

Chapter 11 - Engineer Troop

"We may not have changed history, but we have certainly changed geography."

Introduction

The Engineer contingent of the 4 RAR Battalion Group consisted of 41 soldiers from the Enoggera-based 2nd Combat Engineer Regiment (2 CER), and another five soldiers from 3 CER in Townsville. Known as 13 Troop, the troop drew soldiers from all Engineer trades, including Combat Engineers, Plant Operators, Carpenters, Plumbers, Electricians, Vehicle Mechanics, Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technicians, and a Civil Engineer. The troop had been hand picked for the deployment, and came tailor-made for a broad range of construction and combat engineering tasks, which is exactly what they faced from the outset.

The Arrival – 180 and a Wakeup

The Troop arrived in the sunny hamlet of Tonobibi on 25 April 01 - ANZAC Day. The significance of the day was not lost on the members of the troop, some of whom were lamenting not being able to spend the day at the RSL with beer in hand, playing 2-up. However, once they landed in their new home they soon began the task of settling in and preparing for the work ahead. The troop before us had already done some work to improve the accommodation, but our boys immediately decided that some extra work was needed to make life more comfortable, like doors for their rooms, and flyscreens over the window openings (the glass was long-gone). Needless to say, the first couple of Sundays resembled Home Improvements on steroids, with the sounds of power tools and hammering pervading the compound. The raids on Corporal Evan 'Pencil' Parker's workshop by troop members hunting for plywood and other odds and ends were fairly constant, so much so that Pencil and Sapper Graeme 'LJ' Littlejohns considered erecting a door to protect their stocks of timber! It wasn't long before the Plant Section area became so crammed full of Corporal Shaun 'Wilko' Wilkinson's collection of native East Timorese fauna that people began to get lost in there. Sergeant Dean 'Patch' Patchett even decided to give the Troop HQ a lick of paint to make things nice and homely. Not ones to feather their own nests, the Trades Section, under Pencil's expert guidance, began to erect the first of the upgrades to the awnings for our accommodation - over their own recreational area of course. But this was only the start of something much bigger...

Tonobibi – Oasis in the Rice Bowl

The engineer compound was situated at Tonobibi, on the road between Balibo and Maliana, and about 1500m north of the border with West Timor. It is a village that has had its fair share of excitement during recent years, including riots and illegal trading. However, our most exciting involvement with the local population was limited to delivering pregnant women to Maliana hospital (mid-labour of course), and on one occasion helping an old man when he broke his leg in a fall at a Fretelin flag raising ceremony. With the entire town looking on, our combat medics dressed the man's leg (after getting the end of the bone back inside his leg) and put him in a truck to move down to Maliana. To his credit, not once did the man make a sound, despite our boys sticking saline in the wound to clean it out. It certainly left some of the troop wondering at what level of pain it is acceptable to make noise.

Headquarters

The responsibility for coordinating and directing all engineering related activities fell on the shoulders of the Officer Commanding (OC), Major Harry Jarvie, and the Engineer Sergeant Major (ESM), Warrant Officer Dave Kirkby. Given that there was more work than most Engineer Regiments could manage in a lifetime, it was their job to screen the requests for engineer support, sort out a priority of work, and to provide top cover so the Troop could get on with the job. While the OC set about 'motivating' the logistics system to keep up with the consumption of stores, the ESM concentrated on improving the security at all Australian Battalion (AUSBATT) patrol bases. Consequently, the boys got a lot of practice in rebuilding strong points and filling Flexmac baskets. Dave also became intimately involved with the rotation of the Reverse Osmosis Water Purification Unit (ROWPU), and we could talk at considerable length about this machine, but it would probably give Dave more nightmares, and add weight to his future compo claim for stress. Dave's other role was to be the senior Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Technician - yes, he actually got paid extra money to blow stuff up.

Lieutenant Liam Hansen had probably the best Lieutenant's job in the Army for 2001. He commanded the Engineer Troop, and all the attached elements living at Tonobibi, and was basically king of his own little empire. By the time the Troop left Tonobibi, Liam had over 70 men under his command for local defence, and had added a helicopter landing zone (LZ), kitchen, new accommodation and an enormous workshop on top of the facilities that were already at Tonobibi. It was time for him to go home when he started talking about campaigning for Mayor of Tonobibi. Staff Sergeant Don Quick provided the other half to the Engineer EOD Team, blowing up stuff on occasion with the ESM. In his main role as Troop Staff Sergeant he was an invaluable source of combat engineering experience and expertise to the troop. His unique methods of motivation and maintaining discipline certainly kept the Troop on track, and his influence was largely responsible for the high tempo of operations sustained throughout the six months. Sergeant Dean Patchett was the Troop Sergeant and Plant Sergeant, making up the remainder of Troop Headquarters. Patch was responsible for the design of the gabion wall constructions on the Main Supply Route (MSR), and the design of Route Monster, overseeing its construction himself. However, Patch's legacy will be the Great Wall of Timor, which at 90 metres long and 10 metres high is probably the largest structure of its type built by a Combat Engineer Troop.

