U.S. Army



18th Engineer Brigade



553rd Engineer Company (Float Bridge)

South Vietnam, 1969

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Military Background Information

US Army Engineers in 1965

(extracted from US Army Center of Military History documents)

The American commitment to the preservation of the Republic of Vietnam found its most dramatic manifestation in 1965 in the rapid manpower buildup carried out by the US Army. The expanding involvement of the Army Engineer forces was more a reaction to the growing US strength in Vietnam than the execution of a precisely drawn plan. From the time the first large contingent of Army engineer troops waded ashore at Cam Ranh Bay in June 1965, the demands upon the engineers were immediate. In an amazingly short time they would change the face of a country, win the admiration and respect of those who depended upon them so heavily for support and facilities, and contribute substantially to the defense of the republic.

Beginning of the Troop Buildup

In January 1965 it was obvious that North Vietnam's immediate objective was a full-scale offensive aimed at cutting South Vietnam in two and capturing the local and district centers of government. If successful such a move would place the Saigon government in jeopardy.

The United States responded to the urgency of the situation by deploying forces to the extent necessary to thwart any hopes Hanoi might entertain for an easy and immediate victory in the south.

The United States military commitment in South Vietnam in January 1965 consisted of about 23,000 men of whom fewer than a hundred were Army engineer troops. This force, the United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), consisted of a substantial number of US advisers with South Vietnamese units, Army and Marine Corps helicopter units with their necessary logistic support, the 5th US Special Forces Group, seven Air Force squadrons, a Navy headquarters command in Saigon, and an office of the Navy's Bureau of Yards and Docks whose function it was to supervise civilian contractor construction support to the various US military elements in Vietnam. The civilian contractors alone, however, could not be expected to cope with a dangerously deteriorating military situation and the rapid influx of US Army forces.

Initial deployment of US ground combat forces took place in early March of 1965 when marines of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, later re-designated the III Marine Amphibious Force, landed at Da Nang and took up defensive positions in the very vulnerable northern provinces of South Vietnam. The 173rd Airborne Brigade was airlifted from Okinawa to Bien Hoa on 5 May to relieve South Vietnamese Army forces of some of their security responsibilities and to free them for missions designed to search out and destroy threatening forces. With the growth in tactical responsibilities of US forces in 1965, more combat and logistical support units became necessary.

Force Structure Planning

Early planning for the buildup and operations in Vietnam had little more to go on than tentative indications of the number of maneuver battalions that might be deployed. There was no generally accepted tactical concept, campaign plan, or scheme of logistic support upon which effective engineer planning could be based. In fact, subsequent difficulties tended to confirm that there had been a remarkable lack of appreciation of the amount of engineer effort required to support deployments of the scale being considered in early 1965. The myriad factors to be considered in planning

for any one of the hundreds of engineer tasks to be performed made the planning process much more complex than most commanders who were not engineers realized.

The engineers in Vietnam worked hard to assemble a reasonably valid Army base development plan and construction program before the arrival of the first major engineer contingents. But force levels, tactical concepts, and stationing plans were so tenuous that precise long-range planning was impossible. Only through ingenuity and a good bit of scrounging were some materials made available to the first engineer units to arrive in Vietnam.

Throughout the spring and early summer of 1965 it was generally assumed both within the Department of the Army staff and at Headquarters, United States Continental Army Command, that any augmentation of the Army force structure would include at least a partial call-up of Reserve component units and men.

Contingency plans for a manpower buildup in the Department of the Army contained the proposed call-up of Reserve components and men for a period not to exceed twelve months. In any event all such plans were rendered useless on 28 July 1965. On that date in a nationally televised press conference, President Lyndon

B. Johnson announced plans for the buildup of US forces in South Vietnam. US combat forces in Vietnam would be increased immediately to 125,000 men, with additional forces to be deployed as necessary. This increase was to be accomplished, the President went on to say, through expansion of the active Army by increased draft calls, but no Reserve units or individuals were to be called up.

