies to shift northward in order to extend the supply line. To better supervise the southern leg of the line haul operation, the 57th Transportation Battalion would likewise move its headquarters northward. CPT Walter Anderson’s 563rd Medium Truck Company accompanied the battalion headquarters from Chu Lai up to Phu Bai to assume control of truck companies there. Anderson’s company had six gun trucks: The Preacher, The Lifer, War Monger, Peace Maker, The Private, and Smiling Death. All his platoon leaders were Transportation Corps lieutenants but, typical of other truck companies, he picked up additional officers from other branches. Anderson received one Engineer officer and several Infantry officers, who he assigned as commanders of gun trucks. The Infantry officers definitely liked riding on the hardened trucks better than walking on the ground.

During the 563rd’s first night at Phu Bai, the enemy probed their perimeter making them glad they posted gun trucks on the perimeter. That night, the 57th Battalion also asked for volunteers to lead a night convoy from Phu Bai to Camp Vandergrift. As their first night convoy, it was a frightening experience. So CPT Anderson and LT Al Jones volunteered to lead it.

Entrance to Khe Sanh. Courtesy of Danny Cochran.
Since Anderson had not driven the road, he did not know where the obstacles and trouble spots were. Consequently, night convoys became the norm.\textsuperscript{11}

Anderson’s 563rd Medium Truck Company remained at Phu Bai for a week and a half. Each night the battalion sent out one convoy and each serial was no larger than 20 vehicles including gun trucks with a 15 minute interval. None of the officers of the 563rd Medium Truck were made convoy commanders, but were allowed to ride in the gun trucks though. During the first week and a half, the convoys only ran into two ambushes and fortunately they were short and quick. During one, the enemy opened up with RPGs and .51 caliber machineguns destroying the lead fuel tanker and then fled the area.\textsuperscript{12}

CPT Burch’s 363rd Medium Truck Company moved to Red Beach, Camp Haskins on the north side of Da Nang. After a week and a half, the 563rd Medium Truck returned with its three gun trucks, but left some tractors and trailers at Phu Bai. The 363rd Medium Truck then resumed its normal runs in support of the Americal Division. During Lam Son 719, the 363rd seemed to run more convoys north to Quang Tri where they encountered their counterparts from other truck companies, including the 563rd Medium Truck Company. The 572nd Medium Truck moved up from Long Binh in January where the lieutenants of the 363rd met up with LT Stafford. 1LT Dragavon also ran into a fellow lieutenant he knew from Transportation Officer Basic Course, Wiley Williams. The shuffling of truck companies provided a reunion of sorts as many of lieutenants had come in the Army about the same time and attended the same courses.\textsuperscript{13}

When not out escorting convoys, gun trucks provided perimeter security with a man on the guns at all times. There were always reports the enemy was going to

\begin{center}
\end{center}
"June Bugs" were Transportation soldiers that went out at night with a radio and set up claymores outside the perimeter. One night the team went out, reported lots of movement and finally blew the claymores. The battle damage assessment revealed they had killed monkeys.14

The ARVN convoys had priority of use of Route 9 during the day, so the American convoys ran mostly at night. To prevent driving off the road at night, the trucks rolled with their lights on giving the enemy ample warning of their approach. The steep slopes with thick jungle vegetation growing right up to the road made this ideal ambush terrain. During Lam Son, the guerrillas stepped up the frequency and ferocity of their ambushes hoping to starve off the American support. The 1st Brigade, 5th Mechanized Infantry Division had responsibility for the security of that section of the road from Vandergrift to Khe Sanh, but no matter how hard they tried, they could not secure the entire route.

Due the inability of the infantry to secure the main supply route and the shortage of internal gun trucks, the 39th Transportation Battalion borrowed four M-113 armored personnel carriers (APC) from the 1st Brigade, 5th Mechanized Infantry Division for convoy security. Because the 515th had only one gun truck, it received one M-113 and CPT Lavin liked to ride it back and forth to Khe Sanh.15

**Left:** Changing tires in the rain and mud. Courtesy of Michael Lavin.

**Below:** CPT Lavin liked riding around in the APC. Courtesy of Michael Lavin.
Because the 57th Transportation Company only had three gun trucks, it also received an APC with a turret-mounted .50 on front and two left and right M-60s in the open hatch in the back. SGT Mike McBride, former NCOIC of The Protector, was assigned to it, and picked Leroy Sherrill and another kid named Spears, as his gunners. Since the convoys ran at about 25 mph due to the condition of Route 9, the APC had no problem keeping up. Besides the normal pot holes, the road was scarred with B-52 bomb craters. The B-52s carpet bombed suspected enemy positions and supply routes. One morning while Mike and his men were cleaning the weapons, the ground started shaking and they looked up to see the bombs falling out of B-52s. The biggest problem of APCs running with convoys everyday was maintenance.

Tracked vehicles were not designed for continuous driving like wheeled vehicles. Mike was lucky that his APC never “threw a track” because his crew consisted of truck drivers who did not know how to replace the track on the road wheels.16

One night an M-88 tracked recovery vehicle threw a track by a bridge eight to ten kilometers near Khe Sanh. The commander of the 57th Light Truck Company sent Mike’s APC out alone at night to secure the M-88.
McBride called back on the radio to let the commander know they had arrived. It was pitch black and he and his crew were scared. On the hillside they saw a flashlight blinking, then another flashlight blinking. He called in that there were people out there signaling back and forth. The captain told Mike to wait and he would check to see if those were other Americans out there. Mike called again and told him they had a lot more movement around there to which they were finally told to turn around and “beat feet” out of there. The APC had traveled half a kilometer when someone opened up on it with small arms fire. The crew of the APC returned fire and continued to Vandergrift. Mike was more scared waiting than when he was ambushed. His crew went to sleep in the APC but was awoken by mortar fire, which destroyed another bunker.17

The morning of 7 February, BG Sweeney called COL Richard Morton, Commander of 8th Transportation Group down at Qui Nhon, and told him a Beechcraft L-23 Seminole would land at his base at 1400 hours to fly him up to Quang Tri. COL Morton took his sergeant major with him and wondered what was so pressing that needed to take him away from his duties in Qui Nhon. Upon arrival, they met with COL Emil Konopnicki, Commander of the 26th General Support Command. The next morning, BG Sweeney flew in to discuss the problem. Morton quickly learned from Konopnicki the road was in shambles and getting worse. So over the next two days, Sweeney, Morton and Konopnicki flew in Sweeney’s helicopter from Camp Eagle to Vandergrift, to Khe Sanh and then to Lang Vei to assess the complexity of the problem.18

Because of the size and complexity of the line haul operation, US Army Support Command, Da Nang required a dedicated truck headquarters to manage it. So the 8th Transportation Group would move its headquarters from Qui Nhon to trailer vans in an empty field at Quang Tri and assume command of the 39th and 57th Transportation Battalions from the 26th General Support Group in addition to the 8th Group’s three battalions still in Northern II Corps. Thus, the 8th Group supervised five truck battalions and convoy operations in two corps tactical zones on the most heavily contested roads in Vietnam. No other transportation group embraced such responsibility.

For the first week of the operation, the convoys ran without any interference from the enemy causing leaders to wonder why. CPT Hill received word that three senior officers of ACTIV were flying up to Dong Ha to observe
the operation. He went over to the 5th Mechanized Infantry Division and convinced a maintenance warrant officer to loan him a jeep. The warrant officer gave him a beat up jeep with a leaky radiator. Hill picked up COL Robert Johnson, LTC Peterson and an Australian major named Russell. About halfway to Vandergrift, they stopped to fill the radiator with water. COL Johnson was examining the countryside when he walked up to Hill and said, “We need to get moving quickly. Don’t look up quickly, but slowly glance up the hillside and you’ll see firing lanes have been cut into the vegetation.” Evidently the enemy had prepared a kill zone and they had unwittingly stopped in it. Hill decided the radiator had enough water to get them to Vandergrift and left. He reported what they had seen to the leaders at Vandergrift and thought nothing more of it.\(^{19}\)

After their visit to Vandergrift, CPT Hill drove his VIPs to the airfield at the Quang Tri and dropped them off for their flight back to Long Bien. He then drove to Dong Ha to return the jeep. Needing a ride back to Vandergrift,
he caught a ride with a passing convoy of fuel tankers that had formed up at Dong Ha. He climbed into a gun truck and the convoy left about midnight 7 February. He had traveled north to witness ambushes and he would find one.20

Bad weather prevented C-130 Hercules from flying desperately needed JP4 aviation fuel bladders into Khe Sanh for the start of the offensive. So on 7 February, the 57th Transportation Company sent a small convoy of tractors hauling empty M-49C 5,000-gallon fuel trailers to see if they could negotiate the narrow road to Khe Sanh. The captain arrived enthusiastic that the test worked.21 Later that day, three gun trucks and an M-113 escorted a convoy of fifteen to twenty-four 5,000-gallon fuel trailers of the 3rd Platoon of the 57th Transportation Company to Vandergrift. The convoy departed Quang Tri at dusk. The gun trucks came from three different companies.22

The lead truck was a regular cargo truck, that knew the route, followed by cargo truck, that knew the route, followed five more tankers. CPT Hill and SGT Brittner remembered the Ace of Spades from the 523rd Light Truck Company was in the convoy. The Ace had both right and left front mounted .50s and rear twin .50s mounted on a pedestal. It had the unique double steel wall design with filler material in between the walls to reduce the blast effect of an RPG. The entire bed of the gun box was covered with cans of M-2 .50 caliber ammunition. Coming up from Route 19 in the Central Highlands, the crew of the Ace had plenty of combat experience. These gunners from 8th Transportation Group used spraying fire instead of short three to six-round bursts. So they would easily run out of ammunition in ten minutes of steady firing.

