



Author (left) and Steve Simpson in Vietnam in 1969.

an engineer soldier return

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Veteran of the 19th Combat Engineer Battalion**

On 27 February 2003 my wife and I hired an SUV and driver and drove from Da Nang to Tam Quan and back. This was a distance of about 120 miles, took 11 hours and enabled us to honor the memory of those brave men of the 19th Engineer Battalion (Combat) (Army) who spent so much of their time, youth, and for far too many, their blood and lives over thirty years ago.

My first view of LZ Lowboy was on 20 December 1968. LZ Lowboy was home until I drove through the gate after QL-1 was completed on 10 October 1969 and the remains of the 19th Engineers were transferred to Camp Smith in Bao Loc. We dismantled LZ Lowboy before we left, salvaging all useable materials. This report is about QL-1 between Tam Quan and Duc Pho which was my personal focus and experience.

The 19th Engineers had a primary mission of upgrading, paving, building bridges, maintaining and minesweeping QL-1 from Bong Son to Mo Duc. (photo right) Additional missions included the rehabilitation of the LZ English Airfield and support of the 173rd Airborne Infantry Brigade and the 11th Light Infantry Brigade.

This portion of QL-1 was over 50 miles in length with 44 bridges. During the period in this area of operations from July 1967 to October 1969, the battalion suffered 86 killed in action and hundreds of wounded in action, most of them on QL-1. That does not take into account the infantry, transportation, Vietnamese civilians, Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army losses. A very dangerous, contested, expensive and memorable stretch of road.

While in Vietnam I was married to my wonderful wife Mary Ellen and when I arrived in Vietnam we had a five-month old daughter, Suzanne. Needless to say, this was a tough year for our family as it was for all who served in Vietnam.

Arriving at LZ Lowboy in December 1968 was a lot different than what we saw in February 2003. LZ Lowboy was home to two companies of engineers, C Company, 19th



19th Engineers engaged in building QL-1 during 1969. The portion of road involved was 50 miles long with 44 bridges.

Engineers and the 73rd Engineer Company (Construction Support). It was located on top of a hill on the I/II Corps border, BS913145 to be specific. This border had Binh Dinh Province to the South and Quang Ngai Province to the North of LZ Lowboy. This was a hostile area and we provided our own defensive security, twenty-four hours a day. We did not allow any Vietnamese on LZ Lowboy. It was, and is in a remote corner of Vietnam. My initial assignment was Company Commander of Charlie Company until June and then I was assigned to Operations (S-3) of the 19th Engineers.

In February 2003, we joined our tour in Bangkok, Thailand and flew Thai Air to Hanoi. We toured Hanoi and Halong Bay for a few days before flying to Danang. In this area we visited Hue, Danang and an old city, Hoi An, which

returns to Vietnam to reflect on his time in combat



Vietnamese workers maintaining the road in 2003. Road construction was evident all along the route traveled.

was as close as we were going to get to LZ Lowboy. On 27 February, we left the tour and started at 0700 for LZ Lowboy.

The trip took about five hours and we went through the towns of Hoi An, Tam Ky, Chu Lai, Quang Ngai, Mo Duc, Duc Pho, Sa Huynh and Tam Quan. The road itself was in pretty good shape, but there was a lot of road construction including paving, bridge building and drainage upgrade in the towns (above photo). The standard rollers, pavers, graders, dozers and trucks were to be seen every ten miles or so. We even saw a few United States Army trucks still in service. QL-1 is the main road from Hanoi to Saigon...one thousand miles. Also of note, the railroad is back in operation and we saw several passenger and freight trains.

QL-1 is busy, traffic is slow, but dangerous. Houses and shops line the road with pedestrians and bicycles, motorbikes, trucks, busses, and a few cars competing for space. The horns beep and honk continuously. There is the "here I am" honk, the "hi" honk, the "get out of my way" honk, the "slide over" honk and the "move it or die" honk. Nobody gets mad or even looks, and somehow it works; most of the time anyway, as we did see three major wrecks, and Vietnam does have a lot of accidents, many serious, with a high fatality rate.

As a matter of interest, the Fielding Worldwide guide-

book says these things about the area from Quin Nhon to Quang Ngai, "There's not a lot to see or do in Quin Nhon and it is an unremarkable and relatively dirty city, and was the site of a great deal of fighting with the Viet Cong." There are no comments in the book going north until this about Quang Ngai, "Most travelers stop here to visit the site of the infamous My Lai massacre which is about ten miles east of Quang Ngai." Needless to say, we did not see many western faces on our trip, nor is this area going to be very important for tourists in the future. You have to make quite an effort to get there.

