

INTRODUCTION

This article is an attempt to paint a verbal picture of the lifestyle of a 20 odd year old serving in a Transport Platoon in South Vietnam in the mid 60's.

Photographs have been sourced from a wide range of donors from members of 87 and 1 Platoon. Neil MacPherson, Ken Sceney, Jim Thomson, Ron Wicks, Blue Hickey, Cliff Hodgson and Ron Butcher are just a few of the many who have contributed over the years.

This collection of memories is just that, a collection of memories not necessarily a chronologically nor precise a military history, but rather memories mulled over the past 40 plus years. These may seem rather varied and at odds at times but one of the uniquenesses of any recollection is the variance that can occur in the description of any one particular event, depending on the view or angle from which that particular event is seen by any particular individual. In most events there are distinct different aspects dependent on the standing of the viewer and an army is no exception to this rule. What the planner plans overall is seen as a cause, an action and a result on paper, whereas as the original plan is put into action and filters down through the chain of command, what the actual operative sees is a much more personal and vivid account and this difference is blatantly obvious and exaggerated in the case of 87 Transport Platoon. Not only was there a division from what an Officer saw and experienced as to what a soldier saw and experienced, but in 87 the soldiers themselves were operating different equipment under different circumstances and often saw two extremely different fronts. The following is an attempt to put forward some of these views.

I, along with many others, began my military career by partaking in the standard Recruit Training programme at 1 RTB at Kapooka, situated just outside Wagga Wagga in NSW, and here, learnt the many basic skills needed to become an Australian Soldier. Kapooka was the initial training battalion that turned out the majority of Australia's basic soldiers but, as the demand for more troops through the escalation of the Vietnam conflict demanded a rearranged National Service programme to come into effect, a second Recruit Training Bn was formed (2 RTB). This Training Bn was located at Puckapunyal to process and train the vast extra numbers of soldiers required through the National Service act. From the Basic training stage at Kapooka, or in some cases Puckapunyal, the soldier advanced from the Recruit stage to the glorious rank of 'Private', was allocated a Corps in which to serve and duly posted off to the relevant Corps training school to receive Corps specific training.

In my personal case I was posted to RASigs at the school of Signals at Balcombe where, to cut a long story short, I was trained as a Sig but eventually (because I drove a 1 ton truck at Adelong before joining) I was given a license and posted to the School of Sigs Transport Section as a driver. I thought that this was a bit useless, and decided that if I was going to be in Transport I would be better off in RAASC so I applied for a Corps transfer which eventually came through. Hence from here I shortcut the whole system and ended up in 86 Tpt Platoon at Bandianna and was promptly detached to 6TTU as, would you believe, a driver/radio operator.

Under more normal circumstances, the new soldier was generally assessed here at the Corps school and once again directed in the course of his final destination within RAASC, in those days the second largest Corps in the Army. RAASC covered a wide variety of fields including, Bakery, butchery, laundry, POL, Supply, and of course Transport. Nearly everyone in 87 found himself in the RAASC School of Transport where besides learning about the Corps history in general, he spent a considerable amount of time learning about the basic principals of engines, gearboxes and other mechanical parts of an automobile before actually getting behind the wheel and learning how to control a vehicle. A broad array of subjects including; road law, recovery procedures, water crossings, convoy procedures, general maintenance, camouflage principles and night driving skills, were all honed here before a licence test was sat and passed before being issued a G11 and receiving an actual posting to an operating unit, A regular soldier in 1966 possibly had the advantage of posting to a regular unit to gain a little more experience on the GS vehicles that the army had in service, whereas a lot of our National service Platoon members were trained at the driving school, licenced, and then posted straight to 87 and immediately off overseas.

87 Transport Platoon RAASC was a rather unique unit and found itself in a different situation to most other military units in that it in fact encompassed two completely different units under the one umbrella.

Home in Australia, 87 Transport Platoon was designated (Tipper) in that the unit as a whole was equipped with and operated tippers, originally using F1a Studebakers then later equipped with 'stopgap' International AA series which were in turn later replaced by International AB series 4x4 vehicles. These 'stopgap' civilian pattern 4x4 vehicles were fitted

with trays taken straight from the design used by the by now obsolete Studebaker WWII vehicle and were a rather small tray for an operational vehicle. The nickname 'Tipping Teaspoons' was soon adopted to describe the vehicles, the name alluding to the proportionally miniscule sized tray compared to the rest of the truck. 87 Platoon was a part of 25 Coy RAASC and shared a transport compound with its sister unit, 86 Transport Platoon (GS) (at the rare times that either Platoon was not detached elsewhere) and also shared the compound with 158 Tank Transporter Platoon.

On receipt of an official posting order indicating an imminent deployment to Vietnam, a great amount of reshuffling took place at all levels. The Platoon that under peace time conditions was commanded by a second Lieutenant now came under a war time footing and was to be Commanded by a Captain, numbers had to be made up (at least on paper) to get the Unit somewhere close to operational strength, vehicles had to be drawn, copious amounts of paperwork was to be filled out and acted upon by those that did and understood that kind of thing, medical and dental matters had to be drawn up and equipment checked.

I was a member of 86 Transport Platoon at the time and suddenly found myself, along with a number of other fellow 86 members suddenly belonging to the "other side" and having to switch loyalties from one Platoon to the other. How fickle we are!!

Things became a bit of a blur suddenly as everything had to be up to date and this included dental and medical matters. I remember lining up in a queue that was slowly filing through a nissen hut, in one door and out the other end and duly took my place in the line and wondered just what was ahead of me. As we entered the room with sleeves rolled up, a RAANC nurse on either side of the door swabbed down each upper arm with alcohol, the next ones inserted a needle into the exposed swabbed arm, injected that needle's contents into the unsuspecting upper arm, then removed the body of the syringe from the needle leaving the needle itself sitting quivering in the arm. As the line moved on (shades of Henry Ford's production line!) another vial of serum was affixed to the needle and injected.

All in all that day I received 5 separate injections and lost three teeth to the dentist, who was running a similar production line process, simply removing any suspect teeth rather than attempt any repair measures. Needless to say by the end of that particular day I wasn't feeling that bright really and as fate would have it, that was the day that my parents decided to call in at Puckapunyal and spring a surprise visit on their way home from a trip to Adelaide! That night I dare say my Mother had a few different thoughts about the army system and possibly wondered what they were doing to her little boy.

Trucks were being painted, the colour changing from the shiny bronze green that they were to a dullish shade of Olive drab, all the pretty white bits that were necessary to make the vehicles more visible on civvy roads were painted over. Many visits to the Q store to be reissued with new equipment to replace damaged or non existent gear on hand, truck CES checked etc., things were definitely happening.