The Protector belonged to the fuel platoon of the 57th Transportation Company and was the second gun truck in line of march. It had two side mounted M-60s and a rear pedestal-mounted M-2 .50 caliber machine gun. SGT Healy's crew of The Protector consisted of Sam Bass manning the .50 and Kurtz as the driver. SP4 Charles H. Soule was not a regular crew member, but he had wanted to go out on a gun truck so an M-60 gunner allowed him to take his place. LT Sam Hoskins was riding as the officer in charge of the gun truck and LT Ernie Stafford, of the 572nd "Gypsy Bandits," was just hitchhiking on a convoy. The next gun truck in line was The Baby Sitters, which belonged to the 515th Light Truck Company.23

The 515th only had one gun truck, The Baby Sitters, armed with a forward and rear pedestal-mounted M-2 .50 caliber machine gun and two side-mounted M-60s. SGT Roger Brittner had been the NCOIC of the gun truck since his arrival in Vietnam last June. Brittner's crew had joined about the same time he had, which consisted of Gene Jones as the driver, Walter Crow from Texas was an M-60 gunner, Keith Shed the other M-60 gunner and Pete Aragon had the rear .50. Brittner manned the forward .50. The gun truck also carried M79s and LAWs and about 10,000 to 15,000 rounds per machine gun. The gunners either fired short bursts or spraying fire depending upon the situation or how the gunner felt at the time. They had just rebuilt the gun truck in December with a new 5-ton, ballistic glass, single wall of ½-inch armor plating and added the rear .50. Most of their previous enemy contact had occurred in Hai Van Pass but nothing like what they would experience that night. Brittner did not have much use for officers, but hit it off with 1LT Roger Maloney who had joined the company in September. Maloney liked...
riding in gun trucks and was riding in The Baby Sitters that night. 24

Maloney remembered The Baby Sitters was up front that night but Brittner remembered it was behind The Protector with ten trucks and two gun trucks ahead of it. There were five tankers between each gun truck with an APC in the rear.

With gun trucks from three different companies, each had different policies for reaction to contact. The 515th policy was for every truck to clear the kill zone; even the vehicles not in the kill zone were going to drive through it. The 523rd policy was for only the vehicles in the kill zone to clear it, and the gun trucks would remain in the kill zone to protect any drivers in the kill zone.

The convoy halted by the Rock Pile to reestablish their interval. Not too far away parked a couple M-113 scouts from the 1st Battalion, 77th Armor of the 5th Mechanized Infantry Division. Suddenly, the convoy received a couple mortar rounds and Maloney saw the muzzle flash from the back side of the hill, so he moved the convoy further down the road. The Rock Pile was on the right side of the road and there was a bend in the road that took a sharp turn to the left. The convoy continued down into a draw, crossed the bridge and staged up again near a short bridge with embankments on both sides. As the convoy slowed down to negotiate

the sharp bend in the road at 0115 hours, it was then hit by intense small arms fire from tall grass mostly on the right (passenger) side.\textsuperscript{25} The enemy hit the front of the column as if they knew what the convoy was hauling. The enemy hit a couple of tankers from the right (passenger) side of the road and they exploded. The kill zone contained the vehicles between the lead truck and The Baby Sitters. In the dark, the gunners could see the muzzle flash and green tracers. Maloney fired M-79 grenades as fast as he could while everyone else blasted away. So Brittner swung his .50 around while firing and shot out the antenna causing him to lose radio communication with everyone else.\textsuperscript{26}

An RPG slammed into driver’s side of The Protector killing Soule, blew the rest of the crew out and blinded LT Stafford in back. The enemy poured small arms, rockets and mortars into three different parts of the convoy setting three tankers on fire. Brittner saw a lieutenant in The Protector stand up when the second or third tanker was hit; he then fell down as if he had melted. Brittner did not like lieutenants on gun trucks, because he did not trust them to keep their heads down.\textsuperscript{27}

The enemy destroyed The Protector and three fuel tankers behind it had exploded. The Baby Sitters, however, cleared the kill zone with 10-12 holes and a couple flat tires on the right side. The one-way road was so narrow there was no place anyone could drive past the tankers except a place next to the bridge wide enough for a truck to park. McBride’s APC in the rear was undamaged. The sound of explosions startled the 1/77 Armor scouts at the security check point by the Rock Pile. The scouts looked to their west and saw a ball of fire illuminate the area followed by the sound of small arms fire. They cranked up their APCs and saw a lone APC speeding away from the kill zone. LT Revelak ordered his APC into the kill zone where they saw three burning fuel tankers, one of which had run over the embankment. SP4 Harold Spurgeon saw figures moving in the brush but could not distinguish friend from foe so he held his fire. The tracks advanced further into the kill zone and Spurgeon looked down. He saw a soldier wearing a helmet running alongside yelling at him, but could not hear what he was saying. He later learned the guy was warning them not to enter the kill zone. Revelak yelled at his scouts to open fire and they sprayed the sides of the road. They drove past burning trucks and across a bridge then saw a burning gun truck ahead of
them. Spurgeon saw what he thought was a baldheaded NVA soldier crawling in a ditch ten feet from his APC and was about to shoot him with his M-60 when he realized it was an African-American soldier.28

As the APC rolled further into the kill zone, another soldier emerged from the shadows and ran at a crouch beside his APC yelling something up at the crew, which they could not hear. When the track pulled up next to the gun truck, its machineguns hung down and the gun truck appeared empty and lifeless. They saw nothing past this point, so the APC pivot steered in the road and headed back. The lieutenant yelled at his crew to open fire again. They then stopped and dismounted in the kill zone next to one burnt out truck and four others riddled with bullet holes. All the drivers were missing.29

The Baby Sitters sat at the bridge letting the other trucks pass. Brittner remembered guilt took over so he wanted to go back in because it was the right thing to do. Maloney remembered telling Brittner and the driver, Gene Jones, they had to go back and help the others because the trucks were getting hammered. They then had to figure out how to turn around on a narrow road in the dark and get back in the kill zone. By the time The Baby Sitters returned, the enemy had broken contact.

The Baby Sitters found five or six wounded drivers in a ditch beside the road and could hear enemy voices out in the bush.30

Meanwhile, the medevac came in to take away the wounded. It seemed like it took forever for the medevac to come in because the area still received sporadic small arms fire. After they loaded the wounded in the helicopter, the convoy continued on to Vandergrift.31

The Baby Sitters had to figure out how to get a burning tanker off the road. Because the road was so narrow, there was no room to pass the disabled trucks so drivers could jump on passing vehicles. So the trucks in the rear of the convoy picked up drivers from five damaged trucks and drove in reverse back to Quang Tri.32

Maloney remembered CPT Ken Colucci, of the 585th Transportation Company at Vandergrift, came to Maloney and said he had one driver unaccounted for. So Maloney and CPT Colucci took The Baby Sitters back into the kill zone. There were at least two or three burning tankers still in the kill zone. Maloney jumped up on the running board of one and swore he saw the driver in there. However, he was not. The injured driver had escaped the vehicle and another truck drove him to the medevac station at Vandergrift. The convoy delayed at The artillery firebase at Khe Sanh. Courtesy of Michael Lavin.
Vandergrift for a couple of days then continued on to Khe Sanh delivering its load of vital aviation fuel. BG Arthur H. Sweeney, Jr., Commander of US Army Support Command, Da Nang was waiting for them at the gate.33

A fuel convoy was ambushed the next night and the tankers sustained damage on the underside of the tanks indicating the enemy engagement had been at very close range. Despite the patrolling by the mechanized infantry, the enemy was able to infiltrate within close range of the road. The Rock Pile, Check Points 6 and 44 proved to be the enemy’s favorite locations for ambushes. While the friendly forces in the area may not have deterred enemy ambushes, it prevented the gun trucks from conducting reconnaissance by fire for fear of accidentally hitting friendly troops. The frequent rainy weather also prevented the use of Cobra gunships as escorts. So the convoys had to rely mainly on their gun trucks for immediate security.34

The convoy had nine wounded and Charles H. Soule killed. One gun truck was destroyed, and three tankers...
and two other gun trucks were damaged. The Protector was repaired and renamed the Executioner. The 57th Transportation Company never tried to send fuel tankers to Khe Sanh again, because the road did not allow for vehicles to pass in the event of an ambush. From then on, the 57th ran day convoys from Quang Tri to Da Nang.35

The convoy dela this ambush hinted at the increasing danger that awaited the truck drivers for the rest of the operation. The elephant grass provided the enemy ample concealment so they could approach right up to the side of the road. As the convoys of the 8th Transportation Group had learned in An Khe Pass, areas flanked by tall elephant grass where convoys had to slow down made good kill zones. Deliberately stopping in an area that provided similar concealment for the enemy invited trouble. While the interval at the time of the halt was not known, the initial kill zone included four vehicles. Because the 515th had never faced an ambush on this scale before, the policy of clearing the kill zone left disabled trucks and their drivers undefended in the kill zone.
zone for a short period. Fortunately, the APC of a nearby check point arrived in short order to defend the truck drivers of the damaged vehicles. The crew of The Baby Sitters made the right decision to turn back into the kill zone, but passing trucks escaping the kill zone on that narrow road delayed its return. This same stretch of dirt road between the Rock Pile and Vandergrift, however, would be the scene of another costly convoy ambush two weeks later. The next time, the enemy would attack a convoy of the 523rd, a hardened veteran of Route 19 ambushes.

Besides the deteriorating condition of the road, COL Morton considered the elephant grass growing right up to the road as a serious threat to the convoys, since it could conceal the enemy all the way up to the side of the road. Falling back on his experience along Route 19, Morton requested a Rome plow to clear the vegetation away from the road and to assign combat units along sectors of the road. He did not receive any reason why the engineers were not available, and the infantry explained the best way to defend the road was to push the enemy deep into the countryside. In concept, taking the offensive against the enemy made sense, but reality had shown along Route 19 that offensive operations could not keep a determined enemy away from the road.\textsuperscript{36}

The XXIV Corps Commander, LTG James W. Sutherland, Jr., made an agreement with the ARVN that the Americans would deliver 100 vehicles per day into Khe Sanh. The ARVN stationed a colonel at Khe Sanh counting trucks to make sure they had at least 100 trucks. If the convoy had one less than 100 vehicles, he raised hell. So the 515th and 523rd sent up 100 trucks whether they carried cargo or not. Some drivers risked their lives hauling nothing. The soldiers blamed LTC Ellis for this, but he was just as upset about it as they were.\textsuperscript{37}

Meanwhile, the ARVN advanced toward their objective. On 10 February, the bad weather finally cleared. ARVN airborne forces landed at Objective Aluoi and the armored forces linked up with them. The NVA then began committing more divisions against the ARVN and the incursion ground to a halt. The NVA began to surround and overwhelm the Ranger landing zones.