Since major planning policies for expanded US activity in Southeast Asia had been based on the now fallacious assumption that a significant proportion of the necessary manpower would come from Reserve components, the stage was set for shortages not only of units but also of men with technical training and managerial ability. In the understandable desire to maximize its readiness to fight, the Army tries to retain a high proportion of combat formations in its active forces in peacetime. The cost is always a shortage of ready-to-go support units, including engineers.

Suddenly deprived of their anticipated reservoir of trained and skilled manpower, the services in varying degrees experienced difficulty in meeting initial and subsequent requirements for logistic and combat support troops and units. The Army was hit hardest of

all. Its strength requirements increased rapidly, and with already critical deficiencies in the support units, the decision not to mobilize the Reserves or to allow selective call-up of experienced men led the Army to draw necessary men from other theaters. New units were later activated in the United States and soon after sent to South Vietnam; the peak of the engineer buildup was reached in January of 1968.

Since nearly half the Army's engineers and engineer equipment rested with Reserve components, equipment in the early stages of expansion had to be gathered from Reserve units all over the country to outfit fully those Regular Army units alerted for Vietnam. Crash training programs, intensive recruitment of civil service employees, reduction of stateside and European tours of duty, and volunteer programs were initiated to help fill immediate manpower needs. When these programs failed to meet the demands, the Army began to place officers of its other branches on detail in the Corps of Engineers.

The Army had to expand its training base to provide the troops necessary to meet Vietnam deployment schedules as well as to satisfy the worldwide requirements for individual replacements in accordance

with the Army's rotational overseas service policy. The US Continental Army Command had the responsibility for shipping entire units as well as individual replacements to Vietnam and at the same time maintaining an adequate strategic Army force and training base in the United States.

The expansion of the officer candidate school system provides one of the more easily chronicled examples of the race between requirements and resources in the period of troop buildup. In the spring of 1965 the dearth of junior engineer officers was even more critical than that of noncommissioned officers. In response to this urgent need for new leadership talent, the Engineer Officer Candidate School at Fort Belvoir was reactivated in the fall of 1965. The first class began on 15 November, and by 30 June 1966, 1,132 junior engineer officer graduates had been commissioned. The number climbed steadily and when the school at Fort Belvoir closed on 1 January 1971 it had graduated a total of 10,380 second lieutenants, not all of whom entered the Corps of Engineers.

Initial Engineer Unit Deployment

On 10 April 1965 the headquarters of the 35th Engineer Group (Construction) at Fort Polk, Louisiana, with a

readiness condition of 1, was alerted for deployment to Vietnam. The group initially consisted of the 46th Engineer Battalion (Construction), the 168th Engineer Battalion (Combat), and a maintenance company. However, neither of the assigned battalions was selected to accompany the group headquarters to Vietnam. Instead, the 864th Engineer Battalion (Construction) from Fort Wolters, Texas, and the 84th Engineer Battalion (Construction) from Fort Ord, California, were chosen to go to Vietnam with Headquarters, 35th Engineer Group. The original two battalions of the group soon followed.

Deployment criteria contained in Department of the Army movement directives brought about considerable changes in the 35th Group headquarters. The criteria dictated that before deployment an individual must have at least six months time remaining in service and be outside prior commitments of troops to other assignments. A significant number of men in the 35th Group headquarters and headquarters company failed to qualify for deployment; as a result there was an initial turnover of 30 percent in officers, 66 percent in warrant officers, and 23 percent in enlisted men. Ultimately only four officers, two of them field grade, of the original staff of twenty were sent to Vietnam. The vacancies created

by reassignment of the ineligibles from the unit were filled before embarkation.

The commander of the 864th had left with an advance party from his battalion for Cam Ranh Bay where he was to prepare for the arrival of the transport.

While the 35th Group was busy preparing to embark for Southeast Asia, a flurry of activity was taking place at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, where the 70th Engineer Battalion (Combat) was located. Originally alerted for possible deployment in August 1964, the battalion spent the next year as a *One-Buck* unit – a code designation applied by the Continental Army Command which required the battalion to be in readiness for deployment on 48-hour notice. The 70th Battalion finally departed its home station on 2 August 1965, arriving at Qui Nhon seventeen days later.

