

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A TRUCKIE 1966-1967

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INTRODUCTION

This article is not necessarily a true chronologically correct illustration of an historic event but rather, an attempt to paint a verbal picture of the lifestyle of a reasonably average 20 odd year old volunteer serving in a Transport Platoon in South Vietnam in the mid 60's as remembered by the member and embellished with the wisdom of "hindsight" ..

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 military history, but rather memories mulled over the past 40 plus years. At times these may seem rather varied and at odds, 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 participant sees and experiences is a much more personal and vivid account. 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 compared to what a soldier saw and experienced, but in 87 Platoon, the soldiers themselves were operating different equipment under different circumstances and in entirely different roles at any one time, and as a result often saw two extremely different fronts. The following is an attempt to put forward some of these views.

I, like so many others, began my military career by signing on at the local (Brisbane) Recruiting Centre, then embarking on what at the time was a great adventure, travelling by train to Wagga Wagga to 1 Recruit Training Battalion at Kapooka, located just a couple of miles outside Wagga Wagga in NSW. Here, we learnt the many basic skills needed to become an Australian Soldier. *In my day, Kapooka was the initial training Battalion that turned out the majority of Australia's basic soldiers, but, as the demand for more troops because of the escalation of the Vietnam conflict demanded a rearranged National Service programme to come into effect, a second Recruit Training Bn was later formed (2 RTB). This 2nd Training Bn was located at Puckapunyal to process and train the vast extra numbers of soldiers required through the National Service act.*

On completion of the Basic training stage at Kapooka, (or in some cases as mentioned above, Puckapunyal), we lowly underlings advanced from the "Recruit" stage to the glorious rank of 'Private', were allocated a Corps in which to serve and duly posted off to the relevant Corps training school to receive even more training, this time, Corps specific training. *In my personal case, this process was a little convoluted, as I was initially 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 had previously in my civilian life, been in casual employment driving a 1 ton truck at Adelong before joining) I was given an army license and posted to the School of Sigs Transport Section as a driver.*

I thought that this was a bit sus and showed no great potential for a Signaller, so I decided that if I was to be employed in Transport, I would be better off in RAASC so I applied for a Corps transfer which eventually came through. Hence from here on I seemed somehow destined to shortcut the whole system and was transferred directly to 86 Tpt Platoon at Bandianna without passing through the standard RAASC Corps Training.

I only spent a short time in 86 Transport Platoon, a unit that seemed to have members detached everywhere at different times. It was almost as if the Army was uncertain what to do with some of its' units in those days. Following a short stint at Bandianna, a detachment to 103 Coy in Melbourne I was promptly called back to be detached to a new Unit called 6TTU, but before I reported to 6TTU I was directed to attend a Radio Operators course at Albert Park Barracks so that I could fill my new position as,would you believe, a driver/radio operator.

Under more normal circumstances, any new march-in was generally assessed here at the Corps school and once again directed in the course of his final destination within RAASC. In those days RAASC was, the second largest Corps in the Army, covering a wide variety of fields including, Bakery, Butchery, Laundry, POL, Supply, Air Dispatch, Postal and of course Transport. Nearly everyone in 87 had completed a course at the RAASC School of Transport at Puckapunyal, where besides learning about the Corps history in general, they spent a considerable amount of time learning the basic principles 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 prior to sitting for a licence test. Once this was passed and a G11 issued a posting to an operating unit followed. It should be noted here that in those days the Army had a system where a separate licence code was issued for each type of vehicle driven, those types being divided up as; staff car/ute, 4x4 GS, truck 2.5 ton CL, 4x4 or 6x6 truck 2.5 ton GS, motor cycle, bus, semi trailer and so on. The average driver was rather proud of the amount of "codes" he had endorsed on his licence.

A regular soldier in 1966 possibly had the advantage of posting to another regular unit to gain a little more experience on the GS vehicles that the army had in service, prior to receiving his posting to 87 Tpt Platoon, whereas a lot of our National service members were trained at the driving school, licenced, and then posted straight to 87 and immediately off overseas.

Whilst 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 (2.5 Cu Yds) compared to the rest of the truck (5 to 8 ton civilian capacity) .

Following a minor reshuffle throughout the Corps (with the wisdom of hindsight, probably brought on by the ensuing imminent escalation of the Vietnam commitment) 87 Platoon, a part of 25 Coy RAASC shared a transport compound with sister unit, 86 Transport Platoon (GS) (relocated from Bandianna) and also 158 Tank Transporter Platoon. On notification of an imminent deployment to Vietnam, an even greater degree of reshuffling took place at all levels. Under normal peace time conditions the Platoon was commanded by a second Lieutenant, but now coming under a war time footing, was to be commanded by a Captain. Manning 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 and at the same time, soldiers trained and readied.