Sergeant Rob Batiste and Corporal Rob Nash were the Troop Storemen and Q-personnel. Their tireless pursuit of stores and equipment for the Troop was the grease that kept the cogs of the organisation turning. In no small way, their contribution kept the tasks going and on track.

Combat Engineers

Two sections of combat engineers formed the backbone of the troop for the duration of the deployment, providing the field engineering skills for the force. Ably led by Corporals Mark Bennett and Sean 'Macca' McAlinden, their two main tasks in Timor were the upgrade of defences at all AUSBATT locations before the elections at the end of August, and maintaining water supply for the Battalion during the dry season. In addition to this, they also managed to undertake a variety of other tasks, ranging from a few night patrols of the local towns during the lead-up to the election, to supervising the Locally Employed Civilians (LECs) building Patch's Great Wall.

No sooner had they landed in country, than the combat engineers were sent off to Balibo to build a new kennel complex for the AUSBATT tracking dogs. With a bit of help from Plant Section and the tradesmen, the new kennel facility was finished in no time, and soon became known as the best accommodation in the Area of Operations (AO), regardless of species.

The upgrading of the field defences in preparation for the election occurred over a four-month period from early May until the end of August. The two combat engineer sections covered virtually all corners of the AO, building or upgrading strongpoints at each location, and installing protective earth walls around accommodation areas. In May, LZ Sapper had a guard tower relocated and a new Landing

Point built, and Junction Points Bravo and Charlie's defences were rebuilt. During June, the rebuilds at Fort Maliana, Fort Marko and the new Fort Aidabaleten took place. The work completed at Aidabaleten by the combat engineers (and supporting elements from within the Troop) is truly impressive. In around three weeks, they managed to build four strong points (two as towers) and construct almost 500 metres of protective bunding. July was equally as busy for the combat engineers, completing defensive works and an accommodation upgrade at Junction Point Memo, and upgrades at Fort Bobonaro. Similarly, August saw the completion of defences at Patrol Base Sparrow (about as close to the middle of nowhere as you can get!) and a few ongoing improvements to the defences at Tonobibi.

The combat engineers were also responsible for the provision of potable water to the Battalion from two water points, one located at Batugade and the other at Maliana. At the Batugade water point, the ROWPU was used to turn seawater into fresh water. However, on arrival in theatre, it was discovered that the ROWPU was not functioning properly, and that the previous engineer troop was sourcing water from a nearby well. Realising that this was not going to last during the dry season, Corporal Mark 'Benno' Bennett, Corporal Sean McAlinden, Lance Corporals Mark 'Clance' Clancy and Russell 'Berls' Berlee (along with the rest of the combat engineers) worked in rotations for several months to keep this machine on line. However, it continued to break down frequently, and eventually the decision was made to rotate it for a new one, which ultimately occurred in September, much to everyone's relief.

The other water point at Maliana operated the more reliable CPC 20. However, the issue concerning this water point was the need to balance the provision of water to the Battalion without disadvantaging the local population. This was eventually solved by the electricians who installed an automated switchboard that was able to run two pumps at the aqueduct further down the hill, without the requirement for men to remain on-site. These pumps maintained a steady supply of source water to the CPC, and ensured that we didn't affect the town water supply.

During the course of the deployment, the combat engineers were involved in a wide and varied range of tasks. Sappers Peter George, Andrew Hill, Dave Fagan, Andrew Daly, Warren Pickering and Phillip Jackson all became experts at building retaining walls while supervising the Locally Employed Civilians constructing rock gabion walls. Meanwhile, Clance and Co. got stuck into bituminising the unsealed landing points around the AO - a rather black and sticky task!

As the elections drew closer, the combat engineers found themselves conducting night patrols through the towns of Tonobibi and Nunura, searches through Bobonaro and Maliana, and constructing crowd control barriers at various polling stations in the AO. Much to Evan 'Lappy' Lapworth's disappointment and the Boss's relief, nothing noteworthy occurred during the patrols or election phase. However, Scotty Hann's driving skills came under scrutiny during the election phase when he managed to get the section vehicle bogged not once, not twice, but three times in one day en-route to Sibuni to erect crowd control barriers. And it was also good to see that Macca and Co's search skills hadn't faded with time after their practise at the Olympic Games.

All things considered, the combat engineers completed a huge number of tasks and earned the respect of the other members of the Battalion, who were constantly amazed by their capacity for hard work, day-in, day-out.

