



Lost on Highway 1

by **Morris Johnson**
A 1/44th Arty

In the early part of 1968 about May, I was pulled from the normal operation of the unit and paired with a big jovial black man from Atlanta Ga. We were informed by the Section Chief, that we were off the Dusters now. When we asked what we were going to do, he told us that we were going to drive a truck in a convoy to Da Nang to pick up supplies. Well, no big deal - sounds like, but no convoy had gone from Dong Ha on the DMZ to Da Nang since the Tet offensive. Lucky us! We'd be going through the city of Quang Tri, Hue, and the mountains South of Hue where fierce fighting had occurred days before. There were other trucks in the convoy, some from the 1st of the 44th, but Smitty or myself knew none of the others on the trucks.

Well, we gathered our gear, flack jackets, helmets, canteens, all the normal stuff soldiers carry, and loaded in an old 5 ton the next day and off we went. Met at the gate of Dong Ha fire base, formed into a convoy and got ready to roll, full of fuel and nerves. We were assigned a position toward the rear of the convoy (Newbees always get the choice spots) with the wrecker. There were 2 men on the wrecker, that were assigned to ride drag incase any vehicle should break down, these men were mechanics (they looked the part greasy and dirty) and would repair the vehicle or pull it into a secured area.

All went well as we played the accordion game out of Dong Ha, South until we reached Quang Tri then open country past villages, rice paddies, water buffalo plowing, herds of ducks and geese. Finally reached Hue. It was blown to high heavens. Bridges had been blown then pontoon bridges had been set up by Army engineers. We crossed a river on the out skirts of Hue. Then suddenly the green lizard in which we was riding (Smitty was driving) stopped as all the rear wheels locked up on the truck. Smitties eyes got big, so did mine. Smitty did a good job of getting the hunk of junk, to the side of the rode, then the convoy passed us with out so much of a wave. Here we are in this old ragged truck, gooks everywhere, in the middle of no where. We were scared to death and everybody is going off and leaving us. Dang!!!

Then a miracle happened! Up drove the greasy twins. They stopped and piled off their truck. Their first question was very intelligent - "Something wrong?" (OH BOY!!!) Well, Smitty explained. They promptly crawled under the truck and drained the air tank. Water and junk blew out of the tank eventually purging it of foreign matter, then the brakes released. Man those 2 greasy wrecker operators were like angels of mercy! We pulled onto the road with the wrecker behind headed South. The last thing the mechanics said was "Ya'll better drive like hell to catch the rest of the convoy. They didn't wait on us. We got to catch up." Well Smitty took their advise to heart and off we went, dust flying, rattling and banging, South on Hwy 1. We were really flying for a 5 ton, then Papa son would pull out in front of us or a road block would stop our progress as a herd of ducks crossed the road. A column of track vehicles would meet

us. The road was so narrow we'd have to pull off so they could go North. After a while we looked back, so proud we'd run off and left the wrecker. We had a good laugh then rolled on trying to catch the convoy which was probably just around the next bend in front of us.

We soon came to a big Marine base with sign out front that said Phu Bai then listed the units. Well, we looked about that time and saw our convoy ahead about 2 miles, through dust and smoke. Smitty said I'll catch them on next hill. Over the next hill we could see trucks ahead but we had not gained an inch on them so Smitty kicked the old green Lizard faster down the road. On top of one hill we'd gained on them, then the next hill. They had hit a good stretch of road and left us behind further. As we rolled along we'd go through villages, by ARVN fire bases and there were lots of signs that some big battles had just been fought there. Burned trucks, track vehicles, housed burned and damaged by machine gun fire. Bomb craters everywhere, but Smitty and I just rolled on.

After a while we started to get up in the mountains. Really pretty country, but Charlie's country. No one was around but 2 old ARVN trucks which we were stuck behind it seemed like an eternity. Then suddenly they turned into a ARVN camp, then there was no one but us. Well, we went to the top of the next hill, then caught a glimpse of trucks as they went over the next mountain so Smitty poured the coal to it and here we went to catch them. This went on and on, then all of a sudden we were on the top of a high mountain pass, with a big firebase or something lying in a valley below. It stretched for miles it seemed. We rolled down the hill stopped at the MP check point. Explaining that we had had brake problems and we had gotten separated from our convoy, asking for directions where they might be. We got the normal "I don't know, but you might check at that metal building over there" - pointing across an area. So we stretched a little more, then headed toward the building. By now it's nearly dark, we are both really wondering if there is any place we can get a meal and shower in this big place. We knew there was those showers and food in a place this big, even though we'd never been here before. We ambled along toward our information center which turned out to be convoy headquarters.

We drove up out front of the building, no one around but there was a light inside. We took our bush hats, beat our clothes. It looked like an El Paso dust storm, straightened our hair and strolled to the door. We looked inside. There sat somebody behind a desk. Well, our problems are solved now we think. So we open the door, boldly step in and walk up to the desk real cool like. Then we looked at the man behind the desk. There was a Major behind the desk instead of some nobody like us. We snapped to attention (just out of boot camp we were) and saluted. The Major smiled, shuffled his papers and took a puff off his cigarette. He said "at ease and what can I do for you men?" We went into detail about the brake problems we'd had in Phu Bai, how the convoy had ran off and left us and we couldn't catch them before they had gotten into Da Nang as hard as we had tried. We told that him that hopefully he could direct us to where the convoy was parked so we could get back with them. Well, he just sat and looked blank for a minute, then asked a question. "Where did ya'll come from?" We responded "Dong Ha, Sir." So good so far. Then he asked, "When did ya'll leave?" We explained around 8:00 this morning. Then he asked "Have a good trip?" We said "Yes Sir, except for them dam brakes." Another blank look came over his face. He sat stone silent for a minute. Then he turned and called the name of another man sitting behind a glass partition. The man looked up, it was dang Full Bird. Oh no. !!!

The Major who, we had been talking to us said loudly "Sir, you can tell everyone the road is open from Dong Ha to Da Nang, these two men just drove it in one day. He

then started to shake his head and mumble.!!! I looked at Smitty, he looked at me and both of our mouths fell open. The Major then explained "Men your convoy stopped at Phu Bai, because the roads haven't been swept for mines since about February the first, due to TET." He then told us how to get to China Beach where the convoy would be the next evening, and where we could get something to eat and a place to sleep. Ended up we ate c-rations and slept on the ground, then laid around the next day untill the rest of the convoy got to Da Nang!! See God does take care of ignorant people!!!

China beach is nothing like it was on TV. We finally got back to Dong Ha in about a week!!!

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