
The 300th Military Police Company and Lam Son 719

By Command Sergeant Major James W. Frye (Retired) and Mr. Andy Watson

Operation Lam Son 719 was an offensive campaign conducted by South Vietnamese forces in the southeastern portion of Laos from 8 February to 25 March 1971. The operation was a test of the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese Army. Although South Vietnamese troops took the lead in combat, U.S. forces provided support. However, American ground forces were prohibited from entering Laotian territory. The strategic goal of the campaign was the disruption of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which traversed Laos and was used to supply the North Vietnamese Army in South Vietnam.

300th Military Police Company in Vietnam

The 300th Military Police Company arrived in Vietnam on 25 June 1966 and was initially billeted at the Shes Compound, Saigon, but later moved to the 92d Military Police Battalion area at Pershing Field. Assigned to the 92d Military Police Battalion and under the operational control of the 4th Transportation Terminal Command provost marshal, the company's mission mainly consisted of providing physical security for Saigon Harbor. Other missions varied from providing traffic control in and around Saigon to serving as escorts for very important persons (VIPs). The mission changed when a new harbor facility (Newport) was constructed four miles north of the older Saigon port. Due to increased water and ground traffic, the security mission at Newport was expanded as operations at the original port were gradually phased out.

When the 92d Military Police Battalion was inactivated in February 1970, the 300th Military Police Company was assigned to the 95th Military Police Battalion. Harbor security missions and other commitments continued. The 300th supported customs operations at Bien Hoa and security operations at United Service Organizations shows. They also transported military prisoners to the Long Binh Stockade. In addition, members of the 1st Platoon were deployed to Di An Base Camp to perform military police tasks and receive further on-the-job training.

By December 1970, the 300th Military Police Company had completed their assistance with Bien Hoa customs operations and had finished providing security for the Bob Hope Christmas Show; operations at Newport Harbor and Di An continued. But, the company was to start the New Year with a special guest and an unexpected message.

Staff Sergeant Peter Porche, 1st Platoon, remembered the visit, stating, "Brigadier General [Wallace] Wittwer, the 18th Military Police Brigade commander, made a visit to the 300th Military Police Company, and a company formation was called. [Brigadier General] Wittwer told the men that they did really well on the past IG [inspector general] inspection and he had selected the 300th for a special mission. He couldn't tell the troops what or where, but he was sure that they would make the brigade proud. He then left, and the gates were closed to our compound; no one was allowed in or out."

While on lock-down status, the unit was notified to be prepared to move to any destination within twelve hours' notice, so personnel and equipment were quickly organized and readied. At that time, the 300th was understrength. The first sergeant had returned to the United States on a prisoner shipment and had been reassigned there. The operations sergeant had been flagged and could not be deployed. Within days, seven other Soldiers were dropped due to medical problems, adding to the personnel shortage. Replacements were obtained from other military police companies, but refresher training was required.

Sergeant Carl Mann, of the 300th, experienced some surprises in addition to duty station changes. "After serving a brief stint as 'dock guard,' I was assigned as a clerk in the provost marshal's office," he said. "Then, in the latter part of January 1971, I returned to the company area following the completion of my duty to find a large contingent of 'strangers' occupying the company area—more specifically, my housing area. After a few days of wondering and speculating, we were informed that our company TO&E [table of organization and equipment] was being enlarged and combined with other units."

To remedy the problem of enlisted leadership, First Sergeant James Frye (557th Military Police Company) was selected to serve as the first sergeant of the 300th. Command Sergeant Major Frye (Retired) remembers, “The 95th Military Police Battalion commander and command sergeant major called me to headquarters. The battalion commander told me that the 557th did well on the IG inspection and that I was being assigned to the 300th Military Police Company because they were being deployed on a classified mission and they did not have a first sergeant.”

Involvement of the 300th in Lam Son 719

The message to deploy was received on 30 January 1971. Information indicated that the 300th would be deployed from different air bases, but the names and locations were initially kept secret. Finally, on the day of flight, word was received that half of the company would deploy from Tan Son Nhut Air Base. This group consisted of the company commander, Captain Jacob D. Baergen; company executive officer, First Lieutenant Keith Phoenix (who was also serving as the supply, motor, and mess officer); Headquarters Platoon; and 1st Platoon. The second group, consisting of First Sergeant Frye and 2d and 3d Platoons, would deploy from Ben Hoa Air Base. Mission details and orders were to be received upon arrival at the new (and, thus far, unknown) destination. At this point, the members of the 300th knew only that the unit would be operating as an independent military police company.

Once the two groups reached their departure bases, they loaded onto C-130 aircraft. After the group that departed from Ben Hoa was airborne, First Sergeant Frye asked the pilot about the destination and was informed that the group would land at Quang Tri. Frye was also informed that aircraft at Tan Son Nhut were grounded due to bad weather and poor visibility.

