

UNIT HISTORY

Supplement February 1967 - January 1968

At the beginning of January, A/39 had the job of continuing the mine sweeps and maintenance of QL-1, along with continuation of work on the airstrip at Tuy An. The airstrip was completed at that location along with drainage on the Bong Tre airstrip. The entire battalion had the continuing job of support to the infantry units. B/39 had much the same job as did A/39 during this period of time. They furnished a squad of men to the Infantry for the purpose of demolition work on the access road to Signal Hill. C/39 also contributed to the operations of the Battalion with continued road maintenance in the ROK cantonment area. In the Battalion's work to complete the stretch of road assigned to it on QL-1, it was mainly involved in the installation culverts, building Timber Trestle and Bailey Bridges, construction of by-passes, removal of destroyed bridges and the replacement of them. Along with the Battalion's normal work, they are often called upon to go out and work with the infantry.

February of 67 found the 39th doing a never relenting job of the minesweeping of QL-1 and roads in the area of operations. Of course, while mine sweeps are a never-ending phase of operations, there is much to be done after the road is clear. The VC never tire of blowing culverts and bridges and are always present to harass the Engineers when they are trying to get the job done. The different tasks in the month if February were numer-

ous; everything from mine sweeps, to timber bridges, to furnishing the infantry with sweep teams and demolition squads, to blowing bunkers and tunnels. The artillery also required various jobs of the Engineers which only added to the larger job of the Engineers. All work had to be done with no loss to the Engineer mission.

On 10 April the advance party left Tuy Hoa for Duc Pho. The primary mission was the recon of a proposed Pioneer road building and project planning for the C-130 airfield. When construction began, the perimeter had to be extended to the north about 2500 meters. This involved the complete relocation of a village in that area, which is presently artillery hill. Through coordination with the local MACV advisers, the people were moved to a new location with new houses. A bridge had to be built across the stream to aid the villagers in travelling from their homes to the northern rice paddies. The bridge only lasted two nights before it had to be rebuilt as a result of VC destruction.

As D/39 built the road in from Guadalcanal to Montezuma it was not rare for one of its platoons to provide Engineer security for the Infantry who were, in turn, providing security for the Engineer mine sweep team on the road. Several meters of enemy trench lines and bunkers were destroyed and caches of rice discovered. D/39 was also called upon to provide night am-

bushes along the 2.4 miles of road from their CP to LZ Montezuma. This was done to prevent mining of the road.

In May, C/39 and HHC/39 closed at Chu Lai. Also in May B/39 was transferred from OPCPN of the 577th Engr Bn to OPCON of the 19th Engr Bn. A/39 continued work on the Duc Pho airstrip, completing the grading of the strip itself, and laying the MX19 matting. Although not complete, the airfield was opened to C-130 traffic on 15 May. In late May D/39 was called upon to build a 20 pad ASP at LZ Montezuma. Working around the clock they hauled over 88,000 cubic yards of fill and completed the berms in less than two weeks. The Commanding Officer of Oui Nhon Support Command commented that it was the best forward area ASP in Vietnam. Upon arrival in Chu Lai, C/39 began improvements on the company and Battalion areas. On 23 May they departed Chu Lai, moving south on QL-1 to Tu Nghia. They were primarily working on mine sweep and construction work in the TFO cantonment area. They also had responsibilities from Quang Nghai to Mo Duc, and replaced decking on Bailey Bridges. On 24 May C/39, minus the 2nd Platoon, relocated to Tu Nghia with the mission of reopening Route QL-1 south to Mo Duc. When the unit moved into the area at Tu Nghia it was necessary to clear an ARVN minefield around the existing outpost in order to expand the defensive perimeter. By 28 May, twenty loads of fill had been hauled from a borrow pit to replace the dropped span of a three-span French concrete bridge. A 30 foot gap had been destroyed in the roadway with mine damage to the double-single panels.

“Sniper’s Gap” was a source of daily enemy harassment - until Charlie Company moved in with bulldozers and demolitions. The Engineers had been working on Highway QL-1 just north of the small Village of Nui Dep when they started receiving small arms fire. Unable to do any work on the road, Captain Peter Kelly, CO of C/39, decided that the only alternative was to flush the snipers out.

