



Soldiers from the 34th Engineer Battalion uses a Cedarapids paving machine 4 May 1969 on Highway 13 in Vietnam. Two lanes of asphalt concrete were laid between Phu Loi and Lai Khe during this summer months. (Photo by Office of History, HQ, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers)

The Ambush

Bob DeZenzo

Let me write down this story while it's fresh in my memory. (I hesitate to use the term "fresh" after fifty plus years.) This tale is not all fact, nor is it all fiction. It's based on an incident that happened in March 1969. It won't appear in *Stars and Stripes*, and I imagine Oliver Stone has no interest in it, because I doubt it even warranted a report. Nonetheless, it was traumatic to those who were involved.

My training was in small arms infantry, 11 Bravo was my designation. I had gone through all the training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, "Tigerland." I was a mean, green, killing machine (so they said), so it was ironic that I would end up in an engineer outfit with no training at all!

My first assignment in Vietnam was with the 116th Engineer Battalion, 18th Engineer Brigade, about five miles outside of a town called Bảo Lộc in the Central Highlands. Our base camp, Camp Smith, was situated high on a plateau overlooking the valley below. The camp was named in honor of the first casualty the unit suffered after arriving in Vietnam.

It gave us a great view of the landscape and made us an easy target for rockets and mortar shells. Our primary mission was the continuing development and maintenance (we would pave it, Charlie would blow it up, and we would repave it) of Highway One, which ran from the coast to the Cambodian border. Bảo Lộc



Interpreter Cho Hu (Bad Dog) sits on the hood of a truck in Vietnam circa 1969. (Photo courtesy of the author)

was situated right about in the middle. It was beautiful countryside if you were a tourist but not so much during wartime. And make no mistake, it was wartime. Constant mortar barrages on our compound, nightly attempts to gain access through our wire, and the occasional firefight reminded us constantly of where we were. So, it should not have surprised us that Charlie had a little party in store for us.

Close to three months into my first tour, I was assigned as a driver to the civilian labor office with Lt. Lumia in charge. He was an easygoing officer, as officers go, which made my life a little less stressful. He was from Brooklyn, and since I was a Jersey boy, we had a bit in common. The unit itself was a National Guard group from Idaho Falls, Idaho, so we were the outsiders.

I spent most of my day carting the LT and his interpreter around Bảo Lộc, the capital of Lam Dong Province, picking up items from supply depots, checking in with regional authorities, getting clearances for our laborers, and meeting with provincial mucky mucks while keeping up the good will.

Today was different. We were assigned to accompany a convoy of men and machinery to an outpost near the village of Bazaar about twenty-two miles away. Not far as the crow flies, but the route took us through the mountain region filled with sharp curves and deep drops off to the side. The area was also

heavily forested, which made great hiding spots for our VC friends.

The convoy consisted of a jeep, my three-quarter-ton pickup, two cargo trucks, two flatbed semis, and another jeep bringing up the rear.

The jeeps and my three-quarter-ton all had an M-60 machine gun mounted in the back. The trucks had parts and civilian laborers in the back. The flats were carrying road equipment, a paver, a caterpillar, plus a medium size crane. Ironically, all this equipment was to be used to build a side road to bypass the mountain we were traveling through.

We had gone about ten miles when we started our incline up the side of large rock formation, and with this heavy equipment, the going was slow. The lead jeep jumped ahead to act as point man in case of any issues. There were always rockslides in this part of the mountains, and they would radio back for any help. The road was designed for two lanes by Vietnamese standards, which was just a wee bit tight for the flatbeds. If you have ever seen a paver, you'll remember that it is wide. As such, it took up most of the two lanes.

So far, so good. We were coming into the forested area of the pass, and everyone was on alert. We had sheer rocks on our right, but the problem was our visibility on the left. Vietnamese forests are not like the ones at home where the trees are tall and the ground is covered with pine needles so you can see for miles through them. This was a combination of tree and bushes with a lot of ground cover thrown in for good measure.

As we approached a curve, the lead jeep came tearing back to let us know there was a huge crater in the middle of the road. There it was, the warning sign we were all waiting for. We cautiously approached the hole, knowing in the

Bob DeZenzo is a retired textbook manager living in South Bend, Indiana. His career in the military as a draftee was a brief two years, from 1968 through 1970. He spent one year in Vietnam, first with the 116th Engineer Battalion. Then, after an injury and a short stay at Zama Army Hospital in Japan, he returned to Bao Loc and was reassigned to the 547th Asphalt Platoon. After Vietnam, he spent six months at Fort Hood, Texas, with the 1st Armor Division, 73rd Battalion. In August 1970, he returned home to New Jersey where he settled into civilian life.