[Note – The 553d Engineer Company (Float Bridge) at this time was at Fort Campbell, Kentucky and was likely assigned to the 70th Engineer Battalion (Combat)]

Tactical Engineer Operations

By September of 1965 the American buildup and, in particular, the buildup of US Army engineers had been launched. Many more companies, battalions, groups, and even two engineer brigades would follow these first engineer units to the Republic of Vietnam in the months and years to come. Their efforts would provide a lasting tribute to the professional resourcefulness of Army engineers in the support of the allied military effort.

Tactical plans being formulated at the time contemplated putting the American marines in the northernmost political-military section of the country, known as *I Corps Tactical Zone*. Since it already possessed an operating port at Da Nang, the US Navy, normally charged with logistical support of its marines, was given the responsibility for support activities throughout that zone. In the other three zones the Army was to arrange for reception of troops, equipment, and supplies – a task assigned to the 1st Logistical Command. After reviewing anchorages, ports, road networks, and security considerations, the command decided to expand port and airfield capacities at Saigon, Qui Nhon, and Vung Tau. In addition, massive construction projects would transform the Cam Ranh peninsula (with its well-protected natural harbor) into a major port and logistical complex, together with a road network in support of logistics.

Before the arrival at Cam Ranh of the 553rd Engineer Company (Float Bridge) a ferry had made trips rather irregularly across the upper bay at My Ca, a service provided by Transportation Corps units using strike force boats. On 6 October the 553rd inaugurated regular service at My Ca, using a standard 2-boat, 6-float M4T6 pontoon raft augmented by a Navy cube barge powered by sea mules. The new service soon proved unable to cope with the ever-increasing traffic between the peninsula and the mainland. Near the end of November, the 6-float raft was replaced by a *fast ferry* consisting of a much longer M4T6 raft powered by a bridge boat on either side. The bridge boat side-slipped the raft in the direction of its long axis instead of propelling it in the direction of the long axis of the floats. The boats were fastened to the raft by means of a swivel arrangement

to facilitate changing direction at each shore. This field expedient permitted the engineers to cope with the steadily increasing traffic for the time being. The fast ferry carried trucks full of the quarried and crushed laterite from the mainland to the peninsula; the quarry became indispensable as a source of laterite for Cam Ranh peninsula.

In mid-June 1965 Secretary of Defense Robert S.

McNamara announced that a substantial troop buildup was about to begin in Southeast Asia. Within a month orders were received at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, returning the Headquarters, 18th Engineer Brigade, to active duty. Movement orders arrived at brigade headquarters on 30 July, and the unit left for Vietnam one month later.

Troop List, 18th Engineer Brigade, 21 September 1965

Unit	Officers	Warrant Officers	Enlisted Men	Total
18th Engineer Brigade	31	2	119	152
35th Engineer Group (Construction)	26	4	169	199
62d Engineer Battalion (Construction)	42	7	807	856
87th Engineer Battalion (Construction)	33	11	758	802
864th Engineer Battalion (Construction)	39	13	828	880
102d Engineer Company (Construction Support)	4	2	128	134
497th Engineer Company (Port Construction)	12	1	199	212
513th Engineer Company (Dump Truck)	3	0	101	104
553d Engineer Company (Float Bridge)	6	1	<mark>134</mark>	<mark>141</mark>
569th Engineer Company (Topography)	3	3	109	115
584th Engineer Company (Light Equipment)	4	1	175	180
Subtotal	172	43	3,408	3,623

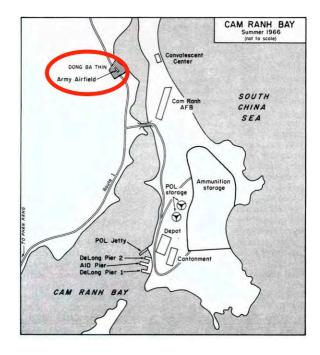
Unit	Officers	Warrant Officers	Enlisted Men	Total
937th Engineer Group (Combat)	21	8	97	126
19th Engineer Battalion (Combat)	30	3	533	566
70th Engineer Battalion (Combat)	30	3	547	580
84th Engineer Battalion (Construction)	39	10	796	845
362d Engineer Company (Light Equipment)	5	1	144	150
509th Engineer Company (Panel Bridge)	2	0	125	127
511th Engineer Company (Panel Bridge)	4	0	103	107
Subtotal	131	25	2,345	2,501
Total	334	70	5,872	6,276