With the Laotian incursion in full swing, the enemy increased their attacks in order to shut down the flow of supplies to this operation. The VC stepped up the number of attacks in the Hai Van Pass. There was rarely a day that did not go by that the VC did not fire on the convoys traveling through the Pass. Slowing down to negotiate the switchbacks, the trucks made better targets to mortar, rocket and small arms fire. The VC would often wait until the convoys were driving up the northern side of the mountain from Phu Bai. Observation helicopters and “Birddogs” observation aircraft usually accompanied the convoys through the Pass and called in Cobra attack helicopters when enemy contact was made. Anderson’s 563rd Medium Truck Company had to modify their gun trucks because the enemy in Hai Van Pass might hide in the culverts just five feet below the road, so the gunners needed to be able to depress their machineguns. They moved the machineguns from
In the beginning, enemy attacks on convoys were small scale but frequent. Any time a convoy drove by the Rock Pile from Dong Ha to Vandergrift, it was shot at and usually the convoys just accelerated. One afternoon, Fuller rode on Uncle Meat in the rear of the convoy heading toward Vandergrift. They received fire and Meat’s left front tire was hit and went flat. So Fuller radioed ahead for the convoy to continue on, and informed whoever was in the convoy to take charge. Uncle Meat stopped with an open field to its right and an embankment to its left. The driver, David Rose, and one of the crew members were changing the tire while Fuller and the rest manned the guns. David said something to Fuller who lifted his helmet when a B-40 rocket flew past the lieutenant, struck the hillside, causing everybody to instinctively drop down. Fuller received a small piece of shrapnel in the back of his head, and one crew member joked, “Oh, hey, sir, you get a slow reaction badge [Purple Heart Medal] now.” Fuller responded, “No way, and don’t tell anybody about it.”

They then started receiving heavier contact and a Forward Air Controller (FAC) flying overhead came on station and asked, “Do you need anything down there.” Fuller replied, “Yeah. We’d like a little support. What’ve you got?” He said, “I’ve got the world up here. I’ve got all kinds of radios. What would you like?” To which Fuller said, “Well, I’d like to light up this tree line over here because we’re receiving fire from it.” The lieutenant popped a smoke grenade, relayed the grid coordinates, and the pilot asked, “Would you like a little napalm?” “I would just love it,” answered Fuller and he called in a napalm strike. The crew of Meat changed the tire changed and then caught up with the convoy.

On another ambush, King Kong and Uncle Meat escorted a convoy to Khe Sanh where the enemy hit a cargo truck and set a fuel tanker on fire. The next driver stopped his truck and exited his vehicle. King Kong turned back and raced into the kill zone. They made the driver climb back into his truck and lead the rest of the convoy through the kill zone because there was no room to turn around. Someone radioed that they thought a driver was left in the kill zone, so Kong drove back to look for him. They could not find a driver since he had already been picked up, so Kong turned around, but about that time mortar rounds began to fall in the kill zone behind Kong. They landed close to Uncle Meat that was bringing up the rear and splashed mud on its armor.

Southerly convoys to Chu Lai also ran into trouble. The VC would incite the
local civilians to cause trouble. They might have someone in a crowded town push an old lady or small child into the path of an approaching 5-ton. The 19 to 20 year olds had enough trouble driving huge overloaded trucks through crowded towns and cities. Kids would drop fragmentation grenades with the handles taped and the pins pulled into the fuel tanks of the trucks when they stopped near populated areas. The fuel would dissolve the tape and the grenade would explode. Fortunate drivers would find these in fuel tank filters at night while topping off their tanks.\textsuperscript{42}

On 15 February, the 572nd Gypsy Bandits were attached to the 57th Transportation Battalion and on 16 February, the 57th Battalion assumed the line haul mission to Vandergrift as well as other missions of the 39th Battalion. From Quang Tri, the 572nd delivered
cargo to Vandergrift along with the 363rd Medium Truck Company. Although not a part of the battalion, the 528th Quartermaster Petroleum Supply Company delivered fuel to the forward base camps under the escort of 39th Battalion gun trucks. Many of the new drivers of the 572nd could not handle the Hai Van Pass and the company lost too many trucks to accidents. Soon the 363rd Road Runners had the Phu Bai run for themselves since the level road to Chu Lai was better for new guys.\footnote{43}

Operation Lam Son 719 nearly doubled the missions of the 363rd, mostly heading north. The VC then stepped up activity in an effort to close the Hai Van Pass north of Da Nang in order to keep the flow of supplies from getting north to Phu Bai in support of the invasion of Laos.\footnote{44}

The waterfall area was full of caves and tunnels that faced a long stretch of switchbacks where the trucks could only drive about 5 to 15 miles an hour. So the drivers called that place “Ambush Alley.” RPGs, mortars and automatic fire kept the drivers in a high state of anxiety. Gun trucks and the gun jeeps drove into the kill zone and returned fire while talking to their top cover. They had a light observation helicopter (LOH) and a Bird Dog, fixed wing aircraft, assigned to their convoys when they drove through the Hai Van Pass. These aircraft would send for Cobra gunships to come in and suppress the VC’s fire.\footnote{45}

The 363rd experienced three major ambushes in Hai Van Pass where the enemy tried to inflict serious damage to a convoy. The first ambush was near the waterfall in the middle of February. The enemy ambushed Dennis Cook’s convoy and then Aichele’s convoy.

2LT Chris Aichele led a convoy back from Phu Bai with 2LT Dee Brinton riding in The Colonel in the rear of the convoy. The convoy was half way up the north side of
the mountain when Aichele heard explosions behind him. He recognized they were rockets and thought it might have included mortars. He continued to the top of Hai Van Pass and waved the lead part of the convoy that had escaped the kill zone past him. He could not get Brinton on the radio and feared the worst. So he told his driver, Runyon, to turn around and head back down the mountain. Runyon spun the gun jeep around and sped down into the kill zone.⁴⁶

When the jeep got close enough to see The Colonel and some trucks, Aichele called for gunship support, but none were available. A Black Ace pilot from Marble Mountain was flying support and contacted the USS Enterprise out in the bay. The pilot informed Aichele that if he could provide the grid coordinates, the pilot could relay them to the carrier. Because of overcast conditions, Aichele could not see the enemy but could see where The Colonel was shooting because of the tracers. Aichele carried a French map and read the eight-digit coordinates to Black Ace. The pilot excused himself to relay the coordinates to the carrier, came back on the radio only to excuse himself again to warn the other aircraft in the area “to un-ass the place.” He did not come back on the radio causing Aichele to think, “Oh, crap!” He had no idea how to adjust fire with naval artillery, but fortunately the first round was on target and the next two or three were spaced out on either side. This was followed by an eerie silence.

When Aichele saw The Colonel start to drive, he likewise headed up the pass. Aichele stopped at Check Point 88 to watch the rest of the convoy pass. Several of the trucks had blown out windshields and some drivers had been injured but nothing serious. When The Colonel passed by, Aichele had his gun jeep fall in behind it.

At some point, Aichele noticed his left arm was entirely covered in dried blood. When the convoy
returned to Adenir, SGT Lane saw the blood and asked if the lieutenant wanted to go to the 85th Evacuation Hospital to get his wound cleaned. Aichele had no interest in staying in the Army. He cared more about getting a cold beer than the Purple Heart Medal. He said he would clean himself up. When he stood in front of the mirror, he also noticed the left side of his neck and face was covered with dried blood from hundreds of tiny abrasions. He could only assume his heart was beating so fast which caused the little cuts to bleed so much. He earned the Army Commendation Medal with V device for that ambush.

As truck units shifted north for Lam Son, the 585th Medium Truck Company moved from Gia Le to Tan My Ramp and the 39th Transportation Battalion headquarters moved from Quang Tri to Vandergrift on 16 February. The 57th Transportation Battalion then assumed the line haul mission to Vandergrift. The 585th Medium Truck Company would pick up cargo at Tan My Ramp and deliver it to Camp Eagle near Quang Tri. The 39th Battalion kept C Company 23rd Supply and Transportation (S&T) Company with its 5-ton cargo trucks; the 666th Light Truck Company, which continued its direct and general support mission to the 101st Airborne Division at Camp Eagle; XXIV Corps

King Kong. Courtesy of Danny Cochran.
Company (Provisional); FLC Light Truck Company (USMC); and the 57th Light Truck Company. It still had the 506th Transportation Detachment, which ran the trailer transfer point at Vandergrift.

The narrow road snaked along the river without any guard rails and the rains weakened the clay soil to where it would collapse under the weight of the trucks. It was not uncommon to see ARVN trucks rolled down the side of the embankment. The Ace of Spades was escorting a 523rd convoy to Khe Sanh on 16 February when the dirt road collapsed under it and the gun truck rolled down into the river bed. SP4 Michael R. Hunter was killed in the wreck. The truck gun box was destroyed beyond repair. 

Four days later, 2LT Baird had been sent back to Phu Bai to pick up 17 brand new 5-ton trucks. His convoy would return after dark. The convoy doctrine at the time limited convoys to no more than 30 trucks with a gun truck ratio of 1:10. Uncle Meat led the convoy with King Kong in the middle and Satan’s Li’l Angel in the rear. All gun trucks had three M-2 .50 caliber machineguns. The M-2 .50 was the most successful design in American weapons and had seen very little change in its design since its original issue in 1919. This time Baird rode close to the rear in a ¾-ton “beep” gun truck with twin M-60 machineguns. He noticed that some Transportation Corps officers preferred to ride up front. He knew that if there was trouble it would invariably occur in the rear and that was where the key decisions would have to be made. If an ambush split the convoy, by doctrine, the trucks out of the kill zone would continue to drive to the next security check point or camp. If the convoy commander was in the lead then he would be unable to make the key decisions for the rest of the convoy either trapped in the kill zone or behind.

Satan’s Li’l Angel had escorted a convoy that had delivered ARVN soldiers to Laos. They had been on the road for 36 hours when they pulled into Dong Ha that

night. They planned to RON because their convoy could not unload until morning, then 1LT Baird called them on the radio, “Hey Red, I’m a little light on security and expect some movement.” They had received a lot of reports of enemy movement along the route and SGT Chester Israel had also seen movement on the way down. Baird only had two gun trucks and his ¾-ton at Dong Ha. He needed some “heavy hitters” in the rear and asked Chester if he would go back with him. Chester asked his crew and they volunteered to return to Vandergrift that night.

