

RED LEGS--STICKY FINGERS
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During the war in Vietnam, from October 1967 to June 1968, I was lucky enough to have commanded the 148th Ordnance Company (Ammo), stationed at Vung Tau, with a detachment at Dong Tam. I have often told people that that was the best year of my Army career; I was doing what I had been trained to do since that first day in ROTC—commanding a company of men in a combat zone during a war. What an honor. I also told people that if you had to go to war, Vung Tau was the place to go. Those who served in Vietnam will remember that Vung Tau was an in-country rest and recuperation (R&R) center in addition to being a medium sized logistical base supporting the III Corps Tactical Zone and the Mekong Delta. Those of us there were basically “support troops,” the kind of soldiers Gen. Patton somewhat derisively described as those who “Never missed a meal or heard a shot fired in anger.” Although the weather was hot, the work was hard, the hours were long, and we did suffer one rocket attack during my tenure, Gen. Patton was generally correct in his assessment. But we ammo humpers had been taught that “A soldier in combat can go weeks without mail, days without food, hours without water, but cannot survive a minute without ammunition,” and we took that lesson to heart and did our best to make sure our customers always got what they needed to survive, notwithstanding Gen. Patton’s obvious bias. In the late 1990’s, I became aware of The Library Congress’s Veteran’s History Project, a program that encouraged veterans to tell their stories, either by way of interviews or by submitting a manuscript to their collection. I wrote and submitted my Vietnam story, and in the process sort of re-lived that year, remembering the good, the bad, and the funny.

War, to be sure, is a serious business, but even in a combat zone crazy, funny things do sometimes happen. What I am setting out below is an extract from my 1998 story I call “The Wrecker Caper.” It is a tale that will warm the heart of anyone who has served in a unit lucky enough to have had one of the most indispensable of all soldiers—a great scrounger. A great scrounger can get you anything you need

or just want, sometimes by making a somewhat lawful trade, and sometimes by way of grand larceny, so there is one inviolate rule—never ask a scrounger where or how he got anything, because you really don't want to know and he would probably lie to protect his sources anyway. (I once tried my hand at scrounging size "D" batteries at Graf in winter where the cold sucks the life out of them in about two minutes, when I was the Commo Officer for the 2nd Battalion, 83rd Field Artillery, but I was summarily unsuccessful. Since I had nothing to trade, I was merely a beggar, not a true scrounger—and besides, scrounging is an art form best left to crafty NCO's.) In this tale my ammunition company and I were the victims or scroungees, if there is such a word, and it did not seem to be too funny at the time. From my 1998 story:

THE WRECKER CAPER

One afternoon in early March 1968, I had just returned from lunch when I got a call from my motor officer in the motor pool. He asked if I had loaned our 5-ton wrecker to anyone. The question was not completely unreasonable; it was a common practice for units to help each other out in a pinch, but I was surprised and a little irritated that he would think I would loan a major piece of equipment without letting him or his motor sergeant know about it, and I told him so. Well, they couldn't find it, and they thought (hoped) I had let someone use it. I suggested that it was probably in the ASP being used to off load projectiles, because of deadlined forklifts, but he said he had asked the magazine platoon leader and he denied having it. I told him to go check in the ASP, himself, since it might be there without the platoon leader knowing about it.

He called back a little later and confirmed it was not in the ASP. Concerned but not alarmed, I asked when the wrecker had last been seen. They were sure it was parked in the motor pool like always when they broke for lunch. When they returned, it was gone. The man left for security was working inside and thought he heard the engine start and the truck pull out, but he assumed it was going to the ASP and thought nothing about it. Not to worry, I said, somebody probably borrowed it, assuming they had permission. Call the truck company since they have used it before and might feel comfortable taking

it without asking. He did, but they hadn't. The matter was now getting serious, but I was still confident the wrecker would come home, wagging its tail behind it. Nevertheless, we sent men to look in every nook and cranny of the logistical complex and notified the MP's and battalion of the possible theft.

