

Military Police Convoy Security— *Then* and **NOW**

By Mr. Thomas E. Christianson

In March 2005—just 26 miles southeast of Baghdad, Iraq—two coalition convoys coincidentally converged and were ambushed by Iraqi insurgents. A military police patrol happened to be tailing one of the convoys, and the patrol reacted to the attack with urgency. During the ensuing counterattack, 27 insurgents were killed and seven were wounded. The immediate and professional actions of the military police saved the convoy. Staff Sergeant Timothy Nein was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, and Sergeant Leigh Ann Hester became the first female Soldier ever to receive the Silver Star for direct combat operations.

Convoy security operations in Iraq and Afghanistan in recent years bear a startling resemblance to operations conducted in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The ingenuity and means that Soldiers used to protect and secure convoys in Vietnam are a part of military police history that can provide lessons for military police today.

During the initial phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom, there was a lack of sufficient military police to provide consistent convoy support—just as there was in Vietnam. Transportation units began to mount an assortment of improvised weapon

A V-100 Commando in a convoy in Vietnam in 1970



systems on “gun trucks.” A sand-bagged “dog house” was mounted on the back of some trucks to house a squad automatic weapon gunner. And just as in Vietnam, armor plating was welded onto cargo trucks and Humvees®. By late 2003, enough steel was being welded to trucks to completely encompass the beds. In addition, .50-caliber machine guns, automatic grenade launchers, and an assortment of crew-served weapons were mounted on trucks.¹ Again, this was a repeat of methods that were used in Vietnam.

In Vietnam, the continuous supply operations mission was fraught with danger to convoys. The Vietcong insurgency, and later the regular North Vietnamese Army, continually preyed upon U.S. Army and Marine supply convoys traveling along the highways. The mountains, jungles, and agricultural foliage typically present along the routes added to the challenge by providing the cover and concealment that the insurgents needed for a successful ambush. Mines were often embedded in and along the roads. The constant vigilance required from American Soldiers made the movement of supplies difficult. Although military police were responsible for providing convoy support, the hundreds of miles of supply routes taxed their abilities. Therefore, transportation units began arming themselves early in the war. “Gun trucks” were armed with an assortment of weaponry, including a variety of crew-served weapons (M60 and .50-caliber machine guns) and grenade launchers. Because there was no real standing operating procedure for equipping vehicles, trucks were often armed according to the availability of weapons and the imaginations of the crews and local units. This individualism resulted in a variety of names that crews used to refer to their vehicles, including “Kolor Me Killer,” “Iron Butterfly,” “Satan’s Chariot,” and “Assassin.”² But as the U.S. role in Vietnam expanded, the military police responsibility for route security only increased.

Early in the Vietnam War, military police modified jeeps with M60 machine guns. These vehicles were often referred to as “Road Runners” because, much like the cartoon character by the same name, they sped ahead to reconnoiter convoy routes at breakneck speeds. However, the Road Runners lacked armor; consequently, military police were forced to endure unacceptable casualties as a result of mines and small arms fire. Some members of Road Runner units claimed that they were being used as “bait” to trigger ambushes.³ Eventually, the Army fielded the V-100 Commando—an armored vehicle that protected military police and provided them with a means of augmenting the ad hoc convoy security approach used by transportation units. (In addition to their value in convoy support, the V-100s also proved to be useful in urban