Most Units that were warned for service in South Vietnam were required to do a preparatory training course at the Jungle Training Centre at Canungra prior to posting. Whether there was no time, or time and a course was simply not allocated, or for what ever reason, 87 Transport Platoon never did this training course, but instead went over to Vietnam having only undergone basic training, Corps training and in the case of some of the older hands perhaps a tactical exercise or two. National Servicemen were at a distinct disadvantage. Many members of the Platoon laid eyes or hands on an M60 machine gun for the first time ever at a make shift rifle range around the back of the sand hills at Vung Tau.

FORMING THE PLATOON

In early 1966 I was a member of 86 Transport Platoon and suddenly found myself, along with a number of other fellow 86 members being hurriedly posted to the "other side" to make up numbers and having to switch loyalties from one Platoon to the other,. How fickle our loyalties are!!

Things became a bit of a blur suddenly as everything had to be up to date and these included dental and medical check-ups, teeth filled or removed and a number of preventative injections all administered to our unsuspecting bodies.

I remember taking my place lining up in a queue that was slowly filing through a nissen hut, in one door and out the other end, wondering 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 lightly slapped the upper arm and at the same time inserted a needle into the exposed, still smarting, swabbed arm, injected that needle's contents into the unsuspecting upper arm, then removed the body of the syringe from the needle, all in what seemed one highly practiced and polished manoeuvre (leaving the needle itself sitting quivering in the arm) and as the line moved on (shades of Henry Ford's production line!) another vial of serum was affixed to the needle and injected. Around about 6 injections if I

recall correctly were administered in that one visit. One or two of our members ended up being carried blissfully unconscious through the process by mates on either side.

All in all that day I received a number of 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 was feeling a little sick, sore and sorry for myself 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.

The 87 Transport Platoon RAASC that was posted to South Vietnam in 1966 was a rather unique unit and found itself in an entirely different situation to most other military units in that it in fact encompassed two completely different components, (3 sections of tippers and 2 sections of Mk3 GS trucks) each with inherently different tasking capabilities, under the one single umbrella, and as a result had an inbuilt 'us/them' complex right from the very start.

All vehicles that were currently in service throughout the Australian Army at this time came from the factory painted a glossy Bronze green colour and this was deemed unsuitable for a warlike situation, so another task fell to the hurried preparation team. Vehicles were steam cleaned, all glass, rubber, light lenses, tyres and other items that were not required to be painted olive drab were liberally covered in grease, and the rest was spray painted entirely one colour. When dry, the greased parts were wiped clean and newly painted work of art stood in all its glory.

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., Gear being packed and marked, Q Store items being stored away in packing cases ready to be shipped off.... 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 whose parade ground was adjacent to the site where this party was held, had a small artillery piece mounted on a plinth next to the flag pole, and naturally as the night wore on it was unanimously decided that it would be an excellent idea to "souvenir" this small cannon 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 gouging 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 of our members obviously said a little too much out of place, and must have offended the MP who promptly 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, the MPs seeing the funny side of it eventually, and within a day or two of this memorable incident I was on a plane bound for my home town of 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 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.

Greatcoats on, Greatcoats off!

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 furl and unfurl a hammock, let alone learn how to get in and out and sleep in a hammock as well. Even the language was new. Suddenly we slept in a

hammock 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', 'scran' and 'goffas' as well as how to stow our gear during the daylight hours.

We spent the 13 days or so at sea, weaving and tying lengths of 3" to 4" wide green and brown hessian "scrim" through camouflage nets (which were unceremoniously dumped overboard on arrival in country), doing PT, drill and rifle practice. This shooting practice was carried out from the rear of the flight deck and the targets were balloons that were released from a lower deck. Unfortunately for us, the ship was carrying out a standard zig zag course pattern and by the time the order to fire came about the balloons were about 40 degrees or so to either side, depending on whether the ship was zigging or zagging. Who said the navy didn't have a sense of humour?



Not all the Platoon sailed on the HMAS Sydney, some stayed back in Australia doing many last minute tasks and these members left Australia well after the main body had departed by sea, flying via a civilian air contractor (Qantas) to Saigon then transferred to Vung Tau, and as a result arrived ahead of the main body by a day or so.