When I hired the driver he told me that he would not leave QL-1 for several reasons. He said that for old bases and battlefields you need the permission of local officials and given the limited time we had, that probably would not happen. Also, he said that the area was a Viet Cong stronghold and that few Americans go there. Anytime you get off QL-1 with an American Veteran, the local people start asking a lot of questions and, although not dangerous, it can become uncomfortable and we could get in trouble with local authorities. Those were the ground rules, so off we went.

The trip south from Hoi An was interesting, but since I had no previous experience there, it was just passing time looking at life in Vietnam today. But, when we passed through Duc Pho and saw the mountain just East of the town where the Infantry had their base, I started paying much closer attention.

Things started to look familiar, but there were some significant changes. There were many more people, houses and traffic. There were houses along the road everywhere, even in areas that were previously uninhabited. The houses were more prosperous looking than during the war, with cement floors and tile roofs. There were even five or six houses and businesses at the intersection of QL-1 and the access road to LZ Lowboy. Also, the vegetation was lush, with trees close to the road and on the mountains. Even with these changes my recollection of the road was very clear. I knew where I was...every culvert, bridge, curve, mountain and village.

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As we approached LZ Lowboy we observed that it is still an operational rock quarry. In 1969 we called it the Tam Quan Quarry, it was operated by the 73rd Engineers. The quarry was still operational in 2003 and is highlighted above.



Top: The entrance to the quarry was blocked by this imposing sign. The tin hut was used to control truck movement to the site. Bottom: The actual quarry site in 2003.



A war memorial located in the village of Tam Quan, recognizing those lost in decades of fighting in the country.

As we approached LZ Lowboy we observed that it is still an operational rock quarry (next page). In 1969 we called it the Tam Quan Quarry, it was operated by the 73rd Engineers. At the old main gate is a scale for weighing trucks and a prominent “no trespassing” sign in Vietnamese and English. Also, a government office with a Vietnamese flag. We were not allowed to enter, but I was able to observe the operation and it sure looked and sounded familiar. One thing that was unusual was an area that did not support (vegetation) growth. It appeared that some hard asphalt prevented this growth. Perhaps some was leftover from one of the fires of our asphalt storage area in either April or June 1969. Perhaps the locals still call it the Tam Quan Quarry.

We then drove into Tam Quan, which is busy, prosperous and with a lot more houses on the road. The road just south of Lowboy was being paved. Déjà vu. In Tam Quan, as in every decent sized village, there is a war memorial honoring the fallen Vietnamese soldiers for their victory during the war from 1954 to 1975 (photo above). Many of these memorials are also graveyards. We then turned around and headed north from Tam Quan to Duc Pho.

Back in 1969 it was our daily routine to begin the minesweep at dawn, heading North out of LZ Lowboy to

meet Delta Company coming South out of LZ Thunder/Debbie. This mission would be rotated among the platoons weekly. This minesweep could take from two to four hours. When the minesweep was complete, we declared the road open for U.S. Military traffic, construction, re-supply and troop movement.

The minesweep was a planned combat operation complete with gun trucks, "dusters", pre-set artillery coordinates, communication and a designated reaction force. Security walked off of the road right and left. Keen observation and use of hand held mine detectors provided the basic tools to accomplish this mission. Thirty pairs of eyes looking for danger from snipers, command detonated mines and ambushes.

From November 1968 to October 1969 there were over one thousand enemy incidents including 80 mines detonated, one hundred and fifty mines detected, three-hundred incidents of hostile fire, ambushes, snipers, harassment and worse. There were more than three-hundred obstacles removed. These included barricades made of bamboo, piles of earth, stone and rubble. These barricades were filled with wire, metal, propaganda, booby traps and mines.

The minesweep got somewhat faster as we paved more and more of the road, but it was always a dangerous, daily mission. The main problem with the minesweep and road building is that the enemy knew where the engineers would be everyday, opening the road, completing that bridge, continuing the paving. We were a convenient target. Many of the one-thousand enemy incidents were directed against the minesweep teams.

A mile or so north of the access road for LZ Lowboy we stopped, remembered and prayed at the location where the bad ambush of 24 May 1969 occurred. (See the photo at the right for a look at the area in 2003)

The peaceful houses, rice paddies, palm trees and beauty of this small place covered over and hid the awful loss of that day so many years ago. We remembered those who died and were wounded that early morning.

SP4 Mark W. Fenner (24W-94), PVT Elmer E. Fields (24W-94), PFC Allen Hargens (24W-95), SP4 Gary Neavor (24W-97), and SP4 Stanley Turner (24W-99), from the 19th Engineers and SGT Stephen McCarvel (24W-98) from the 4th Battery, 60th Artillery (Dusters).

