

## From West Point to Vietnam

After graduating from West Point and completing Airborne and Ranger Schools, I traveled with my new bride in November 1965 to Munich, Germany for what I expected to be a three-year assignment with the 3rd Engineer Battalion, 24th Infantry Division. However, after six months, I was on orders to Fort Lewis, Wash., to be part of the activation of the 93rd Engineer Battalion (Construction). I arrived there in July 1966.

Then in February 1967, I was told I was to become the Battalion S-4 (Supply Officer) and start a seven-week Supply Officer's Course at Fort Lee, Va., the following week. So my wife and I packed up our Volkswagen and began the trek across the country. We drove 2,400-mi in three days and decided to leave our car in Houston with a relative and fly to Washington, D.C., where we would pick up a car from my parents and drive to Fort Lee.

Following the Supply Officer's Course, my wife and I flew back to Houston and picked up our car, then headed back to Fort Lewis, this time taking two weeks rather than three days. We arrived in late March, just in time to prepare the battalion for deployment. I was in the advance party that flew to Vietnam on June 8, 1967, while the majority of the soldiers and equipment was transported and arrived some two weeks later.

The battalion was assigned to one of the primary base camps of the 9th Infantry Division called Bear Cat. The base was near Long Binh, about 50-mi from Saigon. The mission was to establish a battalion base camp and construct facilities at the Long Thanh airfield. There were no existing facilities for the base camp so we positioned the battalion adjacent to the airfield, which had a runway, taxiway and limited supporting facilities. As the Battalion S-4, it was my job to procure the construction materials needed to construct the base camp of administrative offices, barracks, mess halls, shower facilities and utilities. I frequently drove from Bear Cat to Saigon in a jeep, most times with a driver but sometimes on my own. Since we were not the only unit setting up a base camp, the acquisition of construction materials became a major challenge, requiring some good negotiation skills to get what we needed and delivered to our location.

In October 1967, I was promoted to captain and took command of Company D, 93rd Engineer Battalion, which had about 250 soldiers and a substantial amount of construction equipment. We had major projects on the airfield, including constructing a taxiway, parking aprons, revetments for Huey helicopters and fixed wing aircraft, a passenger terminal, water tower, aircraft hangar, dining hall, and a dog kennel. Constructing airfield facilities was a high priority. We operated equipment 24/7. I would often go out to visit our projects and in the evening could be seen operating a tractor-scraper or dozer. We had to move a substantial amount of dirt, much of it composed of laterite.



Part of the engineer effort in Vietnam was the development of the Vietnamese Corps of Engineers. My company developed and instructed Vietnamese engineers on the design and construction of timber trestle bridges. We also did some work in support of the Vietnamese, including a civic action project that replaced a failing bridge over a major highway with a modern structure.

I changed command on May 22, 1968 and returned to the United States with a deep appreciation of the capabilities of military engineering in a combat zone.

During my time in Vietnam, the draft was the primary way the Army recruited soldiers. Some had a great attitude and others were there only because they were drafted and could not wait to leave. The Army also allowed some soldiers to re-join and gave them a promotion from their grade when they left the service. This often elevated some soldiers above their leadership capabilities. As a young officer, I found it a challenge to lead and motivate this diverse group of draftees.

The units of the 93rd Engineer Battalion had an amazing list of accomplishments that were made possible by the talents of the engineer soldiers. Many of the drafted soldiers came into the Army with skills as carpenters, electricians and equipment operators that contributed to the battalion's mission. Others went through Army schools on the way to Vietnam. In either case, we were never unable to accomplish a mission due to a lack of engineering or construction expertise.

I have often told people that despite being away from my family for a year in a combat zone, serving with the 93rd Engineer Battalion in Vietnam was truly one of the most challenging and rewarding assignments in my military career. Perhaps one day I will return to see if the Long Thanh airfield is still there.

**-Lt. Col. Robert Wolff, Ph.D., P.E.,  
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