An average of 80 sorties ran from Vandergrift to Khe Sanh a day and some days the number reached as high as 265. The gun trucks made the daily runs several times. The 1st Brigade, 5th Mechanized Infantry had responsibility for route security and had a difficult time keeping the enemy away from the convoys. The convoys of the 39th Battalion were ambushed 23 times along Route 9. The frequent number of ambushes made LTC Ellis consider the route security totally inadequate. The battalion commander responsible for security of the stretch of road between Quang Tri and Vandergrift, however, boasted the route was “secure enough to walk along with your wife.” Two hours later, the enemy ambushed Baird’s convoy two kilometers east of Vandergrift. Needless to say, this did not impress Ellis.

Uncle Meat led with King Kong in the middle, and then Satan’s Li’l Angel followed by Baird’s ¾-ton in the rear. It was dark on 20 February as the convoy neared Camp Vandergrift. The road turned south, the mountain ridge to the east came within yards of Highway 9 and tall elephant grass covered the valley to the ridge line to the west. At 2311 hours, a mile and a half from their destination, Baird heard an explosion followed by an intense volume of small arms fire from the jungle on the ridge to his left.

An RPG fired from the right (west) side of the road struck Satan’s Li’l Angel’s gun box right under SP4 Richard B. Frazier’s gun, killing him instantly. The same explosion blew Israel to the side of the left wall then knocked him down. Shrapnel had peppered his back and left a hole in his right calf. The initial blast was followed by small arms fire from both sides of the road, but Satan did not stop. Israel climbed over and checked Frazier but already knew he was dead. He then rose up and looked out at the tracer fire. Calvin Bennett was firing to the right side with the rear .50. Israel then stood up to return fire. Shrapnel rendered Frazier’s .50 inoperable and Israel’s .50 would only fire single shots.

A second RPG came through the right front wheel, slammed into the engine and took out a piston. The engine locked up and the truck lurched into a nose dive, then smoke boiled out the hood and cab. SGT Israel was again thrown down. He stood back up and saw small arms fire from both sides of the road. They were right in the middle of the kill zone. Bennett fired his left rear .50 until it jammed. Small arms fire shot out the tires of the gun truck. The NVA had learned to take out the gun trucks first before they went after the rest of the trucks and this time concentrated their fire on Satan.
Israel was shot in the shoulder and side.\textsuperscript{54}

Baird’s $\frac{3}{4}$-ton raced ahead and passed a disabled 5-ton cargo truck in the ditch. He ordered his driver to stop so they could check on the driver. They came to a halt a hundred feet ahead of the truck. Baird did not want to leave the disabled truck until he was sure that its driver was safe. To do so required him to wait in the middle of the kill zone. As soon as his gunner, SGT Richard Downard, tried to return fire, both M-60s failed to fire. Evidently, he had put the gas plugs in backwards when he reassembled them. The three men only had one M-79 grenade launcher and their M-16s to defend against an NVA company. Baird immediately radioed the two lead gun trucks and told them to come back. The one thing that Baird could depend on was the loyalty of his gun trucks to rescue him or any other truck in trouble.\textsuperscript{55}

SGT Israel looked back at Baird’s $\frac{3}{4}$-ton and saw it had stopped and was taking fire. It was sitting cockeyed with the wheel in the road. Chester could not see any fire coming from Baird’s vehicle. Thorn then climbed into the gun box from the cab and asked, “Chester, are you hit?” Israel answered, “I’m fine. The only hope we got is for you to get this started and get us out of here!” Thorne climbed back into the driver’s seat and started up the engine. It clanged and another RPG hit the right front rear duals and the truck bounced. Thorne kept that truck going and it crawled about 25 yards, enough to clear he kill zone, before the engine shut down. They continued to return fire.\textsuperscript{56}

Neither the crew of Uncle Meat nor King Kong had heard the gunfire behind them. The majority of the convoy had continued to Vandergrift as if nothing had happened. Uncle Meat had already entered the compound and King Kong had just made the right hand turn into Vandergrift when they heard Baird’s call for help. They immediately backed up, turned around and raced back to the kill zone as fast as their trucks would carry them.\textsuperscript{57}

Baird knew his gun truck crews and had confidence in their judgment. He also knew that too much chatter on the radio would cause confusion and tie up the radio net. He quickly and precisely informed the gun trucks of the situation. Satan’s Li’l Angel had been hit, his “beep” gun truck and one 5-ton were still in the kill zone. The crews asked which side of the road the enemy was on and Baird informed them that he was taking small arms fire from the ridge to his south and the field of elephant grass to his north. The enemy was close enough to throw hand grenades at his vehicle. He then quit talking. He would count on their judgment about what to do.\textsuperscript{58}

Ten minutes of steady small arms fire had elapsed
since the beginning of the ambush. By then, Baird was taking fire from both sides of the road. Enemy was closing in through the elephant grass while others fired down on them from the ridge to the south. His gunner, Downer, tapped him on the shoulder and said, “I see one. What do I do?” Baird turned, looked back down the road and saw an enemy soldier about 15 meters away on a berm alongside the road loading an RPG. He told his gunner to shoot him. The gunner fired his M-79 grenade launcher at him. The enemy soldier was too close for the 40mm grenade to arm in flight. It struck him with enough velocity to either kill or incapacitate him, because he did not fire his rocket.59

Around ten minutes after the initiation of the ambush, King Kong raced past Satan and up to their convoy commander’s ¾-ton, parking right in front of it at an angle facing to the north. Uncle Meat similarly parked near Satan’s Li’l Angel. Baird was never as glad as when he saw the tracers of those .50s. There was a reassurance that everything would turn out alright. He knew his gun truck crews knew what to do. Baird called on the radio, “They're in the ditches. They're in the ditches.” The gunners on the Kong swung their .50s around and sprayed the ditches. Kong and Uncle Meat took the pressure off of Satan as the enemy concentrated their fire on the two new gun trucks.60

The success of an ambush depended upon surprise and extreme violence. The gun truck crews had learned to turn the fight back on the enemy as fast as they could with even more violence. This would take the psychological advantage away from the enemy forcing them to break

**Spent brass and links on King Kong after the ambush.**
Courtesy of Danny Cochran.

**King Kong after the ambush showing where the oil dripped down the side.**
Courtesy of Danny Cochran.
The .50s blazed away in four to six round bursts at the muzzle flashes to their left and right. The gunners poured 30-weight oil from plastic canteens to help cool the barrels and ensure the smooth function of their breeches after firing off about three to four boxes of ammunition.61

An RPG hit the rear right duals and exploded in all the colors of the rainbow under left rear gunner, Danny Cochran, knocking him backwards on Larson manning the right .50. Cochran then jumped back up, grabbed his .50 and went back to work. King Kong was an APC gun truck. Large chunks of hot shrapnel had come up through the aluminum floor of the hull and lodged in the top of the box right under his machinegun. One piece of shrapnel had burnt a hole in the charging handle and others had left five or six holes in the barrel, but it still fired.62

The hot barrels glowed red and as soon as the gunners saw the rounds curve after they left the barrel they knew it was time to change them. Each time Emery, manning the turret gun, swung his barrel toward Cochran, Cochran grabbed the asbestos glove, spun the barrel off then picked up a new barrel and spun it on tight, by feel counted three clicks back and let go. Gunners had different methods of setting the headspace and timing and none used the timing gage during an ambush. They knew their guns. Some memorized the number of clicks needed on each barrel. Cochran did it by feel. He backed off the three clicks and depending upon the rate of fire of his .50 he added more clicks. He knew his .50. He changed three barrels for the TC and a similar number for himself that night.63

The one advantage to fighting at night was that the gunners returned fire in the direction of the enemy muzzle flashes which betrayed their positions. There was no concealment in the dark once one fired his weapon.

The tactic worked. After about ten minutes of firing, Uncle Meat and King Kong had turned the fight back on the enemy and they broke contact. During the fight, the driver of the disabled 5-ton had run to his convoy commander’s vehicle.

The medic from Baird’s ¾-ton ran up and stopped in front of Satan. Bennett remembered the dustoff helicopter hovered over the road ahead of their gun truck and threw down a stretcher. Bennett, Thorne and the medic lifted Frazier’s body over the cab onto the hood. With blood everywhere in the truck, they were slipping and stumbling, but managed to lift Frazier’s body onto the stretcher. Israel had several wounds and did not want to leave when the dustoff helicopter landed. The medic hit Chester with a shot of morphine as soon as he got on the ground, and then put him on the dustoff.64

That close to Vandergrift, Uncle Meat loaded the rest of the crew from Satan’s Li’l Angel into their gun truck then drove off the road and backed up to Baird’s vehicle.
The drive shaft had broken and the vehicle could not drive. The crew of Uncle Meat hooked up the ¾-ton to Uncle Meat, which towed it into Vandergrift. The two gun trucks that came to the rescue also received damage but could roll under their own power. After the initial volley of fire, no other casualties were taken. King Kong limped back to Vandergrift on its rims.

