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THE HISTORY OF 86 TRANSPORT PLATOON - JULY 1965 TO FEBRUARY 1968 AS I REMEMBER IT - BY JOHN HOARE

BACKGROUND

In the mid-sixties, 86 Platoon was a field force. L of C unit and designated a unit of 1st Logistic Support Force (LSF). It was under the local command of HQ 25 Company RAASC, also located in Puckapunyal. Other sub-units in the Company were 87 Transport Platoon (Tipper) and 158 Transport Platoon (Tank Transporter). 86 Platoon was a 23 x vehicle general service (GS) platoon, equipped with Mk III International, 2 1/2 ton, 4 x 4 cargo trucks. The establishment was 1 x Officer and 55 All Ranks organised into a HQ and 4 x sections each of 5 x vehicles. The platoon had its own war stores (TWET) and Q-account.

Except for exercises, the platoon rarely practiced its FF role and all but one section of vehicles were kept in storage in IBOD, Bandiana. When not in the field, the Platoon functioned as the Puckapunyal Transport Unit. The OC 86 Tpt Pl. carried a sub-account from Area for around 80 x vehicles, which included staff cars, utilities, buses, trucks, semis, water trucks (Country Fire Authority duties). In fact it supported the Puckapunyal Area for all administrative tasks, provided a full section of personnel to support Bandiana Area and to run the Depot POL point, provided support for cadet and army reserve units in camp and a thousand other duties that were not its field force role.

PART 1 - PUCKAPUNYAL

JULY - DECEMBER 1965

On 2 July 1965, I took over from Lt Phil Dawe as Officer Commanding 86 Transport Platoon (GS) RAASC. At that time, Field Force logistic units lost many of their personnel to support area (ASA) units between major exercises and in some cases, ASA units lost personnel to FF HQ for exercise periods and in case of mobilisation. In those days, a lot of people had two postings designated.

86 Tpt Pl was no exception, the whole platoon being used in ASA roles. This was frustrating as it was difficult to get anything done for the platoon's war role. All FF units were supposed to be maintained at DP1 levels of readiness, so that only pre-embarkation training and inoculations etc had to occur prior to mobilisation.

So, not a great deal happened during July - December 1965 except to:

- box all vehicle CES and war stores fit for ship travel and to get the Q-account up to scratch;
- start work on getting our Mk IIIs released from IBOD so that the platoon could train;
- make a good case for the Bandiana section to rejoin the platoon in Puckapunyal; and
- start FF training of a weekend, in between the day to day duties of supporting Puckapunyal Area.

JANUARY - JUNE 1966

All of the ground work done in the previous six months to reunite the platoon was looking good to happen early in 1966. Just prior, over the Christmas break, 87 Tpt Pl were warned out for a tour in SVN (mixed dump and GS vehicles). Their warning order coincided with a general reorganisation and an upgrade of transport units. All non-specialist transport platoons were to become 33 x vehicle units, 2 x Offrs and 75 all ranks, a HQ and 5 x sections. Unfortunately, all of the good ground work put in to get 86 Tpt Pl up to scratch, simply made it easier for 87 Tpt Pl to be upgraded ready for its new commitment. They took our drivers, stores, trucks and weapons and left us with their U/S equipment (all with AHQ approval). They even took my Q storeman. All of the Platoon's hard work was virtually wiped out overnight.

Of course, the upgrading to 33 x vehicle platoons also applied to 86 Tpt Pl. We weren't left with many people and even they were kept busy looking after Area tasking. However, I did get a new Q-Storeman, Cpl Derek Allen, and both he and I began the long haul to materially resurrecting the unit to a new level of DP1 standard. We were re-equipped with International 4 x 4 GS cargo trucks. Other significant things also happened in this period;

- 7 RAR was raised in Puckapunyal;
- we began to support them in field deployments;
- 2 Recruit Training Battalion was established and we delivered the first NS recruits into camp;
- the Platoon's first 2IC was posted in (2Lt Barry Johns);

- some sixty drivers were posted in (all NS); and
- we ran our own two week shake-down exercise, operating and living in field conditions.

JULY - DECEMBER 1966

Preparation began in earnest for Exercise BARRA WINGA which would be held around Rockhampton in October. Det HQ 9 Supply and Transport Column (9ST Colm), 86 Pl, 52 Supply Platoon, Det 21 Construction Squadron and Det 30 Terminal Squadron, were to become the 1 LSF advance party to set up the area and establish support procedures and contracts for the combat elements. This meant that 86 Pl spent from mid-August to mid-November on exercise, ie. first in and last out, with a week's convoy either end of the period.

