



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

## Quite a Caper

How a Company Lost—and Found—a 5-Ton Wrecker

By Brig. Gen. Richard F. Allen

U.S. Army retired

During the Vietnam War, I commanded the 148th Ordnance Company (Ammunition) from October 1967 to June 1968 at Vung Tau. That was the best time 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. What an honor.

Those who served in Vietnam will remember that Vung Tau was an in-country rest and relaxation center in addition to being a logistical base supporting the III Corps Tactical Zone and the Mekong Delta. We were support troops, soldiers Gen. George S. Patton once described as those who “never missed a meal or heard a shot fired in anger.” But the weather was hot, the work was hard, the hours were long and we did suffer a rocket attack during my tenure, Patton notwithstanding. 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 to heart.

In the late 1990s, I became aware of the Library of Congress Veterans History Project, a program that encouraged veterans to tell their stories, either through interviews or by a manuscript. I wrote my Vietnam story, and in the process relived those months, remembering the good, the bad and the funny.

War is serious business, but even in a combat zone, crazy, funny things do



sometimes happen. An extract from my story I call "The Wrecker Caper" is a tale that will warm the heart of anyone who 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 a somewhat lawful trade, and sometimes by way of grand larceny. There is one inviolate rule—never ask a scrounger where or how he got anything, because you really don't want to know. Scrounging is an art form best left to crafty NCOs. In this tale, my company was the victim or scroungee, and it did not seem too funny at the time. From my 1998 story:

### **The Wrecker Caper**

One afternoon in early March 1968, 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 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 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 Ammunition Supply Point being used to offload projectiles, but he said he had asked the magazine platoon leader, who denied having it. I told him to go check the ASP himself, since it might be there without the platoon leader knowing about it.

He called back later and confirmed it was not in the ASP. Concerned, but not alarmed, I asked when the wrecker was last seen. They were sure it was parked in the motor pool 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, but he assumed it was going to the ASP. Not to worry, I said, somebody probably borrowed it. Call the truck company since they have used it before and maybe took 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. We sent men to look in every corner of the logistical complex and notified the MPs and battalion of the possible theft.





It was not uncommon for vehicles to be stolen in Vung Tau. 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 Ba Ria was redeploying to the I Corps area and had been in the ASP that morning turning in excess ammo. They were scheduled to embark on a Navy landing ship the 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 1st Battalion, 83rd Artillery's fire base. We stationed the motor sergeant and others in the port to keep an eye out there. I expected to find the wrecker abandoned at the base camp. 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, 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 he said he would look into it when they got settled in at I Corps. Fat chance, I thought as we headed back to Vung 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 men and they were very excited, shouting 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 onto the landing ship.

When I saw the truck, 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 assembly, had been covered with canvas supported by ribs to make it look like a cargo truck. The boom itself had been wrapped in canvas and appeared

*He realized it  
was a wrecker  
& started asking  
questions.*

to be just equipment protruding from the back. Of course, the identifying numbers had been 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 two

years in the field. The disguise was so good I couldn't stay mad, but I pretended to be for the benefit of the motor sergeant who would have the chore of putting his truck back in order.

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

When asked how he spotted our truck, the motor sergeant 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 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 our equipment until the boat cleared the harbor. I tried to find the battalion commander, but he was in I Corps with the advance party. The executive officer promised to investigate the matter when they got settled, but we both knew he was lying.

I told him when he found out who was responsible, tell them I said, "Nice try."

### Searching for the Truth

Fast forward to October 2017. Old and retired, 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 the 1st of the 83rd, proud of their service in Vietnam and still keeping in touch. Curious to see if anyone would confess to being the mastermind of the wrecker caper, I called the webmaster, one Bill Taggart. He denied any knowledge of the incident, but volunteered to share my tale with others in his network. One former officer, Michael Jalone, remembered it well. Here are some excerpts from his emails to me:

"LOL, I just read your story about the wrecker being 'borrowed.' I was the [executive officer] of Battery A, 1/83rd. It was our unit that liberated the wrecker and attempted to move it north with us. It gives me pleasure to give you the rest of the story. Attached is an 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:"

*Yesterday, we stole a 5-ton wrecker from the 2nd Maintenance Battalion and stashed it up at the Aussie Camp. They called the MPs 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. [David] got overconfident 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.*

Jalone's email continues:

"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 NCOs, Sgt. [Ford] 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. Ford 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.

**Brig. Gen. Richard F. Allen, USA Ret.**, is a graduate of the University of North Alabama, where he received his commission in 1963. He served as the forward observer for the 2nd Battalion, 83rd Field Artillery, Germany, and commanded the 148th Ordnance Company (Ammunition) and Headquarters Headquarters Company, 53rd General Support Group, both in Vietnam. He later commanded the U.S. Army Reserve's 3rd Transportation Brigade, Anniston, Ala. He is also a graduate of the University of Alabama School of Law and the Army War College.

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."

### All Is Forgiven

So, there you have it. They say confession is good for the soul, and now I know that is true. In Vietnam, I had hoped to get a call from the battalion commander apologizing for the attempted robbery, but he probably never knew about it.

I do believe that if the commanding officer had been the great commanding officer 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 Jalone has sort of apologized and the collective souls of the men

of A Battery, especially Sgt. Ford from Chicago, can rest easy knowing they have all been forgiven. ★

ALL PHOTOS  
iSTOCK UNLESS  
OTHERWISE  
NOTED/ARMY  
MAGAZINE  
PHOTO  
ILLUSTRATIONS