Somewhere along the line there was a party held at the canteen, a sort of send off so to speak, and naturally things ended up being quite entertaining. One of our neighbouring units, 2 Field Ambulance had their parade ground very close to the site where this party was held, and as the night wore on it was unanimously decided that it would be an excellent idea to "souvenir" the small cannon that was chained to the flagpole on said parade ground and reposition it somewhere else. The operation started exceptionally well considering the condition of the participants, the bolt to which the chain was affixed was undone and the cannon began its noisy trip across the parade ground, powered and guided by a number of giggling inebriated soldiers. Success was well in sight when disaster struck, one of the wheels fell off the carriage upon which the cannon was mounted and all forward motion stopped rather abruptly. Now, whether it was the noise of the members present, the squeaking of the wheels, or the scraping sound as the wheel fell off and the carriage gouged the parade ground I am not too sure, but it was at this point that "operation souvenir" came unstuck and the cannon was retrieved by the rightful owners, perhaps not actually retrieved but the souveniring bit came unstuck about then, a verbal discussion erupted and eventually the MPs were called. One member obviously said a little too much, offended the MP who placed him unceremoniously in the back of the paddy wagon. The rest of the Platoon, displaying a

wonderful show of mateship, promptly jumped into the back of the Holden ute with him, possibly setting the record for the number of people that would fit in the back of a ¼ ton ute, whilst one particularly clear minded supporter deftly removed the ignition key from said ute and threw it in the bush. The party ended soon after this incident and within a day or two of this memorable incident I was on a plane bound for Ballina on pre-embarkation leave for 5 days, to return to Sydney to rejoin the Platoon on board the HMAS Sydney.

This pre-embarkation leave was a peaceful break from the desperate efforts to gear the platoon up for its immediate deployment, as well as a chance to say farewell to family but whilst I and others enjoyed this break others were still toiling at the task of readying the Platoon for deployment..

Vehicles and stores were loaded on a train and then shipped from Seymour to Sydney, unloaded and then ferried to Randwick. This was a comedy in itself as many of the 'Out of State' based drivers had no idea where they were going in the Sydney traffic, so the convoy was simply a continuous line of vehicles, each blindly following the one in front regardless of traffic lights or other such man made hazards. Luckily the convoy arrived in place pretty well unscathed.

Typical military "hurry up and wait" ensued. From Randwick the vehicles were eventually loaded on board the HMAS Sydney and we were allocated a 'mess deck' which we were to call home for the next week or so.

Loading of the ship took the best part of a week (after our unit was loaded on board anyway) and whilst the Navy boys toiled with loading, stacking and securing equipment the Platoon members were let loose on unsuspecting Sydney town for day leave, to be back on board each night to learn how to sleep in a hammock and learn a new language. Suddenly we slept in a mess and ate in a cafeteria. We were issued coloured discs to denote which sitting for meals to attend in the limited space of the cafeterias and learnt all about 'Tombola', 'scrans' and 'goffas'.

Initially 87 Transport Platoon was officially deployed to Vietnam as the designated Transport Platoon to support 1 ALSG, tasked to carry out 3rd line transport duties within Vung Tau, similar to the "Area Transport" duties that the sister Unit 86 Platoon performed back in Puckapunyal. This tasking involved the transfer of goods and supplies from their initial source to a holding point within 1 ALSG such as the Supply Platoon, or the Engineers Stores depot. On the drawing board it was planned that "1 Transport Platoon", under command of 1 Transport Company HQ., was to be deployed to South Vietnam to carry out 2nd line transport duties for the task force, that is, supply transport where needed on an operational basis to the forces based at Nui Dat. In very early days it became obvious that although this deployment may have looked good on paper, it was impossible to work as planned on the ground.

87 had been revamped and posted as a composite Unit, containing three sections of Tippers and two sections of Cargo GS trucks on its books. As a result, on arrival in Viet Nam, it soon became blatantly obvious that to keep supplies and equipment up to the newly to be formed Task Force area at Nui Dat, satisfy transport demands for the growing Logistical Support Group at Vung Tau, and in the case of the tippers, support Engineering tasks in both vicinities, on top of the mundane but still very necessary domestic day to day tasking, was way beyond the capabilities of any one single Transport Platoon. To overcome this imminent problem, 1 Coy HQ and 1 Tpt Platoon found themselves based at Vung Tau as well, rather than at Nui Dat where their 2nd line tasking duties initially supposed they would be located, the logical departure point from which to carry out resupply convoys to 1 ATF. This adjustment left the Task Force severely deprived of vehicular capabilities available for operational deployments.

To overcome this shortage, vehicle operational requests were lodged weeks in advance and convoys for that particular time arranged and loaded so that the vehicles required on operation with the task force, could be unloaded quickly, deployed on the operational tasking and generally return that night with the return convoy. In many cases 1 Platoon found that they simply did not have enough vehicles available to do this alone, so some of 87's Mk 3 sections were

seconded to assist. As a result, the roles of 87 and 1 Platoon often merged, the Mk 3 sections of 87 often coming under the umbrella of 2nd line transport tasking alongside 1 Platoon trucks.

The tippers sections also worked with other units in a similar manner, often, besides carrying out their intended domestic chores were utilised carrying engineer stores and other awkward tippable loads on convoys as well as assisting 17 Construction RAE in road and airfield construction. In fact one section of tippers was detached on a rotational basis to Nui Dat under the umbrella of 17 Construction Sqn RAE.

As a result of all this, 87 Platoon was virtually split down the middle, having two distinctly different tasking formats during its twelve month stay in country, was comprised members suddenly taken from two different Platoons, was comprised of an almost equal mix of Regulars soldiers alongside National servicemen, and also came under the command of a new Officer that no-one knew, and with all this in mind, possibly the reader will be able to understand why two different members of the same unit may possibly have entirely different and contrasting memories of their service O.S.

EARLY DAYS

Fresh in the country the first five days or so in country was a general blur in more ways than one. Firstly, 'on paper', the Platoon arrived in country up to strength but actual reality showed that the Platoon consisted of approx 3.5 sections of vehicles and men instead of the normal 5 sections, and was immediately tasked with an around the clock job of distributing all the stores and equipment that had been delivered on board the HMAS Sydney to their designated recipient units. This kept all drivers on their toes for the first 3 days non stop, grabbing what sleep they could whilst waiting to load the trucks at the "hard stand" with the stores that were being unloaded by lighterage. The unloading of stores from shipping was handled at the hard stand landing area by an American contractor, "Alaska Barge and Transport", and they were well equipped with cargo handling equipment including fork lifts, making the loading relatively easy.

The offloading at the actual unit sites was another story altogether, as no such modern luxuries were available in many of the units, meaning more times than not the load had to be broken open and unloaded box by box by hand. Most units were eager enough to get their equipment and stores landed that they supplied work parties to unload, but I have very distinct memories of one particular WO in charge of a particular Sergeants mess who refused point blank for one reason or another, to supply any such aid and backed his refusal up with some rather colourful comments re the backbone of certain 'bone idle' drivers. Suffice to say that subsequent loads to this gentleman's area were delivered by tipper rather than a GS tray truck. This indeed tended to speed up the turn-around time to that unit but unfortunately for him, one of the loads to his area that were consigned to the back of a tipper happened to contain most of the crockery for that particular mess.

We did manage to sort out the important things in these first furious days, such as the wonders of the American PX system, where we managed to find enough food to fight off the pangs of hunger that attacked every couple of hours, and we did actually get to find out where we were going to live and sleep once the hectic unloading was completed. Once all the initial hectic rush subsided life began to take on some semblance of routine. Tent lines were set up using the good old well tested WWII vintage 16x16 tent complete with fly.



