

## Part II Vietnam Interview<sup>5</sup>

[Q: Would you describe the most challenging part of the engineer effort in the delta?]

A: Some tentative estimates of the effectiveness of engineers in the delta have been that it takes about twice as many engineers in the delta to accomplish a mission as elsewhere in Vietnam. This estimate has not been confirmed by any detailed analysis. It's just the impression of the people that have been following it.



*Colonel Graves in Vietnam, 1969.*

When you look into this, you might be inclined to think that it is because of the hostility of the environment to engineer work. I would say that in the dry season this is definitely not the case. The conditions are as favorable for engineer work in the dry season as they are anywhere in Vietnam, perhaps more favorable.

In the wet season, they are very difficult, but I don't think that they are any more difficult in the delta than they are in many other regions. The real problem, and this is the real challenge in the delta, is the support of these operations, and the basic support problem is movement. The road system will not support movement to all the construction sites primarily because the bridges are too low in capacity.

---

<sup>5</sup>Part II is not strictly speaking an interview. On 11 July 1969, Colonel Ernest Graves, commanding officer, 34th Engineer Group (Const.), Binh Thu, Republic of Vietnam, on 11 July 1969 responded to a series of questions that Captain Raymond F. Bullock had submitted in a memorandum.

The original questions from the memorandum are enclosed in brackets.

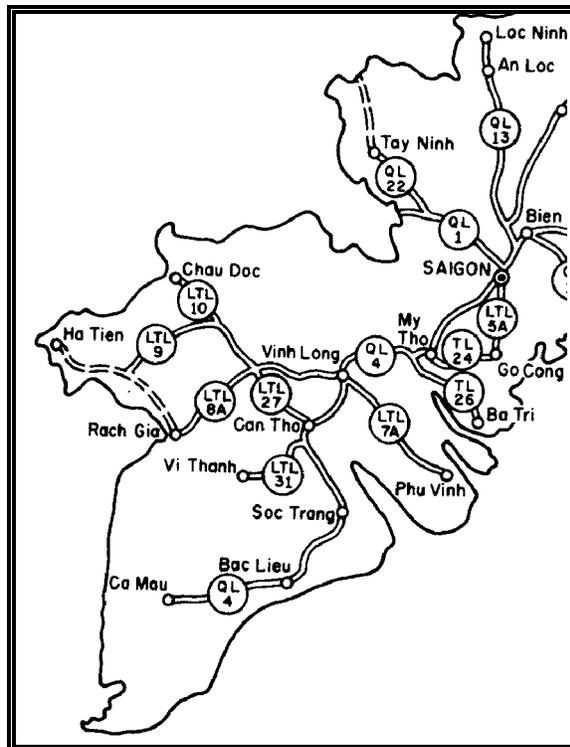
This means that we are dependent on a water line of communications for all our heavy equipment and our heavy construction supplies, not having the airlift capability. Given the priority system in Vietnam, these water movements are very time consuming. For example, the traffic management agency is allowed 20 days in which to complete a normal water movement. If you consider the number of movements required and the length of the various jobs, you pretty soon come up with the fact that half your time is spent waiting for movements.

There is no simple solution to this problem because the transportation people in Vietnam don't have the resources to support water movements all over the country. The engineers have to take their turn. One solution is to plan further ahead. But the military situation changes, and engineer plans have to be changed accordingly. There is no question in my mind that this is greatest challenge in the delta, providing adequate support.

Air is important for support in the delta, and air has been a problem. I think air has been a problem for the engineer troops all over Vietnam. They don't enjoy a sufficient priority to have enough air support. Either they're in organic aircraft for command and control, or in lift for heavier supplies. We've made various improvements; we've shared aircraft with other units, particularly the Saigon Support Command. But there is no question about it, we could do a lot more if we had more air than we now have.

Operation Speedy Express is an example of the effect of support. When you are given a priority, what is the best you can do? The construction work there, while interesting, was not a great challenge in itself. The relatively short time allowed and the difficulty of laying on all the movement incident to Speedy Express made this mission a much greater challenge to the group staff in the way of planning and coordinating than other operations which we have conducted.

At the other end of the scale is the LOC [lines of communication] program, a much more deliberate



*Mekong Delta, Lines of Communication.*

operation with more time to get into place. This is a much greater challenge to the battalions themselves that are doing the job because they have very large organizational problems to support this type of highway construction.

As far as the challenge to the group on the LOC program is concerned, it was a resource problem extending all the way up to the 20th Brigade, which was attempting to come up with enough earth moving equipment to do the job in the available time.

[Q: How did Speedy Express affect the later construction of QL-4?]

A: There's no question about the fact that Speedy Express had a serious adverse effect on this year's LOC program. At a time when we should have been making all-out preparations for the LOC program, we were doing Speedy Express. This was aggravated by the fact that the operation was in a suspended state for a critical period. We might have gone on to the LOCs had we known the fate of Speedy Express, but we didn't know it until later—the end of February, I guess, would be the time when the cancellation of the deployment of the Air Mobile Brigade was finally confirmed.

