



BASE CAMP BASICS

CU CHI, Vietnam (IO)—“Cu Chi, Cu Chi, worst place I ever did see,” laments the lyrics of a song written by a 25th Division Infantryman. But this lament was written in February, 1966 shortly after the 2d Brigade arrived at its then dusty new home.

Newsmen who visited the base camp early that year now say they wouldn't believe it's the same place. Roads that were once covered with choking foot-deep dust or soft unnavigable mud—depending on the time of day—are now paved and useable in any weather.

The disorganized array of tents which were both quarters and offices have given way to a cantonment of uniform tent-kits, keeping both men and gear out of the mud, and to a large extent, away from the ever present insects.

Even now tent-kit offices are being torn down to be replaced by customized quonset huts, or in some cases, air conditioned corrugated steel buildings with cement slab floors.

Nearly every military operation adds something to the base camp area when the troops return. Often referred to as “company beautification” entire battalions now have palm tree-lined sidewalks, or small rubber plants, or flowers.

It has been said that the war in Vietnam is one of the strangest ever fought. Rarely, if ever in a combat zone, did a soldier go out to do battle carrying cameras, transistor radios and his basic military equipment, knowing that when he pulls back to the forward base area there will be a cold beer or soft drink waiting for him.

Certainly then, comforts and conveniences have become a significant part in the life of the 25th Division “Tropic Lightning” soldier stationed at CU Chi. Companies compete with each other, and battalions play the game of one-upmanship to devise new and better creature-comforts which can mean the difference between high or low morale.

Cleanliness may be next to Godliness, but at Cu Chi it is a reminder of civilization that keeps moral high. The evolution of the shower these past months almost equals the development of the wheel by the cavemen.

Originally showers consisted of a 55-gallon oil drum on an overhead rack with a punctured tin can for a showerhead, but “Tropic Lightning” ingenuity has come up with improvement upon improvement in the base camp's bathing system.

Many varieties of showers exist, all efficiently

serving their function. First came the quarter-master power shower, with a nearly unlimited supply of water from an adjacent well, electrically pumped out of the ground, sent coursing through pipes into a tent where it emerges violently to cleanse the 18 or 20 bodies jockeying for position near the eight shower-heads.

Sensing the need to ease the load on the quarter-master shower unit, battalion engineers worked. Airplane wing tanks were hoisted on wooden air and several shower outlets were built on platforms below. Some units went so far as to pressurize the tanks and to build benches for the men to change clothes.

Then the 25th Aviation Battalion came up with the ultimate—at least till now—in unit water systems. First, they hoisted a wing tank vertically so it looks like a rocket waiting for launch (after all, it is an aviation unit), then they dug a well, installed a pump, and connected it to keep the tank constantly filled. Not satisfied with this labor-saving device, the men went even further. They installed underground pipes, and now throughout the battalion area shower buildings and water faucets produce a constant supply of running water.

A lot has also been done to improve what must be considered the greatest morale factor of all—food. From meals of C-rations heated in GI cans and eaten on crude benches outdoors, the division has progressed through tent-kit mess hall with outdoor serving lines to modern half-brick, screened-in, cement-floored, nearly monsoon-proof dining rooms. And with the establishment of more efficient supply systems, fresh “A-rations” are reaching the troops more often.

Finally, the last “way back when” tale.

Catching a helicopter to the field or to Saigon once was a matter of sitting on the chopper pad located near the present division artillery headquarters, and running up to each ship as it landed, determining its destination and trying to hitch a ride.

Now, however, progress and sophistication have set in. No longer do the 25th Division soldiers have to homestead on the landing pad to get a ride. No longer is each chopper pilot approached from all sides with request for rides to all places. With a call to the helipad, the weary soldier can be assured—almost—of a scheduled flight to his chosen destination.

And this, too, is progress.