Command Sergeant Major Frye (Retired) remembers encountering new challenges on the first day of the operation. “I landed at Quang Tri with my two platoons,” he recalls. “The clouds were so low the C-130s hit the runway as they dropped from the low-hanging, thick clouds. It was so cold and rainy that we thought we had landed in North Vietnam. The aircraft were unloaded, and the C-130s departed. I moved the troops under an open, old aircraft (overhead cover) hangar and began to look for a contact person. I did locate the commander of Charlie Company of the 504th Military Police Battalion and informed him of our situation and that we would need help because of the cold and night was approaching. He was able to put us inside one of his buildings, out of the cold. I also told him we did not have any rations. He told me he only drew rations for his troops and we could go to his

mess area and eat after his troops ate. It was a cold night; we bedded down.”

The other half of the 300th Military Police Company arrived at Quang Tri the next day. Sergeant Mann was assigned a special task. “Top [First Sergeant Frye] entrusted me with accompanying and safeguarding the company papers, colors, etcetera,” Mann said. “As a result, I found myself seated solo in the back of a C-130 air transport with the company jeep and trailer and other equipment, wondering where we were headed and what would welcome us. When the plane landed and the crew lowered its ramp, I was amazed to see the high volume of military armored vehicles and military moving up the highway and the amount of planes being unloaded at the air base. Top met me at the bottom of the ramp with, ‘How was your flight?’ and his quick, assuring smile. Our company, equipment, and materials were moved to Quang Tri.”

An officer from the XXIV Corps Provost Marshal’s Office (which was located in Da Nang and controlled all U.S. ground forces in Region 1 [comprised of the five northern provinces of South Vietnam]) briefed the 300th, informing them that things were ahead of schedule and that they would be moving farther north—to the Dong Ha Fire Base, which was a small, semisecure compound. Regarding the briefing, Sergeant Mann recalls, “We were informed that it was our ‘privilege’ to be chosen to participate in an ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam]-American joint effort that would be known as ‘Lam Son 719.’ Our role as military police would be to support the transporting of materials and supplies to the various fire bases along [Main Supply] Route [MSR] QL-9 to ensure the success of the ARVN troops that were trying to cut off the effectiveness of [the] Communist transport system most commonly known as the ‘Ho Chi Minh Trail.’ This would require various MP [military police] troops to escort transportation convoys, secure crossroads, and ‘maintain peace’ on various fire bases and support headquarters. In essence, many of us were destined to become combat MPs!”

The 300th traveled to Dong Ha as a full company, where they were informed that they were one week ahead of schedule. They were directed to establish company headquarters and prepare for convoy escort on MSR QL-9, which was the most northern route running parallel to the demilitarized zone (DMZ) from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh into Laos. On their second day at Dong Ha, the 300th received a message indicating that they were to move a platoon to Vandergrift Fire Base. Then, a second message directed them to move another platoon to Khe Sanh.

The escort duty was made exceptionally difficult by the narrow, muddy, 18-mile defile that traversed the

mountainous terrain from Vandergrift Fire Base to Khe Sanh; only multiwheel-drive vehicles could travel the route. A combat engineer detachment (with heavy equipment) was positioned near Old French Bridge, which was located midway along the defile, to provide road maintenance. One night, the detachment was ambushed by the Vietcong (VC) and they sustained very heavy casualties.

While American forces were not allowed to cross the border into Laos, North Vietnamese forces were under no such restrictions. According to Frye, "Our mission was to move convoys from Dong Ha to the Laos border. We had checkpoints/roadblocks at Vandergrift (2d Platoon) and Khe Sanh (3d Platoon). Rules of engagement became second nature immediately. The MPs became aware of how to move a convoy thru the kill zone, call in fire support, etcetera. For some reason, someone believed the convoys would be safer at night but this proved to be false. There were many ambush sites on [MSR] QL-9, and the VC were able to slow or knock out most of the night convoys in those areas. The day convoys became the only way to move supplies. The convoys were 60 to 100 vehicles transporting potable water, food, medical supplies, jet propellant [JP]-4/diesel fuel, ammunition, and ordnance. The transportation companies had gun trucks located in the convoy, providing firepower that was necessary to move convoys through an ambush."

As escorts along the dangerous route, Soldiers of the 300th Military Police Company were equipped with jeeps and V-100 Commando armored security vehicles. Although some of the V-100s were organic to the unit, some had been requested from the 18th Military Police Brigade. Companies from within the 18th provided the additional V-100s. Frye stated, "Even though they were welcome, the V-100s were in bad shape. We needed tires, parts, and repairs. The motor sergeant, Staff Sergeant Williams, was able to keep our vehicles operational; and Supply Sergeant Morgan had a difficult time getting the needed supplies and equipment for this operation, but somehow he was able to meet most of our needs. He was unable to obtain tires using proper requisition; but the ARVN had V-100 tires, and a trade was made with no questions asked. We also had 'skin jeeps' with M-60s [machine guns]. We called them 'skin jeeps' because you did not have any protection—just your helmet and flack vest."