Base Camp



The 553rd Engineer Company (Float Bridge) was administratively attached to the 864th Engineer Battalion (Construction). I was the platoon leader of 4th platoon. Although my initial deployment (with the platoon) was temporary to Tuy Hoa, the platoon later rejoined the company at Dong Ba Thin (near Cam Rahn Bay).

The 553rd shared the Dong Ba Thin base camp with an aviation unit.





We constructed barracks for sleeping, a mess hall, headquarters and supply buildings, and motor pool facilities. Potable water for drinking was transported daily. Shower and toilet facilities were communal. Local Vietnamese civilians washed our clothes and performed cleaning (to include burning latrine waste daily). Armed forces TV reception was available by antennae, and officers and NCOs shared an outdoor break area. The entire perimeter was fenced, and we built bunkers (near sleeping buildings) for protection during mortar attacks.









































Field Operations

Most of the company soldiers consisted of draftees. One was an artist. I asked him to paint *Road Runners* on my jeep. My platoon sergeant scrounged a salvage APC (armored personnel carrier). We stripped it down, mounted it on the back of a 5-ton bridge truck, added a 50-caliber machine gun mount, and painted *Road Runners* on the side of the APC also. The APC truck was the trail vehicle in all of our convoys ... and *Road Runners* became our platoon motto.



































We did more convoying (using our 5-ton bridge trucks for hauling) than bridge-building. The bridge-building we did do included ferry landing areas, temporary replacements for blown facilities, and natural disaster assistance.

Although bridging was the primary contingency element of our mission, in actual practice we spent much of our time convoying and hauling supplies for the 35th Group construction battalions. Our unit location – near Cam Rahn Bay – was for contingency bridging should the mainland bridge be blown.



















FLOATING CULVERT—The Son Cai River carries a piece of floating culvert—evidence of the destructive power it can possess when stirred by monsoon rains.

Monsoon Damage Repaired

LONG BINH (Engr Trps) -Monsoon rains temporarily halt-ed traffic on two national highways recently until engineers of the 18th Engineer Brigade could repair the damage.

The heavy rains made a quagmire out of a temporary bypass on Highway QL-21 between Ninh Hoa and Ban Me Thuot, and later in the same week a culvert under a section of Highway QL-11 near Phan Rang gave way to swiftly moving currents.

The National Highway 21 by-

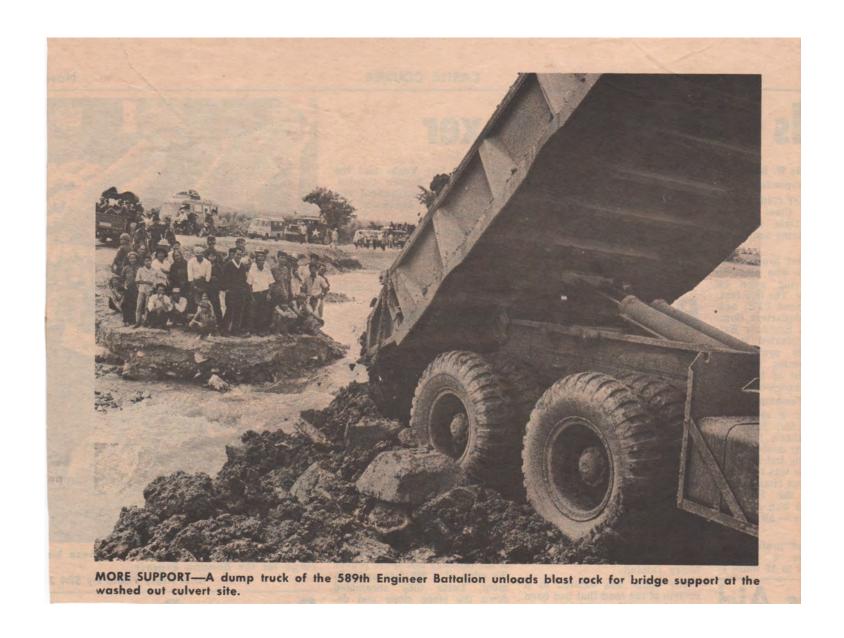
pass, which was constructed before the rainy season when enemy action destroyed an original bridge, consisted of several culverts and compacted dirt. Charlie Company of the 864th Engineer Battalion (Construction) installed three new culverts between abutments of the original bridge and used rock as a filler to form a passable road-