Plant / Transport

The Plant/Transport section of 13 Troop (or "Transplants" as they are better known) have certainly moulded large areas of the terrain here in Timor, but thankfully not in their own images. They sported a real mix of youth and experience, given that two of their number had previously served in Namibia twelve years prior, whereas the four Sapper plant operators were all relatively new to the game. Corporals Shaun Wilkinson (Plant) and Greg Haddy (Transport) headed this section, with Lance Corporal Mark "Mad dog" Madigan as Wilko's second-in-command. Their primary tasks whilst in East Timor were the maintenance and repair of the road system, and providing plant support to the rest of the troop in order to support the Battalion Group.

For the duration of the deployment, the transplants mainly focused on the repair and upgrading of the MSR along the section of road between Balibo and the Nunura Bridge. They were tasked to repair the damage that the previous half dozen or so wet seasons had caused along this 14km stretch of road, so that AUSBATT could continue to use it for resupply of its deployed Companies. Realising that the repair of this entire section of road was beyond the capabilities of a full Construction Squadron, let alone a single Plant Section, the OC directed that only the points that were likely to fail in the immediate future would be worked on, in order to keep the road open during the next wet season. Wilko, Patch and the ESM then broke the route down into 13 critical points. What resulted was some extensive earthworks and construction of several impressive rock gabion walls. The largest of these walls, named critical point 4 and nicknamed "The Great Wall of Timor", took approximately 3 months to complete, and included the importation of around 900 tonnes of rocks to fill the baskets. Although not all of the critical points were completed by the troop during the deployment, the worst sections of the road received some much needed attention to keep it open for traffic during the next wet season.

Whilst this activity was taking place on the hill, plant section also conducted a number of tasks in support of the rest of the troop, and even some of their own. During May, the planties helped build the new landing point at LZ Sapper, and supported the construction of the dog kennels at Balibo. At the end of May, 'Mad Dog' deployed with a small team consisting of Sappers Mark Chambers, David Brown, Mark 'Roddy' Rodrigues and John Kelly along with a section of infantry, to push a road through to patrol base Sparrow, south of Balibo. In the ensuing three weeks, they lived out in the bush and completed around 13km of road. Shortly after this, Roddy's wife gave birth, and he returned home to Australia to take care of his expanded family.

Towards the end of July, another plant team was deployed to the MSR near Aidabaleten, to construct a bypass route for heavy vehicles. Over the course of several years, the bitumen on the main road had slowly worn down, and the heavy vehicles with trailers had begun to jackknife as they lost traction on the hill. Plant section constructed a bypass road in little over a week, and it was aptly named route Jackknife.

In July, 13 Troop was given the task of constructing the access road to the new Battalion Headquarters site at Moleana. The road, named Route Monsta after Corporal "Monsta" Jones who was killed in East Timor in 2000, would eventually be over 8km long and require the importation of around 11000m³ of material from a nearby riverbed quarry. Due to the size of the task, and the need to have it completed before the end of the tour in October, five more men were brought into country from 3 CER to assist with the construction. Groundhog day then started for the Dump truck drivers as they hauled dirt from the river to the road, day in, day out, for almost three months. Plant section worked almost non-stop on this job right up until the last day in country, but by the time they left there was a new line on a map and a road that would serve the next Battalion well.

Trade Section

Electricians. Sappers Clint Maloy and Jason White came to the troop on loan from 21 Construction Squadron to fill the much-needed electricians positions. They achieved a great deal within their 6 months, and it would have been a whole lot more if the supply system had been able to keep up with their pace. Their main task whilst in country was to upgrade the electrical supply system in the AO, since the electrical system was ad hoc at best, and downright dangerous in some areas. In amongst this, Whitey and Clint also managed to fit a large number of air conditioners, along with various fans, lights and powerpoints. They also refitted the pumps at the Maliana Pumphouse, and designed and installed an automated switchboard that allowed the operation of the water point to continue without the requirement for additional personnel to be stationed at the pump-house.

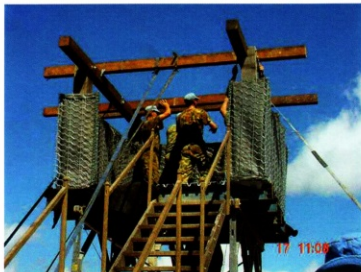
Carpenters. Corporal Evan 'Pencil' Parker and Sapper Graeme Littlejohns formed the chippy team for 13 Troop. For the chippies, jobs generally came in one of two types, either small handyman stuff or large construction jobs. The small stuff included numerous shelves, doors, cupboards or



The Engineer Troop at the Great Wall of Timor



Corporal Mark Lloyd and Sapper Mick Every repair water pipes near Bobonaro



Above: Engineers constructing the roof on a new strongpoint at L.Z. Sapper, Balibo

Right: Engineers showing off their newly constructed workshops, and their mobile scaffold

Below: Engineers together with the Locally Employed Civilians at the Great Wall of Timor