It was not uncommon for vehicles to be stolen in Vung Tau, despite the lock and chains on the steering wheel used to make theft more difficult. Jeeps, however, were almost exclusively the target. To combat units in the area in need of a jeep, ours were considered fair game. No one to my knowledge, however, had ever stolen a 5-ton wrecker. By late afternoon, we still had no wrecker, but we did have a prime suspect.

My magazine platoon leader reminded us that an artillery battalion based north of Baria was being re-deployed to the I Corps area, and had been in the ASP that very morning turning in excess ammo. They were scheduled to embark on a Navy LST the very next day with our truck as war booty if our guess was right. We would not, however, give up without a fight.

Early the next morning, my motor officer and I set off for the fire base of the 1st Battalion, 83rd Artillery on the only road to and from their area. We stationed one of my lieutenants, the motor sergeant, and several other men in the port to keep an eye out there. I expected to find the wrecker at the base camp either still loading equipment or abandoned; nevertheless, as we passed the unit's convoys on their way to the ship, we looked carefully for our truck, which would be easy to spot, even in a moving conveyer or so we thought. When we reached the base camp almost everyone was gone and no wrecker was to be found. The officer in charge was sure they did not have our equipment, but said he would look into it when they got settled in I Corps. Fat chance, I thought as we headed back to Yung Tau in defeat.

As we pulled into port, many of the battalion's vehicles were still lined up waiting to be loaded. We spotted our officer and the NCO's and pulled over to them. They were very excited, and shouted almost in unison, "We just found our wrecker"! They had indeed, and not a moment too soon—it was third in line to be loaded on the LST. When I saw the truth, it was readily apparent why we did not spot

it in the convoy. The camouflage job was truly outstanding and would have fooled all but the most trained eye. The most distinguishing feature, the wrecker boom and assembly had been covered with canvas supported by ribs to make it look like a cargo truth, rather than a wrecker. The boom itself had been wrapped in canvas and appeared to be just some equipment protruding from the back of the cargo bed. On the front, a box had been built to cover the winch and gave the appearance of cargo being carried externally. Of course, all of the identifying numbers had been painted over and changed, and as the final touch, the immaculate truck had been sprayed with oil and doused with red dirt to give it the look of a truck that had spent a hard two years in the field. Soldiers must have stayed up all night working on that truck. It was so good I couldn't stay mad but I pretended to for the benefit of the motor sergeant who would have the chore of putting his truck back in order, which would be easier than trying to persuade a surveying officer why he should not have to pay for it.

Having served in the 2nd Battalion, 83rd Artillery in Germany some years earlier, I knew how valuable a 5-ton wrecker is to an artillery unit, and under the circumstances, I might have tried the same thing myself.

I asked the motor sergeant how he spotted our truck after first missing it. He said he walked by it and something just didn't look right, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He approached the truck to get a closer look and everybody close to the funny looking truck just disappeared. When he realized it was a wrecker and started asking questions, no one had ever seen the truck before or had any idea how it got there. I told them to get our truck home and to guard all of our equipment until the boat cleared the harbor. They all left, and I tried to find the battalion commander but was informed he was in I Corps with the advance party, just as he should have been. The XO promised to investigate the matter when they got settled, but we both knew he was lying. I told him that I was a former Red Leg myself and told him that when he found out who was responsible, tell them I said nice try.

