



Author's Photo

When Tanks Took Wings

Seventeen combat-loaded M41A3s, with their Vietnamese crew aboard, flew into battle 28 years ago.

by Colonel Raymond R. Battreall, U.S. Army, Retired



***Author's Note:** I'm writing to relate a historical milepost for *Armor* which could not be told before because the State Department disowned us at a rather high level of classification. Sufficient years have passed, however, that everything has long since been automatically downgraded. A routine notice of this historic movement — routine at least from the Air Force's point of view — appears in the USAF operational history of the Vietnam era.*

From March into May of 1966 the Buddhist chaplains of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam's (ARVN) crack 1st Infantry Division incited their troops to open mutiny against what was perceived to be the Catholic-dominated government in Saigon. All

operations against the enemy ceased, and the division began moving south against the I Corps headquarters in Da Nang. There was considerable anxiety that the corps HQ might join the mutiny, for the commander and several key staff officers were Buddhists.

Organic to the ARVN IID was the 7th ARVN Cavalry whose commander wanted no part of the mutiny. But he realized that, no matter how it came out in the end, he and his squadron would still have to work with the division. He therefore obeyed the order to march on Da Nang with his three armored cavalry assault troops and one troop of M41A3, 76-mm gun "Walker Bulldog" light tanks. But he seized every excuse to delay his movement and, in fact, avoided any contact with troops loyal to the government.

His intentions, however, were not known to Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) HQ because the Senior Corps Advisor, Marine LTG Lewis Walt, had restricted all advisors to their billets. His intent was to avoid U.S. involvement on both sides of the mutiny. (During the fall of 1965, during an uprising of Montagnard tribesmen, U.S. Special Forces advisors found themselves facing Government Troops advised by other U.S. Army trainers.)

Walt's order resulted in the loss of all communications with the units involved. MACV was, therefore, very much concerned about the armor threat to Da Nang.

4th ARVN Cav, headquartered just outside Da Nang, also wanted to remain loyal but was faced with the

same dilemma of not knowing which way the corps HQ would go. Its commander literally refused to answer either the telephone or radio from corps, thereby evading the need to take sides. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Ky had dispatched three VN Marine battalions to Da Nang by sea and was worrying about how to counter the armor threat given 4th Cav's uncertain status. He hit upon the idea of sending 1st Troop (M41A3), 5th ARVN Cav from Xuan Loc in III Corps to Da Nang. The only way to get it there in time was to airlift it, so he called upon MACV for help.

As Senior Advisor, Republic of Vietnam (RVNAF) Armor Command, I can only speculate as to how high up the chain the decision was made, but one day in April, I received instructions from MAC J3 (MG William DeWitt, later CG, TRADOC) to supervise the loading of 1/5 Troop aboard four USAF C-133s at Tan Son Nhut Airbase. I learned that the C-133 was, in fact, a "stretch" C-130 with a lengthened fuselage. Its internal dimensions could accommodate two M41s if we could get them inside without tearing the plane apart and if we could keep the load balanced. We would have only 1/4-inch clearance on each side!

When the fully combat-loaded tanks (fuel, ammo, rations, and crew individual gear) met the aircraft, I gave the U.S. loadmaster their weight from the vehicle's tech manual. He labored with a slide rule and then told me where to place them inside. Having waited long before that the best way to load armor on a train was for the officers to lead the way to the loading dock and then get out of the way while the sergeants and drivers did their thing. I gave the word to the RVN platoon sergeants and stood back to watch. Everything went slowly but smoothly as each tank rolled into the plane. This having been done and the tanks tied down, I called the loadmaster where he wanted the crews to sit. He replied in horror, "By God, Sir, we can't take the weight. We already have waivers for weight load and floor load, and besides you'd screw up my center of grav-



ity." I explained that the weight of the crew was included in the weight of the tank I'd given him, and he replied, "Well then, Sir, I guess they'd better ride in their tanks." And that's exactly what they did!

I admit to worrying as the first plane waddled out to the runway and to holding my breath as it started its takeoff roll, but it broke ground smoothly and disappeared to the north. We loaded the remaining aircraft. By the time the last was ready to go, the first had returned from Da Nang for a second load. Each plane flew two sorties, and one flew a third to deliver the seventeenth tank. Just as this last tank was loading at around midnight, a USAF sergeant tapped me on the elbow and asked if I was Colonel Battreall. He then handed me a TWX message which I read by flashlight.

It was addressed to me by name from the State Department in Washington and read, "You are interfering in domestic politics. Cease and desist forthwith." It was signed "Rusk." For a split second I contemplated a reply, asking the Secretary just what he thought we'd been doing all along, but discretion prevailed. Thinking of Gen. Patton's reaction when ordered not to seize Palermo during World War II, I said, "Sarge, you didn't find me out here in all this darkness, noise, and confusion, did you?" He thought briefly and replied, "No, Sir, I guess I didn't." I told him to return to his office and I would be in to accept the message shortly. I waited until the last flight broke ground and then acknowledged receipt.

I recall wondering how Dean Rusk got my name and marveling that he

thought a brand-new LTC (I had barely five months in grade at the time.) could marshal one fourth of the world-wide USAF inventory of C-133s and get every waiver in the book without considerable help from much higher pay grades. Nonetheless, we had accomplished the first combat-operational airlift of tanks in the history of warfare. Oh, sure, we had flown empty tanks once around the airfield to prove we could do it

on Strategic Army Corps (STRAC, FORSCOM's predecessor) mobility exercises; and we'd flown empty tanks over oceans when the delivery priority was high enough. But never before had we flown combat-loaded tanks with crews ready to go into action on arrival at the other end. And that is just what 1/5 ARVN Cav did! The M41s shown on TV clearing the streets of Da Nang of mutinous elements were theirs.

I never did answer Secretary Rusk's message, though I suppose somebody did. Its classification and political sensitivity were such, however, that I felt constrained not to report this historic event at the time. But 28 years have passed, and it's about time for the armor community to learn what happened.

Colonel Raymond R. Battreall, (Ret.), was commissioned in Cavalry from West Point in 1949 and served in the 14th, 11th, and 3d ACRs and 1st Cav Div. He was Senior Advisor to the 4th ARVN Cav from May to Nov 65; Senior Advisor, Republic of Viet Nam Armed Forces (RVNAF) Armor Command from Nov 65 to May 66 and again from Aug 70 to Apr 72. He also commanded 3d Sqdn, 3d ACR in 67-68; served as SJS, SOUTHCOM and Deputy Chief, U.S. Military Training Mission, Saudi Arabia; and completed his service as Director of Armor Doctrine, USAARMS, Ft. Knox, in 78-79.