INITIAL PLANNING

Initially 87 Transport Platoon was officially deployed to Vietnam as the designated Transport Platoon to support 1 ALSG, and 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 or the likes of such, whereas on that same drawing board it was planned that "1 Transport Platoon", under command of 1 Transport Company HQ., was to be deployed to South Vietnam a couple of weeks later to carry out 2nd line Divisional transport duties for the Task Force, that is, supply transport where needed on an operational basis to the forces based at Nui Dat.

It became blatantly obvious in very early days that although this deployment may have looked good on paper, it was definitely not going to work as planned on the ground. As a result of the revamp of 87 PI, with 3 sections of Tippers and 2 sections of Cargo GS trucks, it soon became 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, as well as carrying out 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, the initial plans were amended and 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 proposed they be, the logical departure point from which to carry out resupply convoys to 1 ATF.

This adjustment left the Task Force deprived of vehicular capabilities available for operational deployments, (and this situation was not remedied until late into the following year when a separate Company HQ and an extra Tpt Platoon were deployed into country.) 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.

Predominantly these Divisional tasks were the responsibility of 1 Transport Platoon but in so many cases 1 Platoon found that they simply did not have enough vehicles available to complete these tasks alone, so in these cases, vehicles 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, besides carrying out their intended domestic chores, were often 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 in so many ways, having two distinctly different tasking formats (tipper and GS) during its twelve month stay in country. The Unit comprised of members initially taken from two different Platoons, contained an almost equal mix of Regulars soldiers alongside National servicemen, the whole lot coming under the command of a new Officer (to us) that no-one knew and then suddenly finding that we came under the command of a Coy HQ that was not ours!

With all this in mind, possibly the reader will be able to understand why, when talking to two different members of the same Unit about their time in country, one may possibly hear entirely different and contrasting memories of any particular incident, let alone about the Unit's tasking whilst overseas.

EARLY DAYS

My very first impressions of the actual country was a bit mixed in that I found it a bit hard to appreciate the more attractive aspects that must have been on display as I found my mind was otherwise distracted.

Gabby Hayes (the Unit cook) came off the ship as the passenger/Number 2 in my truck with me. We loaded our personal gear on to the truck and then proceeded to manoeuvre the vehicle into position on the flight deck of the aircraft carrier, directly under the boom of the ship's crane (or davit or whatever the navy call these things) so that a sling could be placed around each wheel hub, one on each corner.

We were lifted off the deck, swung out over the ocean and then lowered onto the deck of what to us seemed to be about a match-box sized landing craft that was bobbing about on the swell alongside and well below the ship that had offered us security for the past week or so. When we actually touched down on this heaving (by the Sydney's standard) deck with the bow ramp in the open position, a voice with a distinct American twang said to "move your vehicle over to here" he said pointing to a particular spot on the deck.



Starting the truck was easy, as was selecting a forward gear, as also was ensuring that I was in low range, but letting the clutch out and releasing the brakes at precisely the time I judged the deck of the landing craft was in an uphill attitude was an entirely different thing, as all I could see out the front windscreen was an open ramp and the ocean! Eventually I managed to get the truck into the required position without driving off into the ocean and the crane operator on the Sydney managed to fit another truck into the space that was left over....and that wasn't much believe me. I learnt my first lesson that day about how cluey Americans can be, as once we were under way, the deckie on the Landing craft offered me what I thought was the deal of a lifetime, he would swap me a whole carton of US "C" ration packs for just ONE Aussie ration pack. Well, that is the sort of offer that sounds just too good to be true, so both Gabby and I took him up on this wonderful deal. It only took a day or two of 'Lima beans' and 'sweet corn' mixed with what was advertised as turkey or ham or whatever to realise that all US ration packs tasted similar to the cardboard packet they came in, no matter what the wrapper suggested was in it. Didn't take to work out who was the winner in this deal...and it wasn't us!

Still with this magnificent "deal" fresh in our minds we came across a large MP who told us to "turn right then travel down this road for 8 Clicks then turn left and after about 5 more clicks you will see the Aussie FUP near some large fuel tanks"

We looked at each other and wondered "What on earth is a Click?" (Our money had gone decimal in February 66 but measurements hadn't changed by then!) We presumed it was a Kilometer but neither of us had any idea how far one of those actually was, as everything we had was still in metric.

