

At Port Lane on Vung Ro Bay

They Built A Port To Beat the Weather

Colonel John J. Sawbridge



WHEN the winter monsoon rains begin to lash Vietnam's central coastal lowlands in October, the weather rules the countryside. The area around the South China Sea fishing village of Tuy Hoa, some 200 miles northeast of Saigon, becomes more isolated.

Tuy Hoa is home in Vietnam for thousands of American and Free World soldiers and airmen, a tactical base camp area from which these men operate in their bitter struggle against communist insurgency. As the monsoons drive toward the coast with their blinding, pounding sheets of rain, military logisticians face one of the most difficult problems of resupply encountered in Vietnam.

In April 1966, the commanding general of the Army's 1st Logistical Command Major General Charles W. Eifler, sought to head off the difficulties of the approaching winter by a concentrated effort to improve the existing system at Tuy Hoa. When there had been few personnel in the area, it had been a relatively simple matter to bring needed supplies over the beach during the dry season and by air during the monsoons. But now an all-weather Port was necessary.

Vung Ro Bay, 18 miles south of Tuy Hoa near National Highway 1, which follows the coast from the

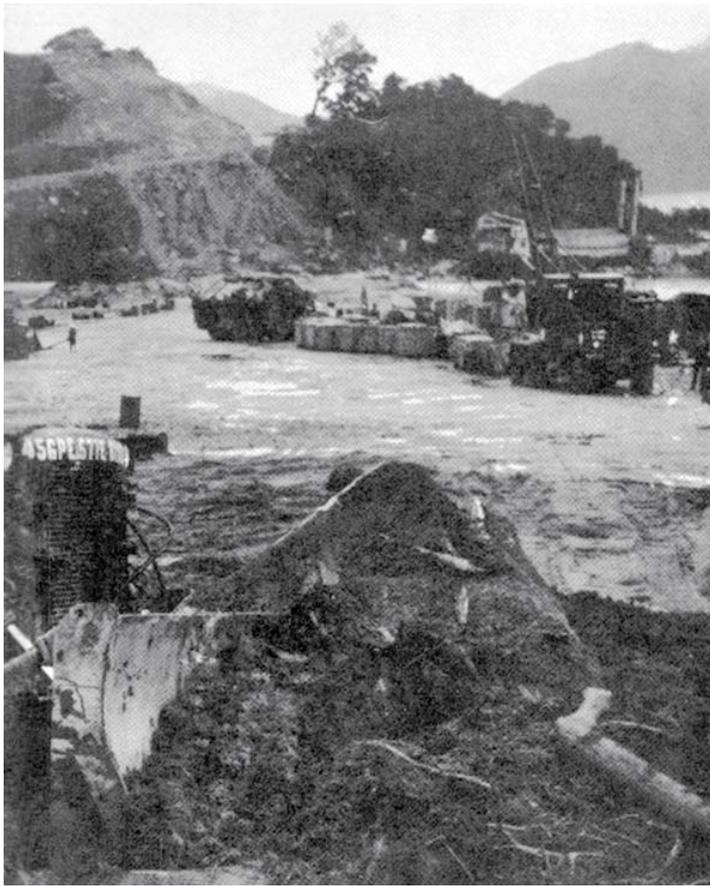
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south to the Demilitarized Zone in the north, appeared to offer many advantages. It had a well protected, wide harbor. Its proximity to the existing road and Tuy Hoa seemed perfect. And equally important, there were only four bridges on the highway between Vung Ro and Tuy Hoa which would require replacing or repairing. But the clincher would come from the experts, the engineers who would develop the proposed complex.

