

97TH ENGINEER BATTALION (CONSTRUCTION)
THOUGHTS ABOUT STATESIDE COMMAND DURING
THE ARMY'S TRANSITION TO THE MODERN VOLUNTEER ARMY
JANUARY 1971 TO JULY 1972

Following is a chronology of some highlights and issues that I am able to recall today (January 2014) regarding command, of the 97th Engineer Battalion (Construction), at Fort Riley, Kansas. Background, Fort Riley at that time was the home of the 'Big Red One', the 1st Infantry Division (Mechanized) minus. One Brigade of the Division was located in Germany. The Division was a designated Return of Forces to Germany (REFORGER) Unit, and each year its personnel moved, to Germany, and picked up prepositioned equipment and conducted limited maneuver exercises. The 97th, was also, a designated REFORGER Unit, but had not participated in deployment exercises since its return to the States from Germany. The 97th was assigned to the 138th Engineer Group. The Group consisted primarily of an Engineer Battalion, an Ordnance Battalion, and a Quartermaster Supply and Service Battalion. Facilities – The 1st Infantry Division was housed in modern barracks and maintenance facilities. The 138th Engineer Group was housed in old World War II barracks and maintenance facilities.

December 1970 – Armed Forces Staff College (AFSC), Norfolk, Virginia.

I was nearing the completion of attendance of the ASFC, myself and others attending were looking forward to graduation and our next assignment. I was not anticipating a command assignment, since I had commanded a CONUS Sustaining Increment Battalion at Atlanta Army Depot prior to my selection to attend AFSC. I was hoping for assignment to a Joint or Unified command staff position. Instead I received a phone call from the Engineer Branch assignments officer and was advised that I was needed in Fort Riley, Kansas to command an Engineer Battalion. Also I was advised that Fort Riley wanted someone that had command experience. I was needed soonest and was allowed only ten days leave and travel time from Norfolk, Virginia to Fort Riley.

January 1971 – Fort Riley, Kansas

After Graduation from AFSC on 15 January, I traveled to Fort Riley and reported in at the 138th Engineer Group. The Group was located in Camp Funston (Fort Riley) in an old World War II Regimental Complex. The Group Commander welcomed me and advised that the previous Battalion Commander had been relieved, and Major Martin Rogers was currently commanding the 97th. Also, upon my assumption of command Major Rogers would become the Group Operations Officer.

Since I was not married at the time, I was housed in a small bedroom and kitchen shack in Camp Funston. It was a cold place to live in Kansas when the wind blows through the place, sucking all of the heat out. I married a lady, I had met in Atlanta, in April 1971 and we moved into a nice set of quarters on the main post across the street from the 1st Division Commander. The Quarters lacked modern cooling systems for the summer. Occupants had to furnish their own air conditioners. When I departed Fort Riley I sold the AC units, I had purchased, to the incoming Commander of the 34th Engineer Battalion.

ASSIGNED MISSIONS – These were normal day to day requirements such as training, maintenance of equipment, maintaining good order and discipline, and etc. I could keep adding to the list as you know. What I want the reader to know is that the Battalion had a bunch of stand by missions such as, Real Property Maintenance (RPM). The Battalion was assigned this responsibility for the Camp Funston Complex. The Battalion was responsible for snow removal for Camp Funston, main post, and major routes into and out of Fort Riley. Range fires were to be put out by the Battalion. (RPM, fighting fire, and snow removal is normally accomplished by the Facilities Engineer, i.e. Post Engineer.) Execute

Construction projects as assigned and continue to remove demolished World War II buildings from Camp Forsyth, an abandoned camp that had been stripped of salvageable building materials and metals by a civilian contractor. What was left was to be hauled away by the Battalion. Nobody wanted to work the site because of nails throughout the site, which punched holes in the truck tires and the tires of the scoop loaders. This, thorn in the side, mission was to be executed as equipment and personnel became available. Needless to say, drivers, equipment personnel and maintenance supervisors were pleased when the project was completed.

STAND BY MISSIONS:

NUCLEAR ACCIDENT AND INCIDENT RECOVERY - During the late 60's and early 70's, nuclear weapons were moved across and over Kansas quite frequently, especially with a Strategic Air Force Base in Missouri. A trained platoon was always on standby, and the responsibility was rotated between the companies. To be prepared for this mission I attended a Recovery Course at Sandia Air Force, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

PRESIDENT HARRY TRUMAN – The State Funeral for President Truman was to be held in Independence, Missouri, his home town, rather than in Washington, DC. The Battalion was responsible for moving Personnel and equipment to, Independence Missouri, and set up television stands, rope line streets, and remove divider islands in street intersections, as directed by the General Services Administration, and the Secret Service. Fortunately, the former President remained in good health and I did not have to execute this mission. The mission did require execution later.

REFORGER – The Battalion was to be prepared to move to Germany and assemble at a Prepositioned Material, Configured to Unit Sets (POMCUS) Site. The Unit would then draw equipment, and move to and assembly area and be prepared to accomplish assigned missions.