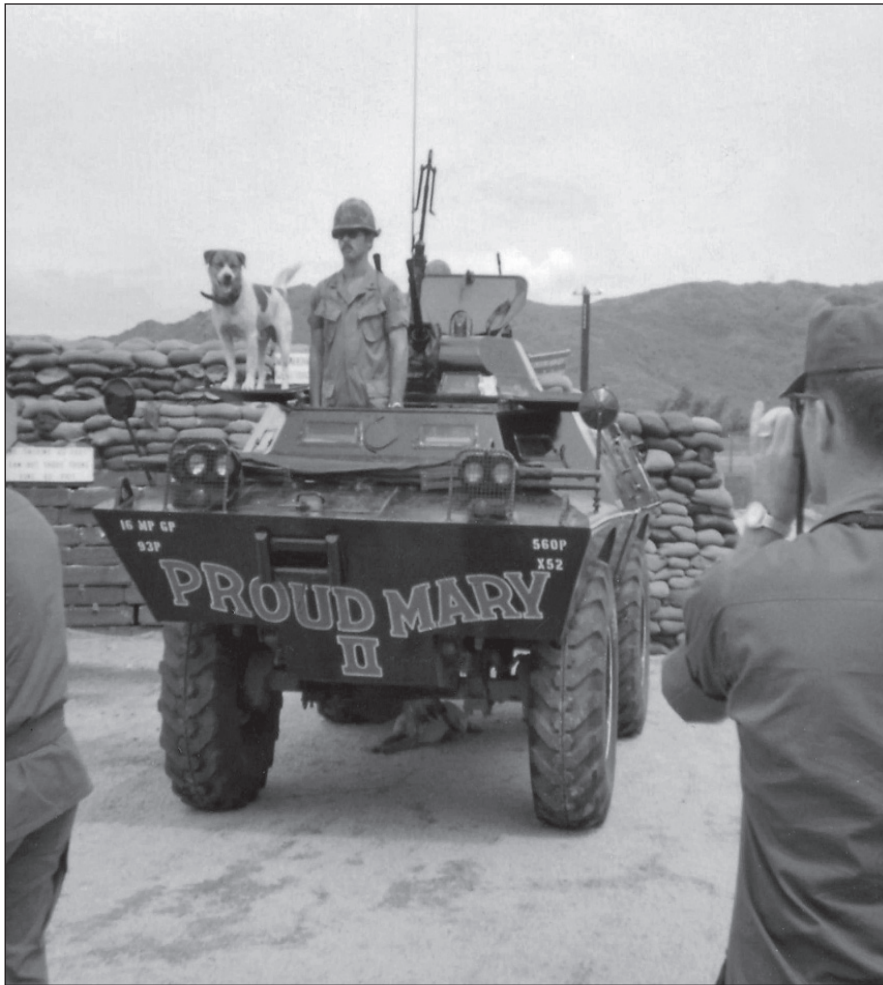


The “Assassin” gun truck

fighting; they were heavily involved in the Tet Offensive in 1968.) Colonel Thomas Guidera, the first commander of the 18th Military Police Brigade, was instrumental in obtaining the new V-100 Commando. Two M37 .30-caliber machine guns were mounted on early official versions of the vehicle; but by 1970, individual units had taken the liberty of adding weapons to their vehicles. Some V-100s sported a .50-caliber and several .30-caliber machine guns (sometimes obtained

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from downed helicopters) and grenade launchers. Some crews welded a gun pintle from an M113 armored personnel carrier to the top turret of the V-100 and installed an M2 .50-caliber machine gun or minigun. And like the transportation units, military police troops named their vehicles. They even painted them with “nose art.” The more paint that became available, the more colorful the vehicles became. Higher headquarters, such as the 16th Military Police Group, tried to ban the modifications that lower-level units allowed (and even sanctioned), but their attempts were unsuccessful.⁴



Sergeant Mungle's V-100—"Proud Mary II"

Although V-100s reached military police units by 1968, they never seemed to be available in sufficient numbers. Vietcong and North Vietnamese "regulars" generally conducted ambushes in a manner that is all too familiar today. The enemy immobilized the lead vehicle in a "kill zone" and then attempted to systematically destroy all vehicles in the convoy. These ambushes were conducted in vegetation that concealed the attackers' whereabouts and in terrain that precluded easy convoy rescue. The difficult terrain also allowed the attackers to withdraw to relative safety at will. Military police generally ran route security details with V-100s, searching for mines and suspicious activity ahead of the convoy. Therefore, V-100s were often near the front of the convoy. Depending on the size of the convoy (ranging from 10 to 300 vehicles), V-100s might also have been present near the rear—though by the end of the war, convoy serials were restricted in numbers due to the difficulty in protecting them. If enough V-100s were available, they were placed throughout the serial.⁵

When a convoy was hit, suppressive fire from military police V-100s was intended to allow the other vehicles to exit the kill zone. Crew members (other than the gunner, who was

providing cover) exited the vehicle to remove Soldiers from disabled vehicles and to collect the wounded. The V-100 then left the kill zone, discharged the wounded for helicopter medevac, and returned to the kill zone to repeat the operation. In addition to evacuating wounded personnel from the kill zone, military police V-100s were used to shuttle ammunition to infantry and other units who were fighting near the ambush site. Therefore, close coordination with supporting helicopter gunships and artillery—as well as infantry units in the area—was essential. The military police mission was to protect convoy personnel and vehicles and to ensure that the convoy reached its designated destination—*not* to attack or kill the North Vietnamese.⁶ Following the ambush, military police provided traffic control around the ambush site and used V-100s to assist in removing disabled vehicles. The military police workload was enormous. For example, on average, the 560th Military Police Company, 93d Military Police Battalion, provided direct support for 12 convoys over a distance of 1,200 miles per day. During the Cambodian Campaign (4 May–28 June 1970), the 560th fought through nine major enemy ambushes, logging more than 287 convoys and 13,670 miles.⁷

The day-to-day military police V-100 mission was described in a 1969 interview with personnel from the 720th Military Police Company, whose convoy support responsibilities included the Quan Loi area. Days typically began around 0500, and trips generally totaled about 200 miles. At about 2300, the vehicles were usually returned to the home station, where they were "topped off" with fuel and the weapons were cleaned. If the convoy was attacked or if it ran late due to congestion in the many villages, the military police stayed out overnight. In those cases, they scrounged for food or ate C rations and slept in their vehicles. Too often, they were asked to provide perimeter security; consequently, their sleep was often limited.⁸ However, Soldiers acknowledged that they received some time off—generally 2 or 3 days per month.

