



## HAVE GUN-WILL TRAVEL

By SSG John Strachan

**F**ighting around the Ben Luc Bridge had been intense and the VC were taking heavy losses from the track-mounted twin 40mm guns. Suddenly one of the blocking force spotted four enemy soldiers, hands over their heads, running toward his position, babbling incoherently.

Aside from the key words "Chieu Hoi," the only phrase that could be understood in the frenzied screaming was "Fire Dragon."

The superstitious VC had been baffled, frightened and beaten by one of the most effective weapons in the 9th Division's arsenal of mobile death-dealers—the "Duster."

"The VC call them 'Fire Dragons' because they don't

know what to make of them," explained First Lieutenant Gene S. Lucas of Clinton, S.C., executive officer of Battery C of the 5th Battalion, 2d Artillery who support the Old Reliables with the armored artillery pieces. "Giving up is a pretty common occurrence."

The Dusters derived their name from a simple fact of life—roaring down the Delta's dirt roads, they raise dust in huge quantities. "In convoys, we travel as much as 500 meters apart so we can see where we're going," said Lucas.

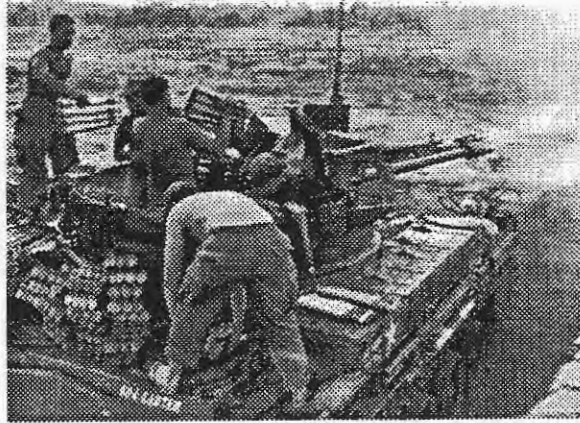
Actually part of II Field Force Artillery, the battery's 16 Dusters are mission controlled by the 9th Division Artillery (DivArty) and are deployed at nine locations throughout the Division's area of operations.

Two dusters each work out of Dong Tam, Can Giuoc, Ben Luc Bridge, Thu Thua, Tan An, Ben Duc Airfield in My Tho, Fire Base Moore and Fire Base Danger. Although these locations are considered permanent, the dusters' ease of mobility often results in quick moves to areas of high tactical priority.

Their mission take in all types of offensive and defensive fire—perimeter security, counter mortar and rocket fire, convoy duty, infantry unit support and direct and indirect fire missions. Their speed in retaliation against enemy mortars is second to none. During a recent mortar attack at Can Giuoc, the duster crews were pouring out defensive fire before the VC could unleash their second round.



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*The duster, a very versatile weapon because of its self-propelled capabilities, fires 40mm high explosive rounds that are fed by hand into the weapon in clips of four. The ammo is used up at the rate of 240 rounds per minute if both guns are firing—almost as fast as the men can work. There is no doubt that when night falls, Charlie will think twice before challenging the rath of the duster.*

Utilizing three types of ammunition, the dusters can crank out 240 rounds per minute from the twin guns with surprising accuracy. The short-range ammo can take down a target at 4,500 meters, while the long-range ammunition has been proven effective to 10,000 meters. The armor-piercing shells, like the other two types are all tracers, point-detonated, and have a bursting radius of 50 meters.

"They're great guns," said Platoon Sergeant Harry Lippert. "With a little normal preventive maintenance they can fire forever and almost never jam."

Flanking the twin 40s and their basic load of 980 rounds are two M-60 machineguns. Almost unnecessary but still on board are individual M-79 grenade launchers or M-16 rifles for each member of the crew.

Supporting this impressive array of armament is an M-48 tank. Its air-cooled, 500-horsepower gasoline engine can propel the 25-ton assembly at a top speed of 60 miles per hour. For Delta use, however, the crews rarely take the duster over 30 miles per hour. Their 140 mile cruising range makes them

easily accessible to all corners of the Reliables' area of operations. The duster's tough hide is constructed of 5/8th-inch armor plate stretched over the frame in a manner which easily deflects enemy rounds.

"We've had two dusters hit by RPGs," Lucas recalled, "and they only did minor damage."

The four-man crews who operate the dusters are graduates of an eight-week training course at Fort Bliss, Tex. Consisting of a driver, squad leader, and left and right cannoneer, the individual men spend most of their tour together. "We spend about two months at one location then move out," said Sergeant Richard Russell of Clemson, S.C., squad leader. "It give us a change of scenery and it makes the time pass faster."