During the first day the Engineers used only grenades, no explosives. Moving cautiously where Viet Cong or North Vietnamese were once dug in, they tossed grenades into bunkers, trenches, tunnels and punji traps, destroying anything that might have been missed by the air strikes. Four 11th Armored Cavalry armored personnel carriers positioned themselves on the hill over looking QL-1 ready to cut loose. The Engineers destroyed 30 bunkers and removed all possible havens for snipers.

At this same time A/39 was working on construction of the Airfield from 0400 - 2400 hours, and maintenance of equipment from 2400 - 0400 hours. In addition, a daily mine sweep was conducted east to the Beach Access Road. On 18 May 1967, heavy rains caused a two-day delay in construction due to flooding of the area. This condition was exactly opposite to that which plagued the construction from the outset. The weather had been hot and dry and water added for compaction evaporated too quickly, even when added at night. An additional mission was initiated on 21 May with the construction of an Access Road from the Airfield to QL-1. Construction started in earnest on QL-1 on 1 June when

one platoon constructed a 45 foot dry span. The following morning it was discovered that this span had been destroyed during the night. A temporary bivouac was established at this site and two 60 inch culverts were installed. On 5 June an APC, providing security for the sweep team, detonated a mine. This resulted in one WIA from the APC crew and one local national WIA. On 11 June, Company A moved to location at Thagh Tru. On 13 and 14 June, Company A supported Company B, 2/35 Infantry with a demo team and 2 dozers to destroy VC tunnels and bunkers in the vicinity of Duc Pho. The pioneer opening of QL-1 was completed on the 14th of June when A/39 linked up with C/39 who had been working south from Quang Ngai. Mine sweep teams were prepositioned along the road to facilitate clearing of the road on the night of the 15th and the first convoy passed over the road on the 16th.

What started as a routine recovery job by personnel from the motor pool of A/39 ended in a fiery demonstration with the engineers using successful counter-ambush techniques. Five men were headed south at about 1730 hours on Highway 1 near the village of Mo Duc to aid a disabled truck. About a mile and a half from their compound, the Viet Cong blew a command detonated mine 10 to 15 feet in front of their truck. Dirt, rocks and asphalt rained down on the men causing them, to duck for cover. SP4 Purucker managed to drive through the huge crater, even though a piece of shrapnel had punctured the left front tire. With his cronies hollering “Keep Moving”, he stepped on the gas. As they passed through falling debris, they

encountered small arms fire and a hail of grenades. The concussion of a grenade which had been lobbed alongside the driver caused him to lose control of the vehicle. He swerved into a ditch on the side of the road about 50 yards from the crater. The VC opened up with automatic weapons fire and another rain of grenades. Finding themselves crowded in the ditch by the truck, two of the men moved to the front of the vehicle. One of them, taking advantage of a brief pause in the firing, crossed the road to a ditch on the other side. Positioned to cover as much area as possible, the men located the enemy and returned fire. They could hear the VC yelling to each other in the brush, and saw them advancing in groups of three and four. Under cover of intense fire, one of the attackers managed to get within 25 yards of the truck, and threw nine grenades. Three of the grenades were duds, but the others slightly wounded SP4 Purucker and another man. SP4 Johnston recalled, “He (the VC grenadier) put himself out in the open, and one of us, or all of us, got him when he was ready to throw another grenade.” An attempt by the VC to recover the dead grenadier was futile - resulting in another enemy killed. Twenty-five minutes after the ambush started, and with the engineers running low on ammunition, a relief column arrived from the south. The VC fled hastily. A search of the brush concealing the VC revealed two killed, and several bloody trails leading away from the scene. Another body was found the next day, and brought the total enemy killed to three.

Working to beat the onset of the monsoon season, and under constant Viet Cong harassment, ele-

ments of the 39th and the 103rd Vietnamese Engineer Battalion completed construction of the longest Bailey Bridge on Highway QL-1. In early July, the Engineers, working with their local Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) counterparts, emplaced 100 feet of dry span on the original 27 year-old bridge. This combined effort opened the bridge for the first time in seven years. In 45 days, expending over 25,300 US man-hours and 2530 equipment hours, engineers of C/39, the first platoon of the 509th Panel Bridge Company, the 554th float Bridge Company, the Heavy Equipment Section of HHC/39, and A/103 constructed five concrete and pile piers for intermediate support, and closed in the bridge.