So we headed bravely off into the unknown and almost immediately were confronted by a number of suicidal idiots driving straight at us. It took a couple of near misses, one with a fuel tanker, before we realised that we should be driving on the right hand side of the road! Ah well, live and learn. We eventually found the rest of those who had ventured off the ship ahead of us and settled down to wait for the remainder. It was nice of the American Engineers present to eventually warn some of us that they were about to blast one of the fuel tanks around which we had congregated, as they had previously recoated these tanks with concrete and were in the process of blasting away the remainder of the steel inner sections, (all that remained of the originals that the French had flooded with sea water on their departure).

When the blast eventually went off it was quite hilarious for "those of us in the know" to watch the reactions of "those to whom we had not passed on our immediate knowledge".

So much for the hilarity of our first day, the remainder was filled in heading to "the Bowl", the reclaimed rubbish dump come swamp that was to be our home for the next 12 months, finding where our area was to be and then pretty well straight away heading off to work.

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 1/2 sections of

vehicles and men instead of the normal 5 sections, and the whole unit was immediately tasked with an around the clock job of distributing all the stores and equipment as they were unloaded from 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. There was no time to set up camp, in actual fact I can't actually remember setting up a real tent at all, for the first week or so. When one did get a chance to sleep it was either under a hutchie in the sandhills or on the tarp of the truck, between the canopy bows. 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 of our trucks relatively easy and fast.

The offloading of the stores at the actual unit sites was another story altogether, as no such modern luxuries as fork lifts 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 Infantry Bn Sergeants mess, who refused point blank for one reason or another, to supply any such work party, and backed his refusal up with some rather colourful comments re the backbone of certain 'bone idle' drivers. This first load was eventually unloaded by hand but needless to say, all subsequent loads to this particular 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 that particular WO, the very next load addressed to his area, and transported on, and tipped off the back of a tipper, happened to be most of the crockery for that particular Unit's Sergeants Mess. Following this event, work parties were readily available in this particular unit.

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, (although I must admit I have never been quite so disappointed as I was when I had my first American Hamburger. What a tasteless thing that was!). Once all the initial hectic unloading 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.

After a couple of weeks of settling in and resupplying ourselves and other units in the area, well after the HMAS Sydney had been unloaded and departed on its return journey to Australia, normal transport tasks began to take precedence and sense of order began to fall into place. All Australian Army Units in country at that time were camped in the Vung Tau area, so imaginably a lot of general domestic type tasking took place, laundry runs, resupply runs to outside suppliers, or from American bases in the case of Ammo, and a lot of early supplies, and the likes of such and as well the resident Battalion, 5 RAR required a number of trucks to train their soldiers in the art of "debussing" on the move (many a soldier broke a leg or two in the first couple of runs) and general movement/training drills etc.

Then one day we were all told to cover the floors of the truck cabs and the tray backs with sand bags and prepare for our first convoy "up the road" to "God only knew where". One can possibly imagine how the imaginations of we youngsters ran riot that day, but we survived the pre job nerves and the next morning, wearing full kit, flak jackets, steel helmets and all the required paraphernalia, smoke grenades etc., we were off on the longest drive I have ever done.

That very first convoy was indeed a different experience to anything I had ever done previously, nothing at all like all the training drills we had carried out on various exercises back home, suddenly this was real. Everything we saw and heard was new and possibly dangerous, every movement anyone made was perceived as a possible threat to my well being, and my nerves being on edge as they were at that time I possibly perceived a lot more than what was actually occurring.

One thing that had been drummed into us when we left Australia was the fact that the VC wore black pajamas and a conical straw hat, and suddenly everywhere we looked, every person, male or female, old or young, was wearing black pajamas and a coolie hat! No one had bothered to let us know that this was the common dress for every peasant in the country.

But eventually we got to our destination, despite not being to understand any of the road signs, having passed over bridges, through swamps, through villages and passing a lot of rice paddies and low and lying scrub type vegetation before deploying. The Infantry dismounted and disappeared into a rubber plantation that in some cases was still being tapped by some locals. We weren't allowed to touch anything unless the Engineers had been through first in case things were booby trapped (We had a booklet explaining many of these booby traps systems so we were obviously well

prepared...ha ha). I had never seen a rubber tree before so I backed my truck gingerly into one to see if it was pliant or not. It wasn't!

This area was to become the site of the home of 1 ATF in days to come and this "operation" we were on was simply a stage of "Operation Hardihood" which was the code name basically for the insertion of the Task Force into Vietnam. This particular convoy consisted of a medley of Unit vehicles, drawing upon 5 RAR transport section, Engineers transport sect and many other units, as at this time 87 being the only Transport Platoon in country, our range of available trucks was limited as domestic tasking also still had to be carried out.