My Initial Impressions of the Battalion Following Assumption of Command and Inspection –

Initially, I met with the Staff and Company Commanders and set up a schedule of visits and inspections of their units and projects. This schedule was shot full of holes the next evening as it started snowing that evening and continued for three days. Thus snow removal personnel and commanders were not available, since they were working around the clock. Maintenance and mess personnel were also providing support of the to the snow removal crews. The rest of Ft Riley was on a limited training holiday.

After adjusting the above schedule, following the snow storm, my inspections of the units, with my Command Sergeant Major and the unit projects, with the Operations Officer, I had the following impressions and findings.

Troop Housing – Barracks - The troops in Camp Funston were sleeping on steel cots. Also, each trooper had a wall locker and foot locker. Within the confines of the troop area temporary partitions were been erected and all kinds of pictures had been affixed to them. The area looked like a jungle and smelled like an out- house. Some of the cubicles were glowing with blue lights. (Keep in mind, as the Transition to the Modern Volunteer Army was under way, it was thought to let the troops do their own thing. It was touché feely time.) I determined that barracks life was getting out of hand. Under these conditions, I could see why the Battalion was failing inspections. I instructed the Commanders to return to the basics,

and remove temporary additions from the barracks. Each Trooper (at Ft Riley all soldiers were called Troopers) would have a bunk, footlocker and wall locker. Nothing would be hanging on the wall locker. Pictures of wives, girl-friends, parents and etc., could be placed on the top shelf of the wall locker or mounted on the left side door of the locker. Boots and shoes were to be cleaned, polished and displayed under the bed. All extraneous material and items, of the trooper's, were to be put in the Company Storage Facility under the supervision of the Company Supply Sergeant. Latrines and showers were to be cleaned and restored to original construction. In other words, clean up the barracks and be prepared for inspection at any time by the Group Commander or anyone from the Fort. It took a while but with the aid of the Command Sergeant Major it was accomplished.

Projects

The Battalion, in early 1971, did not have any significant projects underway, other than the cleanup of Camp Forsyth. RPM and snow removal were on the plate for the remaining winter months, along with mandatory class room training. (The best way to train troops assigned to Engineer Construction Battalions is to actually accomplish projects related to their Military Occupation Specialty (MOS). Pride of accomplishment builds unit cohesion and improves morale.)

Equipment Maintenance

Inspection of equipment, motor pools, maintenance areas, and tool set storage areas were not complementary. Supply and maintenance personnel were complaining of problems with supply and parts systems. On inspection of their supply and maintenance publications, I found them to be outdated and a multitude of changes to the publications were missing. This condition required immediate action. Repair Parts, Supply, and Company Administrative Clerks and their supervisors were instructed to requisition, post, and file the most current publications. This action immediately improved supply and repair parts flow. (During 1971/72 Battalion supply and repair parts were requisitioned, using a two or three part form in the image of a punch card. The hand written forms were delivered to post supply and were converted to a punched card via a key punch machine. This was the beginning of Logistics Automation at Army installations. The Logistic Systems, at this time, were prone to have numerous errors, since there were not many built-in editing systems available.

Initiatives to improve training and enhance unit morale

Coordination with the Group Operations Officer and the Post Engineer resulted in the Battalion receiving the opportunity to execute many projects. Such as, open and operate a Rock Quarry, rehab barracks for Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) Summer Camp, build training facilities and obstacles needed for ROTC Summer Camp, construct concrete Tank Gunnery Pads, and construct Tank Trails on the reservation. Tank Trails were badly needed on the reservation, since the 1st Infantry Division had converted from strait Infantry to a Mechanized Division. This action provided an opportunity to use the crushed rock from the Quarry to surface the Tank Trails.

REFORGER 1972

Whereas the 1st Division participated in REFORGER 1971 and was scheduled again for 1972, I requested that a Company of the 97th be included in the 1972 Exercise. The Battalion did not have any personnel familiar with deployments of this nature and needed the experience of this training. The participation of a Company was approved. The Battalion Operations Officer traveled to Germany on a REFORGER orientation and familiarization tour, in the early part of 1972. A visit to the POMCUS Site revealed that the Engineer equipment (dozers, cranes, graders, compressors, quarry, and other earth moving equipment) were not ready for issue, to an arriving unit. The equipment that the 97th turned in on departure from Germany was stored outside and had not been maintained or serviced. This visit caused

USAREUR to take actions to bring the equipment up to a combat ready condition and to place it into controlled humidity storage at the POMCUS site. By this action, dividends were starting to accrue in improving the Unit Readiness, if the unit was deployed to Germany or elsewhere.

1971/72 Personnel Policies

Unit Commanders are at the receiving end of many gray area and bias policies established by higher command authority.

Haircuts – a Gray Area action that caused unit commanders heart burn was the result of, the Department of the Army, publishing and distributing a poster depicting various style haircuts. These variations were subject to interpretation by the troopers. I and my company commanders were continually being informed by higher positioned personnel about inadequate haircuts. The idea of relaxing established uniform policies, while transitioning to the Modern Volunteer Army (MVA) was causing havoc for leaders. This Army inflicted problem was solved by establishing a Battalion haircut policy, that all haircuts would be tapered on the sides and back. The Post Exchange Barber Shops were advised of this policy. A few troopers visited the Post Inspector General (IG) and were not happy with the response. Later the Assistant 1st Division Commander on one of his morning visits to Morning Parade, commented that the trooper's haircuts were very good. I advised him of the Battalion Policy and he did not question the initiative.

