

Guntrucks of 'Ambush Alley'

by Larry A. Ballard

Displayed on the grounds of the Army Transportation Museum at Fort Eustis, Virginia, is the Vietnam guntruck *Eve of Destruction*. This unusual vehicle is the lone surviving example of the converted cargo trucks that once provided highway security for Army convoys in Southeast Asia. The little-known story of these armored hybrids is one of GI ingenuity, extraordinary courage, and noble sacrifice.

Eve of Destruction began her combat career with the 523d Transportation Company, 8th Transportation Group. Although the group was not the only unit in Vietnam to employ cargo trucks as security vehicles, it was the first to use them on a large scale. Between 1967 and 1971, the 2 1/2-ton and 5-ton guntrucks were used to great advantage by 8th Group, first in the highlands and coastal areas of northern II Corps and later at Hue and Da Nang in I Corps.

The 8th Transportation Group arrived in Vietnam in October 1966 and immediately began daily operations out of the coastal city of Qui Nhon to support tactical units in northern II Corps (see map, page 30). Each month the truckers delivered over 90,000 tons of ammunition, building materials, fuel, and other supplies. Convoys sometimes contained more than 200 vehicles, occupying almost 10 miles of highway. Trips were made north to Bong Son and south to Tuy Hoa on Route 1, and west on Route 19 to An Khe and Pleiku. The latter journey was the longest line-haul route in Vietnam, more than 200 miles roundtrip.

Route 19 was also one of the more difficult and dangerous roads traveled by 8th Group truckers. The highway began near Qui Nhon and wound its way westward through two treacherous mountain passes. It was only partially paved, had little or no shoulder, and was filled with potholes. Sniping and mining incidents were frequent. The enemy made a determined effort to destroy the route's many bridges—an average of one every 3 miles.

By the end of Summer 1967, the enemy activity along Route 19 had increased dramatically. Colonel Joe O. Bellino, then commander of 8th Group, commented that in World War II and



Korea transportation units had operated over mined roads, received sniper fire, and been attacked. "But," he said, "our convoys get one form or another of it damn near every day." The graveled section of road between An Khe and the base of the Mang Giang Pass became the site of so many attacks that the truckers nicknamed the area "Ambush Alley."

The degree of convoy protection on Route 19 left much to be desired. Although military police units were usually able to provide route security in other areas of Vietnam, they had insufficient troops and equipment to cope with the ferocity of enemy attacks on 8th Group convoys. Furthermore, tactical units operating near the highway could provide escort protection only where the road passed through their area of control.

Despite the increasing number of enemy attacks, the truckers of 8th Group continued to remain roadbound, 17 to 20 hours a day, 7 days a week. Sniping and mining incidents took their toll, but it was the highway ambush that presented the most danger. Enemy-detonated mines would suddenly disable the lead vehicles, blocking the road and halting the rest of the trucks. The enemy would then use rockets, recoilless rifles, mortars,



□ *Eve of Destruction* (above) is the only surviving example of the converted cargo trucks—armor-plated to serve as convoy escorts—that were used extensively in Vietnam (left).

machine guns, grenades, and small arms to destroy vehicles in the “kill zone.” These zones could stretch from 100 yards to almost a mile in length, depending on the number of enemy troops involved. The attacks lasted only 15 to 20 minutes, giving the enemy time to hit and run before tactical reinforcements arrived.

September 2, 1967, marked the beginning of an all-out effort by the enemy to close Route 19. On that day, the 8th Group convoy was savagely attacked in “Ambush Alley” as the column was returning from Pleiku with empty trucks. Seven drivers were killed, 17 were wounded, and over 30 vehicles were damaged or destroyed. This was the worst attack on an 8th Group convoy since its arrival in Vietnam a year earlier. It was painfully obvious that the convoys had to have better defense.

As a result of the September ambush, 8th Group instituted what became known as the “hardened-convoy” concept. This was simply an order of march incorporating task vehicles, communications jeeps, and “guntrucks.” The guntrucks were 2 1/2-ton cargo vehicles that had been removed from line-haul operations and outfitted with sandbags on the floors, beds, and sides for protection.