As the biggest unit, we fed the advance party and provided an improvised POL point as well as doing what a transport platoon normally does. The platoon finally got involved with other modes of transport and learnt some valuable operating techniques. Convoys to the Divisional Area including exchange points with 5 Coy, railhead clearance and air head clearance were the main operations encountered.

PART 2 - TRAINING FOR WAR

BARRA WINGA presented good opportunities for the platoon to become a practiced and proficient organisation just in time for an announcement around Christmas that 7 RAR were to be deployed to SVN in April 67 as the third battalion and this meant that other Corps elements would also go in support. 86 Tpt Pl was ideally suited to go to Vietnam. We had worked closely with 7 RAR and we had been well trained as a result of involvement in BARRA WINGA. The unit was also well equipped with both vehicles and manpower.

However, the planners worked their numbers based on theoretical tables which did not reflect the real needs in theatre. For now, 86 Platoon was to be split and a detachment comprising 1x officer (the 2IC) and 29 x all ranks or, a mini-HQ and 2 x sections to go to Vietnam. The remainder would stay in Puckapunyal and continue to support the Puckapunyal Area. Less than 12 months later, it was agreed that the numbers were wrong and 86 Tpt Pl would be made up to a full platoon again in Vietnam.

JANUARY - APRIL 1967

Despite being in a Captain's posting and recently married, I was still a 2Lt and won my case to take the detachment to SVN (with a drop in pay). The platoon, however, remained a whole entity until the detachment arrived in theatre. Preparation began in earnest. Personnel had to be selected. Apart from the ARA members, the remainder were assigned on the basis of preferred volunteers. Of the platoon's strength of 77 x all ranks, there were over 60 NS drivers and after allowing for the fact that 10 of the detachment's 30 x positions would be filled by ARA, only 20 positions could be filled by NS personnel. Physical training was stepped up for the designated detachment as was driver conversion to the new International 6 x 6 Dump trucks. We were given two for this purpose as we were to be equipped with thirteen of these on arrival in SVN. Stores were readied and dispatched by sea. By this time, any reinforcements for Vietnam had to attend a battle efficiency (BE) course as a pre-requisite to be eligible for overseas service in a war zone.

The detachment attended the 28/67 BE Course at Canungra for the first twenty-three days of March, with nearly three days either side for train and other means of travel between there and Puckapunyal. There I introduced the detachment to my old friend, 2Lt Ross Hutchinson. He and all the lads became firm friends, so much so, that they deemed him to be an honorary member of 86 Tpt Pl. He was doing the same course as a result of being posted to the 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF) as a pilot with 161 Recce Flt from where, he was often found having a quick word to them from his low flying "Possum" helicopter, while spotting for their convoys in SVN. In late March, we returned to Puckapunyal to continue training and getting all troops to DP1 standard.

The first inoculations occurred on 31 March and we finally completed the course on 20 April 1967, after a week's pre-embarkation leave. Finally, we were ready to leave and on 22 April, the detachment and most of 8 Field

Ambulance boarded a TAA DC6B at Mangalore airport and were airlifted to Darwin where we spent the night. The TAA crew wanted to take us all the way to Vietnam as they were actually delivering the aircraft which had been sold to an airline in Thailand. However, the powers could not condone this and insisted that we continue our toughening up process by using an appropriate type of aircraft for the final leg. Next morning, 23 April, the Detachment and 8 Fd Amb boarded a C130 E and after what seemed to be a flight that lasted forever, we flew into Vung Tau Airport that afternoon, thereby coming under the command of 5 Coy RAASC.

PART 3 - DET 86 TPT PL IN SOUTH VIETNAM

MAY - DECEMBER 1967

The detachment settled in, sharing a work building with Det 1 Div S&T Wksp RAEME. The 86 Tpt Pl main operations replaced those previously carried out by the 87 Pl "tipping teaspoons" in support of American and Australian unit projects. The majority of work was shift work, six and sometimes seven days a week using one driver per shift. The in-theatre manpower increment of about seven helped in meeting these commitments and still allow the drivers a regular day off. The only convoy work initially encountered was that necessary to satisfy the IATF demand for sand and aggregate which was needed to counter the red laterite soil of Nui Dat. Return trips sometimes brought back soil to stabilise the sands of Vung Tau.