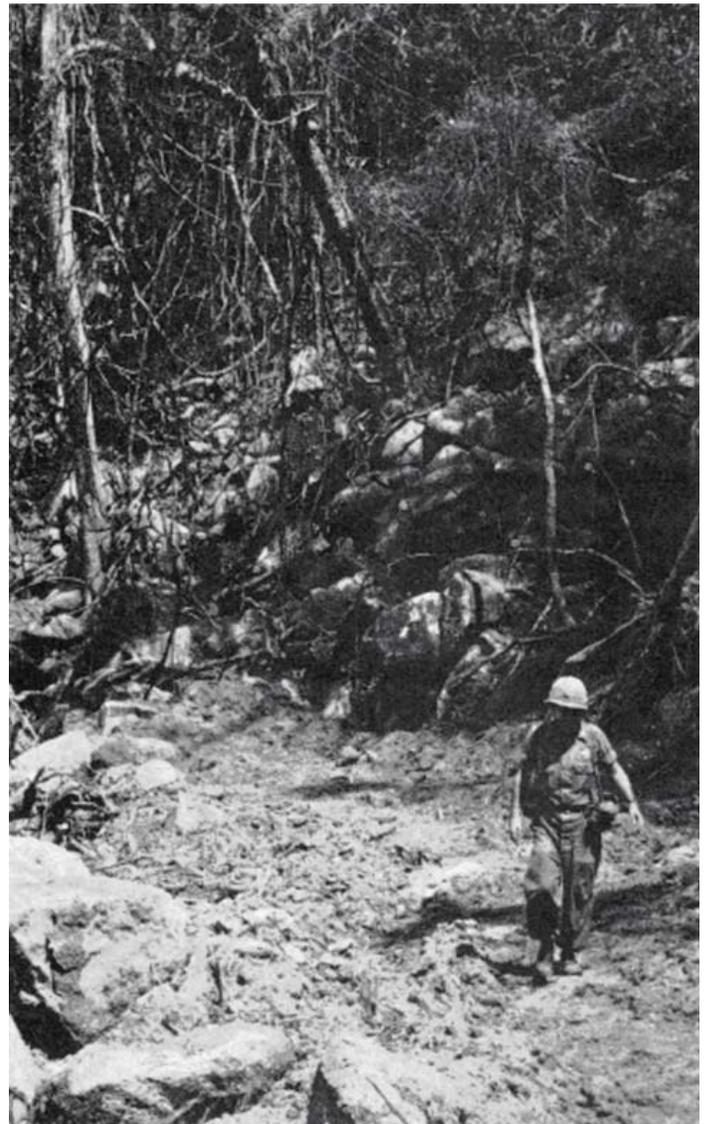
Lieutenant Colonel Ernest E. Lane, Jr., a 1945 West Point graduate, was chosen to spearhead the survey. The commanding officer of the 18th Engineer Brigade's 39th Combat Battalion went into the area initially at dawn on 27 April with a group of engineer experts and an infantry covering force composed of members of the 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne "Screaming Eagles" Division.

While the 2d Battalion of the 327th Infantry cleared the immediate area, the engineers scoured the beaches, bay, road and surrounding mountains in a thorough survey. Ships from the Vietnamese Navy "junk fleet" ferried the party from one beach to another and then dropped back from the shore while the infantry and engineers set about their work.

Overhead Air Force jets screamed past to place fire on suspected enemy emplacements. The heavy quiet of the sur-



Bulldozers work on the beach as 1st Logistical Command race the calendar to complete new port. Below, engineer surveys preliminary work on construction of access road.



rounding jungle was punctuated by the distant boom of naval artillery shells crashing against the mountainsides, fired from a U.S. Navy destroyer two miles offshore.

From landing craft out in the harbor came a crackling voice over the radio: "The hydrography is beautiful!" Depth soundings there confirmed the bay was more than adequate to harbor the deepest draft vessels calling at Vietnam.

Engineers walking on the beach concluded there was ample space to construct a cantonment, storage and clearing area. Although the thick jungle foliage was virtually impenetrable on this first day, the engineers were confident a road could be cut through it and the surrounding mountains of rock to provide an access route to nearby Highway 1.

The survey completed. Colonel Lane became a most enthusiastic supporter of the Vung Ro project. But the completed port, which today carries his name, was never seen by Colonel Lane. He was killed by enemy ground fire while making an aerial reconnaissance over the project area.

On 25 July 1966 Operation John Paul Jones was kicked off and the development of Vung Ro Bay into a logistical port began in earnest. Two days later, while the "Screaming Eagles" patrolled the province area securing the surrounding country-side, Company A of the 39th Battalion under Major John Schultz, former executive officer to Colonel

Lane, began the tremendous task of building a port out of jungle, sand and rock. Two other companies, the 572d (Light Equipment) and 553d (Float Brigade), worked with Alfa Company in clearing the beach and building the access road to Highway 1.

They cleared more than 125 acres of thick, tangled underbrush, moving some 400,000 cubic yards of earth and using over 180,000 pounds of dynamite in blasting away solid rock mountainsides for a road. Within two weeks they had blazed a passable pioneer road a mile and a half from the beach to Highway 1.

Steel planking approaches put in place for landing craft became the bases for concrete LST unloading ramps.



Barely three months after engineers of 39th Combat Engineer Battalion began transforming the area from soft sand and tangled underbrush, Port Lane is in operation for 1st Logistical Command support operations.

Shortly after, a floating pier for barge discharge was anchored in place by the 497th Port Construction Company which also installed the bay facilities for an underwater petroleum pipeline.