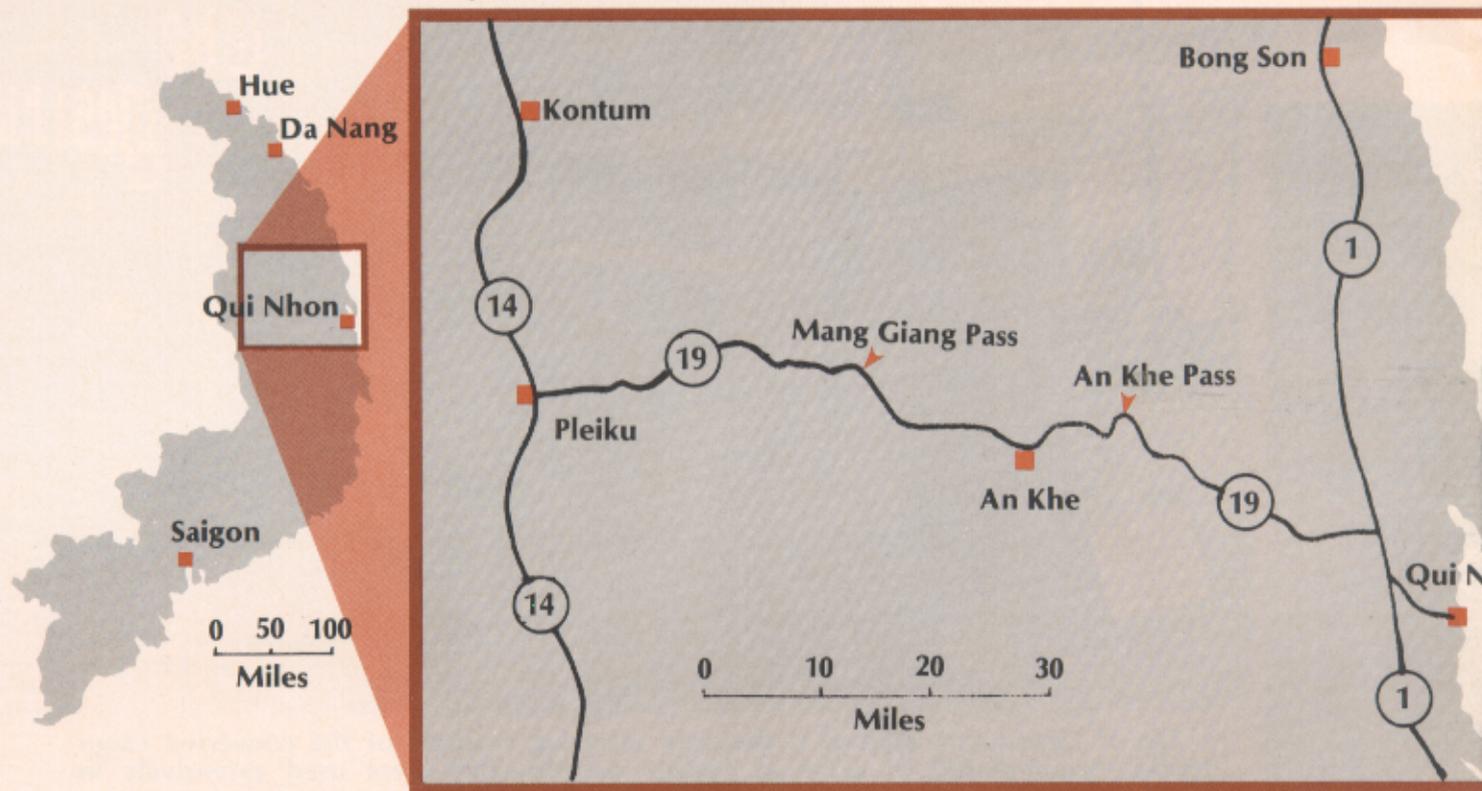
A crew consisting of a driver, two M60 machine gunners, and a noncommissioned officer in charge was assigned to each hardened security truck. The new concept called for the guntrucks to provide a rapid, retaliatory saturation fire within the critical first 3 minutes of an enemy attack.

During ambushes, drivers of supply vehicles tried to get out of the kill zone as quickly as possible. For the crew of the guntrucks, however, the opposite was true. As soon as the enemy launched his attack against a convoy, the guntrucks were to drive immediately into the kill zone to protect disabled vehicles by providing them fire support.

Because of the growing enemy activity in the highlands, the number of trucks in an individual convoy had been reduced. Columns contained fewer than 100 vehicles in march units of 10 to 20 trucks each. More and more guntrucks were outfitted until there was an average of one security vehicle for every 10 task vehicles.

After a few weeks of experimentation, it became apparent that the sandbags on a guntruck absorbed too much water from the frequent rains, increasing the weight of the vehicle and making it sluggish and difficult to maneuver. The problem was alleviated when a young warrant officer of 8th

□ The treacherous route followed by the 8th Transportation Group in supporting tactical units in Vietnam—particularly through “Ambush Alley” (Route 19 on the map below, including the hairpin turn at An Khe Pass, right)—required that guntrucks be used for protection.



Group discovered several sheets of steel plate in a local salvage yard and had them welded to a 2 1/2-ton cargo truck—giving 8th Group its first armor-plated guntruck. Armor soon replaced sandbags on the security vehicles, and by October the unique battlewagons were a common sight along Route 19.