You've got to be honest about this thing. We originally started out trying to get facilities ready in December. Then it was slipped to January, which was very fortunate because we didn't have anything ready in December, and then it got deferred because of the threat north of Saigon. This gave us a grace period because we weren't able really to finish our Speedy Express work until the latter part of February and into March. Chi Lang was finished the latter part of February. The work at Moc Hoa carried on into March. Hindsight is better than foresight. If we'd known nothing was going to happen, all this effort could have been put into the LOCs.

There's another aspect of it which is that the command and staff elements, with all their attention focused on trying to do Speedy Express, just never got around to the planning and decisions that were necessary for the LOC program.

I don't know whether this is generally appreciated, but no headquarters to the very highest and no manager, no commander to the very highest can give equal attention to every problem he has. If you have been in these situations, you can see that one problem will be neglected in favor of another. There is no question, but the LOC program in the delta was neglected because of the attention which had to be directed to Speedy Express.

[Q: Does QL-4 fit into the overall excellent canal system of the area?]

A: As to the relation between QL-4 and the canal system, I'm not very knowledgeable about this. My impression is that the two serve different purposes. I've always viewed

the canal system as a rural communications net which supplied the farmers and by which they brought their produce to centers of population.

The highways are what I would call a bourgeois means of communication. They are much more the commercial means for the more bourgeois element of the society: the tradesmen, the entrepreneurs, and the city dwellers.

I don't mean that the highway isn't used by the farmers to get back and forth, but you don't see very many of them moving their rice on the roads. You do see trucks hauling rice and produce to a certain extent, but I would imagine just from casual observation that the great tonnage of agricultural produce in the delta moves by water and will always do so. It's not a commodity where speed is important. The heavy tonnages of rice move more economically by water.

What doesn't move economically by water is the more expensive goods that move over the road—animals, for example. You see chickens and this kind of thing moving over the road. You see the little people going over the road for trips to Saigon or driving their motorcycles over the road. It's a retail type operation.

The other big element that the road serves is the ARVN. Generally, the U.S. does not use the roads in the delta for supplies; we move our supplies by water or by air, as the case may be. The ARVN makes heavy use of the roads. Their main supply is by truck. The ARVN uses LSTs to bring supplies to ports in the delta, but from there their divisions are supported over the road. The U.S. 9th Division was supported quite a bit over the road from the Long Binh area to Dong Tam. But QL-4 further south is very important in the support of the ARVN 9th Division at Sa Dec and the ARVN 21st Division at Bac Lieu. A great many supplies move over the road from Can Tho up to Sa Dec and from Can Tho down to Bac Lieu. The big ARVN port operation here in Can Tho and QL-4 serve as the main supply route to these two divisions.

[Q: Would you comment on the effects that the rotation of the two brigades of the 9th Infantry Division will have on the group?]

A: It's really useless to speculate on what will happen to the security with the departure of the 9th Infantry Division. There's no question that the ARVN 7th Division is capable, but I think only time will tell. You hear both optimistic and pessimistic predictions. You just can't really tell, and I don't think you will be able to tell immediately. There has been a lot of trouble along QL-4 between My Tho and the Me Thuan ferry even with the 9th Division in place. Actually I think the road may be more secure between Vinh Long and Can Tho than it is on the stretch farther north.

But some indication of positive feeling about this is the fact that RMK is now engaged in a crash program to pave the road quite a bit of way with black base—at least as far as Cai Lay—and there are all sorts of plans that have been made to keep the road open. But I really can't say one way or the other.

[Q: How has the MCA-funded [military construction, Army] LOC equipment aided the group during your command?]

A: It was an inspiration to have the MCA/LOC equipment. I would offer only one reservation. As is almost always the case with something of this kind, the people that sell it tend to emphasize the simplicity of the equipment and of the whole problem. In other words, if we go out and buy something off the shelf, all our problems are solved.

I don't really think in the case of this commercial equipment that we have any fewer problems than we have with military equipment. We have all the same problems. We have the problems of skill of operators. We have the problems of repair parts. We have the problems of having people that are really expert in the equipment. The problems are all the same, but the thing that this equipment brings is unique capabilities to do a job.

For example, the self-propelled stabilizers that we use on the clay lime, the stabilization batch plants that we are using to produce sand cement, the segmented compactors that we are using for compacting the clay lime, the vibratory rollers for the compacting of the sand cement: these pieces of equipment provide us a unique soil stabilization capability down here—where we don't have any rock—that we would not have with military equipment. The equipment is much more productive.

But I would be the last one to claim that it's any simpler to operate or easier to maintain than the military equipment. It's equally demanding, and if any mistake was made with the LOC equipment, it was underestimating the difficulty of setting up an adequate support system for this equipment. Now that we know the need, I think the operation is getting organized very well. But we didn't have, at the beginning, the kind of training program we should, and we didn't have the kind of parts support, and we didn't have in country as many people who were highly knowledgeable of this equipment as we needed.

