

Bamboo to Blue:

Army Engineers in Vietnam Refurbish a Captured Bulldozer

By Mr. Harold Walden

In 1969, a new engineer equipment mechanic was assigned to the maintenance section of the 27th Engineer Battalion (Combat) at Gia Le, near Hue in South Vietnam. While constructing Route 247, American Soldiers happened upon an abandoned Russian-made bulldozer in the A Shau Valley. One of the battalion's lowboy trailers brought the little dozer—about the size of a Caterpillar D6—into the maintenance driveway, where it was off-loaded. A former operator had constructed bamboo-and-leaf additions to make the bulldozer more comfortable. It was surprising that anyone could have spotted the camouflaged machine in the middle of dense forest.

The new Soldier, just a couple months out of mechanic school, was designated to work with a more seasoned mechanic to refurbish the dozer. Immediately, they began to undo all of "Charlie's" skilled bamboo home improvements. Although the Russian manufacturers used metric nuts and bolts, the Soldiers made their tools work. They did extensive rebuilding of the gasoline pony motor used to start the diesel engine. They replaced the clutch with one from a

five-ton dump truck, installed new batteries and a starter, cleaned the fuel injectors and fuel pump, lubricated all the zerk fittings, and changed all the fluids and filters. Finally, they tightened the track. They cranked up the pony motor and engaged the clutch. To their amazement, the bulldozer started up and ran.

The warrant officer who supervised the maintenance operation wanted to make a big impression on the battalion commander, so he got some powder blue paint and the bulldozer got a shiny new coat. When a new battalion commander arrived soon after, the captured equipment played a special role. The outgoing commander reviewed the troops from atop the powder blue dozer, while the lead mechanic drove his pride and joy.



Mr. Walden was a private first class fresh from mechanics training at the United States Army Engineer School at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, when he helped salvage the captured bulldozer at Gia Le.