A headwall was constructed to keep the rock in place, and while the new roadway was being built, bulldozers pulled civilian vehicles through the muddy bypass.

Men of Bravo Company of the 589th Engineer Battalion (Construction) were called to get traffic moving along National Highway 11. They initially tried using a bridge across the gap, but the water level rose above the bridge within a day.

Five-ton dump trucks hauled

rock from a nearby quarry to fill the gap, and the water was forced to flow through a new culvert as the movement of traffic was restored.





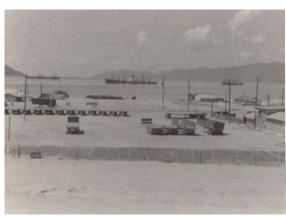


Note – I'm on the left (watching) as my platoon sergeant directs placement



Cam Rahn Bay Bridge and Port Facility

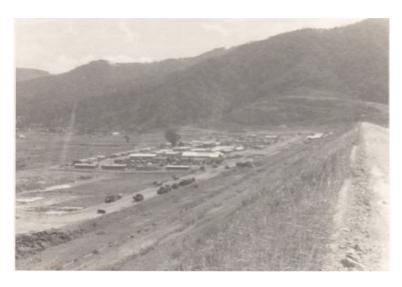








Support to Other Engineer Units



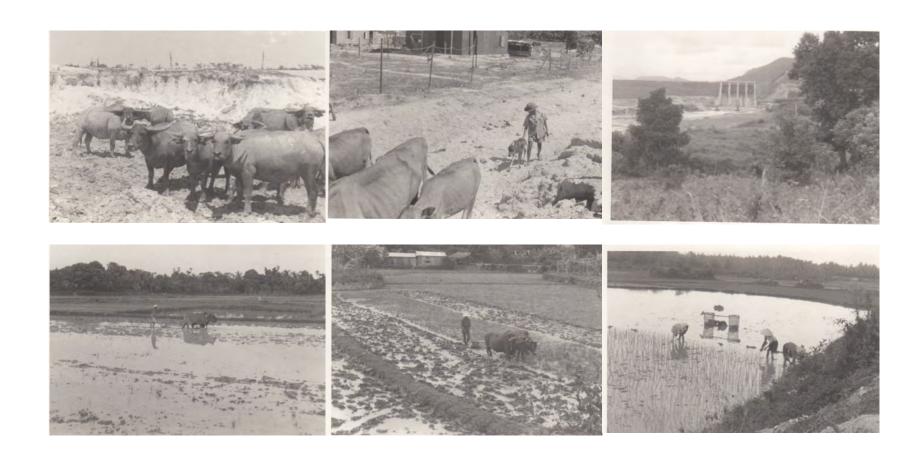




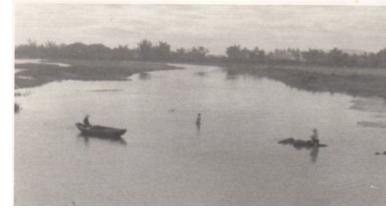




Land, People, and Culture

























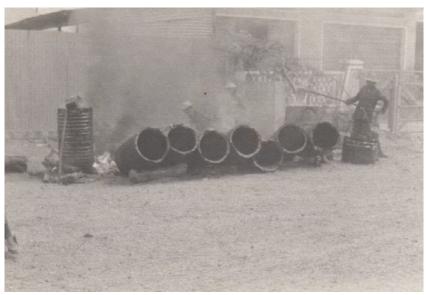




















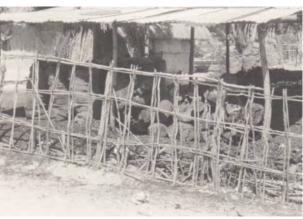
















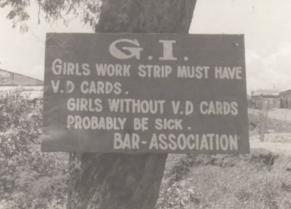




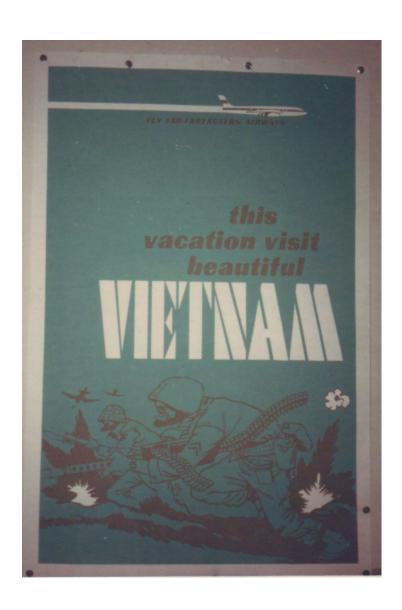








The Lighter Side











Across the wide Pacific,
South Vietnam the spot,
They sent us here by thousands,
To the land that God forgot.

Beneath the jungle canopy, It's easy to get blue, Standing right at nowhere, Ten thousand miles from you.

We sweat and strain and shiver, It's all that we can stand, Casted like a convict, Defending a foreign land.

We're soldiers of the Army, Just earning measly pay, Protecting many millions, For a dollar eighty a day.

And seeded deep in memory, My love across the sea, I hope she still is waiting, And still belongs to me.

Nobody knows we're living, Nobody gives a damn, Our homes we left behind, To fight for Uncle Sam.

But as we pass that golden gate, We hear St. Peter yell, "Fall in you guys from Vietnam, You've spent your time in hell".

