A Day in the Jungle
By Tom Frantz

This story is dedicated to the Engineers who manned the land-clearing teams, companies and battalions. Their contribution, although not highly documented, was as significant as any unit in Vietnam.

The Vietnam War followed the same pattern as other recorded wars. Most of the stories are told about the classic combat arms of infantry, artillery and cavalry, but current writers have added armor, air cavalry and tactical air. These areas are written about because of the interesting battles and tactics. This story is about one of the toughest units in Vietnam – the 984th Engineer Land Clearing Company. It was our job to reduce enemy strongholds like the Iron Triangle and HoBo and Bo Loi Woods to pastures, which would take away one of the enemy's most powerful weapons – concealment. I was the company commander, and it was my job to make sure we achieved our mission and that I sent all of my troops home alive.

The land-clearing companies had three different types of missions: open lines of communications by clearing major highways so that units could be supplied by land, cut around major bases to provide fields of fire and limit the enemies ability to approach undetected, and eliminate enemy bases within the areas cut.

Execution and Organization
Each company was sent out into an armored cavalry squadron or a mechanized infantry battalion area of operations. These units provide security for the cuts and the night defensive positions (NDP's). The normal setup was for the land-clearing company to work with a cavalry troop or mechanized infantry company. The engineer commander was responsible for clearing a given area and the security commander tried to give them enough room to work in. The goal was to clear 100 to 200 acres of triple canopy jungle a day for 45 days. A mission would clear 4,000 to 8,000 acres of jungle.

From the bottom up the land-clearing battalions were designed to support the Rome plow. These plows were specially modified Caterpillar D7E and D9 bulldozers. Each plow had a special blade designed to cut trees several inches from the ground. The blade had a sharpened lower edge and a knockdown bar at the top that pushed trees forward and to the right. By properly using the track clutches, an operator could run several feet of the blade across a tree to cut it down. If the tree was too big, he could split the tree with a stinger. The stinger was a piece of solid steel about a foot long, three inches wide and six inches tall, built into the left side of the blade. Both the stinger and the blade were sharpened every night to maintain the effectiveness of the blade. The plow had a reinforced cab to protect the operator from falling branches and trees. By 1970, some of the D7 and all four of the D9 cabs had water tanks in the roof. The water tanks allowed operators to extinguish belly pan fires. They also had metal guards above all of the hydraulic lines.

Most of the companies had about 30 plows and were doing a great job to get 24 plows to the cut in the mornings. There was always a lot of competition between the individual operators to see how many days in a row they could make it into the cut. Each platoon had 10 plows, nine with cutting blades and one with a normal flat "bull" blade. Each company had three cutting platoons and a maintenance platoon. The battalion itself had three land-clearing companies, a maintenance/transportation company and a headquarters company.

Coordination and Control
Each day, we were expected to clear 100 to 200 acres of jungle. The thicker the jungle the less got cleared. Each evening, I would meet with the security company commander to discuss the next day's cut. This covered how the units would get to the area to be cut, how the morning cut would be laid out and secured, and where the afternoon cut would probably be. The afternoon plans
became much more clear during the lunch break the next day. Afterwards, security personnel could determine where the on-call artillery concentrations for the next day would be located.

I controlled the operation from a light observation helicopter (LOH). While the units were getting ready, I would go up and scout the area to ensure there were no obvious surprises. When the cut started, I would guide the lead plow from the air in order to get the size and shape of the cut correct and protect the lead plow from being ambushed or falling into steams and ravines. During enemy contact, the control of the companies went over to the security commander. If the jungle was not too thick, the trees were fairly small, and there was no enemy on the flanks. A very effective tactic was to have a platoon of plows charge with the security armored cavalry assault vehicles (ACAVs) right behind them. Although they were not armored vehicles, it was pretty hard for the enemy to stand their ground with a plow coming on at walking speed and pushing down trees like 60-foot fly swatters.

Just like most of the other soldiers in the field, the plow operators woke up stiff. When it gets over a 100 degrees every afternoon and the temperature in the dozer cab gets to a 120 degrees, a mere 63 degrees overnight seemed like freezing. The normal wake-up call at 5:00 a.m. was the roar of a dozer starting up 10 yards away. A 400-horsepower engine starting up woke most operators, but some were so exhausted they had to be shaken. Sharpening blades kept operators up until 10:00 or 11:00 at night, and mortar attacks often ate into sleep once it came. It was not unusual for operators to get by on three or four hours of sleep a night.

