

THE BA REN BRIDGE

By Fred DuPont

I was a Marine assigned to “D” Company, 9th Engineering Battalion, 1st Marine Division, III Marine Amphibious Force as a heavy equipment operator. Our area of operations was I Corps, the five most northern provinces of the Republic of Vietnam.

In the summer of 1968, I was sent with a 12 ton, rubber tire, mobile crane to assist 3rd Platoon in building a bridge across the Ba Ren River. 9th Engineers was led by Lt. Col. H. E. Perea, stationed in the southern part of Quang Tin Providence at Chu Lai. “D” Company was led by Capt Reno Rizzo, stationed in the northern part of Quang Tin Providence at Hill 63. 3rd Platoon of “D” Co. was led by 1st Lt Jack Hawkins, stationed in the southern part of Quang Nam Providence, north of Hill 63, just below Hoi An, at a South Korean Marine Corps compound that we had built. We were strung-out between Chu Lai to the south and Hoi An to the north to build and maintain 47 miles of Route 1.



The dilapidated bridge we were to replace was made of reinforced concrete repeatedly made weaker by small, enemy explosives. They used small explosives on bridges and culverts and large mines on the edge of the road to stop our heavy vehicles, not their bicycles and three wheel buses.

Our bridge would be constructed of creosote pilings, cross timbers, steel I-beam stringers, and topped with heavy lumber decking. These materials were brought by convoy from Da Nang in the northern part of Quang Nam Providence. Battalion HQ in Chu Lai sent additional Marines driving low-bed tractor-trailers to assist "D" Co. with these supply convoys. They also sent a homemade, heavily armored six-by truck sporting a fifty caliber and two M-60 machine guns to blast through any ambush, which happened once. In that ambush, Captain Rizzo and 6 other Marines were seriously wounded. That was in August and 1st Lt Gary Ward relieved Captain Rizzo as Commanding Officer of Delta Company.



Capt Rizzo's Jeep
(Photo provided by Reno Rizzo)

The bridge was built from south to north. A crawler crane was mounted on a barge to drive the pilings. A surveyor would site the level to cut the pilings. A crew, working from scaffolding on another barge would cut the pilings and bolt the cross timbers to the pilings. The I-beams would then span from one row of pilings to the next, fastened to the cross timbers. I go through these machinations because it was my job to lift this heavy material in place without killing or injuring my fellow Marines.

Every morning two sweep teams would leave from each outpost, one north and one south, to clear the roads of mines before any work on the road could commence. Our teams usually consisted of two Marines with metal detectors, two with K-Bar

knives to probe any suspected spots in the road, two with grappling hooks out ahead in the rice paddies to snag any wires running to explosives planted in the road, as many Marines with as much fire power as we could muster that day, and one very brave Marine driving a truck behind us. I was one of the Marines providing fire power should anything happen. One mine was found by the truck. The incident happened September 19, 1968 while I was home on leave; I was informed of it upon my return in October. HM3 Kurt Duncan, our Corpsman, was killed instantly. PFC Arlon Schaeffer, of the seven Marines wounded died later. The driver of the truck, CPL Paul Kozak, was so severely wounded and burnt it took 27 separate operations to put him back together. He now runs Vet Works, a nationwide service to help homeless veterans get their lives back together.



Truck driven by Cpl Paul Kozak
(Photo supplied by Paul Kozak)

On another mine sweep the Korean Marines thought that the best way to provide security from repeated sniper fire was to walk artillery down the road ahead of us. When the first shell exploded behind me to the east about one hundred yards away, I found the mud in the west rice paddy comforting until the second exploded on that side. Luckily, the only injury sustained was SGT Lee caught a piece of shrapnel in his right forearm. Before Lt Hawkins could get them to cease fire, the village to the south was destroyed. The corpsman did the best he could but, I'll never forget what White Phosphorus did to that little girl.

