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Even as late as 1970, roads in Vietnam weren't much and required constant repair and sweeps for mines. Doug McMackin's outfit used line charges along Route 4 East to clear it. The charges, white bags in large, trailer-like containers, would be shot out over an area and detonated, clearing potential explosive hazards. The engineers would then continue work on the roads in spite of the heat, booby traps and occasional snipers. (Photo courtesy of GySgt Doug McMackin, USMCR)

Fixed Targets for the Enemy: Engineers Risked It All Every Day To Get the Job Done

By R. R. Keene

Retired Colonel Andy Blenkle returned to Vietnam in 2002 for the first time since the war. It didn't hit him on that trip until he stood near the top of the 1,427-foot Hai Van pass, looked south and saw the city of Da Nang sprawled before him. He drew a deep breath, recalling his time in Vietnam nearly four decades before and found his voice choked with emotion as he said to himself, "I'm home."

Home? Maybe you remember John D. Loudermilk's 1962 song "Tobacco Road": *But it's home. The only life I've ever known. ... I despise you 'cos you're filthy, but I love you 'cos you're home.*

To those who served in Vietnam, it never completely goes away. Vietnam is always with them—beckoning, sometimes sinister, but always beckoning.

In April 2006 Doug McMackin took a tug on his Marlboro and let the smoke out with an almost visible expression of awe and satisfaction to be standing on the exact bridge he helped construct 36 years ago. As bridges go, it isn't anything like Thailand's "Bridge on the River Kwai," but the Cau Giang Bridge southwest of Da Nang spanning maybe 100 feet across the Tuy Loan River was McMackin's and his fellow engineers' legacy in their war in Vietnam. They built others, but this one still stands.

Both Blenkle and McMackin had returned in April with Military Historical Tours of Alexandria, Va. They, with other veterans, had strained to get a porthole-size look at familiar turf from their Vietnam Airlines plane as it glided onto the

Right: Formations are still a main means of passing the word in the Corps. It was so in 1967 for Marines of Delta Co, 7th Eng Bn living on Hill 37 in Dai Loc, and it is so today. (Photo courtesy of Col Andy Blenkle, USMC (Ret))

Below: In April 2006, Doug McMackin (left) and Andy Blenkle returned to Hill 37 and other sites they worked on during the Vietnam War and remembered what it was like for them to be engineers in a combat zone.

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runway at Da Nang, ending the hour flight south from Hanoi. What they saw was gut wrenchingly and nostalgically familiar: white beaches, turquoise South China Sea, horseshoe-shaped Da Nang Harbor, the Han River, Monkey Mountain, Hill 327, the old hangars of Marine Aircraft Group 11 and Da Nang, now home to more than 800,000 residents. Today, Vietnam is one country, but to many Marine veterans it isn't Vietnam until they land in Da Nang: their equivalent of Tobacco Road.

Roads are something Blenkle and McMackin know something about, especially roads southwest of Da Nang where both served at different times in the war. Those who serve the Corps as engineers are a hard lot. Like most of their construction, what you see is pretty much what you get. They have no time for pretensions. There was always too much work to be done, especially back in the Vietnam War.

It was not easy work either. Strip away the years and you have two men lean in their youth with heavy arms, peeling sunburns, in well-worn utility uniforms. They are rough men with rough, calloused hands—men used to working in the sun.

Nowadays it's an easy drive on two- and four-lane paved roads from downtown Da Nang. It takes approximately 30 minutes to reach Dai Loc, 16 miles southwest on the Tu Bon River Basin. It wasn't so easy in 1966. It could take all day if you made it at all. Roads were rutted berms that barely rose above the rice fields. Travelers were subject to ambush, sniper rounds, mines and booby traps. It was the engineers who kept the roads open.

There's an old Asian curse that goes: "May you live in interesting times." Second Lieutenant Andy Blenkle, a former liberal arts major and freshly minted brown bar, stepped onto the tarmac of the 15th Aerial Port in August of '66 and was quickly and unceremoniously ushered to the "Marine side" of the field.