These general living quarters weren't all that flash to look at, but after a bit of Aussie ingenuity and scrounging, even the most basic conditions were made quite comfortable considering the circumstances. 4 men were quartered in each old ex WWII 16x16 tent, snuggled down amongst the sand hills and sparse vegetation at Vung Tau, atop a row of sand dunes that skirted "the Bowl". Each tent was surrounded by a basic 5 or 6 sandbag high protective walls and into these walls was built ammo storage boxes and other creature comforts that were deemed necessary. (Filling sand bags was a never ending job or so it seemed, but at least there was an abundant supply of sand!) When the area was first settled in the dunes were fairly secure, in that vegetation had already taken hold and sent down roots to contain and settle the sand and the rotting leaf vegetation was helping to enrich the soil.

(All this was to change in later months when all the vegetation was cleared and the sand dunes were levelled to allow actual 'tent lines' to be laid out in a lot more military manner, although in the windy months that followed, this proved to be a lot less comfortable).

These sand dunes were home to a lot of animals new to us. We saw a variety of different lizards, some I nicknamed 'racing lizards', (I have no idea what they actually were but they got up on their hind legs and shot through faster than a Bondi tram, hence the name!), and often rather rotund deer and the occasional rat were quite often noted passing through our lines.

During the Monsoon season rain storms occurred monotonously around 1500hrs each afternoon and pelting rain caused a daily minor flooding problem to tents but this was soon overcome with the appearance of duckboard (similar to pallets) flooring. Hutchies and tent flies were fashioned into water catchment flumes to guide the water down into water jerry cans so as to supplement our daily meagre daily water ration.

Our initial latrine was an elaborate 5 seater 'longdrop' affair surround by waist high hessian suspended on star pickets, to offer some modicum of modesty I guess, and perched high on the edge of the sand dunes overlooking the rest of the Australian contingent and offering a magnificent vista out to the South China sea. This was a great and comforting as well as relatively comfortable place to contemplate nature or perhaps peruse a Pix or Picture magazines on a pleasant day whilst doing what had to be done. The only problem that arose was that it was so picturesque and offered such a magnificent panorama, that on a Sunday a number of members from other units used to come up and make use of our facility, enjoy the view and tranquility causing a bit of a backup queue every now and then.



A combination of Aussie and US stretchers, Aussie sleeping bags, mosquito nets, timber, (acquired from various sources by various means) home made slatted & vented tent wall extensions and rough furniture made out of ammo boxes all added a modicum of luxury to the humble abode. These extended venetian blind type slatted walls allowed the opening up of the tent considerably as the built in wall sections could now be angled outwards to sit atop the slatted timber walls allowing us considerable more floor space, growing from 16x16 to close on to 20x20.

These improvements plus the mandatory "Playboy pinups" and the

"comfort parcels" from home usually containing 'hard to source' items and home made fruit cakes and goodies, made for quite as comfortable a 'home away from home' as possible. Visits to the American PX (post exchange- similar to our ASCO canteen outlet store) allowed us to purchase various personal items such as smokes, drinks, cameras, reel-to-reel tape recorders/players, radios, and clothing etc.. This spending ability was all controlled by a PX ration card, supposedly rationing each holder to a limited number of specific items per month and was in place to hopefully control the black market opportunities that such items would present in this very different economy. Also as a further deterrent to Black Market opportunities, payment was received in Military Payment Certificates as opposed to the local currency, and were supposedly only of any use when spent at an authorised outlet. When visits to town on leave were planned, the MPC was changed into Vietnamese piastres at the Orderly Room enabling us to partake of some of the delights the civilian township of Vung Tau had to offer, such as Ba Mi Ba (Vietnamese -33, as the local brew was designated. This was served straight off the shelf until the locals twigged that Australians liked their beer cold, thereafter it was poured off the shelf into a glass containing ice! Great solution, although on hindsight, the ice was always bit suspect and often had a brownish tinge to it.

It didn't take the locals long to work out that they had ways of taking the MPC as currency and finding some eager GI who was interested in and capable of changing this money back to hard local currency for them, and probably at a good price as well so the whole system was only partially effective. In an attempt to curb this blackmarket money trade from time to time the US government would call their MPC in and issue a new differently coloured lot with the intent of catching out the black marketeering network and so deterring the practice, but to little avail.

Ablution facilities consisted in the very early days of a row of canvas shower buckets hung on a suspended support over drainage duckboards and situated in a secluded spot just beyond the tents and on the top of the edge of the sand hills allowing any waste water to run down the side of the dune and away from the camp, but as time and the availability of materials allowed, a purpose built shower block replaced this rather antiquated system



At the time, unknown to us, Americans in our vicinity were quite envious of our shower system, the canvas bucket with an adjustable screw rose under it that we suspended from any tree for a shower, as apparently they had no such equivalent item and unless they were quartered in a fully “set up” barracks block they didn’t enjoy the luxury of a shower as did we! A story circulated that an American Major, on seeing our simple shower system made enquiries at a Q store in Bien Hoa as to whether he could acquire some of these devices. The Q bloke, obviously intent on doing his little bit to cement Aussie/American relationships, answered that he could see no real reason why he couldn’t help out with a couple, and enquired “how many did the Major require?” only to be taken somewhat aback to receive the answer “a couple of thousand!”

The new ablution block consisted of a concrete floor, corrugated iron walls and roof and a ‘woofer’ hot water system that operated in a 44gallon open topped drum. When a shower was required a bucket of cold water was taken and poured into the ‘woofer drum’ and a bucket of heated water removed in its place. This hot water was then poured into the canvas shower bucket and that was raised by pulley and suspended overhead from a beam and the luxury of a hot shower became a reality.

Minor daily ablutions, shaving and teeth etc., was usually carried out, often out of a steel helmet outer, ‘al fresco’ on the sand-bag tent surrounds as these were in abundance and were extremely handy. Once the morning ablutions were over, personnel rostered for work dressed and readied for another day, trudged from the top of our sand hill down the steep track, across the narrow sandbag bridge across the large deep puddle at the bottom, then back up the next sand hill to the mess (tent) for breakfast. Meals in the mess were always an enjoyable time of the day, often a chance to catch up with fellow members of the unit who may be rostered on entirely different taskings and often had interesting different experiences to relate. Weapons were carried everywhere one goes even though they weren’t to be loaded whilst at base, generally two magazines were strapped together head to tail, one fully loaded and the other empty. The empty one was inserted into the weapon whilst we were working around the base area, the loaded one sticking upside down alongside it. The main reason for this was an attempt to keep sand out of the mechanism of the weapon. Whether or not this practice was frowned upon from powers to be up above I am not too sure but it was the normal practice of the day and carried out by most. The Owen gun with the stock removed in the picture below shows the two taped together magazines.



