

War Trophies of the Past

By Mr. Garry Hollands and Mr. Wil Nelson

The role of the United States Army combat engineer usually gains little press coverage, while the infantry and armor Soldiers often gather accolades for their endeavors. However, thirty-eight years ago in Vietnam, American combat engineers were engaged in the largest and most successful combat engineering feat of that long-ago war—one that tested all their skills and ingenuity and brought them recognition—Operation Horace Greeley. The operation involved the construction of Route 547—also known as the A Shau Expressway—from Hue across the steep jungle-covered mountains of the Ammonite Cordillera and into the infamous A Shau Valley.

The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had captured the A Shau Valley in 1966, driving out the United States Special Forces from their camps at A Luoi, Ta Bat, and A Shau. Attempts by the 1st Cavalry Division, and then by the 101st Airborne Division (Air Mobile), to retake the Valley first failed in 1968, primarily due to poor weather. Lieutenant General Richard Stilwell, commander of XXIV Corps, and whose area of responsibility was I Corps Tactical Zone (the five northernmost

provinces of South Vietnam), determined that an all-weather road would be constructed to bring armor, tracked artillery, and supplies to support infantry actions sweeping the Valley. To achieve this tactical necessity, engineers of the 45th Engineer Group, 18th Engineer Brigade were gathered in March 1969 to form Task Force Tiger. Led by the 27th Engineer Battalion (Combat) out of Gia Le Combat Base, south of Hue, the task force also included the following units:

- 59th Engineer Company (Land Clearing)
- 511th Engineer Company (Panel Bridge)
- 591st Engineer Company (Light Equipment)
- 630th Engineer Company (Light Equipment)
- C Company, 1st Engineer Battalion, Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)
- 2d Platoon, A Company, 14th Engineer Battalion (Combat)
- D Company, 14th Engineer Battalion (Combat)
- 1st Equipment Platoon, D Company, 87th Engineer Battalion (Construction)



This 85-millimeter ammunition was discovered while clearing the jungle beside Route 547 in Vietnam.



Soldiers display a Russian 85-millimeter field-piece captured near FSB Blaze.

The task force's mission was to—

- Construct 55 kilometers of Route 547, a heavy-duty, two-lane, all-weather road from Fire Support Base (FSB) Bastogne to FSB Blaze, and a one-lane, all-weather road to FSB Rendezvous in the A Shau Valley.
- Construct necessary bridging.
- Construct two FSBs.
- Make tactical improvements to Route 548 in the A Shau Valley.

Operation Horace Greeley supported the 101st Airborne Division's Operation Massachusetts Striker and Operation Apache Snow, which included the infamous battles of Dong A Tay (Bloody Ridge) and Dong Ap Bai (Hamburger Hill). The engineers began Operation Horace Greeley on 20 March 1969 and constructed the road to allow the armor of the 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry Regiment, to reach the Valley in May. Operation Horace Greeley officially ended on 29 September 1969, in preparation for the monsoon season.

A critical part of the road construction was the clearing of the jungle for 200 meters on both sides of the road to help prevent ambushes. The 59th Engineer Company (Land Clearing), with its 30 Rome plows, accomplished this portion of the mission. In doing so, the Rome plows uncovered large amounts of enemy equipment, bunkers, ammunition, and weapons. Numerous small trucks, most of them destroyed by earlier air attacks, were also uncovered. While clearing vegetation along Route 458 in the A Shau Valley, the 59th discovered a Russian bulldozer that the NVA had abandoned when it fled the Valley in May 1969. The dozer had a broken

clutch, so the Soldiers towed it along the perilous one-lane road carved through the steep mountains from FSB Rendezvous to FSB Cannon. There it was placed on a low-boy trailer and hauled back to Gia Le. This dozer was of American design but had been manufactured in a factory shipped to Russia during World War II as part of the Lend-Lease Program.

Back at Gia Le, the dozer was repaired and made operational. (See sidebar, page 42.) The dozer's clutch throwout bearing was replaced with one from a five-ton dump truck. That replacement would not be surprising, given the Army's habit of using common parts in many vehicles over a long period of time. That the dozer was an exact replica of an American Lend-Lease dozer was evident from the numerous nameplates copied on various parts of the equipment, including one on the right-hand side of the engine block. The casting duplicated everything—including the fasteners that secured the plate to the engine block—except the lettering and numbering on the nameplate.

Of more significance was the discovery in the Rao Ninh Valley of three buried Russian 85-millimeter artillery pieces, complete with cleaning equipment and ammunition. Buried nearby were three small stake-bed trucks that may have been used to pull the artillery. It was rumored that these cannons were loaded and a few rounds sent into Laos. At that time, these were the first artillery pieces captured by engineer Soldiers since World War II. One of these guns was shipped by Major General William T. Bradley, then commander of United States Army Engineer Construction Agency, Vietnam, to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, where



Engineers inspect a Russian bulldozer captured in the A Shau Valley.

it is on display at the Engineer Museum. Another was lost en route to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and the third was presented to the mayor of Hue. It was probably recaptured by the NVA when Hue fell in 1975.

Of the many heroes of the Vietnam War, the combat engineers who drove the Rome plows stand out near the top.

officer until June 1969. Then he served as a platoon leader and the executive officer of C Company, 27th Engineer Battalion (Combat).

Mr. Nelson, who was a captain, served as the 27th Engineer Battalion maintenance officer from mid-January to mid-December 1971.

These young men operated their powerful machines on dangerously steep slopes, pushing down vegetation full of poisonous snakes, stinging insects, and occasional mines and snipers. They pulled guard duty every night, then went out each morning and worked all day in the oppressive heat, risking their lives at every turn. 

Mr. Hollands, a first lieutenant during his tour in Vietnam, was the battalion intelligence