Da Nang was a bustling bastion of modern military hardware, cacophonous noises and discordant sights that overwhelmed the senses. More than 300,000 refugees crowded the city. Ancient Champa sculptures were squeezed by open-front shops that would sell anything and everything. Squatters' suburbs, such as the one called "Dog Patch," were infamous hovels of squalor.

The dirty brown haze of smog from diesel-powered vehicles mixed with the noise pollution caused by the endless drone of thousands of swarming Japanese motorbikes. The air was pungent with garlic, jasmine and rotting waste. Over it all, radios blared music, such as "Wild Thing" by the Troggs and "Summer in the City" by the Lovin' Spoonful, from the American Forces Radio and Television Service affiliate perched high on Monkey Mountain. In the 1960s Da Nang was the gateway to "interesting times."

In 1966 American forces in Vietnam were also quickly ratcheting up to 385,000 with an additional 60,000 sailors in warships offshore. More than 6,000 Americans would be dead before the end of the year with another 30,000 wounded. It is estimated that 61,000 Viet Cong died too. More startling, however, were estimates that the number of live VC forces, aside from their North Vietnamese counterparts, had increased to more than 280,000.

Second Lt Blenkle, of course, could know none of this. His orders got him out of Da Nang, assigning him to 7th Engineer Battalion and eventually giving him command of 3d Platoon, Company D on Hill 37 in the rural, but no less interesting Dai Loc District.

Today Hill 37 is somewhat obscured by copses of trees and shrubs and is hardly noticeable from the nearby Highway 4 bridge over the Vu Gia River. Back then, Hill 37 resembled just about every hill occupied by U.S. forces: a mound of red clay stripped bare and baking under the 100-degree sun. Engineers had landscaped the outcropping with heavily sandbagged structures of canvas, wood and sheet metal, generators, water purification equipment, concertina wire, claymore mines, and wafting, odorous, black smoke from diesel fuel burning human excrement in 55-gallon drums cut in half and called "honey buckets." For the Marines, however, Hill 37 was home, at least until ordered to move to a similar hill elsewhere.

For engineers, that meant moving methodically up some road. "What I'd heard 'bout engineers was booby traps, mines, roads and water points," said Blenkle. "It was pretty much that way. If you were a 1371 [combat engineer], you were involved in road construction, mine sweeps in the morning and then building bunkers and SEA [Southeast Asia] huts.

"As a new kid second lieutenant, I looked to my experienced noncommissioned officers and staff NCOs. You always listened to them, especially your platoon sergeant. I had a good one. He was a Samoan, and initially I had a little trouble understanding him, but he controlled the platoon. He taught me to focus on the mission as well as troop concerns. I had no problems with my platoon, none. They were a team, and they were good."

Thinking back, Blenkle recalls opening the road to An Hoa Combat Base for traffic in '67, which previously was resupplyed only by air. "Basically, I was in my little world. I was aware that the infantry were going out and doing something, but I don't recollect knowing what the operation names were. There was a great routine in what we did.

"You'd get up in the morning and get on the road, do road sweeps, and begin work where you left off the day before."

The engineers worked on nearby Liberty Road around My Loc 2 and Phu Loc 6. While road construction jobs the world over have similar routines, this routine had one big difference.

"You had to do your road sweeps for mines, put security out and walk [lead] your heavy equipment out every day and make sure you didn't have a scraper or bulldozer blow up. The infantry would provide some security and roving patrols on the flanks. They didn't have the manpower to do it all. Consequently, the engineers would establish observation posts along the route with two or more men.

"The dilemma of being an engineer was that you couldn't vary your work site." The enemy knew it too.

"Why did they, for the most part, leave us alone?" Blenkle asked himself. "If they had mustered a sizable force, we wouldn't be around today. But remember, everybody likes to use a road."

Occasionally, however, communist forces would leave reminders that they were still around and cause mayhem. "They'd use a frag grenade in a ration can, or tuck a grenade away with a lightweight filament wire. Once they used a pressure mine, which someone stepped on. It took out seven engineers; three were medically evacuated and the remaining four were painted with iodine, dressed with bandages and went back to work."