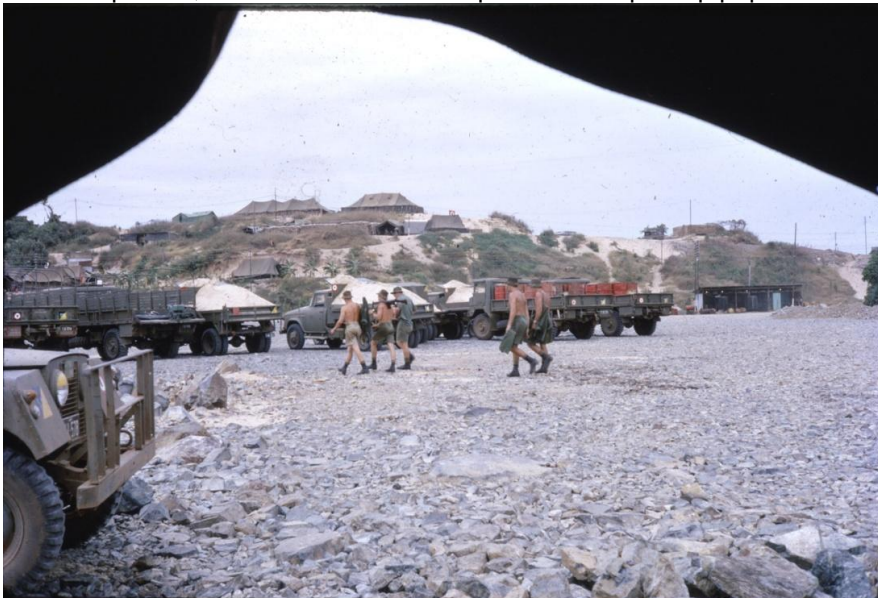
One of the things that always amazes me and I am sure any serving member will agree, is how one can leave a uniform hat and weapon on a rack, both of which are exactly the same as the next bloke's, and always pick up the right one at the end of the meal! Well, nearly always!

Once breakfast was over, the trudge is repeated; down the hill from the mess, over the sandbag bridge and up the 'home' sand hill, clean the fangs then head off back down the sand hill to the morning parade where the roll was checked and tasking was allocated.



The photographs above and below show trucks lined up, 87 vehicles to the left of shot and 1 Platoon to the right, tippers already preloaded with sand that was to be transported to Nui Dat mainly for the use of concreting and a couple of Mk3s already loaded with fuel drums and well dressed drivers heading toward their charges. The tippers backloaded with laterite that was used as a hard stand in the bowl as shown in both shots, as well as other units storage areas where the soft sand required solidifying.

From the parade, drivers visited the transport office to pick up paperwork for the day then headed off to his truck.



If you were lucky and had the chance to load your truck the night before, it was a leisurely drive from the bowl to the Form Up Point at "Back beach", have a bit of a chat, and possibly supplement breakfast with an intricately peeled pineapple or perhaps a "hepatitis roll" (bread roll with a banana), purchased from one of the local merchant "pineap girls"; but if you had scored a load of perishables, ammo or the likes of such then you had to load up now before heading to the FUP for departure.

Once all the vehicles are loaded and assembled, Section or Packet commanders check that they have all the relevant trucks for their packet and that the drivers of that packet are briefed on contact drills etc and equipment checked, and the convoy is ready to set off



The above photograph was “posed” especially for insertion in the “Army” newspaper showing a pre convoy O group where supposedly, convoy protocol including distances apart, speed, check points, code words etc. were discussed, whereas the shot below is a much less formal actual “O” group where the discussion probably glossed over the more crucial subjects such as drop off points and timing, and concentrated on more pressing subjects such as “what are you planning tonight after work?” Convoys became a drearish fact of life after a short while and soon grew to become second nature to all.



Every now and then some rather startling event occurred that woke every one up a bit and one of these events was a tipper returning from a convoy hitting and breaking a wire that had been stretched across the road (at about head height in a Land Rover), and even though the official explanation of this deed was attributed to a group of bored misdirected youths rather than a dedicated attempt by enemy agents to disrupt convoys, it did hasten the fitting of wire breaking star picket devices to the brush guards of open vehicle and convoy escorts as is visible on the gunjeep shown below.



Once the convoy is assembled, it heads off through the village, past the US air base and leaves what is generally considered the "green" area, around the actual built up area of the 'village' (By Vietnamese standards Vung Tau was a village, but we would class it as a prett big sized township containing an ARVN military base, an Australian Military base and a reasonable sized US air port and military base), weapons were loaded and test fired (much to the chagrin of a poor old Noggy duck farm owner) and the convoy set out at around 25 MPH with a catch up speed of 30MPH. The roads in this part of the country were in reasonably good condition, narrow bitumen with fairly deep drainage ditches on either side of the road and was reasonably well maintained as it was the main thoroughfare from Saigon to this pleasant seaside area, A lot of the countryside on the Cap St Jacques peninsula was actually a low lying swampy area, ideal for rice growing and similar agricultural enterprises.



As the convoy heads further north it encounters two narrow one way bridges en route and these bridges were a bit of a logistical problem to the task force as they supposedly limited the weight and size of supplies on this specific route for a number of years until the Engineers upgraded them*, and practically to us as they caused a bottle neck of traffic where road speed was limited to 10MPH (15KPH) whilst on the actual bridge. Only one truck per span etc so the poor old packet commander had his hands full trying to keep his packet in contact with the rest of the convoy. Slowing down to cross a bridge at less than half the speed of the normal convoy causes a banking up of vehicle on the approach side and a stringing out of vehicles on the departure side, so to overcome this problem the whole packet slowed down to 10KPH once the lead vehicle reached the bridge and stayed at that speed until the last vehicle of the packet had cleared the hazard. This procedure took quite a while to master successfully, but with the introduction of a couple of radio transmitted code words that indicated the start and finish of the bridge crossing operation, changed daily and included in the convoy orders, all ran quite smoothly with a bit of practice.

*I find it fascinating to note that these bridges had to be upgraded before the five tonners were allowed on convoys on this road, as the five ton F1 truck utilised exactly the same tray as the Mk3 and our trucks were generally loaded to space capacity in most cases, rather than tonnage, thus meaning that the larger trucks carried no more cargo than the smaller ones!