All the men are cross-trained and can effectively perform any of the unit's jobs. "We have a Combat Readiness Evaluation test every quarter," said Lippert, "and the men always do well in all phases of the operation."

Eight hours of maintenance is called for every time a track is moved. Again the crew members prove their versatility with

first-echelon and occasionally more involved, maintenance. "We take care of the engine, transmission and running gear," said Staff Sergeant Patrick Webster of Los Angeles, Calif., section chief. "Every time the guns are fired, we tear them down completely and clean them."

Working on a duster crew has its advantages and disadvantages, according to the crew members. Rated highest on the list of pluses is the feeling of confidence and security the dusters provide. "Charlie doesn't usually mess with us, unless he hasn't seen a duster before," explained

Sergeant Ernest Smith of Allentown, Pa., a squad leader. "If the VC have ever come against one before, they'll usually stay away." The Duster's biggest shortcoming is its inability to negotiate the deep Delta mud of the rainy season. Twenty-five tons of armored track is also hard-pressed to cross several of the Delta's weaker bridges.

"We're water-borne much of the time," explained Webster. "The dusters can't be airlifted and this is probably the best way to move them."

Floating on the canals, the dusters also serve another purpose. Working with M-8 landing craft, the dusters cruise up and down the myriad of Delta rivers and canals, firing at intelligence targets. Intelligence targets and radar sighting have proven lucrative for the "Have Guns Will Travel" crews. "We rely heavily on radar and intelligence reports," Lucas noted. "They're usually right on the nose."

The deafening roar of the armored monsters keeps them away from infantry night patrols but when possible the dusters are in the paddies providing security for daytime infantry unit sweeps.

Their construction gives them several advantages over conventional artillery pieces. They can provide pinpoint short-range fire and easily wipe out a VC mortar or rocket platoon set up close to a unit's perimeter.

The 240 round per minute firing capability allows them to put out an impenetrable wall of fire before the howitzer have slid home a second round. Their flat trajectory and choice of automatic or single fire affords them more target accessibility.

The addition of dusters on the division's Dong Tam headquarters berm adds to the security of the Reliables' perimeter. A group of vehicles utilizing them in a convoy need not worry about the sniper or the sapper.

The 140-man battery has supported the division since April, 1968. The 5/2d's other batteries are presently with the 1st Division in Phu Loi, and the 25th Division in Cu Chi. A third battery operates in support of Thailand forces at the 9th Division's former headquarters at Bearcat. The duster concept is still unique to Vietnam, in that there are only three battalions located here, most of them guarding convoys.

A direct descendent of the World War II famous "pom-pom" guns, the




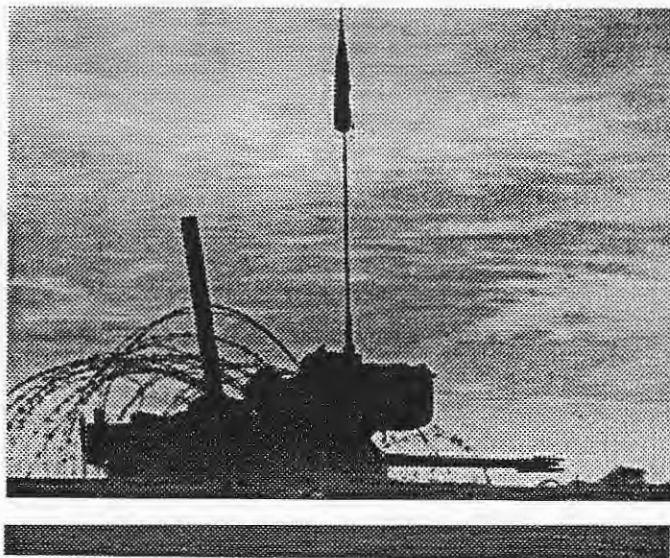
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present-day concept of the dusters was introduced in 1949. Making their debut during the Korean War, the supermobile guns proved their worth in infantry support.

Strangely enough, the dusters were introduced as anti-aircraft weapons and still fall under the air defense artillery branch. "It was really here in Vietnam that they proved useful in ground defense," Lucas noted.

Mounted in the Duster's turret is a vestigial computer whose ancestry dates back to the original idea of air defense. The straight forward mechanism can track enemy aircraft and zero in the sights of the twin 40s, enabling a gunner to knock a jet or prop plane out of the sky.

"That's one thing we haven't used here," said Lucas, "but it's ready to operate any time we need it." 



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