XUYEN MOC. This somewhat mundane earth-moving role was expanded when it became evident that the 5 ton dumps were the most efficient means of delivering defence stores by road. Two months after arriving in SVN, the detachment participated in a 57 x vehicle (5 Coy) convoy to Xuyen Moc in support of Operation Paddington. I was convoy 2IC and this was the first time that an ASC unit had defended its own perimeter since WW II. On this occasion, a couple of the 86 Tpt Pl dumps even carried two pallets of gun ammunition each, as well as defence stores. The trucks rarely carried tail gates when dealing with loads like this.

This was the convoy of all convoys, classic text book stuff! The convoy was planned and controlled by II Field Force (US) and individual groups were allocated road space for their vehicles by time. Hwys 15 and 23 were full of vehicles of fighting and logistic units, from Long Binh to the North of Saigon, to Xuyen Moc in the extreme East of Phuoc Tuy Province. Our convoy was allocated time to join the convoy and get onto the road at Baria, which we did. From Dat Do on, the road to Xuyen Moc was only wide enough for single vehicle traffic and paddy fields to each side confined any wheeled movement to the road itself. Our vehicles were just past Dat Do when suddenly, all movement stopped. We could move neither forward, nor back. Here we were with 57 x task vehicles, nose to tail, most loaded with gun / other ammunition, vehicle fuel and demolition explosives for engineers. The famous US 7th Cavalry had take a wrong turn, leaving the designated route some distance back and had found their way back onto Hwy 23, a few kilometres East of Dat Do leaving us to sweat out being a perfect target for a big bang while more than 100 M113s were fed back onto the road ahead of us.

Eventually, we reached Xuyen Moc and unloaded. 5 Coy 2IC, Capt Barry Fegan, was already attached to the II Field Force HQ there as a liaison officer and since it had been established that we would not be able to get back on the road before morning, he negotiated a small plot of real estate for us to deploy into for the night. The site was not much more than a half hectare, just outside the perimeter and adjacent to the Xuyen Moc defended hamlet. The plantation to our SEast had not been cleared. The US cadre officer at the hamlet agreed to disconnect the 200 or so claymore mines pointing at us once we convinced him of the firepower we possessed. We couldn't deploy conventionally because of a lack of space and to make matters worse, we inherited 4 x US low loaders for overnight protection. Capt Ron Sherman and I decided that we would deploy in a leaguer formation (hollow square) with the perimeter weapon pits only five or so metres in front of the reversed-in vehicles. It wasn't easy interlocking a defence in depth with all those task vehicles in such a small area.

Vehicles continued to arrive into the area well into the night which didn't do much for a sentry's hearing and night vision. Some of the ARVN soldiers from the hamlet, obviously had friends in the nearby village and walked both ways through our area well into the night. Come morning, after a very sleepless night, Hwy 23 had been

designated "one way" out of Xuyen Moc (East to West) and we were given an early berth. Getting back to base proved to be much faster than getting to Xuyen Moc with the previous day's convoy.

DAY TO DAY OPERATIONS. Apart from the daily resupply convoys to IATF, other convoys to support fire support base (FSB) deployments and the like, often saw the Detachment's dumps carting in gun ammunition, defence stores and aggregate for hard standing. The static FSB at the Horseshoe north of Dat Do (hwy 23), and others set up from time to time at Phuoc Hoa, Long Cat (Hwy 15), Binh Ba and Binh Gia (Hwy 2) were some of the destinations for resupply runs. As time passed, the dump truck was also seen as ideal for the road movement of fuel bladders because of the solid state aluminium tray.

Det 86 Pl had become a very versatile load carrying group. The wide range of loads that they could carry, insured that they were constantly in demand for one job or another. Although the actual statistics are not available, it took only some four and a half months to overtake the tonnages moved over the previous twelve months by the 87 Tpt Pl 2 1/2 ton dumps.

However, the International 6 x 6 Dump had more than its share of problems settling into service with some 27 in theatre modifications being authorised, mostly within the first three months. Initially these included safety problems with brakes failing, wheel nuts working loose and rear of tray air hoses and wiring being severed, caused an incredible amount of vehicle down time. The Detachment had two mechanics among its drivers and they and others worked with the workshop mechanics to get the vehicles back on the road. The 86 Tpt Pl drivers also carried out regular servicing and minor maintenance on their own dumps under workshop supervision.