Blenkle explained: "Most of the mines my guys found were not with a mine detector. They found them visually. It was an acquired ability. They had become so good on a road they could recognize if something was out of sorts.

"On the other hand you could get too familiar with a road and familiarity breeds negligence. Sweep teams would rotate just to break up the routine. Even then a lot of booby traps were where en-

COURTESY OF COL ANDY BLENKLE, USMC (RET)

COURTESY OF GYSGT DOUG MCMACKIN, USMCR

Above: Contrasts? Maybe, but the left side of this composite photo shows the road north to Dai Loc in 1967 with Marine Ontos on the move and the right side shows the same road in 2002. (Photos courtesy of Col Andy Blenkle, USMC (Ret))

Right: Lt Andy Blenkle (right) had his picture taken with a fellow Marine officer and friend, 1stLt Paul Bertolozzi, who later died in a road ambush.

Far right: LCpl Doug McMackin, circa 1969-70, "got a great deal of satisfaction" as an engineer.

gineers or grunts were breaking brush just off the road. Flank security would find them, hear the spoon pop, and they'd dive for cover."

Construction is by nature a noisy business. Consequently, it required Blenkle to have Marines keep an eye out for suddenly appearing bullet holes. "When the heavy equipment was rolling, you couldn't hear anything. I always had somebody walking next to the heavy equipment whose job was to reach up and grab the operator."

There are still several Seabee-built pilings in the Tu Bon River, the last remnants of the old Liberty Bridge. Today there also are remnants of the old Liberty Road running north from the riverbed. Blenkle and McMackin watched the river traffic much as it had been back in the '60s.

"This was a very unpleasant area," said Blenkle, who was there while the bridge was being built. McMackin, who worked the area later, agreed.

Blenkle explained: "Second Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment provided security for the engineers. First Lieutenant Paul C. Bertolozzi [23, of Elmwood Park, Ill.] was a friend of mine. Two months after I left the area I learned that on August 2, 1967, he was acting as pay officer and riding out with a road sweep team from

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Left: In April 2006, Doug McMackin stood on the Cau Giang Bridge that spans the Tuy Loan River. He checked its understructure and found it to be essentially the same bridge he and his fellow engineers constructed 36 years ago.

COURTESY OF GYSGT DOUG MCMACKIN, USMCR

Above: "If they needed a grader operator, they called Frank Klaiber," said Doug McMackin of his fellow engineer and friend LCpl Klaiber, who was killed by a mine in 1970.

Below: Marine Corps engineers, such as these conducting ferry operations on the Tu Bon River in 1967, were then and are now, for the most part, a rough and rugged lot. They can build roads, bridges, camps, fire support bases, landing zones, airfields, you name it. They also can blow up and destroy the same with equal fervor and professionalism.

COURTESY OF COL ANDY BLENKLE, USMC (RET)

An Hoa. It was a well-set up ambush, and there was only one survivor." Bertolozzi was killed radioing for help.

Doug McMackin was a 20-year-old lance corporal, 1345 or heavy equipment operator, assigned to "Charlie" Co, 7th Engineer Bn from 1969 to 1970.

By then the war had changed. People were thinking about declaring a victory and pulling out. With more than 9,400 Americans killed that year and massive marches of protest in Washington, D.C., President Richard M. Nixon began withdrawing troops.

McMackin and his buddy LCpl Francis Earl Klaiber, 21, of Kane, Pa., had been together since Heavy Equipment Operator School at Courthouse Bay, N.C. They, with other "FNGs" (new guys), had heard the scuttlebutt, which was now being passed as: "This is no s---!"

"They told us not to unpack, because we would be leaving again. Battalions had begun rotating home," McMackin said. "Sure enough, a year later, we rotated."

Meanwhile, McMackin and Klaiber realized they kind of liked being engineers. "It had its advantages," said McMackin. "You didn't feel like an office pogue who never got out of the compound. Most engineers kind of thought they were grunts just doing a different mission. You were close enough to the defecation to smell it, but you didn't have to jump in it."

