

Anchor Away (Not Aweigh)

The Ben Luc Float Bridge

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Introduction -

I was delighted to see 1st SGT Carter Glass' write-up on the Ben Luc float bridge that was built in August '68. I had wanted to relate another aspect of that operation for a long time, as it was rather unique; his write-up was all the impetus I needed. I too have a fuzzy recollection of some of the facts going back 35 years, and I especially regret not being able to recall the names of all the troops who worked this project and were so deserving of recognition. In my book they are all heroes, then and now.

In August '68 I was ending my tour as S-3 (Operations) for the Battalion and was due to rotate back to the States. As I suspect is natural, I wasn't hoping for another Tet and thought I'd just ease onto that freedom bird and peacefully fade away.

When I went into the S-3 shop at O-dark thirty that August morning the Operations Sgt. greeted me with the news that the Ben Luc Bridge had been blown, cutting the primary route to Saigon from the Delta, which, among other dire consequences, caused the price of rice in Saigon to go up by some bazaar amount each day the bridge was out. I immediately went into the denial mode. In a few more days I would have made a clean get away. It seemed like forever but when the Ops. Sgt. repeated the dreaded news a few seconds later, I came back to reality and after coordinating with any and everyone who knew about float bridging, learned that the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) would be putting in the float bridge.

Ben Luc Float Bridge

Although I can't recall how it came about, but suspect I got direction from Col. Loper, I learned that the ARVN needed support and tasked Capt. Best (C, Company) with the mission. The float bridge went in in very good time, thanks in part to the efforts of the 1st platoon, C Co.

The float bridge had been placed on the up-stream side of the permanent bridge that had been blown. The river at that location was tidal and it was secured to the blown bridge at various locations, which prevented it from moving up-stream as the tide came in.

To secure the float bridge during an outgoing tide, a 2-inch diameter wire rope had been strung across the river, up-stream of the float bridge, and anchored on both banks. (See 1st SGT Carter's story "Float Bridge at Ben Luc" regarding installation of this cable)

The up-stream cable anchors were an issue. There was no way to predict if the anchors would hold as the days and weeks went by. That, plus any debris or other things the bad guys might float down the river to take out the float bridge, caused a good deal of concern. An additional up-stream restraint was needed to secure the float bridge during an outgoing tide.

Anchor the Bridge, Literally: Round One -

I had some time before seen a huge ocean-going ship anchor in the depot in Saigon and thought why not? Plop that thing in the middle of the river with a fan of cables running from it to the float bridge and that bridge wasn't going anywhere.

I don't know how he did it, but Maj. Stu Williams, the S-4, had that anchor delivered on a flat bed the day after I asked him to get it. In the mean time, I arranged for a flying crane, CH-54, to lift the anchor and place it in the river. Must have asked for it the day after the anchor got on site, as we had to hook cables of various lengths, with

floats, to run from the anchor to the bridge and arrange to have the crews in boats to do the attaching. I can't swear to it but I must have tasked C Co with that mission as well as they were familiar with the operation. Must not have been 1st Platoon or Sgt. Glass would certainly have remembered that aspect of the operation. Well, the next day came and everything was ready.

The CH-54 arrived mid morning, let out its cable and was hooked onto the anchor. And like an elephant letting out a mouse fart, lifted that anchor about 6 inches off the ground and no more. The lift capacity of a CH-54 is something on the order of 22,000 pounds (11 tons). So that anchor must have weighed with cables and all maybe 6 or 7 tons, well below the max lift capacity of the CH 54. Somewhere in the back of my mind is the figure of 13,000 pounds, which would make sense. Must have got that number from the depot documents, but whatever it was, it was too much for that time of day. The mid-morning heat reduced the air density, reducing the lift capacity of the chopper. Scratch that day.

Round Two: Improvise -

Told the chopper to be back as early as possible the next day and had the cable on the anchor that the 54 would hook onto shortened as much as possible so as to gain lift through ground effect of the chopper's rotors.

Next day every thing went like clockwork - almost. Chopper arrived early, hovered as low as he could, was hooked up to the anchor, lifted off without a problem, out to the middle of the river, enough up stream to allow for a fan of cables, with floats attached, to run from the anchor to the bridge. The hookup crews in boats were ready to do the job. I've got the chopper on one frequency and the guys in the boats on another. Gave the OK to the chopper to lower the anchor to the riverbed and drag it a little way down stream to set it. That seemed to work as he couldn't drag it any more and the chopper started to tilt sideways, making for one nervous pilot. Gave the OK to release the cable -- and nothing happened. As explained to me, the release

mechanism is an electrically activated device. It shorted out in the water and wouldn't open.

Told the pilot to lift the anchor and drop it when the release mechanism was clear of the water. He thought about that for a few seconds and thought the jolt from a sudden release of such a great weight might throw the chopper out of control and he didn't want to risk it. A good chance he could be right and I didn't need an accident investigation to extend my tour. Brought the anchor back to the flat bed on the Saigon near side shore. By then too hot for any more attempts so released the CH 54 and asked him to be back early next day while we tried to come up with a solution.

Round Three: Anchor Away - Murphy RULES! -

Next plan was to have the anchor lifted with a shorter cable and bring it to the far shore where a crew would remove the short cable, attach a long cable to allow the chopper to drag the anchor out to the middle of the river. The cable would be long enough to keep the release mechanism clear of the water. Crews would get the floating tie cables to the bridge and we'd be in business. Anyway, that was the plan. Early next morning the chopper was on site (probably with one PO'ed pilot), short cable attached, lifted off without a problem, over to the far shore, crews standing by to attach the long cable, boat crews with the float supported tie cables, chopper lowers the anchor to the ground, and from what I understand, it just kept going down, down, down into the muddy bank. That anchor wasn't going to be dragged anywhere.

Well, making the best of what you've got to work with, as good combat engineers are supposed to do, tied the bridge to the anchor where it was. Left a few days later for the land of the big PX and have no idea if that rather bazaar approach to anchoring a float bridge stood the test of time. But I'm sure that anchor isn't going anywhere. In a 1,000 years when archeologists come across that anchor, they'll be scratching their heads as to what it's doing there.

For that whole operation I spent the entire time on the site, sleeping on the ground on the blown bridge overlooking the float bridge. Next to

me was the Provost Marshal who also spent the entire time there and also slept on the ground. I didn't want to waste time going back and forth as it all started early and had other things on site to take care of, and the PM was there to oversee traffic and supervise control of the civilians using the float bridge. One night woke up as a group of captured VC came by under ARVN guard. That was the closest I came to the bad guys.

Epilog -

I may have overlooked some aspects but the essence of what I've written is how it was. Maybe some of the guys on shore or in the boats have photos of a CH-54 flying with a sea anchor hooked to it, or can add or correct anything I may have misstated. Again my regret is that I didn't personally thank the guys who did the work. If you're out there now, please accept a much belated "thank you" for a most unusual job well done.

And now you know the rest of the story. If you're wondering what happens to engineer S-3 Majors with strange solutions, they wind up as engineer O-6's with strange solutions. Called it quits in '87 after 30 years and would do it all over again if I could. I'm afraid health problems may prevent me from attending the next reunion, but I wish the best to all of you.