

344th Transportation Company

World War II

The 344th Harbor Craft Company was constituted as part of the Transportation Corps on 14 December 1943 then activated at Camp Gordon Johnston, Florida, on 7 January 1944. Harbor craft companies had primarily tugs and barges. The 344th served in Europe during the Rhineland Campaign, 15 September 1944 to 21 March 1945. It served under the 17th Port at Antwerp and was cited in the Order of the Day of the Belgian Army. The company was redesignated the 344th Transportation Corps Harbor Craft Company on 21 April 1945 then redesignated as the 344th Transportation Harbor Craft Company on 7 July 1947. It was inactivated at Fort Eustis, Virginia, on 1 September 1952.

Cold War

In 1949, the Soviet Union tested its first nuclear bomb and the Communist Chinese drove the Nationalist Chinese off of the mainland onto the island of Formosa. The threat of world communism became real and heralded the Cold War where communist and democratic nations poised on the brink of war. Center to the threat was the defense of Europe against Soviet aggression. The free European nations and the United States for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949. The boundary between East and West Germany represented the front line and France was the communication zone (COMZ) where an intricate supply system had grown. For fear that the Soviets would use their nuclear capability to destroy the deep draft ports in Northern France, the NATO planners expected to have to conduct a Normandy style amphibious resupply mission. The US Army Transportation Corps began to focus on its ability to conduct supply over the beach operations. The terminology changed to logistics-over-the-shore (LOTS) operations when soldiers realized that they had originally been working on the SOB. The Cold War saw significant development in LOTS capability.

While on inactive duty, the 344th was redesignated as the 344th Transportation Company and allotted to the Regular Army on 5 January 1955. On 24 February 1955, the 344th Transportation Company was reactivated as an amphibious truck company at Fort Eustis, Virginia. At that time, it had the 2 ½-ton DUKWs. It moved across the James River to Fort Story, Virginia, as part of the 11th Transportation Battalion. The beaches at Fort Story provide ideal training areas for LOTS operations.

The DUKW was built out of the urgency for a truck that could swim. However, it handled like a truck in the water. The COT, MG Paul Yount, directed the US Army Research Command (USATRECOM) in 1956 to build a boat with the ability to drive on land. The prototype was built in July 1959 with final design produced in 1963. Besson, who was COT from 1958 to 1962, was instrumental in the purchase of them. They LARC V, with a 5-ton capacity, did not handle the way it was expected so most were given to Army Reserve companies. The first active duty companies to receive them were the 165th, 305th, 344th, 458th and 461st Transportation Companies. On 28 March 1963, the company was reorganized for use of the Lighter Amphibious Resupply Cargo (LARC) V.

From 8 July through 18 August 1963, the 344th participated in a test of the capabilities of the LARV V. This was a 24-hour day operation. The biggest obstacle for the company was the

shortage of personnel with the correct military occupational skill to replace those leaving the unit. As one of the first LARC V companies, this novel company participated in numerous parades, demonstrations, and static displays at civic and military functions. From 19 January to 9 February 1965, the company sent one officer and 34 enlisted men to Granite City Illinois Army Depot to assist the US Army Mobility Equipment Center in conducting confirmatory tests of modifications made to selected LARC Vs.

Vietnam War

The increase in guerrilla activity and the ineptness of South Vietnamese Army leadership to deal with it, caused General William C. Westmoreland, Commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), to seek US involvement in the ground war. In the summer of 1965, the US Army assumed a major role in fighting the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army guerrillas. The First Logistics Command needed transportation units to bring in the combat brigades and divisions. In 1965, MACV identified four deep water ports to establish supply bases: Saigon, Cam Ranh Bay, Qui Nhon and Da Nang. The 344th LARC received orders to deploy to Qui Nhon.

CPT Thomas E. O'Donovan, Jr., Commander of the 344th Light Amphibian Company, arrived at the Qui Nhon airfield with his advance party on 29 May 1965. The airfield detachment lived downtown. The only American units at Qui Nhon at that time were the 92nd and 117th Aviation Companies and some maintenance units. The helicopter companies had arrived in 1963 and 1964. The 5th Ordnance Battalion had just arrived a few weeks earlier. The bulk of the troops in the area were part of the 22nd Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Division, which secured the airfield. Consequently, the first arriving units crowded into the airfield, which was the only area considered secure. The rest of the units quickly poured into the area after O'Donovan's arrival. Right behind him staged six other plane loads at Nha Trang for arrival into Qui Nhon. All the early units flying into Qui Nhon staged out of Nha Trang. At least 1,000 men a week arrived at Qui Nhon. The 19th Quartermaster Company and two transportation companies landed the next day. The 1098th Medium Boat company arrived next on 30 May.