(1 Company HQ's advance party was already in country but its main Transport Platoon 1 Platoon was still at sea on the HMAS Sydney at the time.)

Convoys up and down this road in days yet to come were to become second nature to us, even dreary and boring, a daily routine, sometimes two or even three per day, but I must admit that that first trip was one I don't think I will forget for a long time.



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 just outside the village of 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 wall and into which were 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 the sand was 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 more military like manner, although in the windy months that followed, this proved to be a lot less comfortable and also less stable).

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, 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 spasmodic backup queue.



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 improvemnets 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 Orderley 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 and more often than not, contained a wriggler or two..

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 in 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 this practice only caused some local discomfort for a week or so then all went back to normal.

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.

One of the positive aspects of the National Service system was the variety of outside trades that were gathered together in the one place, and we found that 87 was no exception to the rest of the world in that we had a number of people in our Platoon with backgrounds in the construction industry and these people's expertise was put to good work.



At the time, unknown to us, Americans in our vicinity were quite envious of our shower system, the basic canvas bucket with an adjustable screw rose under it that was filled with water and 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, as well as possibly make a couple of quid on the side 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 44 gallon 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 hanging outside the mess tent in the picture below shows the two taped together magazines.



L-R Pommy Adcock, Blossom Thomson, Pussy Cat Stace, Shaun Siddell, Chris Curtis and Ron Herbert at the mess tent.

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!

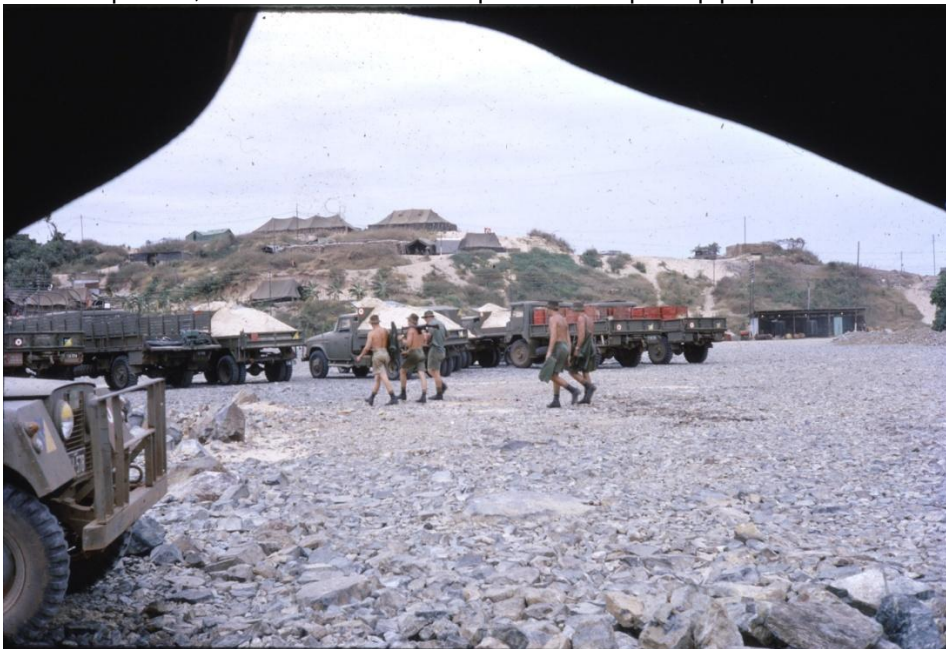
Once breakfast was over, the trudge is repeated; down the hill from the mess, over the sandbag bridge and up the 'home' sand hill, clean the fangs then head off back down the sand hill to the morning parade where the roll was checked and tasking was allocated.



These photographs 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, defence actions, code words etc. were discussed. The shot was actually taken in the “Bowl” outside the 1 PI Transport Offices. The Power generating shed is visible in the background.

Whereas the shot below was actually taken during the formation of the daily convoy and shows 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. Having studied the Official "Commanders Diaries" of our stay I note that only one of these events concerning wires are

mentioned whereas I am personally aware of at least three occasions when wire was strung across the road and broken by vehicles in convoy.



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 pretty large sized

township by Australian standards, containing not only an ARVN military base, an Australian Military base and a reasonable sized US air port and military base, but was also considered a sea side resort town for Saigon and local residents), 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 maximum space capacity in most cases, rather than tonnage, thus meaning that the larger 5 ton trucks carried no more cargo than the smaller 2.5 ton ones, but were heavier because of the extra running gear!.