Wake-up calls sent by the Vietcong and North Vietnamese were far louder and less pleasant, and many operators slept under their dozers in the event of night attacks. Being under the transmission of the D7 was one of the safest places during a mortar or rocket attack. In this position operators had the cab, floorboards, engine and the transmission between them and any incoming artillery rounds.

Crawl-out, Maintenance and Layout
Each morning the plows and security would gather up into platoons and then start the crawl out to that day’s cut. Even though the area might be adjacent to the one from the day before, a new road would be cut.

As a unit commander, I never wanted to establish a pattern. We would get the whole area cut, but how we did it was always unpredictable. This decreased the number of casualties due to ambushes, booby traps and mines.

Every day each plow was maintained at least four times. In the morning the operator checked the oil, hydraulic fluid, water and fuel levels, and rechecked his previous evenings work. From November to February the maintenance was really tough because most of it was done before it got light or after it got dark. After the crawl out and four or five hours of cutting, the operators took a break for lunch and maintenance. Each operator idled down the plow without turning it off, and then pulled another round of maintenance. During maintenance the M548 would come around to each plow and give the operator some ice water and add oil and hydraulic fluid if necessary. After maintenance each operator ate his rations and then either worked on other mechanical problems, talked to his buddies or fell fast asleep. After the first week of the normal 45-day cut, most of the personnel were on the verge of exhaustion.

The idea of the layout was to create the outline of a large area that would be cleared for the rest of the morning or afternoon. By doing this, plows could continue to clear toward the center when the helicopter had to leave to refuel. It also allowed one of the bulldozer blades to build a road around the cut so the armored personnel carriers (APCs) could move around without destroying their suspensions, transmissions and radios. In the jungle even lightly loaded tracks had problems and most of our security tracks had three times the basic load of ammo. All of the 548s were heavily
loaded with spare parts, extra water, oil and hydraulic fluid. During the first circuit, the APCs were posted as security around the outside of the cut.

The morning and afternoon cut layout was always the hardest time of the day due to enemy attacks. The security unit officer and I would fly around in the LOH looking for trouble that might be waiting. We would fly a hundred feet over the trees to draw fire and look for other problems such as bunkers, booby traps, ambushes, streams, swamps or ravines. Some of these could kill, but others merely slowed us down.

Almost every day we had plows stop in the cut. During one week I had to transport operators out by Medivac for two broken ankles, a centipede sting, multiple bee stings, snakebite, a tarantula bite, a scorpion sting, third-degree burns and heat prostration. My unit lost nine operators without a single enemy contact. All but the burned operator came back within a day or two on one of the supply Chinook helicopters.

Everyday I reported to the Corps Commander on how many acres were cut. One of my reports actually became a part of history in VIETNAM STUDIES, U.S. Army Engineers, 1965-1970:

"Because of the intense command interest in land-clearing operations, daily production reports received careful scrutiny at all echelons. Unit commanders and even troops themselves quickly learned this fact, and competition between land-clearing companies became intense. The most forthright production ever received was submitted by a company commander whose Rome plows had all become hopelessly mired in the monsoon mud before reaching the cut area. His report for the day in the line reserved for "acres cleared" was the most famous one-liner in land-clearing history. It said, "one tree." Needless to say, this report created great concern as it filtered up through channels. An investigation clearly disclosed the impossible situation of the unit; in fact to cut down a single tree under the circumstances was a major achievement. Queried on this point, the company commander admitted one of his plow operators attached his winch cable to a dead tree in an attempt to extract his tractor from the mud, the tree fell over and was counted.

With up to twelve hours in the cut and three or four more spent doing maintenance, it was very difficult for the operators to stay clean. Many of them found that they had a better chance of preventing jungle rot if they only bathed every third day. By the end of a 45-day cut, most of the operators and mechanics were exhausted, and their uniforms became oily, sweaty, smelly rags.

I remember one time the 984th returned to Long Bihn, off-loaded all of the low-bed trailers, dropped the blades and headed for the main PX to buy soap, shaving gear and everything else we had been missing for the last six and a half weeks. My soldiers were stopped by two sergeants in starched jungle fatigues, and told they were too dirty to enter. I arrived right after my men and was nearly as dirty as they were. Seeing the situation, I stood the sergeants at attention, complete with salute, while my men walked into the PX to get what they needed.

Rank does have some privileges, and it was the least I could do for my troops. I salute these men, most of whom had volunteered to be in this elite unit, whose mission was to clear the jungle and reduce risk for other soldiers.