1st Platoon, Charlie Company, 19th Engineers was traveling north in minesweep convoy on paved road and was ambushed at 0620 hours. The attack was by a powerful NVA force which hit the platoon hard. The platoon was lead by ILT Thomas Wilczak and PSG Mack Bush, both of whom were wounded in the attack, as was almost every member of the minesweep team. B-40 rockets hit the platoon leader's truck, the "duster", a five-ton dump truck loaded with Engineers and a fifty-caliber machine gun truck.

The convoy was stopped with the rocket attack and the area was a free-for-all fire fight which included a frontal attack by Engineers and a counterattack by the reaction force. Fast, furious and deadly. A few hours later the situation was "calm" again, except for the noise of bulldozers clearing everything back for one-hundred meters or so.

This was the same area where ILT James Brierly (36W-10)



Site of the deadly enemy ambush as it looked in 2003. Peaceful scenery today killing zone on 24 May, 1969.

was shot and killed traveling North of LZ Lowboy in his jeep on 12 December 1968.

Just three-hundred meters further north we passed by the spot where on 25 April 1969 the minesweep point heard movement off the road, shot quickly and killed a Viet Cong soldier with an M-14 rifle that was captured from Charlie Company a year earlier. It is believed that the weapon was captured when SP4 Alton Sebastian (37E-43) was killed on 5 February 1968, virtually in the same place.

Four kilometers north of LZ Lowboy, I vividly remembered an ambush that involved a large NVA force on 17 August 1969. Somehow, none of our men were killed, although we had twelve wounded from Charlie Company and five more wounded from the "dusters". The ambush was from both sides of the road. Some of the NVA were pre-positioned, well camouflaged just two meters from the edge of the road. Automatic weapons fire, AK-47s, many rocket-propelled grenades. Very chaotic. We lost two 5-ton trucks. At least five NVA were killed. ILT Don Lambert and CPT Bill Obley were both present on this minesweep, which contributed to another exciting, dangerous day on QL-1. The Huey "dustoffs" were busy that day too, but somehow none of the 19th Engineers were killed; a miracle for which I still am very thankful.

Also, south of Sa Huynh we passed the spot where SP4 Charles Cunningham (28W-97) was killed. The date was 31 March 1969. He was participating in the morning minesweeps, backing his 5-ton dump truck as a mine detector. He was riding on the running board when the mine detonated and ignited his fuel tank causing fatal burns. No one who was there will ever forget that day.

Next came the Sa Huynh Beach. My 1969 description of this beach to my wife (by letter) observed that a resort should be built there. The two-mile long white sand beach framed by mountains north and south always seemed too beautiful to be in the middle of such a hostile area. It is still beautiful and we stopped for lunch. My memories of this area included the occasional platoon swim on Sunday afternoons. I also remember the Mess Sergeant buying huge shrimp from the fisherman from Sa Huynh for a special treat. We asked for a lunch of these shrimp, and sure enough my memory was correct. We



Top: The beach at Sa Huynh in 2003 as beautiful as it was in 1969. **Bottom:** The author enjoys a remembered food treat from his Vietnam War days. No matter the circumstances, Army Engineers always found ways during the war to wind down from the stress, and often looked to the ocean for relaxation.



ate three huge shrimp that were barbecued and excellent. It still is a beautiful spot. (see photos on Page 32)

After lunch we again proceeded north to the very dangerous, deadly, five-mile distance through the "98 Pass" area to LZ Thunder/Debbie, stopping several times to remember and pray.

Just out of Sa Huynh is a salt evaporation enterprise near where SP4 James Idlett (24W-72) was killed while setting up security for the work crew on 12 May 1969. Working the hillside west of 97 culvert his security detail came into contact with several Viet Cong, killing one, but with our own loss. In the same area PFC Clarence McCraney (34W-39) was killed in a D Company ambush on 19 January 1969 and PFC Felix Jacques (26W-25) by a command detonated mine on 22 April 1969. This ambush also resulted in many WIA and a very hectic, hostile day. Lt. Donald Lambert was platoon leader.

We recalled the ambush with B-40 rockets, automatic weapons and small arms fire on 13 March 1969. SFC Lindberg Wade (24W-23) of the 4/60th Artillery (Dusters) was struck by a B-40 rocket on top of his duster and killed

immediately. Also in this area SSG Berton Decker (29W-36) of D Company lost his life on 14 March 1969 while attempting to defuse a mine, SP5 Ross Mandeville (19W-70), 73rd Engineer Company (CS) was killed in an ambush of the paving team on 19 August 1969.