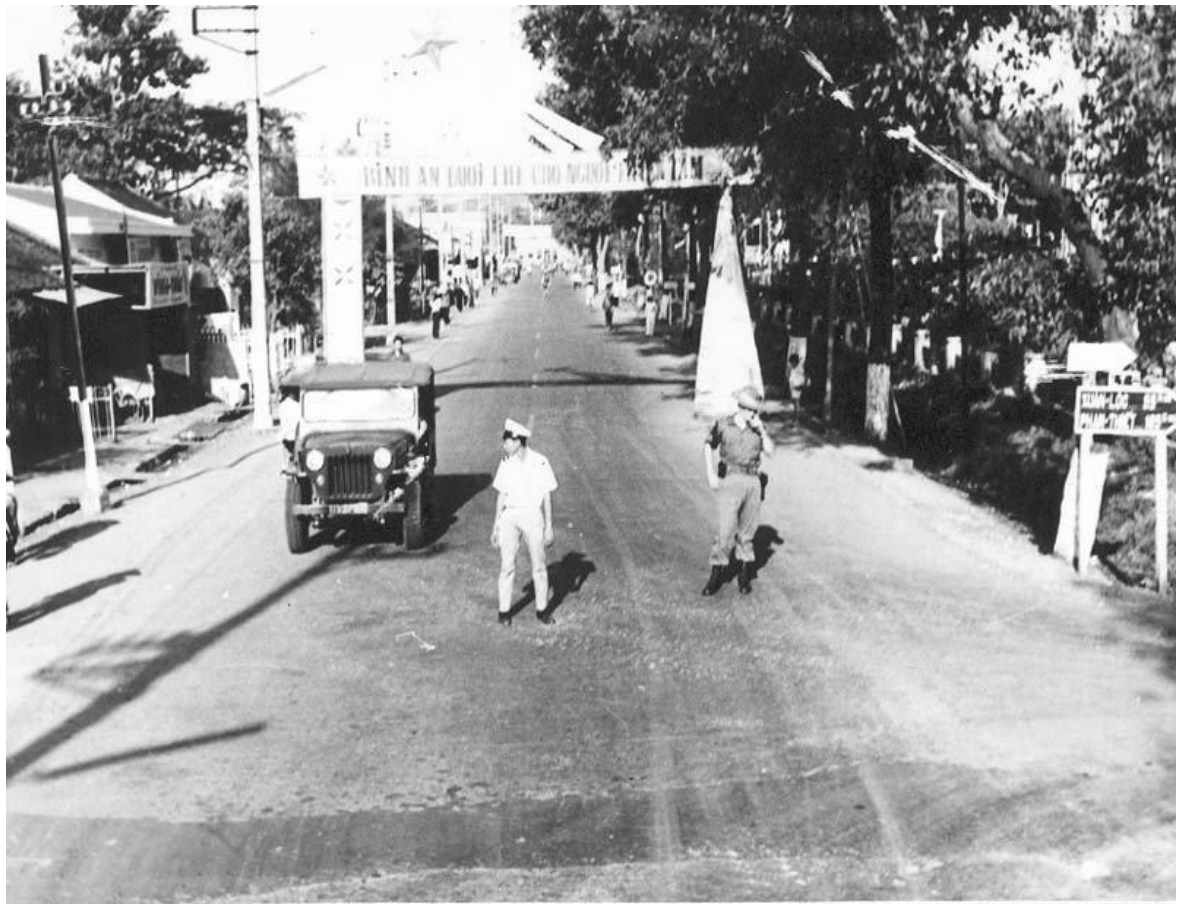




All the while the convoy was under way it was overflowed by either a Bell Sioux chopper or a Cessna spotter aircraft belonging to 161 Avn Coy, with the call sign "Possum". These aircraft acted as spotter aircraft, flying above and ahead of the convoy, often carrying one of the Transport Company's NCO's as the spotter, checking for any suspicious or unexpected activity along the convoy route and in constant radio contact with the FAC and Transport Coy HQ.

Any suspicious activity or movements that were noted from this aerial escort were radioed back and checked out before the convoy arrived at the spot.

Major intersections where the convoy changed direction from heading north on the main road to an easterly direction at Baria were controlled by Australian MPs, Vietnamese "White Mice" (SVN civvy police) and QCs (Vietnamese Military Police). The road straight ahead was off limits to convoy vehicles and the police presence was to ensure that all vehicles took the turn and traveled through the next village, Hoa Long en route to Nui Dat.



On arrival at the Task Force area at Nui Dat, stores were unloaded at their destinations and often, this is the point where the lives of a Mk3 driver and a tipper driver often changed tack.

Should one of the Battalions or an artillery battery be scheduled be deployed or picked up from an operation by truck then it was those trucks that had just done the convoy that carried out that tasking.

In this first shot, a section from 5RAR is about to load onto the back of the truck whilst others are loading onto or into APCs prior to moving out on an operation.



5 RAR troops loading onto APCs and trucks prior to an operational insertion. This shot was taken in relatively early days as Luscombe Field (to the left) is in its very early stage of development.



Things didn't always go to plan as this shot of bogged vehicles on an Artillery insertion operation shows. On this particular operation almost everything that ventured off the road sank, Land Rovers, trucks, even tracked American mobile artillery pieces.



Not all of these operations went as planned, sometimes nature intervened and the gunners had to lug their personal gear a bit further than they had hoped. On this particular operation the Artillery insertion had been planned to take place in what turned out to be a surprisingly soggy waterlogged site, and everything except for a couple of APCs, sank. Not all tracked vehicles escaped the grip of the mud though as the shot above shows an American 155mm mobile gun down to its hull.



On an operation such as this, the trucks were loaded with troops, gear, supplies ammunition, sometimes towing the howitzers, inserting them into position to enable the battery to commence their operation once unloaded. Extra ammunition and resupply runs were often done by helicopter, and in this shot a Chinook is doing just that.



Some operations were classed as "cordon and Search" operations, and this following shot shows where a Company of Infantry has been discretely inserted around a village ready to slowly advance into the village from all sides and search everything in the village looking for 'Charlie' or signs of Charlie sympathisers. Extraordinarily large caches of food, weapons, money etc. were all treated as highly suspect. Often these villagers were cajoled or otherwise into



supplying a percentage of their harvest or their savings to support the VC front, and it was operations such as this that were set up to discourage such activities. I remember noting carrying marked bags (they were marked each time they were captured) of 'US aid' rice out on its third marked rotation on an operation such as this. This rice was initially donated by the American public, distributed to the Vietnamese villagers by the local government, extracted from them by the VC as payment of levied taxes, then later recaptured on a subsequent operation and once again reissued to the Vietnamese Government, who in turn again reissued it to the people, who in turn duly paid to the VC as taxes and captured again on another op, and on and on it went.

This following shot is on a slightly different type of operation. Here a Company of Infantry has been dropped out in the paddy fields with the intent of guarding the villagers who are involved in the annual rice harvest so as to stop the VC from coming along and demanding their share by intimidation. By carrying out operations such as this at least the farmer got his crop in in one piece, what happened to it after this was perhaps another question.



These operations involved quite a bit of the standard military "hurry up and wait" but all in all the organisation of some of these little sojourns fitted in pretty well with the order of the day. Only once or twice were we caught out and couldn't get home again that night but compared with some, we truckies had a pretty comfortable life in the bush as long as the powers to be didn't catch us sleeping on top of the truck canopy between the bows, a perfect hammock, rather than in the prescribed hutchy.



Under normal conditions, on completion one of these operations the participating vehicles would then return to the basic security of the task force area at Nui Dat, reform with the rest of return convoy and head off back to Vung Tau in time to load up again for tomorrow's excitement.

In later days once the Task Force became a bit more populated and the requirement for more supplies became apparent, when there were no operational duties to perform at Nui Dat the convoy would hasten back to Vung Tau, reload and fit in a separate afternoon convoy that day.

In the following year, (after we had well and truly left the country), an extra Transport Platoon was deployed to Vietnam and based at Nui Dat to cover the Task force operational requirements, allowing the boys from 5 Coy to run up to three convoys a day to and from Vung Tau.

I guess the description in the earlier paragraphs describes a reasonably typical day from one aspect of a Mk3 driver, but of course other things were happening every day as well. Sometimes life bordered on the mundane and sometimes it was plain boring. Set domestic tasks had to be carried out each and every day. Simple tent maintenance and improvement took a lot of time. Filling bloody sandbags took forever as did getting used to the stifling monsoonal temperatures, especially as the unit originally was staffed by members who had spent the prior twelve months or so in sunny Puckapunyal in Victoria. The climate in Vietnam is pretty close to the equivalent of that of Cairns in Far North Queensland although being in a different hemisphere, the seasons occurred in reverse, i.e. Summer in Australia was winter in Vietnam.