Chorus

This land is your land, this land is my land, From the muddy delta, to the central highlands, From the U Minh forest, to Danang harbor, This land was made for you and me.

We roamed and we rambled, we followed your footsteps,
Through Chi Com mines, in jungle footpaths.
And all around us, VC kept calling,
This land was made for you and me.

We rode in convoy, on toward Dalat,
The roads were dusty, the weather hot.
There was an ambush, awaiting for us,
This land was made for you and me.

We hit a land mine, I lay there sweating,
And deep inside me, I felt the pain.
The medic told me, it's a shrapnel fragment,
This land was made for you and me.

And soon above me, a chopper whirling,
It was my *dust off*, descending toward me.
And on my way home, one thought will linger,
This land was made for you and me.

Chorus

Well, take these medal off my shirt, and rotate me.

One hour seems like eternity.

I've been living here too long,

Fighting dirty Viet Cong.

Well take these medals off my shirt, and rotate me.

Send those Berkeley kids out here in place of me.

They can demonstrate and fight for Nguyen Ky.

All that shouting and that pain

Tends to sharpen VC aim,

Send those Berkeley kids out here in place of me.

Oh, there's no one quite like an engineer.

Each man can drink his weight in beer.

Give him hammer and some nails,

Some directions if he fails,

Oh, there's no one quite like an engineer.

Give me ice to chill my beer.

If you want me to fight without fear,

Give me beer, give me ice,

Nothing else will suffice,

Give me ice to chill my beer.

Final Chorus

Well, take these medal off my shirt, and rotate me.

One hour seems like eternity.

I've been living here too long,

Fighting dirty Viet Cong.

Well take these medals off my shirt, and DEROS me.

Please send me back home across the sea.

South Vietnam doesn't mean that much to me.