Specialist Andrew Ross, also of the 300th wrote, "Huge convoys were assembled in Quang Tri to make the often treacherous drive to Khe Sanh. Interspersed in the convoys were gun trucks; armored, five-ton trucks outfitted with .50-caliber machine guns; M-60s; Honeywell grenade launchers; and about a half dozen highly motivated Soldiers providing overwhelmingly suppressing firepower. Our V-100 escort vehicles, also heavily armed, took their positions in the convoys and in the very front, leading

the way. In every convoy, there were a couple of our military police patrol leaders in their jeeps. 'Move out,' the order was given. Onward and upward they went—often driving through the rain—[along] the single-lane, winding roads carved high into the sides of the mountains. The 18-mile defile would be muddy, with only multiwheel-drive vehicles allowed. Some of the vehicles would bog down, and the combat engineers located in the middle of the defile used bulldozers to keep the convoy moving."

Sergeant Mann recalls, "As a result of our assignment, the 300th Military Police Company was moved up one morning in late January [at] approximately 1:00 a.m. to an area that moved us closer to Khe Sanh and, ultimately, the DMZ. My particular assignment was to lead a group of six men in three skin jeeps located at Fire Base Vandergrift, approximately 1.5 miles from the 'Rock Pile' [hill and site of heavy resistance on the route]. I had the privilege of making some good friends during this time. We were assigned temporarily to the 5th Mechanized Infantry Division. This was of particular interest to me, since my father was assigned to the 5th Infantry Division during World War II and I also had the same rank [E-5, sergeant] as he did. I have always been proud to carry his name, but never more than at that time."

Captain James G. Ferguson took command of the 300th Military Police Company on 22 February 1971; and on 25 February 1971, tragedy struck a night patrol. Specialist Peter M. Lopez was killed and his squad leader, Sergeant Peter Van Prooijen, was wounded when a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) struck their jeep during a VC ambush. Military police night convoys were terminated after the incident. Although there were other casualties and numerous "close calls" along the road and in the company area, Specialist Lopez was the only 300th Military Police Company fatality during the Lam Son 719 operation.

Sergeant Mann recalls, "After a period of time, my supervising sergeant told me that my 'services' [administrative duties] were requested at the company area in Dong Ha, but it was my decision whether to go back or not. I took a few days to think about it, and after some time, I told him I was willing to go back. I returned to the company area on the morning of 25 February 1971. On the night of 25 February 1971, [Specialist] Peter Mitchell Lopez Jr. was killed by an RPG round while patrolling Highway QL-9. Peter was driving the jeep I would have been driving. I think of him and my decision every day!"

As patrols continued, other operational concerns surfaced. Frye remembers, "The communication chief erected 292s [antennas] at all three locations, giving us our own commo [communication]. The MPs were accustomed to the Radio 10 series. Going tactical was a change to most."

And there were other interesting incidents. Sergeant Bob Dalton, 3d Platoon, recalls, "We were located at the end of MSR QL-9. We would sweep the 18-mile defile from Khe Sanh to Vandergrift every morning and just before sundown with gun jeeps. After sundown, it belonged to Charlie [VC]. On one occasion, I was traveling with an advisor on the defile and we were near the Old French Bridge. We came under mortar attack. The carburetor foot feed rod came off, and he and I got our carcasses out of the jeep and into a ditch, and the VC decided to be quiet. We were able to fix the jeep and get out. Two VC were captured and turned over to my platoon [as prisoners of war]. One of the captured VC was an officer of low grade, and he had 300 vials of cocaine. One was an enlisted soldier. We released them and the cocaine to the proper authorities. We were receiving artillery fire almost daily. [VC] hit the helo [helicopter] rearmament pad [and] blew up a couple of helos. The Hueys [helicopters] were making strafing runs on the hills around us." Staff Sergeant Porche remembers another incident, stating, "The Rock Pile was in my patrol area between Dong Ha and Fire Support Base [FSB] Vandergrift. I remember, in February 1971, we were escorting a convoy of 5,000-gallon JP-4 tankers from Quang Tri to Khe Sanh when we got hit hard at the Rock Pile. 1st Platoon MPs pulled what was left of the convoy into FSB Vandergrift to wait until daylight to continue on to Khe Sanh. I took over as convoy commander, and Lieutenant Phoenix got us some medevacs to get out the wounded under air support from a couple of Cobra gunships that laid down some heavy firepower as we moved the remainder of the convoy. 2d and 3d Platoons dug bunkers to protect themselves from incoming fire."