Morning Parade – In 1971/72 the majority of the troopers in Squad and Section Leader positions were lacking in command and leadership experience. To overcome this, the Fort Riley Commander directed that all units, from Section Leader thru Company Commander, conduct Drill and Ceremonies Training for the first hour each training day. Hopefully, this training would enhance the Leader's position in the eyes of the subordinates. An initiative of the MVA was that the first formation of the morning was at 08:00 hours. The last formation was to be at 16:00 hours, where the troops were to be released from training or work. Imagine how one hour of Morning Parade each work or training day impacted the remainder of the day for project personnel working at a site five miles from the Battalion area, and the Motor Pool a mile from the Company area. Project personnel, with equipment, would arrive at the work site by mid-morning. They would work for an hour plus, have food delivered to the site, work for two to three hours, demobilize the site, and return to the Battalion area. They would then service and turn-in equipment and be available for release at 16:00 hours. This routine was not a morale builder in the eyes of the troopers.

Personnel Diversions

During the 1971/72 period, as the draw-down from Vietnam, was ongoing and the transition to the MVA was underway the Army was issuing orders and transferring Specialists and NCO's from one unit to the next. Copies of these orders would cross my desk. Based on vacancies an annotation on the orders would indicate the Company to which the individual would be assigned. Later on, I would visit the units and ask about the equipment operators or heavy truck drivers, they should have received. Often I was advised, the individual never arrived. Research revealed that the individuals arrived at Fort Riley, but were diverted to the 1st Infantry Division. The Battalion was in dire need of experienced Engineer Equipment Operators. I asked my Command Sergeant Major, to informally, locate some of these individuals and encourage them to seek transfers to the Battalion. No one accepted the idea because of the poor troop housing and maintenance facilities.

Mal-assigned Personnel

The 1st Infantry Division being a REFORGER designated unit, and desiring to make a good impression when deployed to Germany, for an Exercise, would transfer out their Unit's malcontents and trouble makers. These personnel without an Engineer Unit MOS were foisted on the Command, without recourse. I instructed the Unit Commander to streamline, with the Post Legal Office, their administrative relief from the Army Procedures and rid their units of personnel who did not attempt to

meet the standards of the Battalion. The Command Sergeant Major did an outstanding job of overseeing this initiative. In this vein in early 1972 an Engineer Officer was assigned to the Battalion. On his arrival, I interviewed him and advised him that he was to be assigned to be the Battalion (S-4) Supply Officer. The Battalion did not have an Officer to fill the position. The Officer advised me, that he did not want to be in the Battalion and did not want to be Battalion S-4. To make a long story short, I advised him to tender his resignation from the Army Officer Corps, which he did, after on one would accept him at Fort Riley. The Fort had a surplus of officers in the MOS that he wanted to work.

Engineer Equipment Repair Parts

The Battalion's Engineer Equipment were not high density items at Fort Riley. Since they were not, the processing of parts requisitions were treated as extra ordinary by Post Supply personnel. It required the personnel to look in publications to verify the accuracy of the submitted requisition. These requisitions were not a welcome site at Post Supply. I noticed that many items of equipment were dead-lined for extended periods of time. The Battalion Maintenance Warrant Officer told me that the Post Supply Personnel advised him that the requisitions had been processed. Having worked at an Army Depot, during a previous assignment, I was very familiar with the repair parts system. I obtained a cross section of Engineer Equipment Part Numbers and called the National Inventory Control Point (NICP) for Engineer Equipment. My concern was related primarily to the age of some of the equipment. The NICP Parts Manager advised me the equipment was still maintained in the Army Inventory and parts were on hand in their inventory. Also their data base contained no requisitions from Fort Riley for the Stock Numbers that I was inquiring about. Bottom line – The requisitions were found in the desk of a Supply Clerk of the Fort Riley Post Supply Office. Needless to say, but the non-action by the Post Supply Clerk did not contribute to the Readiness of the 97th Engineer Battalion.

In Summary

The above are some thoughts about the conditions and environment of Stateside Command during the period January 1971 through July 1972. The Battalion was composed of some outstanding Officers, NCO's, and Troopers. The majority of the leaders were young, considering the amount of command time they had accrued. Having said that, they were eager and strived to do their best. The many projects they were assigned, were well planned and executed in a professional manner. One Project was poorly designed, by the Group Design Section, and had to be reconfigured during construction. The Personnel of the Battalion represented the Army and Fort Riley in a distinguished manner during the Dedication Ceremony for the Eisenhower Library in Abilene, Kansas. I am sure these same personnel performed admirably during REFORGER 1972, as the 34th Engineer Battalion (Construction). The Company that was to participate in REFORGER 1972 had completed its Field Training prior to my departure in July 1972. I hope the training they received during REFORGER 1972 stood them in good stead for the unit deployments in their future assignments.

ESSAYONS

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