Water trucks were in constant use keeping water up to the demanding requirements of the various messes catering to a couple of thousand men, plus the personal requirements of those camped in the vicinity. A crew of two worked pretty well around the clock 7 days a week on this task. To start with, the water was carried in a bladder and pumped in and out but this system was later replaced by a dedicated tanker fitted to a truck. This new replacement tanker truck was a very popular means of transport for those sneaking back home after curfew. The tanker operated 24 hours a day between the town water supply point and camp, and for a small fee, the tank could offer ample room for a few wayward leave revellers, provided of course there wasn't too much water on board!



In later days a refrigeration plant and ice making plant was introduced and ice delivery was another staple that was delivered by truck. The ice became a great trading commodity, especially at unit level. For example there was a time when convoy vehicles were being harassed by a particularly petty minded MP so the MP unit was presented with a suggestion that perhaps all the infringements notices may not really be necessary, and the following disregard of this suggestion resulted in their finding themselves in the situation that their canteen's ice ration was arriving very late in the day and on a hot, sunny day in the tropics, the quality and remaining size of their ordered quota had been somewhat adversely affected and was in a diminished state, so to speak. Their ice delivery had simply been relegated a later delivery time and quite surprisingly, after this alteration the harassment abruptly ceased!

Fuel was another commodity that had to be transported regularly and this was usually done by drum. The fuel was taken forward by drum (18-20 drums was deemed a load), offloaded to the recipients and any available empties were stockpiled and eventually backloaded by return convoy



Later during our stay, a detachment of 8 Petroleum Platoon was deployed in country and the use of storage tanks/bladders was initiated. Smaller bladders that fitted within the confines of the 1 ton trailer and towed behind Mk 3s, being easier to transport and service, eventually replaced the drum system.

Loads were many and varied. Ammunition was picked up from the US ammo base and either carried forward by truck or carried out to a helipad and then underslung by chopper to carry forward. A very early lesson was to be learnt about the force of the downdraught from the rotors of a chinook and the mess it made of the unfastened windscreens on a Mk3



Not long after the Australian 'upgraded commitment' to the war's arrival and setting up in South Vietnam, the need arose for the existing force that was already in country, (1 ALSC and 1 RAR), to be relocated from their existing base at Bien Hoa, to the new Australian Area of Responsibility in Phuoc Tuy province. The road from Vung Tau was designated as a "Red" road (under the control of the VC) so all movements from Bien Hoa to Nui Dat were either done by air or in the case of some of the bulkier of items, by road from Bien Hoa to Saigon, then by river by LSM to Vung Tau, then by road from the "hard stand" to Nui Dat.. A number of 87's Mk3s and tippers made a few of these journeys up river, staying overnight in the bustling city of Saigon, then conveying out to Bien Hoa to load up and then back to the waiting LSM for the return journey. These trips were an amazing experience for a young blood such as myself for number of reasons, firstly it got us out of the mundane routine of camp life for a couple of days, the bright lights and bustling traffic noise and chaos of Saigon had to be seen to be believed, - (*traffic signs were only a suggestion rather than an order over there,*) plus the unknown quantity of a foreign city and its entirely different lifestyle to anything I had previously ever experienced.

Our 2 sections of Teaspoon tippers, that were still stationed at Vung Tau, were also kept busy all the time as well. During the day time on top of the domestic chores such as rubbish runs and other domestic tasking, they ran convoys carrying a variety of goods ranging from engineer store, barbed wire, star pickets, fuel, ammunition, palletised cargo as well as sand that was required at Nui Dat to make cement. Roadworks and general track maintenance within the ALSG area also kept a lot of them busy plus some were tasked carrying gravel and laterite from American quarries in



conjunction with the Americans on a 24 hour rotation. One piece of Engineer equipment that was of note that came direct from Borneo to Vietnam via the LSM was a large rock crusher.

I have distinct memories of that piece of equipment, in that I was the one to tow it from Vung Tau to Nui Dat. What really made this trip rather memorable was the fact that my truck was loaded with a couple of pallets of star pickets (for traction) and the towed implement itself exceeded the posted bridge classification on the route. All in all the total weight of the tow and the towed vehicles was well in excess of the stipulated 12 tons.

I carried as my number two on this particular trip, an American engineer Major, who much to my amusement on arrival at the first of the load limited bridges, refused to ride with me in the truck over the said bridge but instead opted to walk alongside the truck. His reasoning was that if the bridge went down he didn't want to be in the truck at the time, so out he got, and proceeded to walk alongside me as we crossed! Personally had it been me doing the walking I would have ensured that I was NOT on the same bridge span as the truck, but then again, each to his own.

In the following photograph it may be noted that the tippers were often grossly overloaded, fitted with hungryboards that often exceed 9". When the truck left Vung Tau at least, it was overloaded but because the load was never covered it probably arrived at its destination with about the right amount of payload.



Sometimes the overloading proved to be just that little bit too much.



This was definitely NOT a desirable outcome for the crew of the truck as once their vehicle went off the road for any length of time; they became available for other less attractive duties. If they were lucky they may have been allocated to drive or man the MG on the gunbuggy or perhaps crew the convoy/packet commander's vehicle. If not so lucky they found themselves on CSM's work party, mess duty or some other not so desirable but still necessary duty until the truck got back on the road again.



The long base below (113117) was the boss's (CO) vehicle in its normal running form. i.e. no canopy, bows, windows or windscreen. Doors always stayed on it as it was a road vehicle and the star picket "wire cutter" was hastily put on it and the gunbuggies after a lead truck in a convoy broke a wire stretched across the highway.



An interesting little anecdote regarding the boss's vehicle occurred years later at a reunion in Victoria when the Association bought two randomly numbered bottles of commemorative port, marking the removal from the 'Order of Battle' of 87 Transport PI RAASC. The numbers of the bottles were #113 and #117.

This shot shows a convoy just about to depart the FUP. Packet commander would be in the gunbuggy escort, then the convoy commander followed by usually two or three packets of 6-8 vehicles. These vehicles would generally travel about 100m apart unless you drew the straw to carry the Arty detonators, then no one really wanted to be that close.





The shot following shows a packet passing through a typical village en route. This was one of three villages that the convoys travelled through each day. Baria, Hoa Long and Cat Lo. Cat Lo was the home of a US Army Hovercraft river patrol base where our Mascot Blue Heeler dog "Smedley" found a home once we had been ordered to "dispense" with him. The new American hosts got to love him as he would bark about five minutes before any Australian truck came into sight and he absolutely hated the locals so was invaluable at the strongpoint at night. I don't really know where Smedley came from, he was just there..



This last shot shows some of the Laterite that has been brought back from Nui Dat, dumped in the compound and still awaiting levelling out.

The Tippers did a lot of work with Engineer units, mainly in setting up roads, airstrips and barrack compounds, but were also used on convoys to carry sand from Vung Tau to Nui Dat to be used for concreting and often, in later days, returned with laterite from the quarry and rock crusher at the Dat to stabilise the compounds built on sand dunes back at Vungers.

Loading techniques differed from point to point and varied from 966B caterpillar front end loaders



to bucket loaders, depending on where they were.



Convoys were a common occurrence and usually meant carrying sand, which was never covered and as a result a considerable amount was lost en route. To counteract this the trucks usually left on a convoy with slightly more than the stipulated 2.5 tons.

The tippers were also found to be extremely handy to carry engineer stores, sand bags, coils of barbed wire, star pickets and the likes of such that could be tipped safely at the other end.