In the interview, members of the 720th admitted to some "unauthorized" modifications to their V-100s. They indicated that they had added a minigun to the vehicle's normal armament of two .30-caliber machine guns. And because they might expend their entire basic load within 10 minutes of contact during an intense ambush, they also admitted that—based on their experience that air support was not always readily

available and that firefights always seemed to last longer than expected—they routinely carried more than five times their basic load.⁹ After all, their lives and the lives of the convoy they supported depended on their ability to provide protection. Remarkably, from January 1968 through September 1969, this single military police company sustained more than 88 significant enemy contacts during convoy support operations.¹⁰

On 5 September 1969, while in convoy support, the 720th Military Police Company was hit in a complex ambush. The V-100 commander reported seeing numerous white puffs of smoke on the side of a hill along the roadway. From experience, he knew that the smoke signified rocket-propelled grenades; and he heard the grenades whistling overhead. Two of the convoy lowboys were hit with grenades, but the V-100s were hit only with small arms fire. The V-100s and military police gun jeeps directed suppressive fire at the white puffs of smoke. While continuing to fire at the ambushers, they sped up and moved through the kill zone—in some cases, noting tracer rounds ricocheting off the V-100s. According to the commander, even after picking up speed for 20 to 25 minutes, the 720th was still in the ambush kill zone. Cobra and Huey gunships finally put an end to the ambush, but not before the enemy sustained numerous casualties. The commander later explained that just before the ambush, numerous Vietnamese children had appeared in the roadway—probably to purposely slow the vehicles.¹¹ This, again, is a story that is all too familiar to modern-day military police in Iraq and Afghanistan.

On 12 June 1971, a military police V-100 responded to a convoy ambush in the An Khe Pass. While traveling through difficult, mountainous terrain, a combined U.S. transportation unit/Korean supply unit convoy was attacked by a company-size group of North Vietnamese who had ambushed the convoy using B-40 rockets, machine guns, and other small arms. Military police Sergeant Henry Mungle and his unit, including his two-man V-100 crew, responded to the attack as it developed. They fought a continuous, 2-hour battle, helping to repulse the attackers. Sergeant Mungle immediately moved his V-100 armored vehicle into the kill zone to provide convoy protection and to assist the wounded. Under intense fire, Sergeant Mungle exited the vehicle to provide first aid to a critically wounded U.S. Soldier. As he shielded the Soldier with his own body, Mungle called for helicopter medevac support and proceeded to fire his weapon at the attackers. When he ran out of ammunition (following the evacuation), Mungle returned to the V-100 for more. He continued fighting alongside his crew members (one of whom was seriously wounded), moving other vehicles from the kill zone. Sergeant Mungle and his crew eventually evacuated all of the wounded and moved the entire convoy out of the kill zone. They also rescued two Korean Army soldiers, five South Vietnamese soldiers, and three Vietnamese civilians. When the fight finally ended, the military police had expended nearly all of their ammunition, nine North Vietnamese were found dead, and numerous trails

of blood leading into the nearby elephant grass indicated many more casualties. Sergeant Mungle was awarded the Silver Star for his actions and heroism.¹² The Military Police Museum, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, has obtained a V-100, which will be displayed with the name of Sergeant Mungle's vehicle—"Proud Mary II."

The convoys of today face many challenges in moving supplies through the potentially hostile environments of Iraq and Afghanistan. Today's weapon systems mirror the systems deployed in Vietnam. Gun trucks, armored Humvees, and the M117 armored support vehicle are in use, but are vulnerable to mines and ambushes. However, professional military police remain vigilant and dedicated to ensuring that convoys successfully reach their destinations. Today's military police carry on the fine tradition of those who served in Vietnam decades ago.

Endnotes:

¹Richard E. Killbane, "Circle the Wagons: The History of U.S. Army Convoy Security," Global War On Terrorism Occasional Paper (OP) 13, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, 2005.

²James Lyles, *The Hard Ride—Vietnam Gun Trucks*, Gallant Warrior Press, Planet Art Publishing, Quezon City, Philippines, 2002.

³Rick Young, *Combat Police: U.S. Army Military Police in Vietnam*, Sendraak's Writings, Farmingdale, New Jersey, 1994.

⁴R. Lathrop and J. Mc Donald, *Cadillac Gage V-100 Commando 1960–71* Osprey, Oxford, United Kingdom, 2002.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Killbane, 2005.

⁷"560th MP Co History," <<http://560mp.tripod.com/560MP/History.htm>>, accessed on 25 January 2012.

⁸"Combat After Action Report: Ambush, Quan Loi Resupply Convoy, 17 July 1969," 46th Military History Detachment interview with Captain Richard Schumann, Company C, 720th Military Police Battalion, 89th Military Police Group, 18th Military Police Brigade, October 1969.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹"Combat After Action Report: Ambush, Quan Loi Resupply Convoy, 17 July 1969," 46th Military History Detachment interview with Staff Sergeant Cal Strong, Company C, 720th Military Police Battalion, 89th Military Police Group, 18th Military Police Brigade, October 1969.

¹²Department of the Army, General Order 56, Silver Star Citation for Henry H. G. Mungle, 31 December 1974.



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