Along the shore, tents sprouted as the engineers settled to the gigantic task ahead. Only a tracked vehicle could move on the beach itself. The sand was the consistency of a pile of wheat, and there was not a chance of it packing down. The entire beach area had to be stabilized wherever trucks and handling equipment were to be used. The engineers put down a six to eight inch covering of laterite and rock over some 10,000 square yards of sand.

On an adjacent beach, the pipeline was installed. The multi-fuel four inch line extends from mooring points out in the bay to a petroleum storage point some four miles inland. The line can drain coastal tankers at a rate of nearly 36,750 gallons of POL products an hour. A 16-mile long extension of the pipeline carries jet fuel from the storage farm to the Air Force base at Tuy Hoa. The harbor itself can easily handle tankers with more than a half-million gallon capacity.

On 11 October 1966, less than three months after the

project was begun, the Vung Ro area was open for unrestricted traffic. Five days later the facility was formally dedicated "Port Lane," and officially turned over to the 1st Logistical Command. In its first two weeks of operation, just in advance of the "monsoon deadline," more than 565 tons of vitally needed war supplies a day were being cleared across the beach, a figure more than sufficient for immediate needs, and increasing with each passing week.

A prefabricated DeLong pier for deep draft unloading, already a valuable aid at such locations as Cam Ranh, Qui Nhon and Da Nang, was installed by year's end to expand the base's capability. The bay, large and deep, is able to harbor safely up to a dozen large vessels.

Further developments include covering the beach with asphalt and paving the connecting road to Highway 1. Additional improvements will be made on the cantonment area.

While the story of Vung Ro Bay and Port Lane is a continuing one, it is already synonymous with inspired insight and dedicated effort by Army engineers working in close coordination with the infantry in combat.





Google Earth view of Vung Ro Bay, date May 2010.

Bryant Road -

David Banks Bryant was with the 18th Engineer Brigade, 35th Group, 572nd Engineer Company. He died while helping with the building of Port Lane at Vung Ro Bay. He was operating a dozer on a steep incline when the dozer rolled over on him. That accident occurred in August of 1966. (Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall at Panel 10E Line 004). A sign was posted along a road naming this section after him. David's nephew, Ralph H Bryant Jr., is trying to find out which road at Port Lane was named after his uncle. Was it the main road that runs from Highway QL1 down to the port facilities? Was it one of the other roads within the Port Lane facility? If you are reading this and remember seeing this sign and have any information on the approximate location of this sign please contact me or Ralph H Bryant Jr. He is trying to find information about the location of this sign.

His e-mail is: ralph.bryant@cox.net



David Banks Bryant

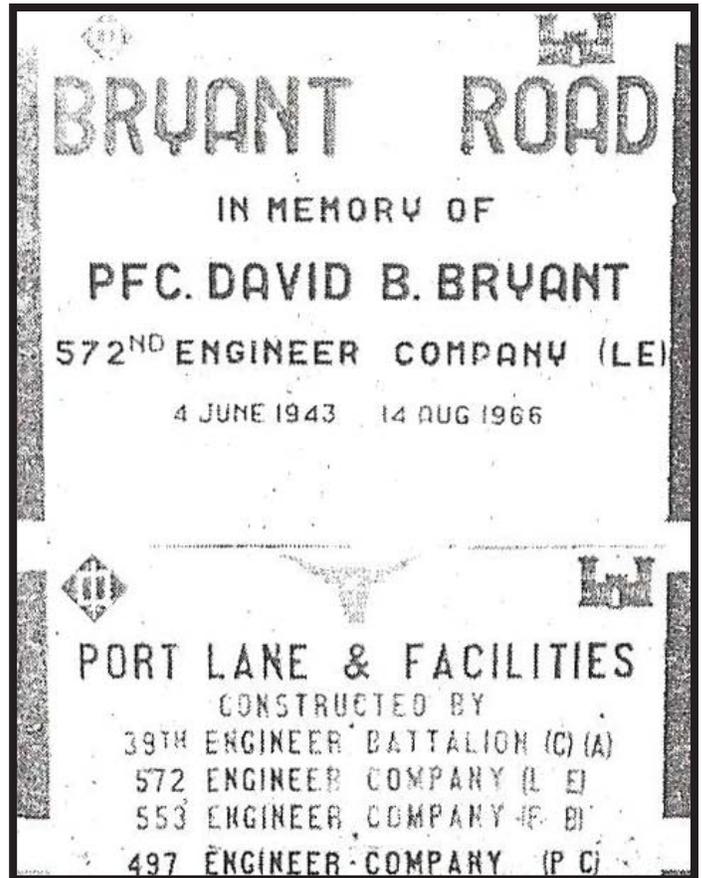


Photo of sign placed somewhere along one of the roads at Port Lane at Vung Ro Bay.