The 2nd Platoon, C Troop, 3rd Squadron, 5th Cavalry swept the area the next day and saw no enemy dead on the east side of the road but there were two fighting positions 30 meters from the west side of the road with an RPD machinegun and one empty rucksack. There were plenty of tracks running away from the road. While waiting for a tracker dog team, the cavalry platoon saw an NVA soldier armed with an RPG approach. He tried to throw a hand grenade but was shot and killed in the
process. The grenade exploded in his hand. The infantry were then engaged by small arms fire and the fight resulted in two NVA killed. They found another dead NVA from the contact and a large amount of weapons and ammunition. The enemy usually made great effort to recover their dead and conceal their losses, so no one could accurately determine the total enemy losses.65

CPT Voightritter was furious about the attacks on his convoys and blamed the ability of the enemy to get so close to the road to running convoys at night. So he took Frazier’s bloody helmet and flak jacket to battalion and told them, “Night convoys have got to stop!” Whether it was his demand or to avoid conflict with...
US and ARVN use of the same road, the Joint Movements Control Center eventually published a schedule change. From 0600 to 0730 hours, all traffic would leave Khe Sanh and from 0730 to 1100 hours, all traffic would leave from Vandergrift to Khe Sanh. The traffic would wait at Khe Sanh while others swept the road from Vandergrift to recover damaged or broken vehicles. Upon completion of the sweep at 1300 hours, traffic from Khe Sanh would return and between 1500 and 1630 hours would wait for the sweep team to return to Vandergrift. The last traffic out of Vandergrift would depart after 1700 hours. Any convoys from Vandergrift to Khe Sanh would have to travel during those times.66

With Frazier killed and Israel in the hospital, Thorne and Calvin Bennett returned to Vandergrift and salvaged parts from Satan to rebuild their gun truck. Thinking that the name Satan’s Li’l Angel might be jinxed, the crew renamed the gun truck Proud American, but had not time to paint the new art work on the side, which they planned would be the head of a bald eagle.67

On 20 February, COL Morton’s 8th Transportation Group headquarters arrived at Quang Tri. This allowed him better observation of convoy operations during Lam Son. With that move, the 8th Group controlled five truck battalions operating in the two most heavily contested Corps Tactical Zones. The other two truck groups commanded no more than two truck battalions. No other logistical headquarters in Vietnam had ever faced such a challenge.

It was not enough that the enemy tried to kill the truck drivers when they rolled out of the camp, but also regularly tried to kill them in their camp. For a week to ten days, 120 mm rockets and mortar rounds slammed into Vandergrift between 1630 and 1700 hours every day, which the American occupants called, “Happy Hour.” “Six O’clock Charlie” would get up on Hill 180 and fire rockets at the helicopter landing strip every afternoon. The landing strip was close to the hill, but the enemy never hit anything except the perforated steel planking. One day he hit the ammo dump and the explosion felt like it lifted up the Bedrock Hotel. Debris rained down on everybody. One day someone finally spotted him and the Cobra attack helicopters killed him. With that, the daily rocket attacks ended.68

The third major ambush of the 363rd occurred on 26 February. 2LT Bob Mitten was leading a large convoy of over 80 vehicles of the 363rd north over Hai Van Pass to Phu Bai with an NCO in the rear of the convoy on Canned Heat. The convoy reached the MP station atop the mountain and Mitten pulled his convoy over to the side of the road to wait for the gun truck to reach the top. Hai Van Pass was socked in the clouds so he could not see the trucks. Two MPs walked over and said he had to move that convoy. Mitten said, “I’m waiting for the gun truck and then I’m going to go.” About that time he heard Canned Heat say they were at the top. The MPs then said, “We’re going down with you. We’ll get in the middle.” Mitten replied, “Fine, come along.”69

The convoy started down the mountain and still could not see anything. It came out of the clouds as soon as it reached the double switchback. As soon as Mitten’s gun jeep cleared the clouds, he heard a
rushing sound. He looked to his left and saw an RPG coming his way. As soon as he saw the rocket, he lifted his M-79 grenade launcher over his head and fired. He instinctively looked down at his watch and saw it was 1130 hours. The gun jeep pulled over and the next truck, a mail truck. Mitten always put a senior driver in the lead truck in case something happened to him, so the driver knew what to do. The driver pulled up next to the gun jeep and Mitten told him, “Go!” He knew to drive down to the next check point. When Mitten looked up the road to his left he saw the next truck was a stake and platform hauling black gun powder tubes. A rocket had hit them and they were exploding like fireworks on the Fourth of July. The truck was weaving down the road while the road was sprayed with small arms fire. Mitten could not see the driver so he ran up to the truck, jumped on the running board, looked in and did not see the driver. Mitten then looked back and saw the driver, named Moore, running past him with the back of his head on fire.

Mitten had to get that truck off the road. It was heading down the switchback and if it hit the rock wall it would block the turn in the road. While holding onto the M-79 with one hand, he turned the steering wheel with the other. He wanted to steer the truck off the edge of the road and down the mountain. He waited until the truck hit the bump and then he jumped off. The truck went over the edge and went straight down the mountain. Mitten looked up and saw two drivers trapped in a ditch to the right of the road shooting back at the enemy. Their two trucks were to the left by the road berm. They had been caught in the kill zone and

**Canned Heat.** Courtesy of 363rd TC.

**Enemy fire came from this location.** Courtesy of 363rd TC.

**Kill zone was the on the switchback seen above the barrel of the M-60 machinegun.** Courtesy of 363rd TC.
could not move because the truck was weaving in front of them, so they had jumped out. The rest of the convoy had stopped short of the kill zone as per SOP. Mitten heard the MP jeep had been hit by an RPG.

Mitten intended to get up on the hill and fire his M-79 so the drivers could get down the hill. He ran down the concrete abutment when an RPG exploded at the end of the abutment knocking him down the hill into the brush. He lay there stunned but still had his M-79 grenade launcher in his hand although he had lost his helmet and bag with the 40mm rounds. As he crawled up the hill he saw the bobtail driving into the kill zone. Canned Heat had already driven down the road below him and was shooting over his head at the enemy. Mitten reached up to wipe the sweat from his brow only to discover it was blood. Shrapnel had hit his flak vest and, as he would find out years later, his left wrist. Walt Hines was standing on the running board of the bobtail yelling, “Come down! Come Down!” Suddenly Mitten’s legs started to freeze up. Before the war, Mitten had an accident where he lost the feeling in his legs and feared it was the same thing again. Walt yelled over at him by his nickname, I’m coming to get you, Dog. I’m coming to get you.” Walt crawled up through the vegetation and grabbed the lieutenant. Mitten said he did not know how he was going to get down because of losing the feeling in his legs; so Walt grabbed him and together they rolled down the road. They put him in the gun truck, took him down the mountain and called in a medevac for Mitten. Walt then tried to start the truck but it would not.

Mitten remained in the 85th Evac Hospital for a day and then returned to duty. He received the Purple Heart and Bronze Star Medal for valor. Walt Hines also received the Bronze Star Medal for valor.

To be different, LTG Sutherland did not want to leave any debris behind as the Marines had after their withdrawal, so he assigned the 39th Battalion the mission to recover any battle damage. LTC Ellis assigned the 515th the mission and issued 2LT Bartletti an M-88 tracked recovery vehicle to recover tracked vehicles. Bartletti had a crew of four, mostly African-Americans, and Don bonded with them. He told them not to call him ‘sir,’ but not to give him a stupid nickname either. The recovery team drove Route 9 every day looking for vehicles just as a tow truck might drive up and down the highway recovering broken down vehicles, but one day they found an APC destroyed by a mortar round. The hot shrapnel had melted the exterior of the aluminum hull and they saw the scattered remains of soldiers torn apart by the explosion. Bartletti found a boot with the foot still in it and recovered the soldier’s billfold. At that moment he connected the battle damage with the human loss which deeply affected him.70

According to the plan, the Americans delivered cargo to Khe Sanh where the ARVN trucks pushed it the rest of the way to the border. This changed on 5 March.

Eve of Destruction. Photo by Teneyck courtesy of Logan Werth.
Fuller received the task to lead a convoy loaded with crates of 105mm artillery projectiles farther west from Khe Sanh than any previous convoy. He was told if they did not arrive by 1800 hours, the artillery troops would be defenseless. The artillery battery was going to shoot off everything it had. Dan Hill remembered the convoy was destined for Khe Sanh where it arrived at midnight and learned the ammunition was needed immediately by the ARVN battery. The ARVN would meet the American convoy with trucks at the border to take the ammunition the rest of the way. During the convoy brief, Fuller explained the importance of the mission and told his drivers how important it was that everybody understood the route. The convoy needed to make the two right turns. He reminded them, “Be sure when you come to an intersection that you take a right.” It was the quietest briefings Fuller had ever held. Fuller would ride in the Eve of Destruction. CPT Hill hitched a ride on Uncle Meat and someone told him he was crazy to ride on that convoy, but having ridden up to Khe Sanh, he did not want to look like a coward and back out at that point. Fuller remembered his convoy ranged between 50 and 100 vehicles and he placed a gun truck every ten cargo trucks. Roberson remembered the convoy consisted of 10 to 15 cargo trucks, while CPT Hill remembered five or six. The lead cargo truck had a PRC-25 radio. The convoy took off in the dark with head lights on.71

David Rose, driver of Uncle Meat, remembered flipping a coin with the driver of Eve of Destruction and lost. So Eve led

![Crater left by the mine that damaged Uncle Meat. Courtesy of Logan Werth.](image1)

![Crew of Uncle Meat standing around the mine crater. Courtesy of Logan Werth.](image2)
a cargo truck the crew told the driver to turn around, go back to the intersection any way they could and make a left to catch up with the rest of the convoy. Fuller then radioed another gun truck to watch for them. The Eve then caught up with one cargo truck that had crossed a bridge and was starting up a steep road to the right. They stopped the driver and he said he was going to try and back the truck down in the dark. Backing over a bridge and turning at the same time, part of the truck went off the left side of the bridge and the driver bailed out. He escaped injury and the Eve put him on another cargo truck. Their destination was just a few hundred meters from the Laotian border and the truck that crossed the bridge had left Fuller’s map sheet, which was the end of South Vietnam.73

They finally had everybody turned around, heading in the right direction and reached their destination just before first light. Roberson asked where Laos was, and the ARVN soldier pointed to the ground.74 No American ground troops were permitted to cross the border. Upon arrival, the truck unloaded their ammunition while the artillery fired volley after volley. There were so many trucks in front of him, he could not see what else was there. Someone just told him to stay there and pull security. When it came time to leave, David said, “If I pulled tail then I get to pick my position going out of here.” So Uncle Meat would lead out on the return trip and CPT Hill climbed in to ride with them. The convoy headed back with Meat in the lead and Eve in the rear.75

David Rose could hear talking and saw the mine sweepers walking ahead of him. One mine sweeper waved him to pull forward. David backed up then pulled forward and Uncle Meat ran over a concussion land mine. The blast lifted the truck four to five feet in the air and knocked the crew around in the back. CPT Hill remembered slamming into the VRC-47 radio with his chest and knocking it off the stand from the force of impact. Fortunately his flak jacket absorbed most of the impact but he was in serious pain. When he looked around, the other crew members were dazed and just starting to get up when someone crawled up the back of the truck and said, “Don’t get out, there are land mines all over the place.”76