When the original "planning" was being undertaken prior to Australia's commitment to SVN in 1966 all Transport movements were practiced about the system where the Section commander or NCO would control his packet utilising a motor cycle.

When we left Australia this system was obviously under review, the motor cycle seen as an inapt vehicle for this task and as a result we moved into country with no vehicle set aside for the Section commander whatsoever. Short base Land rovers were discussed, one per section but these were not forthcoming, so eventually a rather unsatisfactory solution was hit on when two 105MRCL mounted vehicles (deemed superfluous to the Bn needs, as the enemy had no tanks in theatre) were stripped of their anti tank weapon and rearmed with a swivel mounted GPMG M60 and issued to the Company. One vehicle per Platoon, rather than one per section, I suppose in some eyes, was better than none!

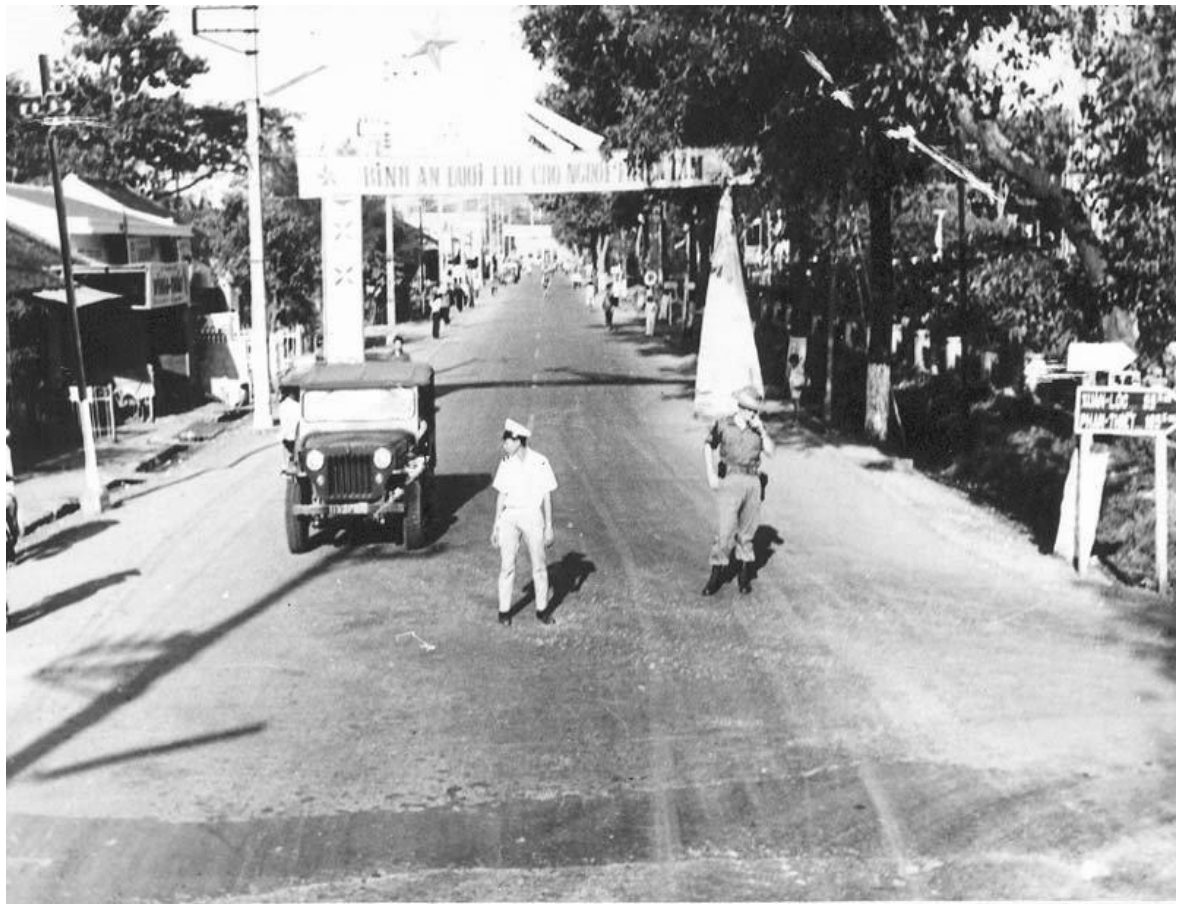


All the while the convoy was under way it was overflowed by either a Bell Sioux chopper or a Cessna spotter aircraft belonging to 161 Avn Coy, with the call sign "Possum". These aircraft acted as spotter aircraft, flying above and ahead of the convoy, often carrying one of the Transport Company's NCO's 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 travelled through to the next village, Hoa Long en route to Nui Dat.