The weather's too hot,

And your likely to get shot,

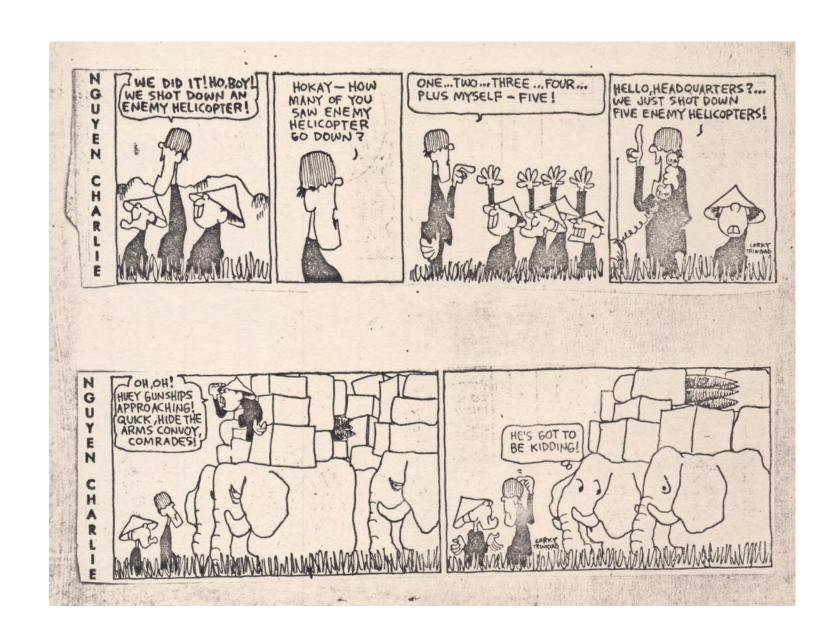
Please send me back home across the sea.

Nguyen Charlie is a comic strip that appeared during the Vietnam War in the Pacific edition of the US Army military newspaper *Stars* and *Stripes* from 1966 to 1974. It was created by Corky Trinidad, a Philippines-born editorial cartoonist who worked for the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* from 1969 until his death in 2009.

Its title hero is a dedicated *Nget Cong* (as Trinidad calls them) who shares the battlefields of South Vietnam with his American counterparts, everyone having a common interest: survival. The comic strip is non-political and both sides are treated equally. No one dies in Nguyen Charlie's war. The cast of characters includes Nguyen Charlie's comrades and their leader (Comrade Commander), as well as the members of a US infantry platoon.



















Personnel Documents



DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE SECRETARY OF THE ARMY HAS AWARDED

THE ARMY COMMENDATION MEDAL

TO FIRST LIEUTENANT GARRY V. COOPER, CORPS OF ENGINEERS, UNITED STATES ARMY

FOR

MERITORIOUS SERVICE IN THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM DURING THE PERIOD 13 JANUARY 1969 TO 29 NOVEMBER 1969

GIVEN UNDER MY HAND IN THE CITY OF WASHINGTON THIS 8TH DAY OF OCTOBER 19 69

Brigadier General, USA

Commanding

CITATION

by direction of THE SECRETARY OF THE ARMY

THE ARMY COMMENDATION MEDAL is presented to

FIRST LIEUTENANT GARRY V. COOPER,
CORPS OF ENGINEERS, UNITED STATES ARMY

who distinguished himself by exceptionally meritorious service in support of military operations against communist aggression in the Republic of Victnam. During the period

13 JANUARY 1969 TO 29 NOVEMBER 1969

he astutely surmounted extremely adverse conditions to obtain consistently superior results. Through diligence and determination he invariably accomplished every task with dispatch and efficiency. His unrelenting loyalty, initiative and perseverance brought him wide acclaim and inspired others to strive for maximum achievement. Self-lessly working long and arduous hours, he has contributed significantly to the success of the allied effort. His commendable performance was in keeping with the finest traditions of the military service and reflects distinct credit upon himself and the United States Army.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY HEADQUARTERS, 18th ENGINEER BIRGADE APO San Francisco 96377

GENERAL ORDERS NUMBER 895

15 October 1969

AVARD OF THE ARMY COMMENDATION MEDAL

1. TO 320. The following AWARDS are announced.

Awarded: Army Commendation Medal
Date Action: As Indicated In Standard Name Line
Theater: Republic of Vietnam
Reason: For Meritorious Service
Authority: By direction of the Secretary of the Army under the provisions
of AR 672-5-1 and USARV Reg 672-1.