The typical guntruck was armor-plated on the front, rear, and sides. The cab floor and bed were also armored for protection against mines. Pedestal mounts for the M60 machine guns were installed in the bed, and sections of the side plate directly in front of each gun were cut down several inches to provide a field of fire. In addition, a grenadier, armed with the M79 grenade launcher, was added to the crew.

Another change within the hardened convoy concept was that 8th Group did not confine the guntrucks to one location in the convoy but allowed them to vary their positions daily to prevent the enemy from detecting a pattern.

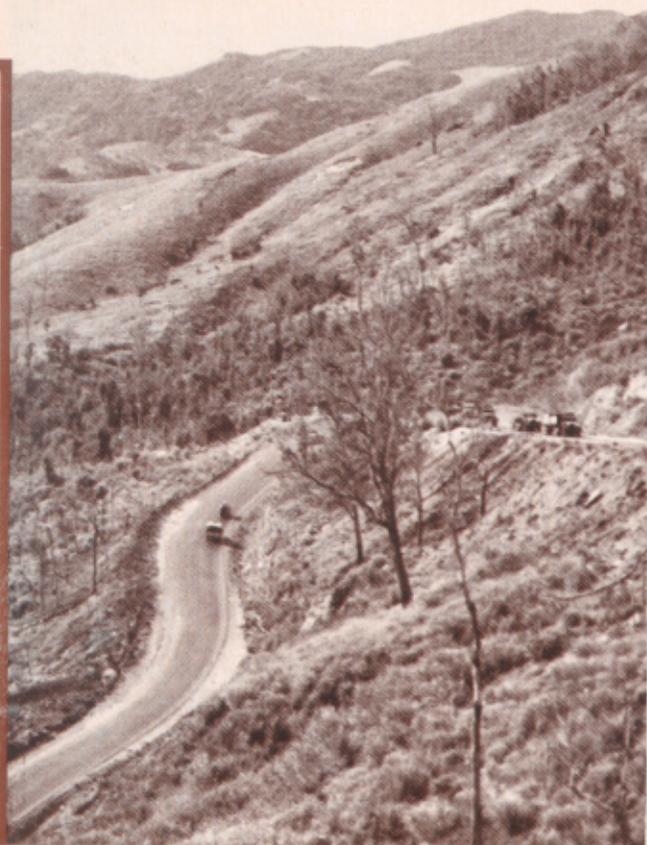
On the morning of November 24, 1967, the guntrucks got their first real chance to prove their effectiveness. As the daily convoy was approaching “Ambush Alley,” the column was suddenly attacked by a North Vietnamese-Viet Cong rifle

company. Rockets struck the first vehicle in the kill zone, igniting loads of artillery ammunition and blocking the road. As the enemy soldiers attempted to overrun the stalled vehicles, the guntrucks entered the ambush area to do battle.

After about 20 minutes, the immense firepower of the guntrucks prevailed and the enemy began to withdraw. Amidst the twisted and smoking wreckage of cargo vehicles lay the bodies of 41 enemy soldiers. Four others had been wounded and captured. In the 300-meter kill-zone of the convoy, 3 were killed, 17 were wounded, and 10 vehicles had been damaged or destroyed (including 4 of the 6 guntrucks engaged). In an after-action report, the 8th Group commander reported that “the quick reaction and firepower of this convoy were the only factors that prevented this ambush from being a success.”

As the ambushes continued, so did the evolutionary process of guntruck design and employment. Design and armament were restricted only by the materials available and the imagination of transportation unit personnel.

One major change in the guntruck concept was that the 2 1/2-ton truck was phased out as the



mainstay of route security because it was too light to maneuver with the added weight of armor and weapons. Instead, the 5-ton cargo truck began to replace the "deuce-and-a-half" as a convoy escort vehicle.

Another change was the modification of the armor on some guntrucks into "box" structures in the beds. Within this box were kept weapons, tools, extra wheels and tires, water and oil, and a fire extinguisher. Thus, the guntrucks served not only as security vehicles but also as maintenance trucks, capable of protecting and restarting disabled vehicles on potentially dangerous sections of highway.

As a protection against enemy rockets, double walls of steel plate were attached to some guntrucks. The theory was that incoming rockets would be detonated on contact with the outer wall. Shrapnel would then bounce harmlessly off the inner wall, never reaching the crew.

Many of the guntrucks replaced the M60 machine gun with .50-caliber machine guns, either alone or in multiple mounts. One innovation was the "quad-fifty." This weapon consisted of four electronically synchronized .50-caliber machine

guns mounted in the bed of a 2 1/2-ton truck. At one time, 8th Group was employing seven of these weapons.