The second Transportation Corps company to arrive at the Qui Nhon airstrip was O'Donovan's 344th Light Amphibian Company on 2 June 1965. Its LARC Vs would arrive later. These amphibious vehicles carried a five-ton capacity and could drive right up to the depot. They eliminated the need to transfer cargo from the landing craft at the beach to the awaiting trucks. By that time most combat veterans were senior in rank. The first sergeant was a Korean War veteran who had served in that same company for twelve years. The 344th LARC deployed by air from Fort Story, Virginia, and its equipment would arrive on the *USS Comet*. The operations and maintenance personnel of the 14th BARC platoon fell under this company. The platoon's four BARCs with their sixty-ton capacity would arrive out of Okinawa.

To offload the cargo and equipment from the ships and on the beach, Qui Nhon needed stevedores. The 155th Terminal Service Company, under the command of CPT Ralph C. Sande, also deployed from Fort Story. O'Donovan knew the men of this company very well since his company had also deployed from Fort Story. The 155th had been alerted on 5 April and the personnel deployed from Langley Air Force Base, Virginia, in five C-124s. The personnel arrived at Saigon on 4 June and they then flew up to Qui Nhon the next day. Since there was no

transportation battalion headquarters at Qui Nhon at that time, the companies were attached to the 5th Ordnance Battalion for administrative and logistic support. Since CPT O'Donovan was the senior Transportation Corps officer, he controlled all transportation activities at Qui Nhon from 2 June to 9 August until a battalion headquarters arrived.

These units arrived with what they could carry, just their basic issue. As the tentage arrived, the soldiers erected their tent city in an area of real estate that was 200 yards by 700 yards along the airfield. Space was scarce since no unit have ventured away from the security of the airfield up to that time. CPT O'Donovan became the initial camp commander. During that first month, soldiers just tried to exist. The population crowded to over 1,500 soldiers in that confined area. Their B and C rations were already prestocked in tents at the airfield. O'Donovan remembered, "I might say in passing that this was an eat your way into a home program. They [rations] were all under tentage and you could have the tent as soon as you ate your way through the rations. There were sufficient tents each day set up to take care of the next day's arrivals." The only problem came in a shortage of sandbags for the blast walls around the tents. COL Scott, Deputy Commander of 1st Logistics Command, flew in, walked around and left in a quiet manner. "The next day sandbags fell out of the sky instead of people." Evidently, COL Scott reported that one enemy mortar round would kill 500 soldiers. By beginning of June they had their tents up, a consolidated mess hall, security established and a transportation battalion organization established.

The first major problem that became evident to the Americans was that their was a shortage of real estate. All the good property belonged to someone. The Vietnamese firm, Tai Hai, had been offloading US AID cargo at a small commercial pier and LSTs right on the beach since the 1950s. The rest belonged to the city for locals to go swimming. The Vietnamese government had paid the province chief for the land but he did not want to release it. The 40th Vietnamese Terminal Service Company, commanded by CPT Thien, had to take the property at gun point. For that reason the Americans had a beach operation. Neither did it please the locals when the BARC platoon began erecting a fence around the area cutting them off from their local recreation spot.

The beach was a bare strip of land pointing out to sea and a long peninsula stretched along the coast to create a protected harbor. The peninsula culminated with a large hill directly across from the beach. However, the shallow gradient did not allow the sea going vessels to anchor in the harbor. Instead they had to anchor two to three miles out at sea. T-1 tankers when a third full could also reach the inner harbor. The peninsula only provided protection from rough seas for offloading cargo on the beach facing inland. The tidal rise and fall was insignificant and LCUs could not get stranded if they wanted to. The LCUs did have trouble negotiating the sand bar although the smaller LCMs or the amphibians did not have any trouble. The Americans named their beach, Red Beach. The Vietnamese ran the LST beach.

Since O'Donovan did not have a bulldozer, he had a hundred men with entrenching tools build the first beach ramp. A Vietnamese from one of the engineer battalions passed by and said that was a silly way to do a real simple job. Even the Chinese did not work like that. He told them that the Vietnamese were not going to let the Americans work that way either. He went down the street and borrowed a bulldozer from a Vietnamese Army R&U. He brought to the

Americans and said, "Okay, now when you get finished with the bulldozer, you come back and you see that American advisor and he should tell you how to get the road grader when you're finished with the bulldozer." The standing joke became, "The thing that was holding up our mission – or our greatest enemies were in order: Americans, weather, and then the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong weren't much of a problem."