On some occasions 105mm ammo was carried on tippers when speed of delivery was a factor and simply tipped off at the Arty Battery.

One particular Sergeants mess flatly refused to supply a work party to unload their initial load of stores (when the camps were initially being set up and speed of turn around was at a premium), and found that their second load of china crockery was delivered on a tipper. We never had a problem with that unit again as far as work parties were concerned!



Life wasn't all hard work, there were moments that shone through when the work load slackened off to the extent that the unit could take a day off as a unit, and on these days, rare as they were, usually a unit beach party or Bar be Que would ensue. These were usually attended by anyone the unit could possibly spare, plus any of the Red Cross girls and anyone else of interest was invited. On days such as this, grog flowed relatively freely, having already been purchased in advance by unit funds and dispensed from a #5 trailer filled with ice, and fairly predictably, any attending officers took a dip even though they were still in full uniform. The following shot shows our OC returning from one said such dip and

already savouring another drink!



Our OC was issued with a S2a 109 GS (I don't really understand why, as back in 1966 we were still purchasing 88" GS (Command Reconnaissance) vehicles and the name itself tends to suggest to me that a unit Commander would use a vehicle purchased for that purpose - (but then again, who am I to question military thinking?) This vehicle was only crewed by a driver, the boss, or the convoy commander of the day, and one "shot gun", so to my way of thinking a long

base was superfluous to requirement.

This shot displays adequately, as I had mentioned earlier in this thread somewhere, the travelling condition of the Boss's Land Rover. The windscreen was permanently removed as were the bows and canopy. A make shift wire cutter was fashioned out of two star pickets bolted to the brush guard and the top of the firewall. Sand bags were laid out all along the floor, front and back as a mine deterrent. Note the yellow painted section of the headlights to compensate for the fact that our headlights threw to the wrong side of the road. (Traffic drove on the right hand side of the road over there so I found out after driving about 20 or so hair raising clicks on my first day.)

This shot was taken fairly early in our tour as the Owen gun was still the personal weapon of drivers.



When a work party was operating "outside of the wire" for some reason, erecting wire defensive positions, bulldozing heli pads, building fortifications, loading trucks, filling sandbags or the likes of such, an alert and diligent gunjeep crew were dispatched as an escort as seen in the following shot.



Some may note the use of the weapon holder fitted to the floor besides the seat box designed to hold the OMC belonging to the driver.

Some of the more astute readers may also note that the weapon is very handy, easily accessible with his right hand, BUT cannot be carried in this position with a magazine fitted. Very handy in an emergency I must say.

Some of the more mundane of the duties of the gunjeeps (gunbuggies) was of course convoy escorts and the following shots are all taken in regards to this task



87 was, as I have mentioned earlier, a composite Platoon consisting of two entirely different types of operational vehicles and was even more diversified in that although the unit HQ was based at Vung Tau, sections were rotated through Nui Dat, being based alongside the Engineer lines. Being very early days in the setting up of the Task force area, life was interesting, hectic and diversified.

Most of the pictures you will see with a sand backdrop were taken around Vung Tau whereas a lot of the others were taken around Nui Dat in the very beginnings of that post's existence.

Areas of responsibility around the perimeter were allocated to various units and the particular area under 87's jurisdiction had a fairly boring outlook. A swathe of country 100 meters wide was cleared in front of the site to allow a clear field of vision plus an interrupted arc of fire.

The next urgent requirement in a situation such as this is to set up a strong point/weapon pit and these initially were built out of sandbags with corrugated iron and sandbag roofs.

First, find a nice deposit of loamy soil, hire some locals and fill the sandbags. (There is bound to be a gunbuggy parked under a shady tree somewhere nearby here).



Select the defensive area and arc of fire and plan the position of the structure.



Dennis Quinn rests during construction, fitted in between normal work shifts, vehicle maintenance, picquets and security duties etc.



And, voila, the finished result, somewhere to sit, listen and stare into the darkness for two hour stints each night listening to the rubber trees grow. (They creak during the night as the branches rub against each other, even if the night is still.)



Home away from home for the monthly rotational stint. The trees in the background are part of the rubber plantation that were, I believe, one of Michelins suppliers and amongst which the Australian Task Force was situated. The Australian Government had to pay for every tree that was damaged!



Meanwhile, work went on as normal. Other units needed road base, soil for sandbags, sand for concrete, gravel for culverts and so on, so life was never boring.



Sometimes machinery broke down and when this occurred a great opportunity arose to catch up on some reading whilst waiting for the RAEME workshop VM to get to you to get the truck mobile again. One always hoped the LAD could repair the fault quickly otherwise one found ones name on the sandbag filling list for the duration of the "down time".



Sometimes the breakdowns were of a more personal nature. You can't trust these Engineer front end loader types to watch out for your weapon.

"I wonder will it still work if I adjust the sights?" thinks Ted Hall.



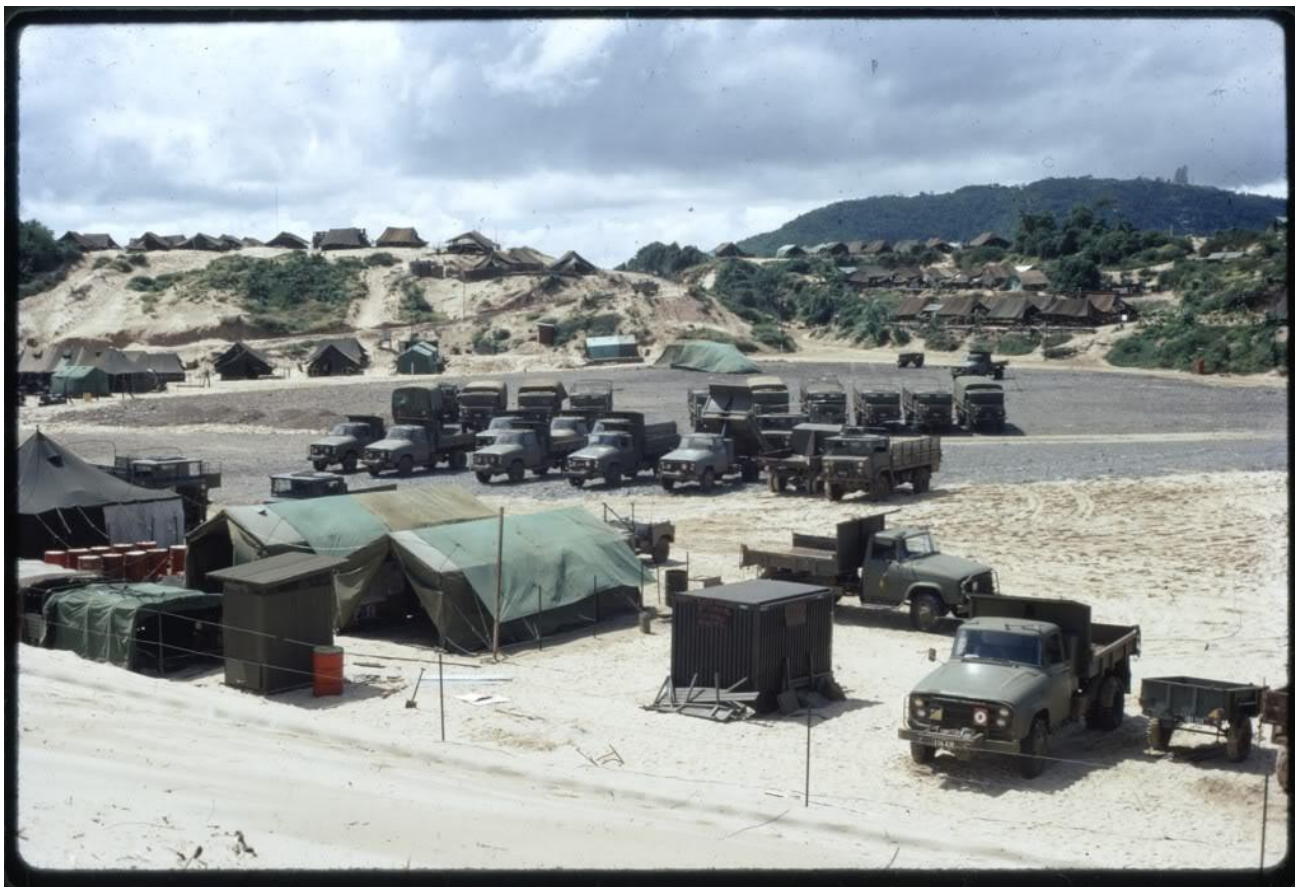
Nearby the entire Engineer store was stockpiled and most of this type of load was transported by tipper where possible. Star pickets and barbed wire coils were not the nicest things to handle by hand so the tippers were used whenever possible.