A few escort vehicles were equipped with the 7.62-millimeter "minicannon," a modern version of the Gatling gun. This "smoker" was capable of delivering 6,000 rounds per minute. The guntrucks became such fortresses that after a day of convoy duty many were put to work during the night, patrolling transportation unit compound perimeters. Civilian contract convoys, some traveling the same routes as 8th Group, often "borrowed" guntrucks for escort duty, in which the armored vehicles continued to prove their ability to make the enemy pay dearly for his attacks.

The availability of armor plate was an ongoing problem for 8th Group. Truck companies obtained the material from a variety of sources, including the local salvage yard. As the guntruck program continued, armor-plating "kits" became available, some from a nearby South Vietnamese Army depot. However, as the armored vehicles "washed out" through hostile action or heavy usage, the armor became increasingly difficult to obtain. Several times its unavailability threatened to jeopardize the guntruck program.

One alternative to outfitting guntrucks with armor plate was to strip an armored personnel carrier and to mount its hull on the bed of a 5-ton truck. These modified vehicles afforded firepower comparable to that of plated trucks, while offering additional protection to the crews.

The guntruck crews were, for the most part, truckers and maintenance personnel who had been assigned or had volunteered for convoy security duty. Even as casualties among the crews mounted, morale remained high, the men being bound by wartime esprit de corps. Many of the men donned shoulder insignia and pocket tabs indicating their roles as drivers and gunners. The men painted colorful names on their vehicles, reminiscent of the American bombers of World War II. Names such as *Bounty Hunter*, *Ho Chi's Hearse*, *VC Undertaker*, *Highland Raiders*, and *Old Ironsides* became familiar sights to the truckers of 8th Group.

The personal bravery and fighting spirit of the guntruck crews, along with their quick reaction to ambush situations, were no doubt responsible for saving the lives of many truckers. This courage was exemplified by Specialists-4 Dallas Mullins, of the 444th Transportation Company, and Larry A. Dahl, of the 359th Transportation Company. When the driver of Mullins' guntruck was wounded during a highway ambush, the vehicle

□ A supply convoy pauses behind its guntruck escort near Qui Nhon during the Summer of 1969.



became stalled in the center of the enemy kill-zone and subjected to intense small-arms fire. Even though Mullins was also wounded, twice in the arm and once in the leg, he came to the aid of the wounded driver and maneuvered the truck out of the line of fire. During an ambush on Route 19, Dahl jumped on an enemy grenade that had been tossed into the back of his guntruck, saving the lives of the rest of the crew with the sacrifice of his own. For their unselfish acts, Mullins was awarded the Silver Star Medal, and Dahl, posthumously, the Medal of Honor.

In addition to the unusually large number of Bronze Star and Purple Heart Medals awarded within the transportation companies—especially for a noncombat unit—the 8th Group was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation. It was also the only transportation group in Vietnam to receive the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry.

The guntrucks of 8th Group were always considered an interim measure until the unit could obtain standard escort vehicles, specifically the V100 armored car. However, the V100 was never provided to transportation units in sufficient numbers; consequently, the converted cargo vehicles bore the brunt of convoy security until the end of the American involvement in Vietnam.

Although highly successful, the guntrucks did have their disadvantages. The most important of these was that their continued use diverted driver personnel and vehicles from their primary mission and thereby degraded the lift capability of the unit. In some companies, as many as 15 percent of assigned drivers were used for security.

In addition, the “hardening” of the 2 1/2-ton and 5-ton cargo trucks created stresses for which the vehicles were not designed. The extra weight of the armor accelerated vehicle deterioration and created new maintenance problems.

Despite these problems, the guntrucks patrolled

Vietnam’s highways from late 1967 until the American pullout in 1973, playing a major role in keeping supply lifelines open to U.S. Forces. During this period, more than 50 cargo trucks were converted into armored combat vehicles for route security.

Today, the last vestige of these warwagons, *Eve of Destruction*, rests quietly among the static displays at Fort Eustis. Converted in late 1967, *Eve* provided daily route security in the central highlands and along the coast for 3 years before participating in the Cambodian incursion. During that operation, the vehicle escorted convoys from Qui Nhon to the Cambodian border; the entire crew was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for outstanding performance in protecting supply columns from enemy attacks.

In January 1971, *Eve* led elements of 8th Group north into I Corps to participate in operation LAMSON 719, the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos. Day and night convoys of Khe Sanh and to the Laotian border exposed *Eve* to numerous enemy attacks during the operation, but the guntruck never failed in its mission.

Eve of Destruction made its final run on June 8, 1971. Since then, it has been retired to the Transportation Museum at Fort Eustis. Now, far from sounds of battle, the armored truck silently reminds those that view it of the courage and sacrifice of transportation personnel who fought and sometimes died in “Ambush Alley.” **ALCG**

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