“The most exhilarating feeling in the world is to be shot at and missed.” Winston Churchill



Marines of 3rd Platoon pinned down by snipers and returning fire
(Photo supplied by Mickey Ryan)

Sniper fire became a way of life for us. Most of it was H&I, Harassment and Irritation, a few shots fired from a tree line five hundred yards away with a worn-out rifle from the French colonial days. It regularly happened at one place on the road, at the end of the day, heading back to the KMC compound. One day, Lt Hawkins stopped there, put us all on line, and led a sweep through the rice paddy to the west, into the tree line. This was not new to me; I grew up hunting like this in Florida. The trick is to keep abreast of the man on your right and the man on you left so you don't shoot each other. Only this time the game could shoot back. We progressed like this until we were so deep in the woods; I lost sight of my fellow Marines. I'll never forget that feeling of loneliness when I got to a clearing, alone. After a few minutes, I decided to leave this sort thing to the infantry and retreated back to the road to find everyone else way ahead of me...

As we progressed on the bridge, however, the NVA moved in with more sophisticated weapons and the sniper fire became more intense. It always came from the west about five hundred yards away where the river bent towards the north.

Defensively we did several things. As the materials were delivered, we stacked them on the western edge of the bridge. This provided us cover when we dropped

our tools to return fire. Another thing we did was mount machine guns behind armor plating. A fifty cal in the middle and a M-60 on each end. As the bridge got longer, so did the distance between the machine guns. Offensively, we did two things stand out in my memory.



One of the machine gun placements
(Photo supplied by Johnny Burleson)

One day we were pinned down behind the stacks of timbers. Lt Hawkins called in an air strike. I got impatient and climbed the boom of my crane with the surveyor's transit, hoping to direct fire from that position. While concentrating through that scope, 30ft above the bridge, 50ft above the river, I heard a noise behind me. I turned to see two Forward Air Controllers in a spotter plane grinning at me from ear to ear. Soon I had an amazing vantage point to watch two A-4 Skyhawks do their thing to the enemy.

The second occasion involved the South Vietnamese Army. The ARVN's, as we called them guarded the two bridges and all the equipment when we returned to the Korean compound at night. At the end of the day, Lt Hawkins would give us permission to do a little "redneck fishing" with a grenade or two. The ARVN's would then paddle out in a small boat to collect their evening meal.

One day they mounted an aggressive operation to go after the bad guys, only they forgot to tell us. When the shooting started, we thought it was the typical barrage of sniper fire that occurred almost every day about that time. Drop your tools, man your guns, blow the hell out of the tree line across the river, and go back to work... Wrong! I was at the south end of the bridge when the fire fight broke out. The ARVN Lieutenant came running out of his bunker shouting “ARVN! ARVN!”; and pointing in the direction of the tree line. To yell over the roar of 20 or 30 fully automatic weapons would have been useless, so I ran down the bridge, slapping helmets, and yelling at the top of my lungs to cease fire. Later, they brought the wounded to the bridge. We administered first aid as best we could and got them on a Medevac Chopper; another not so proud day for the good guys.

Another incident involving the snipers must be mentioned. Lt Hawkins was by himself on the old bridge inspecting our work on the new. He was just opposite my crane, when all hell broke loose. I think they were trying to kill him and two rounds came through the cab of my crane. He jumped for cover, missed the ledge, plunged into the river, and was injured. In the excitement, as I was standing from cover, I sprayed a few rounds into the old bridge. As I was reloading, my attention was drawn to the Lieutenant, 20ft below. He was already being helped, so we moved our base of fire to the old bridge to cover his rescue. He was awarded his second Purple Heart and, in my opinion, it was well deserved.

I recently confessed to him my premature trigger finger. He gave me back a sarcastic “Thanks!” He still doesn’t tolerate ineptness and he was the finest officer I ever served with in my 23 years of military service. He is currently the chancellor of Troy University and has made several trips back to Vietnam to visit the campuses of Troy in Hanoi and Saigon.



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