Many early operations carried out by the Battalion (5 originally, then later, 5 and 6) were reasonably local but when a more distant insertion was required US choppers were brought into play. Of course Luscombe field hadn't been built by then so the chopper units shown here have landed where Luscombe was eventually to be placed.



Meanwhile, back at Vung Tau life was still going on for the remaining 4 sections. The boring day to day routine of loading for convoys, doing the convoys, coming home again, re loading for tomorrows convoys, build up our own living quarters and domestic infrastructure, sandbagging structures, plus never ending vehicle maintenance and other domestic chores, kept every one occupied.



Loaded for tomorrow's convoy. Pretty close to two and a half tons??



My old mate Bob von Harten "Von" was never one to do things by halves either.



The little tippers earned their money; working on convoys during the days and doing shift work with the Yanks out of various quarries through the night.





Towards the end of 87's 12 month stint in South Vietnam, a number of changes were taking place in the camp site itself. The original mess tents and canteen tents that were situated on top of one set of sand hills were replaced and resited on the same levelled out sand dune as the tent lines, and these two Lysaght hut structures were much more modern and permanent in their structure, being placed on a permanent concrete base and having actual walls, doors and venetian slat style windows to compensate for the tropical weather and the ever shifting sand that often either undermined or sometimes blew over and encroached upon living space in the tents. There was no doubt that they had to be a lot more comfortable for the cooks who worked there full time.

Work was beginning to be carried out, mainly by local contractors on more permanent soldier accommodation and office structures, although we were not to stay in country long enough to see these structures completed let enough reap the benefits of their added comfort. It ended up a daily occurrence to see the camp area being invaded by local Vietnamese constructors arriving often 20 plus at a time crammed somehow or other aboard a small ex WWII jeep each morning, ready for work. In hindsight, the Australian camp building contract must have been a bit of a boon to the local economy.

The time eventually drew close that we had all been counting down for, even though it was not till the very last moment that we were actually informed precisely when and how we were going home. All gear that we had been wearing and that would have been exposed to whatever types of disease carrying germs that lurked in Vietnam mud and sand was taken from us and accounted for in true military style of precise accountability, that is, handed in by the soldier, checked off by the Q staff, written off the soldiers AB83 by the clerk and the said item then thrown on to an awaiting tipper to be carried away to be destroyed.

Any soldier who was deficient of any of these items was to be responsible for said losses and the replacement costs were to be deducted from the said poor unfortunate person's paybook! Strangely enough there were very few deductions made that day from any pay book, mind you, I am not too sure whether this was because of the meticulous care of personal equipment that 87 soldiers obviously took of their issued gear, or whether it was because of the apparent gusto with which some items were thrown onto (or sometimes over) the waiting tipper, and may have in actual

fact been written off once again against a different AB83 more than once.

Brand new uniforms were issued, hats, boots socks, lanyards, everything and then we got these new shiny ribbons to put on top of our left breast pockets and we really looked the picture of a perfect soldier once again, just like the day we marched out of Kapooka all those many years ago.



During the past few weeks when the actual date of return to Australia was getting a bit closer, some brand new trucks were arriving in country in the form of 6x6 tippers and 6x6 cargo trucks. These were in general driven straight from the off loading hard stand in Vung Tau directly to the local Ordnance Field Park where they were to be held for delivery to the brand spanking new 5 Coy RAASC that was due to replace us very soon. Somehow, though, due to unforeseen circumstances, one or two of these trucks were pressed into service by 87 for a couple of days when availability of the AB160 tipping Teaspoons that we had been thrashing all year long was very limited, but it was only for those couple of days that we had any experience of these vehicles O.S.

It was quite interesting I find, to note that the 5 ton F1 cargo truck replaced the good old Mk3 2.5 ton truck as a cargo carrier in that it had a greater weight carrying capacity, but in actual fact the two trucks shared exactly the same tray. We had for the past 12 months been loading the trays "pallet wise" at least to their capacity, therefore in fact carrying exactly the same weight, and in actual fact, more economically. There was a lot of discussion about the Engineers upgrading bridges with this projected weight increase of the 5 ton capacity trucks using them in mind amongst various levels of rank for quite a while during our stay, and every time I hear comments re this subject I think back to the "rock crusher" tow that I carried out to the task force earlier.



The Unit had one or two other drivers that I have so far simply glossed over that I would be remiss not to mention. One of these drivers was that of the OC, purloined as his own for the duration, Stretch. Stretch's job was to drive JJ where ever he needed to go and this was not only in his position as Unit CO, but often as convoy commander, Entertainment Officer and many other hats that were worn during the time. In this guise Stretch was to see another altogether different aspect of the year's deployment than most of us, mingling with a different crowd, Officers, Entertainers and even the odd Foreign dignitary or two.

With his job as Entertainment Officer, John John and Stretch had a lot of contact with quite a number of entertainers who generously donated their time to visit South Vietnam to entertain the troops, and two of these that stand out in most members memories are Col Joye and Little Patti. So much so that at the 87 Association Reunion that was held in Sydney, both these entertainers overjoyed the attending members by turning up as invited guests.

Another driver that saw an entirely different picture was Stuart Golland, (Golly) and Golly was snavelled up in very early days as the General's driver. We never saw much of Golly during his stay as he lived an entirely different life from the rest of us, driving a Ford staff car to various places that we possibly didn't even hear about until about a month or so later when some operation took place. Chances were that Golly had been there a month or so ago as well as to a lot of other places that were on the "planner's" itinerary, and he also carried a number of people that we didn't even know existed.

87 Transport Platoon

Tippers

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Mk3s

170032
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170137
170362
170375
170378
170411
171998

109" 6028 L/R 113117 Stretch MacPherson

88" 6005 gun/buggy 110578