As soon as the convoy left, Fuller heard the explosion. It had blown the left two rear wheels off and, of the five men in the gun box, only CPT Hill was seriously injured. The others just had some scrapes or bruises. Rose injured his back but could still drive. Rose assessed the situation. The axle was down in the dirt and Fuller could not see how they could possibly drive Meat, so he said, “Take the guns, and ammunition and everything off, and we were going to leave.” But they replied, “Give us a minute, sir.” And they took a chain and tied the axle up to the frame, and said, “We can make it.” To which Fuller said, “If that’s all it takes.”77

While they were securing the axle, Fuller walked around and discovered the tire tread sandal tracks of one individual, who had planted the mine and gone back
the same way. So Fuller knew from his Ranger training the guy was not NVA. He would not have gone back the same way, or would not have been wearing sandals. The crew rigged the axle so a tow truck could tow it back to Khe Sanh. The convoy passed the rusted hulls of enemy tanks along the road from the attack on Khe Sanh during 1968. Upon reaching Khe Sanh, they then took Meat on down to Vandergrift. Rose and Werth flew down to pick up a new 5-ton cargo truck. Upon return, they put Meat’s gun box on that chassis but did not repaint it until the operation was over.\textsuperscript{78}

While at Khe Sanh, a helicopter evacuated CPT Hill to a field hospital where medical personnel assessed his injuries. He learned the impact had broken two ribs, his sternum and a bone in his foot. They then flew him down to the hospital in Cam Ranh Bay where he recovered for four days. Afterwards, he returned to duty at his headquarters in Long Binh where he spent the next month and a half writing up his report on convoy operations.\textsuperscript{79}

The 523rd was not the only company to have the privilege of driving to the Laotian border. One day, Bartletti, Harvey and Jim Calvert drove to the border to recover a vehicle. Its transfer case was missing. The recovery team saw the sign marking at the border shot full of holes.\textsuperscript{80}

The enemy was not the only danger the truck drivers had to face on Route 9. On 6 March, Telucci led a convoy of the 515th to Khe Sanh. The clay road gave way on the turn and PFC Kenneth H. Jones’ truck tumbled down into the river bed. Telucci immediately ran down to rescue Kenny but the truck was on top of him. He saw no bullet holes in the truck. It had just missed the turn. 2LT Bartletti and his crew went out to recover the truck and body. Jones’ dead body was so heavy it took Bartletti and four others to pull it up. Bartletti tied Jones’ sleeves together and they dragged his body up the embankment then loaded it on a stretcher on a jeep. That was the second American death from a truck rolling down the hill. Jim Calvert took the shackle off an M-88 down to the truck. Four times the shackle snapped pulling the truck up and it slid back down. After the fourth try, they were told to leave it. Colucci received the Silver Star Medal for risking his life. The loss of Kenny significantly affected CPT Lavin as he had failed to keep all his men alive. He personally wrote the letter home to Kenny’s parents.
He did not even know him but in later years went on to learn everything he could about Kenny. After three weeks of fighting across the border, one ARVN Ranger Battalion was badly mauled, two had withdrawn from the area of operations. Two positions were overrun, six abandoned and the ground assault halted halfway to Tchepone. Beginning 3 March, the ARVN launched a series of air assaults leading to Tchepone. On 6 March, the ARVN launched their largest air assault yet and the next day forcibly took the NVA supply base at Tchepone. On 10 March, the ARVN forces abandoned Tchepone and began their withdrawal back to the border. On 12 March, two ARVN airborne companies landed by helicopter north of Tabat to clear the enemy route of withdrawal. The enemy counter-attacked not only in Laos but also in South Vietnam. Enemy artillery even began to hit Khe Sanh. Two NVA sapper attacks on a fire base east of Khe Sanh destroyed 8,200 rounds of ammunition and 36,000 gallons of aviation fuel.

Further south, the 363rd Medium Truck pulled mostly fuel tankers, but on one convoy, the company dispatched 30 drivers to Quang Tri and then Vandergrift to haul supplies to Khe Sanh. Roger Rahor was one of the drivers sent north. He remembered driving to Khe Sanh at night and then four trucks hauled back dead ARVN soldiers. They loaded the dead on pallets into Sea Land refrigeration vans and drove them to the boat ramp near Phu Bai where they backed the vans onto Navy LSDs. They then picked up empty vans and repeated this process for two to three days. The stench was so bad the drivers burned their uniforms and washed their bodies with diesel fuel. Upon completion of the unpleasant task, they returned to their company.

The 523rd Transportation Company encountered the last major ambush of the operation. On 12 March, Callahan had returned on a convoy from Khe Sanh and informed LTC Ellis his convoy had received enemy fire and thought that it was not safe to take another convoy up there especially since it would be dark by the time they returned to Khe Sanh. Nonetheless, the convoy kicked out from Vandergrift to Khe Sanh with 2LT Jim Baird as the convoy commander. Just in case the enemy tried to ambush the convoy, the detail left behind formed a reaction force of gun trucks. 1LT Fuller had all the remaining gun trucks lined up ready to go while he monitored the radio for contact.

On Proud American, Robert Thorne was the driver, Calvin Bennett was the rear gunner, McDonald was the...
Above: Inside the gun box of Proud American. Courtesy of Logan Werth.

Right: Willie Strong standing next to Proud American. Courtesy of Logan Werth.

Above: Damage inside the cab of Proud American. Courtesy of Logan Werth.

Left: Removing the driver’s door armor to Proud American. Courtesy of Danny Cochran.
right gunner, and Nelson Allen was the NCOIC. Both CPT “V” and Baird rode on the gun truck. A B-40 rocket hit the gun truck, Proud American, between the cab and the gun box on the driver’s side mortally wounding the driver, SP4 Thorne. Fortunately Thorne managed to steer Proud American into the hillside instead of down the steep cliff into the creek thus saving the rest of the crew. Unfortunately, Baird had been kneeling by the radio mounted in the left front corner of the box when the rocket hit and received multiple fragmentary wounds to his left arm. McDonald, the right front gunner, received a facial wound. Two other tankers were immobilized.

Fuller heard the call, “Contact, contact, contact,” on the radio and led his convoy of gun trucks. Heading out the gate in Daughter of Darkness, an engineer stopped Fuller, “Don’t go up there! They’re having an ambush! They’re having an ambush!” To which Fuller replied, “That’s what we’re going up there for.” Around six gun trucks rolled in and laid down suppressive fire which ended the enemy fire. Fuller saw that Baird was badly wounded and learned Thorne was dead. Callahan laid Baird on a stretcher and Fuller called for a medevac.
then looked around for a good place for the dustoff helicopter to land. He found an opening by a bridge and Uncle Meat drove Baird to the bridge. The helicopter arrived but the pilot was afraid to land. Instead, the men lifted the stretcher up to the bird. Fuller told the medevac crew, “Take care of him. He was a good one.” They placed Thorne’s body in the Black Widow and took it back to Vandergrift. A squad from the 4th Battalion, 3rd Infantry went out to block the enemy escape but found no enemy killed or wounded.

The day after the ambush, Fuller left on his scheduled rest and recuperation (R&R). He and Thorne were both from Denver, Colorado; so after Fuller met his wife at the airport, he told her he had to visit Thorne’s Crew of the Eve of Destruction. Courtesy of Logan Werth.

Hauling a load to Khe Sanh. Courtesy of Logan Werth.
parents. His wife waited in the car while he went inside and told the parents how their son died. They thanked him profusely. Because of the close bonding on a gun truck, after the death of a crew member, the remaining crew members usually left the gun trucks. Calvin had lost two crews but filled in on Black Widow for a while. When asked why he kept going out on the gun truck, he admitted that he just did not feel it was his time. He had a feeling he was not going to die.  

Across the border, the 1st ARVN Armored Division abandoned Objective Aloui and the NVA counter-attacked with a fury. The ARVN paratroopers then panicked and the orderly withdrawal turned into a route. Meanwhile the enemy stepped up attacks along Route 9. On 23 March, 40 NVA soldiers with the support of mortars and rockets penetrated the perimeter Khe Sanh, destroying two helicopters, damaging four, and inflicting 22 casualties. In the latter half of March, as many as 20 rounds of mortar, rockets and artillery fire poured down daily on American fire support bases along the border. For two days, Route 9 could not be secured. As ARVN troops neared the border, American infantry and armored forces attacked west of Khe Sanh to clear Route 9. When it was reopened, convoys could only travel it “with acceptable risk.”  

The 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) assumed responsibility for the security of Route 9 on 28 March. The division provided constant aerial support to locate the enemy and strategically positioned armored vehicles to provide instant reaction. This minimized the attacks on convoys and LTC Ellis commended the 101st on their performance.  

One night near the end of March at Khe Sanh, LT Gardner came up and asked Roberson if he wanted to go on The Justifier, since the gun truck was short a gunner. When Roberson joined it, The Justifier had a .50 on center front and an M-60 center rear with M-60s midway on the right and left side. Later, they put a .50 on back and put twin M-60s on the sides. The crew consisted of a driver, NCOIC and four gunners. Roger “Hillbilly” Randolph was driver, Wayne Rogers was NCOIC, Dennis Butte was front .50 gunner, John Kanipe was back M-60. Paul Banner was right side M-60 and Robby was left side M-60 gunner. Jose Garcia was on it for a short while and then went on The Assassins. When Wayne left, Roberson took over as an 18-year old NCOIC of a gun truck.  

Lam Son 719 ended on 4 April 1971 with mixed results. They had reached their objective at Tchepone but failed to expand beyond and withdrew under serious pressure from the North Vietnamese. The ARVN attacks became bogged down claiming the lack of American helicopter support as the reason. After the Lam Son 719, ambushes fell off to an irregular pattern of once every two to four weeks.  

With the end of the operation, the Army had to vacate Khe Sanh and Vandergrift as had the Marines before them. CPT Lavin drove his APC to Khe Sanh to monitor vehicle spacing as they left the camp. The Americans abandoned everything and 600 trucks left with empty loads. Lavin’s M-113 was the last vehicle to leave Khe Sanh. The 515th remained at Vandergrift for three to five days waiting for clearance to leave. The battalion XO instructed Lavin to clean out the

Danny Cochran eating a C-ration near his bunker. Courtesy of Danny Cochran.
CONEX bunker, burn the latrine and get rid of any 155mm projectiles. He rolled the projectiles into puddles, made a deal with a local Vietnamese to trade the metal in the bunker for soda and then set the latrine on fire. As the last to leave Vandergrift, he remembered there was no noise. It was absolutely quiet.