back of our minds that this was surely a trap. The lead jeep had enough space that it was able to easily get around the hole. I was next and could see into the crater as I passed. Man, it was awesome! Following me was a five-ton cargo truck that carried men and supplies. The thing was unbalanced, and I could see in my mirror that they were having a hard time maneuvering around the hole. I was focusing on the road ahead with one eye in the mirror when I heard an unearthly scream behind me. It was the screech of a rocket from somewhere in the woods that hit one of the flatbeds. There was a loud explosion, and a huge bellow of smoke filled the sky. Immediately following was the small arms fire that tore into the side of my truck. One round, coming from behind, whizzed by my ear and smashed out my windshield. I felt something warm on my hand, but in the chaos, there was only time to react. In seconds, the world seemed to catch fire as more rockets poured in from the dense forest, and everyone started returning fire. I was mesmerized by the goings on behind us when the sergeant sitting to my right screamed, "Get this f-ing thing going!" Straight ahead, the jeep had already made it halfway down the hill to what we hoped would be our support. I slammed on the gas and pointed straight ahead. I could see that the cargo truck had made it through and was right on my heels. Unfortunately, the flatbed was not so lucky. The second cargo truck that was directly behind it took some machine gun fire but was somehow able to skirt around the remains of the damaged flatbed and edged the remains off the side of the hill, enabling its escape from the onslaught. The second flatbed stopped in its tracks, and along with



Cappy poses with the M-60 machine gun in Vietnam circa 1969. (Photo courtesy of the author)

the jeep in the rear, decided to make a stand. The lead jeep had managed to call in air support while boogying down the hill, and they were quick to respond.

At first, there were two gunships accompanied by a medevac. The gunships sprayed the side of the hill while the medevac landed on the road and removed the wounded and remaining troops. Once the gunships were gone, I could hear the jets approaching, and I knew it was all but over for Charlie.

In the meantime, I was still working my way down the mountain trying to get to safety when I saw a man on a moped coming up the hill toward us. He had situated himself in the middle of the road and was on a collision course with me. As we got closer, I could see he had an AK pointed directly at me. At first, I looked at the possibility of somehow going around him, like it was a normal traffic situation. Then it occurred to me that this guy was trouble, and under the circumstances, trouble had to be eliminated. I put the pedal to the metal and aimed straight for him. It was a deadly game of chicken that I was not about to lose. We closed the gap and just at the last minute, he tried to dodge me but was not quite successful. I felt the jolt as my truck clipped the back of his bike and sent him



Aerial view of Camp Smith at Bảo Lộc, Vietnam, home of the 116th Engineer Battalion. (Photo by Sgt. Jake Cordova; courtesy of the author)



Maj. Coats (left), Lt. Lumia, and Sgt. Benedict discuss the ambush in March 1969 at base camp near the village of Bazaar in Vietnam. (Photo courtesy of the author)

sailing into the air. I didn't know what happened to him after that, and I didn't care, as long as he was gone.

The battle continued to rage behind us as we careened down the road to the safety of our support. Once the last jeep had made it through, the F-4s charged in and covered the mountainside with napalm. If you have never seen the aftereffect of napalm hitting the ground, let me tell you, it's gruesome. Napalm is a dry brown compound that when mixed with fuel becomes an adhesive chemical that burns everything in its path. It was initially used in flame throwers to clear the thick brush we encountered in the jungles. But it became a weapon of choice when the military discovered how effective it was in clearing out the enemy.

We all gathered in the outpost and assessed the damage from the attack. Aside from the one flatbed, we had made it out relatively unscathed. The driver had been removed via medevac to Nah Trang for treatment, and three civilian workers had been injured by shrapnel from the exploding RPGs. The medics treated them and sent them on their way. We never saw them again. As we were all congratulating each other on our narrow escape, I noticed there was some blood that had dried on my left hand to the tip of my thumb. When I looked closer, I

realized I had a tear in the top of my hand just below the base of my thumb. My guess was the bullet that blew out my windshield must have grazed the top of my hand on its way out. I can't tell you why, but my first impulse was to hide it. I wrapped it in an oil rag I kept under my seat and never told a soul.

Vietnam is not a network of connecting highways like back home, so getting back to Camp Smith safely was not going to be an easy task. The semi with the heavy equipment was to remain at Bazaar along with the cargo trucks so that the laborers could be returned to their homes when the mission was complete. So, it was just the jeep and my three-quarter ton for the return trip. This turned out to be a blessing because the dirt road we ended up taking back would not have accommodated the larger vehicles. But that's another story.

The following week, I was called into the CO's office. It's kind of like being called in to see the principal. I thought I might have been getting an "atta boy" for getting my truck through the ambush. Nope, that wasn't it by a longshot. It seems the fellow I had sent sailing off his moped was an ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam), who was coming to our rescue. What? He was coming straight at us! He had a weapon pointed at me! It was either him or a truck full of Americans! What is this bulls—? The captain sat patiently through my tirade and then in a calm voice explained how the local ARVN commander was quite upset and wanted compensation for the pain I had inflicted and the damage to the moped. I was to pay a total of 5,000 dong (about \$445 American). Fortunately, Lt. Lumia has insisted on accompanying me in the office and spoke up for my case. He reminded the CO that he too was in the truck at the time of the incident and my actions were clearly an act of self-defense. He said, if anything, I should be getting a commendation for my actions. While the captain agreed that I had no other course of action under the circumstances, the amount would have to be paid to keep the peace with the locals. So, it was decided that the Army would foot the bill, with a written apology from me to the poor hero of the Vietnamese army. Bah!

Such was the story, as I remember it, of the ambush at Bazaar. Of course, some of the facts are a little vague and some are pure bull, but that's the way I remember it! *Tam Biet!* ■