The forward road was considered to be "not green" and therefore off limits, although during one or two "operations" we did travel further north carrying Infantry to Bihn Bah on one occasion and carrying Vietnamese civilians who were being "relocated" on another.



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 and has yet to be sealed.



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, and 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.

One of the more interesting points that stick in my memory is the fact that on the forward journey on most of these "insertion Operations" the convoy was usually escorted by Armoured vehicles, Armed helicopters, FAC Birdogs and whatever else was available.....but once the drop was made, suddenly all the protection disappeared and we "mere truckies" were instructed to get home as best as possible. It was always comforting to know the amount of importance placed on our welfare!

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 was picked up from the ice works early in the morning and was transported in block form on the back of a truck. The ice itself was stacked and the stacked load was covered by wet hessian bags to protect the load from the sun. This ice became a great trading commodity, especially at unit level. For example, there was a time when convoy vehicles were being harassed by a newly posted and particularly petty minded MP, so the MP unit was presented with a suggestion that perhaps some consideration could be made as to whether all these infringement notices were really necessary and productive, and the following disregard of this friendly suggestion resulted in that particular unit finding themselves in the situation that their canteen's ice ration was rescheduled and 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 quite a noticeably diminished state. Surprisingly soon after this alteration to the delivery timetable, the harassment abruptly ceased! The original schedule was once again reintroduced and all was sweet!

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 sitting unsuspectingly below.



Not long after the Australian 'upgraded commitment' to the war's arrival and setting up of the Task Force 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 the final destination of 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 convoying out to Bien Hoa to load up before returning 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, as well as sand that was required at Nui Dat to make cement, a variety of goods ranging from engineer stores, barbed wire, star pickets, fuel, ammunition, and palletised cargo. The tippers came into their own when it came to

handling awkward stores such as barbed wire coils, as tipping the load off rather than manually handling sharp and awkward items saved time and a lot of cuts and bruises.

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 particular piece of Engineer equipment that was of note that came direct from Borneo to Vietnam via the LSM was a large rock crusher and I have distinct memories of that particular piece of equipment. The towed article itself well exceeded the posted bridge classifications on the route and on top of that my truck was loaded up with an extra two and a half tons of star pickets just to give traction.

On this particular trip, I carried as my number two, 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.



Every now and then the overloading proved 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.



One particular case of a driver not wanting to stay on CSM's duties any longer than was necessary when can best be illustrated when John Bell's tipper was put off the road and stayed off the road for quite a while because of the lack of parts available in country to get it going again. John was not at all happy about this situation, so he contacted his father back in Mount Gambier and asked could he purchase the part and forward it to him in country. As a result of this "forward and imaginative" thinking, he was back in his truck and back on the road a lot sooner than was expected.

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 bosses 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. The Packet commander would ride 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 Artillery 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, backloaded with laterite from the quarry and rock crusher at Nui 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.

The unloading of artillery ammunition was a learning curve, in that prior to leaving Australia we all did a course on carrying and handling ammunition, learning to respect its frailties and to treat it gently.

Imagine our surprise when we landed on the doorstep of one of the Artillery Batteries and they tied their Land Rover to a pallet on the back of our trucks and then smartly drove off a short distance, and in doing so unloaded the ammunition, pallet at a time. After this introduction to the real world, on many future occasions 105mm ammo was carried on tippers when speed of delivery was a factor and simply tipped off at the Arty Battery.



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.



An interesting insight into the Australian preparedness to commit a force as large as the 1 ATF and 1 ALSC to a war zone showed up in not only the weaponry we were issued with, my Owen gun was manufactured in 1941, initially radios were outmoded and not compatible with American gear, and closer to home was the situation re Section Commander's vehicles.

In training exercises back home in Australia, the Army dictated that the Section Commander was to be issued with a motor cycle, but this did not eventuate as two things occurred in this case, firstly the current Harley Davidson WWII bikes were being withdrawn and replaced by a new BSA, and secondly some new thinking in places higher up decided that motor cycles were not safe. Short base Landrovers were suggested but that did not eventuate either.

In the end the Section Commander either rode with someone else, hitch-hiked, or drove one of the convoy trucks as the whole exercise was apparently relegated to the "Too hard basket."