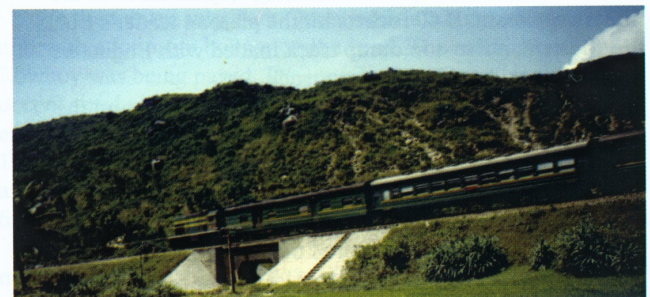
Driving slowly through the Pass (photos below), memories of anxiety, alertness and observation came back. The necessity of knowing where to look and what to look for was keen even though 34 years had passed.

Enemy incidents in this area were so frequent, that for any of the 19th Engineers, the reputation of 98 Pass still causes us to shake our heads at what we had to do to minesweep, travel, secure, grade, drain and pave this five miles of hell. This area was a favorite attack point for the VC and NVA. Never to be forgotten by men of the 19th Engineers.

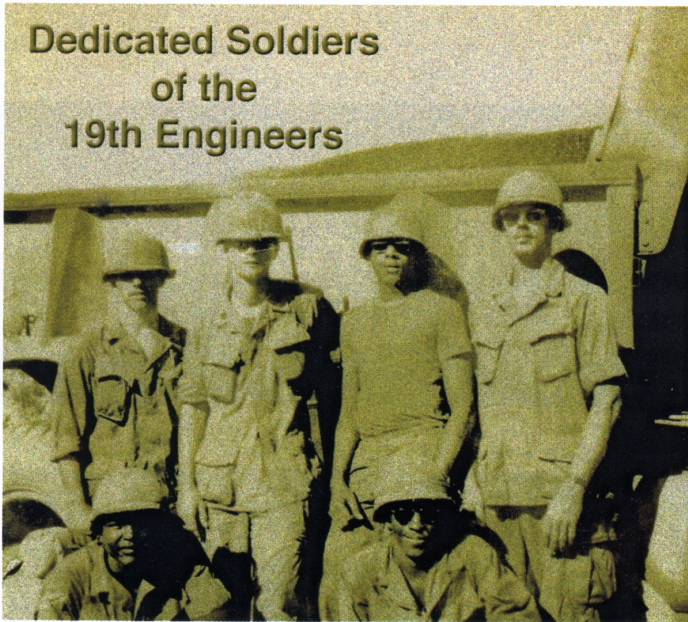
As Engineers not attached to an infantry division, we had to provide our own security. Enemy activity got so bad that in May through July 1969, A and D Companies were reorganized as infantry to provide extra security so we could finish the roadwork. This was detailed in the summer of 1970, "The Kysu" publication. That article says that the 19th became known as the "Fightingest Engineer Battalion in Vietnam". It does seem that we got more than our fair share of attention from the enemy.



Top: 98 Pass during 1969, when it was one of the most dangerous locations faced by the Engineers of the 19th. Note burned-out vehicle. **Bottom:** A peaceful 98 Pass in 2003, but it still felt the same to the author when he returned 34 years after his wartime experiences there.



**Dedicated Soldiers
of the
19th Engineers**



"The men of the 19th Engineers were smart, well trained, hard working and brave. They always showed initiative and worked well as a team. They were good troops. The BEST. I remain very proud to have served with them and I am always proud to say I was a Combat Engineer in Vietnam."

After passing LZ Thunder/Debbie I was able to relax and reflect on the twelve to fifteen miles where I had spent so much time from December 1968 to October 1969. I felt a sense of emptiness and futility leaving our part of QL-1. I'm sure it was because we were not victorious in this war, and knowledge of the losses that the 19th Engineers suffered.

I was satisfied that we were able to honor in some small way these men. The men of the 19th Engineers were smart, well trained, hard working and brave. They always showed initiative and worked well as a team. They were good troops. The BEST. I remain very proud to have served with them and I am always proud to say I was a Combat Engineer in Vietnam.

The incidents that are described here come from personal recollection, a review of historical documents with John Boyle our Historian, and conversations with other members of the 19th Engineer Battalion Association.

I apologize for the brevity and omissions from this time period. Documents and memories are sketchy and focus on my personal experience.

The building of QL-1 from Bong Son to Mo Duc by the 19th Engineers has a painful history that deserves recording. Any and all recollections that any other veteran may have would be appreciated and will be incorporated into our history.

A paragraph, photographs and any personal recollection with names of men killed or wounded, names of those present at a particular incident, location and dates would be appreciated. Essays!

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The authors wife, Mary Ellen Smith, near LZ Lowboy in Vietnam during a return visit with her husband on 2003.