Even more than that McMackin realized: "I got a great deal of satisfaction. Vietnamese civilians, who seemed to appreciate what we did, used many of the things we built. When bridges were blown up, it separated villages completely and people couldn't visit their relatives. We'd

repair and open up a bridge and there would be masses of people coming across.

"For me, every day was different. I didn't have an assigned mission except to operate heavy equipment. I learned to operate scoop loaders, scrapers, bulldozers and everything else. Most people became accustomed to working one piece of equipment and got better than others on that piece and eventually that became their piece of equipment. In my case it was the Anthony Hydraulic Crane. If they needed a crane operator, they called on me. If they needed a grader operator, they called Frank Klaiber."

McMackin's mind jumped back to Liberty Bridge. "Not much had changed from when Andy Blenkle was there except that the bridge had been completed. The VC was still laying mines on the roads, and every day at sunrise there was a sweep team. Behind the team came the heavy equipment and Marine Corps vehicles. Behind that there were civilians lined up for half a mile—all just trying to get down the road."

McMackin looked up the road toward Route 4 and remembered July 13, 1970. His friend Frank Klaiber was helping dump trucks with their loads and was standing next to a truck when it rolled over a mine. LCpl Klaiber died from multiple fragmentation wounds.

"It was a pretty nasty road, and we always expected things like that," was all McMackin said.

"We also took harassment fire. I think snipers appeared mostly during bridge building because they found nice static targets, in clusters of 20 to 30 people, working. And the noise from generators and heavy equipment made them harder to detect. Somebody would pop off a few rounds—enough to make operations stop for a considerable time. It would take a good hour out of the day before we could go back to work.

"We lost our corpsman during a MEDCAP [medical civic action project]. Hospital Corpsman Third Class 'Nick' [Nicholas John] Braico. He was the greatest. He was always there. Anytime anyone had a problem he knew what to do and did it. He also enjoyed working in the villages and helping in community projects. He was treating some Vietnamese when someone drove by on a motorcycle and threw a satchel charge."

McMackin paused to consider what his words would be and said, "I look at this area of Vietnam as a place for reverence—a place where we put all our efforts, all our hearts and all our souls. That can never go away even if the landscape changes. There are places that we can no longer identify, but we all know that on some hill someplace, somebody put in every bit of effort he could, and because we were all very young, he probably became a man at that time.

"Even though our time in Vietnam was for a very short period in our lives, it impacted on us powerfully in good and bad ways. It also gave us what it takes to complete a job."

After leaving the Corps, McMackin went to work in finance. "I didn't follow up on engineering because, frankly, I wasn't very good at it." He did, however, remain in the Marine Reserve, made it to gunnery sergeant and is retired in his hometown of Phoenix.

Col Blenkle retired from the Corps in 1992. "I went on to several jobs. I always wanted to teach and found my niche with the California Youth Authority Facility in Orange County teaching juveniles."

He recalls the countryside that he knew back then and the way it looks today. "It is hard to determine where you were on the roads. A lot followed the trace of an old trail or old road. But returning to Vietnam let things come to mind that I hadn't thought about. It was a reflective time.

"I had a great platoon, and I loved those guys. There was a connection, a real caring concern. I remember their general attitude was 'Lieutenant Blenkle, why are we playing in our half of the football field? Why don't we build a road to Hanoi and end this war?' "

Doug McMackin stood on the exact bridge he helped construct 36 years ago. It is one of many still in service throughout I Corps in what was the Republic of Vietnam. Many of the roads he and Andy Blenkle helped build have been improved and are still in use. Although the Vietnamese government has just about erased every terrain feature occupied by Americans in the war, infrastructure transcends ideologies.

Da Nang, once the gateway to interesting times, has become a promising city of boulevards, villas, sports arenas, large single-span bridges, excellent restaurants, and a city where a few Marines who spent their youth and who became men in Vietnam call home: *Bring dynamite and a crane, blow it up, start all over again. Build a town, be proud to show. Give the name Tobacco Road.*

Editor's note: Military Historical Tours, run by retired Marine Col Warren Wiedhahn, is a longtime friend of Leatherneck. *We encourage you to check out MHT's available tours of sites where Marines became legends at www.miltours.com.*