Once the Company and its two transport Platoons were actually on the ground in country, it was decided that something had to be done so two Gunjeeps were purloined from the resident Infantry Battalion. These vehicles originally belonged to the Anti tank section of Support Company, but with the enemy not having any armour in the district, they were considered surplus to requirement.

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.



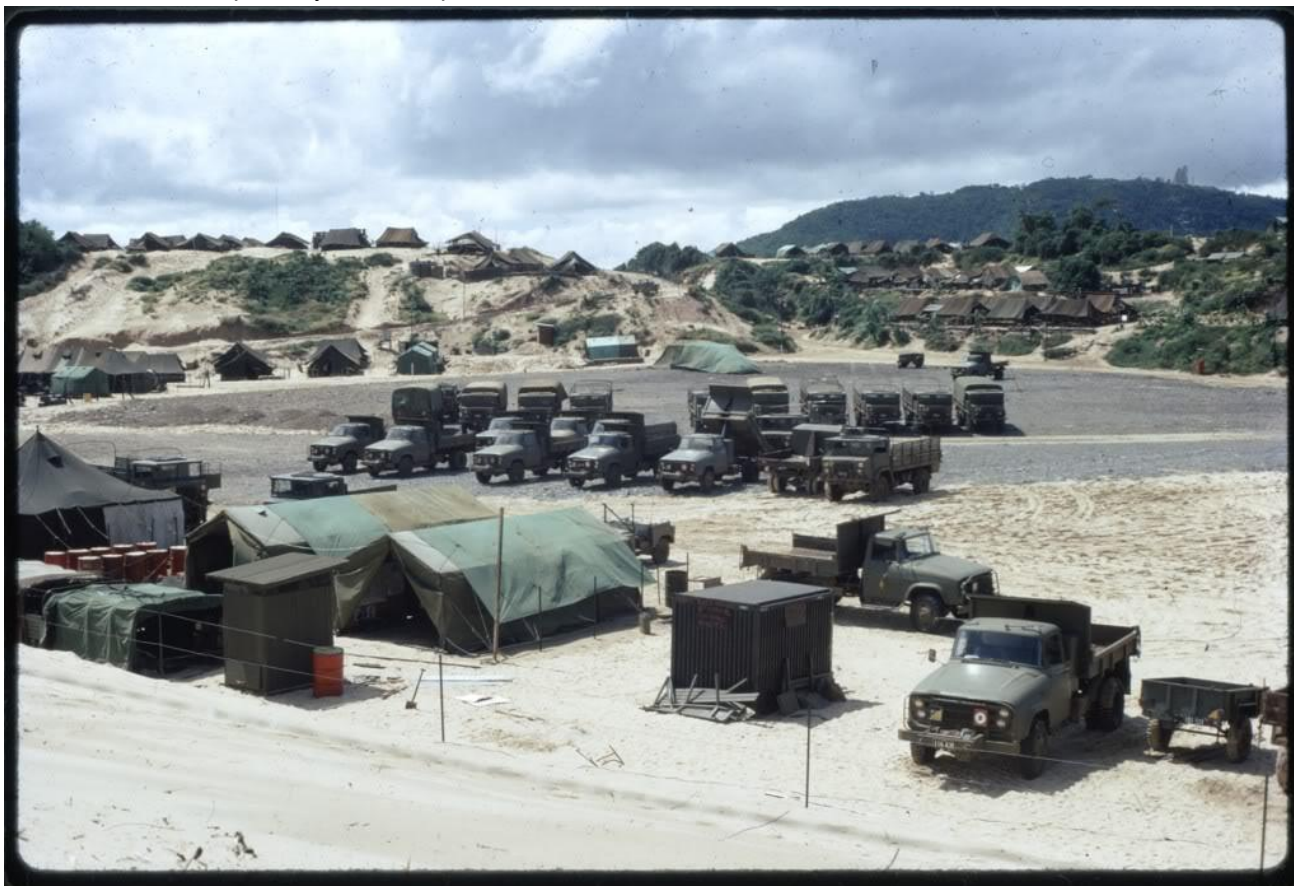
Nearby the entire Engineer store was stockpiled and most of this type of load was transported by tipper where possible. Star pickets and barbed wire coils were not the nicest things to handle by hand so the tippers were used whenever possible.



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 alone 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 detracted 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

88" 6005 gun/buggy 110578

Tippers

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Mk3s

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109" 6028 L/R 113117 Stretch MacPherson