The work that had been done by the engineers and the ARVN Engineers was nearly destroyed when an intense attack by the VC was directed at the 2nd Platoon of C/39 the night before the bridge was to be opened. The VC attacked the bridge site from the south with an estimated two-company force. The men from the 2nd Platoon, with excellent support from G Troop, 2nd Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, fought 45 minutes under an intense barrage of 60mm mortar and 57mm recoilless rifle and automatic weapons before the enemy withdrew. All through the night the enemy directed harassing sniper fire at the security force. At dawn an examination of the bridge revealed minor damage, and later in the morning the launching was completed.

On 12 June D/39 relocated to Montezuma and began pioneer opening of QL-1 south from Montezuma to the I Corps boundary. A/39 was

now relocated at Trach Tru with C/39 at Mo Duc. The joining of A and C Companies opened the road and the two companies began Phase II: upgrading the road to a class 50, all weather road. Culverts were continuously blown by the VC. Many culverts were replaced three and four times. During this period the companies were constantly subjected to enemy fire.

The middle of August brought another alert for a new road opening. On August 21 A/39 began reconnaissance and mine sweeps on the road from QL-1 to LZ Liz. The mission proved to be another big challenge. Heavy rains fell continuously, and, as a result, the pioneer road was under two feet of water. Work persisted and upon completion of the 60-foot pile bent bridge on 4 October, the opening to LZ Liz was in sight. Then more rain came and portions of the road washed out. Despite arduous working conditions, the road to LZ Liz was open for traffic on 31 October.

Although continuous work was being done by the line companies, they were not the only portion of the 39th that was doing an outstanding job. Captain David L. Mainz, Battalion Surgeon with the 39th, could not be kept from assisting the villagers of Kuong Nhon Village on the outskirts of Chu Lai. Prior to the doctor's first visit, the village was considered under the control of the VC. On his initial arrival, only a handful of women and young children worked up enough courage to greet him. Angered by the visit of the American Doctor, the VC burned the one-room village school-house to the ground the night that Doctor Mainz left the village. Undaunted, Doctor Mainz

and his assistant, Staff Sergeant Joseph Wallace, were back two days later with not only medicine and candy, but enough cement to enable the townspeople to start reconstruction of the school. Admiring the doctor's courage, more of the villagers now came out of hiding. Doctor Mainz said, "We told the village chief that we would provide the material if his people wanted a school, but that they would have to do the actual construction." Discovering that the VC were stealing the bags of cement, the doctor further informed the village chief that no more supplies would be provided until there were visible signs of construction progress. Not long after this contribution to the village, the school was complete. The school was not Doctor Mainz's only contribution to the village. As often as he could, he made a MEDCAP visit to treat the children for malnutrition and various skin diseases.

With better than 200 children living in Khuong Nhon, the Engineers of B/39 felt that the children's education was of utmost importance. They cheerfully devoted their spare time in providing technical assistance and supplies for the construction of two more classrooms. Also, believing in the old adage that "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy", they decided to make a playground for the school children.

Much work was done at this time to try and win the confidence of the people. One outstanding example is that of a young engineer with D/39 who had placed a demolition charge over a suspected VC mine on OL-1 north of Due Pho. The charge had been ignited and the mine sweep team had taken cover, waiting for the charge to explode.

As the charge was burning, a Vietnamese farmer appeared from a rice paddy and headed down the road toward the ignited charge. Members of the mine sweep team shouted to the man, warning him of the danger. He did not understand and kept going toward the charge. SP4 Michael D. Mijan, realizing the danger, removed his gear and ran to the civilian. He pulled the, old man to safety - seconds before the charge exploded.

On 1 September, clearing was started for a new ASP on the north side of LZ Montezuma by D/39. Working with only 2 dozers, they cleared a 1400 foot by 400 foot area and graded it for drainage. Over 50,000 cubic yards of earth were moved by the dozers to complete the drainage alone. Once the drainage was complete the 3rd Platoon D/39 worked 24 hours a day for five days to complete the first 5 pad cell. While hampered by having only one loader operational, the job was completed by hauling 25,000 cubic yards of fill.

The experience that the men of the 39th have gained during this period has been immeasurable. The only thing that has been regretted by the men is the loss of their friends and fellow workers. The 39th Engineer Battalion will continue to drive ahead with the motto "We'll Try". When there is a job to be done, the "Blue Bull" will be there first to do it right.