Late in 1966, 85 Tpt Pl (replacing 87 Tpt Pl) moved to Nui Dat to become part of the newly arrived 26 Coy RAASC and as a result, 86 Tpt Pl was to become a whole unit again. The Detachment took over the 85 Pl work lines. New vehicles began to arrive ahead of the additional troops. We took on American semi-trailers and buses and started driver conversion. I was one of a few testing officers in the Company for both of these vehicle types which made it easier to conduct some basic conversion training as well as, at the same time, working. It wasn't long before there was a demand for the services of these vehicles, even though we didn't have sufficient drivers.

The Company ran special convoys to the Task Force at Christmas, with the Officers and Senior NCOSs driving the trucks to deliver Christmas rations and extra ice for 3,000 troops. This included Australian sausages and meat pies brought up by sea resupply especially to provide an Australian touch for Christmas.

PART 4 - 86 TPT PL IN SOUTH VIETNAM

JANUARY - FEBRUARY 1968

During the period Oct - Jan, I was also moonlighting as tasking operations officer for the Company Ops Centre. It was at this time that the new OC 86 Pl (Capt Tony West) arrived with the rest of the new platoon. The Detachment became a part of the Platoon, including me as 2IC (on paper) and the new organisation took over from where the combined Det 86 Pl and 85 Pl had left off. I never worked within the Platoon after that except for about three weeks at the huge American Long Binh Logistic Base in Bien Hoa, as the 5 Coy detachment commander.

TET OFFENSIVE 1968

As a result of the enemy forces build up North of Saigon which was the start of the forecasted TET Offensive, a forward detachment of 1 ALSG, including elements of 86 Tpt Pl, was deployed by road to Bien Hoa/Long Binh in early January, to tap into the American logistic organisation there and to resupply the Fwd Task Force Maintenance Area (TFMA) set up by 26 Coy. The TFMA was a part of Fire Support Base (FSB) Andersen set up on Highway 1. The FSB was supporting the Task Force Operation Coburg (2 and 7 RAR) in their defence of the huge Long Binh Logistic Complex and other US units in range. Holding the line of Hwy 1 was vital to the defence of Saigon, Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa air bases and also Long Binh, one of the largest military supply bases in the world.

OC 5 Coy, Major Peter Douglas, had gone with the convoy and his 2IC was on court martial duties so until he was released, I couldn't join the OC in Long Binh. Around the beginning of the second week in January I was cleared to go and joined the Comd ALSG on a UH1B to fly into Bien Hoa and the Fwd ALSG. It was not a good time to be crossing boundaries of areas under different control groups, especially by air. There was a lot of confusion caused by the movement of big forces and rapid reaction to the increased enemy activity. Air waves were crammed with traffic and information finally acquired from air traffic control, might not be as accurate as it should. An example of this was when the then Lt Col Gilmore and I, while on this flight, found that flying through two consecutive US Forces artillery patterns was a stimulating experience if nothing else. The UH1B refuelled at Tan Son Nhut Airport and then delivered us to Long Binh. By that time, OC 5 Coy had assumed overall command of the Fwd ALSG Det and I took command of the transport, comprising about 26 task vehicles, a Workshop Recovery vehicle and a Supply Platoon detachment of two.

The 26 task vehicles came from both 2 and 86 Tpt Pls, so again, some of the original detachment plus new 86 Tpt Pl members were involved. We resupplied the TFMA at FSB Andersen as requested. On at least two occasions, possibly three, the convoy was drenched by liquid from low flying C123 transport aircraft spraying Hwy 1. I was informed by an American NBC corps officer at Long Binh that this was undoubtedly herbicide designed to keep unnecessary foliage down. He said that the spraying was most important to provide reasonable fields of view for friendly forces with the impending enemy force build-up, bearing in mind that Hwy 1 was a key lateral communication route behind the defending forces. He said the spray shouldn't affect us and to make sure that we had a shower at night!

The convoy was forced to run resupply at the same time on every run, an absolute security no, no! Unfortunately, we were tied to the times that the Long Binh supply group could handle our demands, security reaction forces were available and when 26 Coy could handle reception and unloading. Radio communication between FSB Anderson and Long Binh was unreliable and frequently, non-existent. One day at the end of January 1968, we were unable to load until mid-afternoon and were some four hours later than normal. Major Christopherson, OC 26 Coy, concerned for us and unable to make radio contact, had some APCs sent from his area to see if we had met with foul play along Hwy 1. Fortunately for us, they triggered an ambush that was most likely set for our convoy. We, blissfully unaware of what had happened, travelled the road and reached the FSB late in the afternoon. Unloading was slow, but regardless we had to leave as the trucks would have been an embarrassment inside the Fwd TFMA perimeter overnight.