With the military equipment and with the warrant officers who have been working with it a long time, we do have people that are familiar with it. What clearly is needed for the commercial equipment is to have representatives from the manufacturing firms come in at the very beginning—representatives who are just as knowledgeable relatively as our warrant officers are with our standard equipment.

We have had some factory representatives, but we didn't have, as far as I know—I'm not familiar with the procurement contract—we didn't have a specific standard arrangement that every item of equipment would be accompanied into the country by a set of people from the manufacturer fully qualified to introduce the equipment. This is what I think should be written into the contract.

Now we have a maintenance contractor who has skilled maintenance people. But these are no substitute for factory representatives. They know this type of equipment, but they may or may not have worked on a specific item. For example, the stabilization plants are [made by] Cedarapids. We need a man from that company to come and tell us how to run this equipment. This is a big, complicated piece of machinery, and we don't have anybody that's familiar with the particular piece of equipment. We're overcoming these difficulties, and the idea of getting this machinery that's particularly capable is a marvelous one.

I am less sure that I agree with some of the items that we've gotten that have close analogies to military equipment. For example, the 600 CFM air compressors are fine pieces of equipment, but I'm not sure that I agree with having spent money to buy them. I'd rather use the money to get equipment for which there is no military parallel. One exception to this is the 5,000-gallon water distributors. In this case the MCA equipment is so much better than anything we have in the military that it's not really comparable.

On the subject of morale, the experience down here is that hard work out in the sticks away from the cities is the best thing for morale. The units that have the best spirit, the men that seem most satisfied, are people that are out working on a fire base or some other remote site. There are several things about this. One is that they are left to their own resources. They don't have the barracks "spit and polish" and all that. Another thing is that they are close knit out there; they rely on each other. When you put them in a town, they go off to town and get into trouble. They're not as happy getting into trouble as they are out working. This has been our experience.

I won't talk much about maintenance. The first and foremost problem we have in maintenance is that our whole army isn't adequately trained in this subject. Our operators aren't, our junior officers aren't. I guess nobody is adequately trained.

After a person has been over here working on a problem for 8 or 10 months, he knows an awful lot about it. But as people come over, they don't know enough. There is no question that it's a highly complicated problem that requires a great deal of skill and knowledge and ability to get right. We are amateurs at it until we are about ready to go home.

In the 34th Group, we've had a long uphill struggle to develop decent maintenance. There was a complete lack of appreciation, I would say, when I got here 10 months ago of how much effort, how much care, how much organization are needed. This is particularly true in the delta where, if we don't make the system work, we're not near enough to any sources of supply to short-circuit it. If you're in the Long Binh area and you're not doing it right, there are all sorts of alternatives. Down here if you don't have your requisitioning and everything else working properly, you have no alternatives. Next to the transportation problem, maintenance is probably the biggest challenge that you have down here.

[Q: Would you comment on the use of the 35th Engineer Battalion (Combat) since its move to the delta?]

A: The 35th came down in some respects under ideal circumstances, with one job and a clear understanding that they wouldn't be frittered away. They've done that job very creditably. They had their own problems with the delta, getting accustomed to the situation down here.

The pacing factors in their job have been equipment and rock. They did not have enough rollers and asphalt distributors for the job, and not enough rock was delivered down to their rock sites. Now we are starting to use them for operational support missions, and they do very well on these. The boost they've given the group is to take these on instead of the 69th Battalion, which previously had to do all this type of work south of the Mekong. That's allowing us to collect up the efforts of the 69th. The 69th was always badly fractionated with so many different jobs. The 69th is now able to concentrate its efforts a little more and will, I think, become more effective because of it.

We fought very hard for the 35th. There was some question about whether the 35th was being gainfully employed down here. We definitely felt that they were. Now with the redeployment of the 86th, they'll end up being our only combat battalion down here, and I think that makes sense.

[Major General Harold R.] Colonel Parfitt, the 20th Engineer Brigade commander, has made the decision to leave the area of responsibility of the 34th Group just as it is until next dry season. This has to do with the missions he has elsewhere in the brigade AOR [area of responsibility].

This means that all the missions of the 86th will have to be picked up by the 93d. The major problem that has to be solved here—and it's too early to say how it'll come out—is that the 93d already had a full program with MACV advisor facilities and preparations for its work on TL24 in the coming dry season. To this has been added the

work it's doing at Tan An airfield to settle the 3d Brigade of the 9th Division, and some cleanup and disassembly work at Dong Tam. This gives it a completely full program from now through the end of the year. If there is a lot of operational support in Long An Province, then something that the 93d was already programmed to do just won't be done. That's going to be a difficult decision.

The theory is that with the 9th Division gone, the 7th ARVN Division will be operating in this area. There are ARVN engineers, and a great deal of the operational support should devolve upon them. The burden on the 93d should be less then.

The 93d won't have to pick up the full program that the 86th would have done. However, you have to recognize that the 3d Brigade of the 9th Division has been operating in Long An Province all along and certainly at least a third of the effort of the 86th Battalion was committed to them. They are still going to be there. So, if they enjoy the same level of support that they did under the 86th, this is going to be a substantial demand on the capability of the 93d.