The day the truck companies left Vandergrift, they formed a 70-vehicle convoy of the 515th, 523rd and possibly the 666th. It seemed they staged forever as they watched engineers blow up bunkers and burn anything left behind. LTC Ellis warned them to expect to get hit by 500 VC on the way out because of the convoy's small size. So they had Cobra air cover and some V-100 armored car escorts from the 101st Airborne Division, and fortunately did not get hit.

2LT Bartletti remembered being the last to leave both Khe Sanh and Vandergrift with his recovery team. Someone told him he could leave after he removed a 125-pound projectile from the road. He also got rid of the of the latrine. Bartletti and his recovery team spent Saturday morning at Khe Sanh and drove around to make sure no vehicle remained. The day was sunny and quiet. Their departure ended the American participation in Lam Son 719.
1 Ellis, 39th ORLL.
3 Lavin interview; and Fuller interview.
4 Hill, A Soldier.
5 Ellis, 39th ORLL.
6 Nolan, Into Laos.
7 Ibid.
8 Israel interview.
9 Ibid.
10 COL (R) Walter Anderson interview by Richard Killblane at Ft Eustis, Va, 26 July 2006.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Dragavon interview; and Roger Rahor email to Richard Killblane, 18 August 2004.
14 Israel and Bennett interview, and Michael McBride interview by Richard Killblane, 9 July 2004.
15 Mike Lavin interview, 17 June 2005; and Ellis, 39th ORLL.
16 McBride interview.
17 Ibid.
18 Nolan, Into Laos.
19 Hill, A Soldier.
20 Ibid.
21 Nolan, Into Laos.
22 Ellis, 39th ORLL.
24 Roger Maloney interview by Richard Killblane at Kirkwood, Mo, 28 June 2013; and Brittner interview.
25 Maloney interview, and Roberson interview.
26 Brittner interview, and Maloney interview.
28 Nolan, Into Laos.
29 Nolan, Into Laos.
30 Brittner and Maloney interview.
31 Maloney interview.
32 Brittner interview; and McBride interview.
33 Maloney interview.
34 Ellis, 39th ORLL.
35 The 5th ID (M) After Action Report stated one vehicle destroyed, five damaged, one driver killed and nine wounded.
36 Nolan, Into Laos.
37 Dan Hill telephone interview by Richard Killblane, 19 November 2015.
38 Rahor email, and Anderson interview.
39 Fuller interview.
40 Ibid.
41 Cochran interview.
42 Rahor email.
44 Dragavon email to Killblane, May 21, 2015.
45 Rahor email, August 18, 2004.
46 Christopher Aichele email to Robert Mitten, June 1, 2013.
47 Israel interview; Seay and Cochran interview.
48 Since the ¾-ton truck was a little bigger than the ¼-ton jeep, they were called “beeps.”
50 Israel interview.
51 Ellis, 39th ORLL.
52 The 504th MP Bn Forward Log recorded the ambush at 0015 hours on 21 February 1971, but Baird and Israel remember it at 2355 hours or midnight.
53 Israel interview.
54 Ibid.
55 Baird interview.
56 Israel interview.
57 Baird and Cochran interview.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Cochran interview.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Israel interview.
66 Ellis, 39th ORLL.
67 Will Abshire, untitled article on gun trucks in I Corps, 1st Log News, April 15, 1971.
68 Mike Lavin and others remembered their experiences at the Vietnam veteran reunion of the 515th at Kirkwood, Mo, 29 June 2013; Israel and Bennett interview; McBride interview; and Hurley interview.
69 Mitten interview.
70 Don Bartletti presentation to the 515th TC reunion at Kirkwood, Mo, 28 June 2013. Dan Hill remembered the mission came from the corps commander.
71 Fuller interview, Roberson interview, and Hill, A Soldier.
72 Rose interview, and Fuller interview.
73 Fuller interview.
74 Roberson interview.
75 Rose interview, and Fuller interview.
76 Rose interview, and Hill, A Soldier.
77 Rose interview and Fuller interview.
78 Fuller interview.
79 Hill, A Soldier.
Top: CPT Mike Lavin, aka Superman, showing how short (time left in country) he is. Courtesy of Mike Lavin.
Bottom: Upon return from Lam Son, the 515th Transportation Company threw a party with the money raised from selling cold beer and soda. Courtesy of Mike Lavin.
Although the ARVN offensive failed to disrupt the NVA buildup, the truck drivers overcame tremendous odds to deliver the cargo to the forward camps. The drivers lived in austere conditions, drove around the clock and encountered 23 ambushes. The trucks of the 39th Transportation Battalion drove 5,007 sorties moving 29,329 short tons from Vandergrift to Khe Sanh. The two truck battalions lost 40 vehicles damaged or destroyed, 12 men killed and 35 wounded. As a testament to their heroism, the 39th Transportation Battalion recommended soldiers for four Silver Star Medals, and awarded 20 Bronze Star Medals with Valor device, 37 Bronze Star Medals, 10 Army Commendation Medals with Valor device, 108 Army Commendation Medals and 56 Purple Heart Medals during this two and a half month operation. As a testament to the intensity of the fighting, the gun trucks took a beating. King Kong was damaged by an RPG. Ace of Spades was destroyed early in the operation and The Protector, Satan’s Li’l Angel and Proud American were damaged, repaired and renamed. Hardcore took an RPG in the driver’s compartment. In spite of the enemy’s best effort, the truck drivers kept the supply line open.

At the close of operations, the 39th Transportation Battalion expanded the trailer maintenance facility at Phu Bai and began an extensive trailer repair program to repair 212 trailers used in the operation. To finish by June, the maintenance warrant officer and NCOs organized the crews into shifts so they could run 24-hour operations.¹

After Lam Son, the 515th and 523rd returned to Camp Eagle for a short time. Upon return, the men found time to relax and celebrate. There the soldiers took delight in simple things like hearing a toilet flush. They had stage shows with Korean dancers. CPT Lavin had created a company slush fund selling beer and sodas. With the $1,000 profit, the 515th hired a band with women, bought a pig to roast, had the engineers build picnic tables and held a big party.

CPT Lavin wore his superman outfit with “short” written in masking tape on his shirt. Most did not know why he wore it. One event at the party involved a tug of war contest over a mud pit. Soldiers and NCOs threw Lavin in the

To show their appreciation, the men threw CPT Mike Lavin in the mud pit. Courtesy of Mike Lavin.
mud pit. They then carried the muddy and drunk company commander to Big Al’s hooch and dropped him on the floor. A slightly intoxicated Lavin saluted from the prone position. He identified very closely with his enlisted men and having submitted his paperwork to leave the Army, the pretense of rank meant very little to him.

CPT Lavin knew Larry Simon was bringing the women onto post but not how. Larry was a very funny guy. He had lots of energy and liked to make people laugh. He wore a little black short billed civilian hat similar to a “boonie” hat around camp to be different. He brought prostitutes into camp every night by slowing down in the village and letting them jump in his cab. He knew the MPs did not check the trucks as they came in on a convoy, so he would have the Vietnamese women duck their heads down so the MPs would not see them. After he finished with the prostitute, he released her to service the NCOs. By this time Lavin was comfortable with the discipline in the company and asked Larry not to bring them in as often. Larry just quit bringing them in every night, but still had his needs. One day, the NCOs were standing around the orderly room discussing who Simon was bringing in that night. One joked, “Ask the CO,” and Lavin yelled out, “He’s bringing in so-and-so and so-and-so.” The orderly room burst with laughter.

The 515th then moved into new housing in Phu Bai. Having put in his paperwork to leave the Army, LTC Ellis asked Mike Lavin to extend in command. Lavin instead...
passed the company guidon to 1LT Roger Maloney on 20 April and left Vietnam. Leaving the company was the hardest thing he ever did. Maloney commanded the company for about a month and a half as a first lieutenant. One day in May, LTC Ellis called Maloney and said BG Sweeney wanted to see him. Sweeney asked Maloney to be his aide. Maloney had less than 30 days left in country so he turned him down. He left Vietnam in June and returned to his old job with Sears and Roebuck.2

The 572nd “Gypsy Bandits” only had a handful of tractors running out of 60 and those were virtually worn out. From early April until June, they were primarily regrouping and rebuilding.3

In April after Lam Son, the 363rd Medium Truck moved north to Camp Haskins on Red Beach, a former Sea Bee Base, where it was assigned to the 57th Transportation Battalion with the 64th, 563rd, 572nd Transportation Companies. From then on the convoys ran north every day. Because the trailer transfer point in Da Nang had worked so well under the control of the 363rd, the company was directed to establish and operate a trailer transfer point at Camp Haskins along with the POL point.4

The 523rd Light Truck pulled back to its new home at Phu Bai and remained under the 39th Transportation Battalion until the company’s departure from Vietnam in March the next year. The trucks were beat up and missing lots of parts. So Fuller told his PLL clerk to find whatever they were missing. They cannibalized parts from other trucks and scrounged or stole what they could not get legally. Fuller left Vietnam with an assignment to the Army’s shooting team at Fort Benning, Georgia. He retired as a captain in 1975.5

Not long after Lam Son, the 523rd turned King Kong over to the 173rd Airborne Brigade and SGT Mike Emory remained as its NCOIC. He could not part with the truck. He remained on Kong until the 173rd left Vietnam in August 1971 and then the hull was removed. Emory had served with the same gun truck from its construction to the end for a total of two years. He never told anyone in his family about the war or what he did.6

Danny Cochran left King Kong and joined up with SGT Richard Downard as the NCOIC to form the new crew of Proud American. They restored the gun box to its original design and renamed the gun truck Ace of Spades. The bonding of gun truck crews was strong and the death of a crew member often resulted in the others leaving the gun truck. Calvin Bennett had survived two ambushes resulting in two deaths on his gun truck yet he remained on it. He believed it just was not his time to die. David Rose was sent to Cam Ranh Bay where they loaded him on a plane without even out-processing. The Army took care of that at Fort Lewis, Washington.
He was issued a brand new green uniform and then returned to his wife in Los Angeles. Everyone tried to pick up where they left off two years prior. Since Cochran was Regular Army, he had to wait three years to get out.