Fast forward to October 2017. Old and retired now, but still a Red Leg at heart, I was surfing the internet looking for snippets about the good, old 2nd of the 83rd when I stumbled on a website maintained by veterans of nefarious 1st of the 83rd, deservedly proud of their service in Vietnam and still keeping in touch. Curious to see if anyone remembered and would confess to being the mastermind of the wrecker caper now that the statute of limitations has long since expired for grand theft auto, I called the Webmaster, one Bill Taggart who lives somewhere in the internet. Bill, of course, denied any knowledge of the crime, but volunteered to share my tale with others in his network and now, as Paul Harvey used to say, we know the rest of the story. I will share excerpts from our email exchanges:

Michael Jalone: LOL, I just read your story about the wrecker being “borrowed.” I was the XO of Battery A, 1/83rd. It was our unit which liberated the wrecker and attempted to move it north with us. I am headed out the door this morning but will find and read my “daily log” and send you more information from our perspective.
Regards, Michael Jalone

Richard F. Allen: Sticky-fingered Red legs—who would have thunk it! Can’t wait to hear your side of that nefarious scheme.
RFA

Michael Jalone: Hi Richard, it gives me pleasure to give you the rest of the story. Attached is excerpt from my March 17, 1968 entry in the daily log I kept during my stay in Vietnam. After all these years I don’t remember why we thought having the wrecker was a good idea but I do recall it seemed important at the time. Although I didn’t write about it I do vaguely remember a water truck that somehow made it into our convoy.

I enjoyed your story, especially the arrival in Vietnam and waiting for orders at the replacement unit. Like you, I was fortunate with where I ended up. My original orders were to an infantry unit as a forward observer. Going to work with the Aussies and Kiwis close to Vung Tau was a good way to start my year. We ended up without a wrecker bounding all around I Corp and even spent July 4th at Con Tien on the DMZ.
Best, Michael

Michael’s Belated Confession

Here is an excerpt from my log date March 17, 1968-Sunday:

Yesterday, we stole a 5-ton wrecker from the 2nd Maintenance Battalion and stashed it up at the Aussie Camp. They called the MP’s so everyone was looking for it. I decided we better disguise it. It is a

very obvious looking truck because it looks like a big tow truck with a long boom. We put bows and canvas over it to make it look like one of our ammo trucks. We put a wooden box over the boom to make it look like cargo sticking out the back of the truck. We also splashed it with oil and lots of dirt. I thought it looked pretty good when we were finished.

They moved it down to Vung Tau about 5 minutes behind the convoy. We planned to have it lag behind and when the boat was loaded we would call it forward. That way, if it looked too dangerous we could ditch it.

The plan blew up because Sgt Dagner got over confident with the disguise and took it into the dock area. They got to snooping around and found it! Luckily, he got out so although they were sure it was us they couldn't prove it.

We got loaded and are now waiting for the rest of the battalion to load and then they will sail. We really could have used that wrecker.

Current thoughts - almost 50 years later:

We were 'A' Battery of 1/83rd Artillery and we were at Nui Dat about 7 clicks north of Vung Tau. We were a combination 8 inch and 175 mm howitzer unit and primarily supported the Aussies and Kiwis in the area.

As I recall, one of the battery NCO's, Sgt Crawford from Chicago, was our master scrounger. If you needed anything, you sent him to Vung Tau and he would come back with it. I believe it was Sgt Crawford who found the 5-ton wrecker and for the record I was not there when it was liberated.

There was fair amount of discussion about taking it, leaving it behind or taking it back to town. In the end, the decision was to take it North where we could put it to better use. I don't recall the painting over of identification but I do remember using a ton of canvas to make it look like one of our trucks.

This was just one small story in a long year in Vietnam but it was fun to read about it from Richard's perspective and I now am glad he got this wrecker back.

So there you have it. They say "Confession is good for the soul," and now I know that old saw is true. In Vietnam I had hoped to get a call from the Battalion Commander apologizing for the attempted robbery, but he probably never even knew about it, and even if he did, I know he was far too busy taking care of business to be distracted by trifles such as a purloined 5-ton wrecker. I do believe that if the CO had been the great CO of the 2/83 I served with in Germany, he would have been peeved that such an event had

occurred during his watch, but he would have been doubly annoyed that it was not successfully carried out. My soul will rest easy now that Michael has sort of apologized and the collective souls of the men of "A" Battery, 1st Battalion, 83rd Artillery, especially Sgt. Crawford from Chicago, can rest easy now knowing they have all been forgiven.