BRANDVOLD, Richard W., Specialist Four, United States Army, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 577th Engineer Battalien (Construction), APO 96204, 30 November 1968 to 29 Nevember 1969

BUTIER, William C., Sergeant First Slass, United States Army, 513th Engineer Company (Dump Truck), APO 96321, 20 November 1968 to 19 November 1969

CALLACHAN, Joseph P., Specialist Five, United States Army, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 864th Engineer Eattalion (Construction), APO 96240, 2 December 1968 to 1 December 1969

COFFEY, John J. Jr., First Lieutenant, Cerps of Engineers, United Stated Army, 553d Engineer Company (Floating Bridge), APO 96377, 7 November 1968 to 1 November 1969

COOPER, Garry V., First Lieutenant, Corps of Engineers, United States Army, 553d Engineer Company (Floating Bridge), APO 96377, 13 January 1969 to 29 Nevember 1969

DYSON, Charlie J., Staff Sergeant, United States Army, 687th Engineer Company (Land Clearing), APO 96312, 17 November 1968 to : 16 November 1969

HIBBS, Gary L., Specialist Five, United States Army, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 864th Engineer Bettelion (Construction), APO 96240, 3 December 1968 to 2 December 1969

KELLEY, LeRoy., Sergeant First Class, United States Army, 553d Engineer Company (Floating Bridge), APO 96377, 9 October 1968 to 8 October 1969

MOELLER, David L., First Lieutenant, Carps of Engineers, United States Army, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 864th Engineer Establion (Construction), APC 86240, 11 November 1968 to 1 November 1969

PADUCH, Jehn A., Specialist Five, United States Army, Headquarters and Headquartes Company, 937th Engineer Group (Combat), APO 96318, 23 October 1968 to 22 October 1969

GENERAL ORDERS NUMBER 895, dated 15 October 1969, DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY, HEADQUARTERS, 18TH ENGINEER BRIGADE, APO San Francisco 96377, (Cont'd) PAINTER, Arthur D., PAINTER, Arthur D., Specialist Five, United States Army, Headquarters Company, 937th Engineer Group (Combat), APO 96318, 24 October 1967 to 2 October 1969 PHILLIPS, LeRoy., Sergeant First Class, United States Army, Company C, 84th Engineer Battalion (Construction), APO 96238, 30 September 1968 to 2 September 1969 SAXSMA, Dennis L., Sergeant, United States Army, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 577th Engineer Esttalion (Construction), APO 96204, 31 January 1969 to 29 October 1969 FOR THE COMMANDER: John & hearifu H. C. SMITH Major, AGC Adjutant ROBERT F. CIAMPA CW2, USA Asst Adjutant DISTRIBUTION: SPECIAL DISTRIBUTION: 3-TAGO ATTN: AGPF-F 1-Rec Set 10-TAGO ATTN: AGPE-F 2-USARV-AGA 1-COMUSMACV 2-Ch, OPO ATTN: EPADS-M 1-CG, Engr Trps (P) ATTN: AVHEN-AO 2-Ch, OPO ATTN: EPADS-G 7-CINCUSARPAC 2-Ch, OPO ATTN: EPADS-C 2-CINCUSARPAC ATTN: GPOP-MH 6-Ch, OPO ATTN: OPD-CE 3-201 File 2-Each Individual Concerned 1-IO, 18th Engr Bde 2-937th Engr Gp 2-35th Engr Gp 2-577th Engr Bn 2-589th Engr En 2-864th Engr En 2-84th Engr Bn 2-513th Engr Co 2-553d Engr Ce 2-687th Engr Co 2-Co B, 84th Engr Bn