The 155th Terminal Service Company began discharging the LARCs and company equipment from the first deep draft ship, *USS Comet*, at anchor in the bay although their equipment would not arrive at Qui Nhon. They operated 24-hours a day while the Vietnamese only worked during daylight hours. However, the local Vietnamese took a siesta in the afternoon because of the heat. O'Donovan allowed his men to adjust to the climate by having a double lunch break. In other words, one half of the crew ate early and the other half ate second. They did no work until both had finished. They maintained this routine for a month until became accustomed to working in the heat. He had no heat casualties during those hot summer months.

The 155th would send the ship platoon to unload an arriving ship as soon as it anchored offshore while the shore platoon unloaded cargo off of the LCMs and amphibians on the beach. The temperature became as hot as 120 degrees down inside the holds. One other platoon maintained the equipment and another documented the cargo coming through. Because of the shortage of property, they had no depot to drop off the cargo so they had to keep it on the vessels until called for. O'Donovan summarized, "It's always been my personal belief that someone thought it could float in the water until it was needed because it was a boat type unit, and all the terminal service equipment could float with it." The transportation soldiers also provided security for their port against possible VC activity.

Because the transportation companies did not any trucks, they had to march the one mile distance from the airfield to the beach thus wasting time. After a twelve hour shift in the hold, a man was not in any condition to march a mile through soft sand. O'Donovan wanted to move his the terminal service company right onto the beach. In the middle of June, COL Dolan arrived by plane and said, "I'm here to solve your problems. What are your problems." O'Donovan took him down to the beach and showed the colonel what he wanted to do. The colonel said he would go have a talk with the ordnance battalion commander, O'Donovan's superior. They set up a perimeter and lived right in the area where they worked. This also alleviated the overcrowding at the airfield. He turned command of the tent city at the airfield to CPT McKenzie.

By the end of June, O'Donovan received the task to send one of his LARC platoons up to Da Nang on a thirty-day temporary change of duty to help the Navy deliver ammunition to the Air Force. Every thirty days, they received another thirty-day extension and remained up there.

O'Donovan kept close contact with Colonel Dolan by telephone and received most of his technical data and instructions. However, the phone system had problems. O'Donovan had to spend up to two hours just trying to get hold of the Transportation Officers at Logistics Command. Even the arrival of his next unit did not help matters any.

The 41st Signal Battalion arrived with a signal company by ship on 24 July. O'Donovan went immediately with a boarding party to visit the battalion commander while the stevedore company

commander met with the ship captain. O'Donovan asked the colonel how he wanted his equipment unloaded. The equipment was stored in two hatches, one for B-bags and the company TAT and the other with battalion headquarters TAT. The battalion commander wanted the hatch with the finance records unloaded first since his men had not been paid for half a month. The LARCs brought the men directly to their sleeping area right on the beach. Since they had nothing else to do, they constructed their sandbag revetments around their sleeping area. The 400 signal men went to sleep in their shelter halves by 2000 that night and were paid the next day. O'Donovan remembered that they had filled so many sandbags through the night that their revetment looked like the Great Wall of China. No other arriving unit had to fill a sandbag. They just borrowed from the pile. The LCMs and LCUs delivered their TAT the next day.

Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment, 394th Transportation Battalion (Terminal) had been alerted at Fort Eustis in July for movement to Vietnam. Its personnel had departed Langley Air Force Base on a C-130 on 2 August and landed in Saigon on 7 August. LTC Thomas D. Emery, 394th Battalion Commander, arrived on 9 August and immediately assumed command of all the transportation units with mission of operating and clearing the port of Qui Nhon. The battalion headquarters arrived on 12 August 1965 and was assigned to the 4th Transportation Command (TRANSCOM), which arrived from Fort Eustis. While an average of 500 tons were arriving a day, Emery was informed to prepare for a significant increase with the arrival of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, with the 1st Republic of Korea Division right behind it. The next months were spent offloading the combat units then the ship-to-shore operations focused on sustainment.

During the month of April 1966, civil disturbances broke out at Da Nang. The resulting roadblocks prevented entry and exit from the installations there. On 11 April, the 344th LARC Company deployed there because it could with minimum risks travel by water routes and short land trips. Because of the maintenance and supply difficulties with the LARC-Vs, the 359th Terminal Battalion decided to transfer the 344th LARC to Cam Ranh Bay under the 10th Transportation Battalion. About that time the 458th LARC was transitioning from amphibious operations to port security. The 344th LARC would pick up the ship-to-shore duties at Cam Ranh Bay.

The 344th LARC was inactivated on 20 October 1967.