Enemy attacks were also a problem in the company area. VC sappers occasionally lived in spider holes¹ inside the perimeter of Fire Base Vandergrift. They came out at night and used satchel charges to blow up fuel bladders and helicopters. Specialist Virgil Miller wrote, "As I recall, it was a very dark night—maybe 2:00 a.m. I had to step out of my bunker. I heard a commotion coming from the other side of our area of operation. I ran over there with my .45 in hand; I always carried [it] under my left arm. As I got there, one military police Soldier yelled 'stop' two times, and all at once, the VC [sapper] threw a grenade—with shrapnel hitting a fellow military policeman in the right leg and me in the left leg. The other military police Soldier shot the sapper. I ran back to my bunker to get my M-16 [rifle] and yelled on my way 'Get out of your bunkers; there's sappers in the wire.' After getting my M-16, I took cover near the top of my bunker, where I could have two lines of fire. By then, the platoon was in a defensive mode. Some shooting started. A second sapper ran into one [of] our bunkers. [There was] some more shooting, and one of our men shot an M-79 [grenade

type] round into the bunker. At the same time, I saw the sapper come out to the right rear of the bunker and he ran over to a dead tree, where he stayed a short time. Then, he began to run between popped flares and one of our guys behind my bunker shot once; then his M-60 jammed. As the sapper ran for the wire, I put him down. When the sun came up and it was all over, the wounded military policeman and I went to the aid tent down the hill. I was told my leg wasn't bad, and returned to duty. The other military police Soldier was not sent back [to] duty; I assumed he was medevaced."

Following the Operation: Chu Lai Base Camp

Lam Son 719 operations wound down in early April 1971. The 2d and 3d Platoons of the 300th Military Police Company were pulled from Vandergrift and Khe Sanh, and stand-down operations began at the A Company, 504th Military Police Battalion, area at Phu Bai. On 7 April 1971, the 300th Military Police Company Lam Son 719 mission was complete, and 1st Platoon began their stand-down at Quang Tri. However, new challenges were in store for the 300th.

In late April 1971, the company convoyed to the Chu Lai Base Camp. From Chu Lai, 3d platoon was divided into detachments and sent to serve at Hoi An, Tam Ky, and Quang Ngai. Those members of the 300th who remained at Chu Lai continued to provide combined road patrols with the 23d Infantry (Americal) Division Military Police Company, travelling north and south along MSR QL-1. In addition, the 300th provided security for the prisoner-of-war hospital at Chu Lai and support to the 23d Infantry Division provost marshal.

Frye described some of the problems and complications facing the 300th at Chu Lai. "During this time, we Soldiers were seeing the erosion of national will," he said. "The antiwar movement at home was high, young men were trying to avoid the draft, the drug culture was 'in,' [and] combat refusals [and] 'fraggings' all combined to undermine military discipline." Frye continued, "When our mess became operational, the division had combat refusals² that were told to eat at our mess. They caused delays in the chow line. As a result, some of the military police Soldiers complained and I assigned NCOs [non-commissioned officers] to the chow line, with instructions to move the chow line without interruptions. This did not go well with them, but it was good for my troops. Some [combat refusals] went to the IG."

An attack followed. Frye said, "It appeared [that] those combat refusals were involved in the fragging of my living area. My operations sergeant and I were in it

at the time. Two grenades were thrown, with only one going off. God was watching over us.” An investigation was conducted, but the attacker’s identity was never determined.

First Sergeant Frye was reassigned to the continental United States in August 1971. In September 1971, the 300th began moving to a new station at Long Binh, where 1st and 2d Platoons served with the new U.S. Army Drug Abuse Holding Center Vietnam. The company also provided gate security at Long Bihn and returned to its mission at Newport Harbor.

Afterward

In April 1972, the 300th Military Police Company was inactivated in Vietnam. The 300th was reactivated in Germany in October 1977 and continues to serve with distinction.

Command Sergeant Major Frye (Retired) states, “I strongly feel the 300th MP Company was called upon to perform a mission with unclear objectives [but] came together (cohesion) in a combat environment that would make the 18th Military Police Brigade commander proud. Unfortunately, the courage of the men of the 300th Military Police Company was never reported.”

Endnotes:

¹A spider hole is a small, one-man foxhole, which is often camouflaged and used for ambushes.

²A combat refusal was a Soldier who refused to obey orders.

Command Sergeant Major Frye (Retired) served as the first Regimental Command Sergeant Major of the Military Police Regiment, September 1980–October 1984. He is a recipient of the Bronze Star Medal with three oak-leaf clusters. He is also a member of the Military Police Corps Regimental Hall of Fame.

Mr. Watson is the U.S. Army Military Police historian.