The enemy could not close down the flow of supplies because of the fire power of the gun trucks and the heroism of their crews. The 5-ton gun trucks had proven themselves the best deterrent against a convoy ambush. COL Garland Ludy who was then the Assistant Commandant of the U.S. Army Transportation School and former 8th Group Commander in 1969 had written COL Morton back in February that the Army needed to preserve an example of the 5-ton gun truck. Ludy’s favorite had been Big Kahuna, an APC gun truck, and COL Morton considered it and Madam Pele as the best examples of the two types of gun trucks. Both belonged to the 2nd Transportation Company and 48 hours after learning of the request, the company commander had raised $800 from the officers and men to ship the gun trucks to Fort Eustis, Virginia. Morton could not accept the money and recommended the commander instead offer it to the Transportation Museum. With Lam Son over, Morton finally replied to BG Ludy on 17 May that the 2nd Transportation Company could not release those two gun trucks until the unit retrograded back to the United States scheduled sometime later. Morton instead decided to ship a gun truck from his favorite company, the 523rd Transportation Company. That company felt the Eve of Destruction best represented their gun truck history. On 31 May, CPT Voightritter wrote BG Alton G. Post, the current Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics in U.S. Army Vietnam and former Assistance Commandant of the Transportation School, for assistance in shipping the gun truck. They loaded the Eve aboard the Pioneer Commander on 11 June and it arrived at Norfolk a month later where it became an iconic artifact of the Army Transportation Museum.\footnote{After Lam Son, the 8th Transportation Group Headquarters convoysed south to a place north of Da Nang, possibly Phu Ni. Headquarters and Headquarters}
Detachment, 8th Transportation Group was scheduled to inactivate on 28 April 1971. The soldiers of the headquarters were sent home or to the other two truck battalions. Three NCOs (an E8 and two E7s), who had come over with 8th Group in 1967, wanted to bid their farewell to the unit. They drove down in a jeep from Quang Tri and wanted to return that very night. On the return trip, they were killed. Only CPT Jess Perez, the HHD Commander, and COL Morton remained. They reported to Da Nang Airport with individual travel orders and were told that one had to stay since they did not have unit movement orders. Since Perez commanded the HHD, he had responsibility for the 8th Group colors and had to stay. COL Morton boarded the plane and left. Perez returned to Da Nang and spent the next three weeks getting an accounting classification for unit movement orders. He finally brought the 8th Group colors to Fort Lewis, Washington. They were uncased in a ceremony that resembled a change of command ceremony. He handed the colors over where they were cased and sent for storage until the headquarters was reactivated as a training brigade at Fort Eustis in July 1986. This ended another chapter in the history of the unit. The battle-hardened truck drivers of the 8th Transportation Group had earned a respected place in the history of the Vietnam War.8

Most of the wounded recovered and lived fruitful lives. Chester Israel spent three months in a hospital and was later discharged from the Army. Stafford survived the war and although blind, earned a law degree from the University of Georgia. Baird went on to earn his graduate degree in Animal Husbandry at the University of Kentucky so he could breed pigs scientifically. He went on to serve in the Indiana House of Representatives in 2010.

Although the ARVN had failed to destroy the enemy logistics bases in Laos, the Easter Offensive of 1972 drove all the way to Quang Tri. The American combat veterans came home without any fanfare that greeted their fathers, uncles and grandfathers before them. Instead, protesters waited for them outside the gates intended to feel make them feel ashamed of their service. Those who were proud of it would not find much moral support since the public had grown tired of the war. Many had little time to transition from war to peace. They came off convoys one day, processed out of Vietnam in khakis the next day, flew to the States to draw their discharge and a new dress green uniform, and were civilians after that. Their bodies were at home but their minds were still in Vietnam. So the veterans tried to pick up where they left off and many avoided talking about their time in Vietnam.

Several of the officers stayed in the Army after Vietnam. Don Voightritter made the Army a career and

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8 Eve of Destruction on its way to the Army Transportation Museum at Fort Eustis, Virginia.
Courtesy of Voightritter family.
retired as a colonel. Dan Hill likewise had a successful military career and retired as a colonel. Ralph Fuller retired from the Army in 1975 as a captain due to his accumulated enlisted time. He had wanted to leave the Army right after Lam Son but his wife convinced him to stay because of how close he was to his military retirement. The rest came home to pick up where they left off or start new lives. Tom Callahan became a lawyer after the war. Mike Lavin worked in construction for a year in Helbronn, Germany trying to figure out what to do with his life. Depressed, he returned home to Missouri where he started a career in light construction. As part of his healing process, he began talking with local high schools about his experience in Vietnam with other veterans. Ed Harvey retired as a hospital administrator and then became a college professor. John Dragavon returned to his wife and completed his graduate degree in Wildlife Sciences with the University of Washington. Surprisingly, he ran into a lot of Vietnam veterans in that program. This led to paid work with the National Park Service and US Fish and Wildlife Service. Seeking full time employment, he went to work for an engineering firm as a consultant. Don Bartletti returned to San Diego, California, grew his hair long and became a hippie. He started his photojournalist career with the Vista Press and joined the Los Angeles Times in 1984. For three decades he chronicled the struggles of migrant workers. In 2015, he became a Pulitzer Prize finalist for his series on Mexican farm workers.

Of the enlisted men, Danny Cochran worked in a body shop after the war. Calvin Bennet worked in maintenance in the school system. Logan Werth worked as a handyman in a number of jobs. Each had different ways of dealing with their war experience. Many, especially the crews on the gun trucks, would suffer varying levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This one common bond of service in Vietnam would eventually bring them together again.

The United States and the Republic of Vietnam concluded a peace treaty with the Provisional Revolutionary Government and North Vietnam in Paris on 27 January 1973, thus ending the war. The United States then pulled out the remaining ground combat units. Two years later, the North Vietnamese Army violated the treaty and Saigon fell to an invasion of Soviet-built tanks on 30 April 1975. For this reason, the media would promote the myth that the United States had lost the war. This left the Americans who had lost friends and parts of themselves with a sense of bitterness. Had all this sacrifice been in vain? Deep inside the veterans knew they had not failed to accomplish any mission assigned. In spite of their best efforts, the enemy had never shut down the supply route. So the veterans felt they had won, but were cheated of their honor.

The ordeal of combat left some veterans with deep scares while, for many, it formed a strong bond of brotherhood among those who fought side-by-side. The individual replacement system did not foster too much bonding except with the replacements one came over with and within the crews of the gun trucks. Never were any group of truck drivers closer during the Vietnam War than the gun truck crews. It was only a matter of time before the Vietnam veterans would begin to hold reunions as had their predecessors. In 1989, the Vietnam veterans of the 359th Transportation Company held their first reunion. Surprisingly, the military stevedores would be responsible for getting the drivers of the other truck companies together.

In 1992, Rick Phillips, Bill Wandall, and a few other 4th Transportation Command veterans met in Washington D.C. and set up the organization, the 4th Trans Command Vietnam Association, for reunions and history preservation. It quickly evolved into the Army Transportation Association Veterans (ATAV) to include all Transportation Corps Vietnam veterans. Immediately after the first meeting in Washington, Dr. Ralph Grambo, Associate Professor of Economics-Finance, created a web page using his University of Scranton website. He was an early user of the web and had unlimited resources when working at the University of Scranton. Other units followed suit.

ATAV then held reunions every two years and, during the July 2002 ATAV reunion in New Orleans, Larry Fiandt, a veteran of the 523rd Transportation Company, approached Richard Killblane, Transportation Corps Historian, about holding another reunion the next year at Fort Eustis. Killblane worked with Barbara Bower, the Army Transportation Museum Director, to host the reunion, which they simply called, “The Gathering.” The bulk of the attendees were veterans of gun truck crews. The attendance of veterans started at around 70, but the next year rose to a hundred. The Museum hosted the
2003, 2004, and 2006 Gatherings and Barbara Bower and Kathy Blackstone continued as active members of the planning committee. They alternated the location of the reunions every year.

In 2008, the veterans held the Gathering at Pigeon Forge, Tennessee with attendance of a dozen members of the 566th Transportation Company. This was the best turn out of veterans of Cam Ranh Bay. By 2009, Bud Whitehead took an increasing role in the conduct of the reunion so he held a separate Gathering of primarily the Cam Ranh Bay veterans at Pigeon Forge while the original Gathering held theirs at the Army Historical and Education Center at Carlisle, Pennsylvania in 2010. This divided the reunions into the Cam Ranh Bay and 8th Transportation Group reunions. Although the stevedores of the 71st Transportation Battalion at Newport had an active reunion organization, for some reason, the truck drivers out of the 48th Group in Long Binh had yet to turn out in large numbers. They were the only truck organization in Vietnam that did not build gun trucks.

As the Vietnam Transportation veteran reunions grew in attendance, they began to hold the company reunions. The 523rd and 359th Transportation Companies always had the best turnout at the Gatherings and several of the veterans even rebuilt replicas of their gun trucks. Finally, Mike Lavin fulfilled a promise he made to the men of his company and hosted the first 515th Transportation Company reunion in his hometown in Kirkwood, Missouri in June 2013. This provided the opportunity for healing and a chance to renew old friendships. They would always reflect on their service during Lam Son 719 as one of their greatest accomplishments. The truck drivers’ performance during this operation would stand out as one of the greatest acts of heroism of the Transportation Corps and in recognition of its sacrifice and service during Lam Son 719, the Transportation Corps Regiment inducted the 523rd Transportation Company into its Hall of Fame in 2012 and the 8th Group in 2018.
Seven rebuilt gun trucks at the 2008 Gathering in Pigeon Forge. Photo by author.

1 Ellis, 39th ORLL.
2 Lavin interview, and Maloney interview.
3 Hampton, “Gypsy Bandits.”
5 Fuller interview.
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Don Bartletti presentation before the 515th TC reunion at Kirkwood, Mo., 28 June 2013.
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Mike Lavin interview by Richard Killblane at Kirkwood, Mo., 29 June 2013.
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