It was last light as we pulled out onto Hwy 1 and some 30 km to travel to the relative security of the junction of Hwys 1 and 1A between the Bien Hoa Air Base and the Long Binh complex. Night convoys were a no, no, especially given the present situation! Right or wrong, I decided to run a redball convoy and gave the section NCOs a quick brief on the basic requirements. Because the wrecker was too slow up inclines, I gave them an additional GPMG60, an M79 and my blessing, to wind the M543 up to whatever speeds they could achieve down hills in an endeavour to keep up. I was worried that the other side's ambush team might still be hanging around so, I figured the best option was to present the fastest moving target possible. The element of surprise!

My gunjeep travelled about 100 metres ahead of the convoy to warn civilians and ensure the route was clear of potential road blockages and the task vehicles were bunched at about 20 metre intervals, full headlights. I had radio contact with Major Christopherson for the first half of the run and with Major Douglas for the last quarter. In between, I had contact with only the front truck, section NCOs and the wrecker bringing up the rear. The speed set was about 70 - 80 km/hour. It is difficult to remember anything about the actual move.

I made contact with Major Douglas just before reaching the Hwys 1 / 1A road junction. We propped the gunjeep at the intersection and waved the task vehicles through, waiting for the wrecker to appear. It was only a couple of minutes behind the convoy and went through the junction like a locomotive with a full head of steam. I think everyone had a drink or two that night. Major Douglas' years in the USA stood him in good stead to be there. He had called up a favour and had a gunship team (2) on standby in case we ran into trouble and more importantly, he had a rum and coke waiting for me when we got back.

Another interesting occasion for the detachment was the night a couple of squads of enemy sappers infiltrated the defences to hit the Long Binh ammunition dump and other parts of the Long Binh perimeter with satchel charges. I was informed that the detachment vehicles were loading ammunition that night and not being able to account for all of them, I took a gunjeep and went to the ammunition dump. The whole scene was chaos. One of the MPs from the gate agreed to let me in providing he came with me to check the relevant bays. None of our vehicles were to be found. The noise was incredible, but fortunately, the ready reaction groups were making it hard for the enemy to engineer much in the way of sympathetic ignitions. I later found that the last lot of our trucks had left at about the same time as the trouble began. Yet another example of the platoon's good fortune and lucky number.

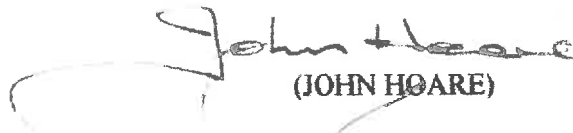
We continued with the task at hand and became busier as the enemy build up became more threatening. On the afternoon of 1st February 1968, Major Douglas informed me that I was booked on a C130 departing Vung Tau Airport on the morning of the 3rd, if I could make it. He told me to take a gunjeep to Tan Son Nhut Airfield and I was on my own from there. I couldn't find anyone to drive the vehicle until one of my long time drivers, "Nicko" Nicholson came up volunteering to take me to the airport. After a nerve wracking drive through the outskirts of Saigon where everyone was celebrating TET by letting off fireworks, I bade my driver farewell and spent about 20 hours trying to get on any aircraft going my way. A scruffy looking Lieutenant in US Army uniform without any orders and who talked funny, didn't really command any great priority with the US air movement system, especially when the landing and take-off times had been slowed significantly by the infrequent arrival of mortars and rockets onto the airfield. Eventually, I was put on a C123 going to Phan Rang, with the promise of a Caribou to Vung Tau via Nui Dat. Most of the airfields, including Vung Tau, were being bothered by the enemy activity.

EXIT OC DET 86 TPT PL. I departed as planned, after a very hurried pack-up, on RAAF C130 E. tailplane number 13 for RAAF Base Butterworth, Malaysia. The remainder of a Boeing 707 passenger load would be ferried into Butterworth from Vung Tau over the next two days for the flight home to Sydney on 6th February. Meanwhile, I had two days resting in Butterworth, reflecting upon the fact that I had very little time to say farewell to 86 Tpt Pl prior to my rude and hurried departure from Vietnam. On the reverse side of the coin, everyone was probably so busy dealing with the effects of TET 1968 in their own way, that they probably didn't have time to worry about goodbyes either.

**TOOWOOMBA
MAY 1998**

PS - DISCLAIMER

While the account I have written is correct to the best of my knowledge, I acknowledge that these events happened thirty years ago and whereas I can generally tie events to names, places and times through records that I have in my possession, some recall may not be as perfect as one would desire. Without prejudice.


(JOHN HOARE)