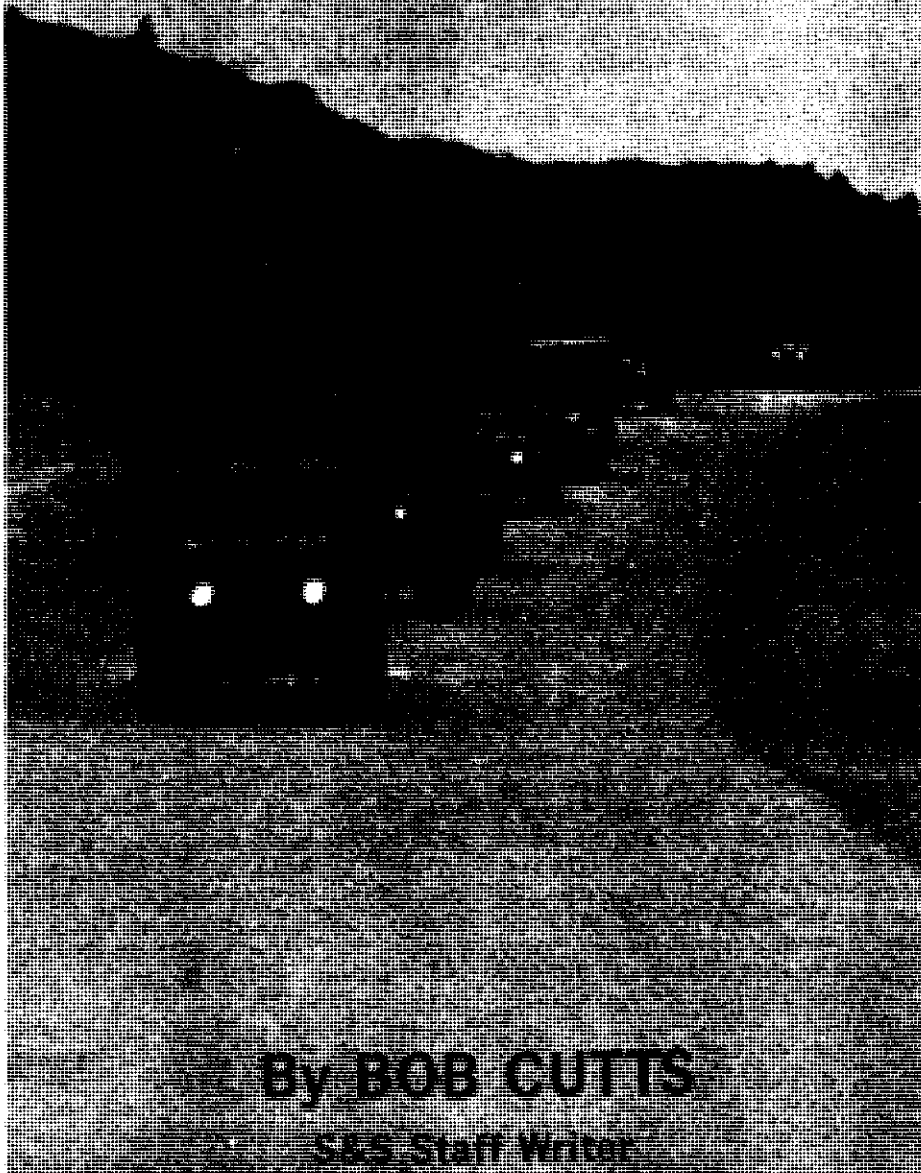


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CUT THE STEM AND THE FLOWER DIES

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A truck convoy heads for "Ambush Alley" where Red gunners invariably lay in wait for the men who damn the torpedoes and push on with supplies for units in the field.

By **BOB CUTTS**
S&S Staff Writer

Photos by Cutts



The 4th Trans. Command uses 7,000 men a day to push cargo around the clock.



Small boats ply the waters between the big cargo ships and the drop points where supplies are awaited.

colored flower. Supply is the stem without which it could never have blossomed."

—Winston Churchill

LONG BINH, Vietnam—"We're in the kill zone! We're in an ambush!" The roar of six thundering cylinders exploded over them as Spec. 4 Bob Logston stomped the accelerator down to the floor-plates: Jerry Christopher's words were washed away in noise as he yelled the same warning back into the bed of the deuce-and-a-half.

The mine, a string of fat paper bags stuffed with ammonium nitrate that squatted in the road like big brown mushrooms, would rip their whole front end off, Christopher knew. But he also knew the whole convoy behind would be jammed up into the kill zone if he stopped now. The first truck had to run the mine and get off the road, so the rest could speed through. Or they'd all be dead.

Christopher's was that first truck.

Logston, driving, knew it too and pushed her flat out for the mines. He never made it. A B40 rocket whizzed out of the roadside grass and caught the armored gun truck under the left front wheel, blowing off the tire. She skidded around to the right, lurched into a ditch and stopped, 25 yards short of the mine.

The two machine gunners in the bed were firing already. Christopher shouted "Contact!" three times into his radio and dove out of the cab with his grenade launcher. Logston was right behind him.

Two more tractor-trailer rigs behind downshifted and tried to run the blockade, whooshing past the gun truck and blowing their front axles off suicidally on the contact mines. A third truck got through and raced away for help, but the fourth, loaded with 155mm cannon rounds, ran into the last mine and became a broken heap, blocking the last patch of open road and trapping over 70 ammo trucks and fuel tankers in front of the Red guns.

The fight was on. Behind Christopher, a 700-yard-long river of flame and death blossomed. Five-thousand-gallon gas trucks exploded, frying drivers in their cabs. Viet Cong crawled along the tops of the trucks, trying frantically to rip open and destroy or steal the loads. Drivers, running from their trucks across the road into the cover of two-foot-high elephant grass, picked them off with rifles.

Christopher, hiding under the tailgate of his own truck, was trying to get the B40 man with his grenade launcher. He couldn't find him. A rocket smacked the truck above him. One machine gunner was badly hurt, the other knicked in the arm. Both their guns were mangled. Artillery rounds on the wreck up ahead were burning now, cooking off and sending murderous fragments whistling all around.

Logston, hiding under the engine, was hit next. His legs were ripped open.

blood with a first aid kit.

The road was littered with burning, blasted corpses, twisted piles of steel and wreckage that had once been trucks, and dying men.

North Vietnamese gunners were so close across the road that Christopher thought his M79 rifle grenades wouldn't have enough space to go off in. But they did. Then, aiming with exquisite care, he finally got the NVA B40 man.

Then tanks, APCs and helicopters charged in from the flanks and from above, driving out the North Vietnamese ambush force.

The Reds melted back into the jungle, and things got quiet — except for hot bullets snapping on the burning trailers in the afternoon, and the moans of the wounded.

It was all over, until the next time Charley decided to bushwhack a convoy in "Ambush Alley". And the trucks roll on that same road every day.

Supply.

Divisions march; tanks crash through the woods; a bomber soars and swoops, walloping enemy supply caches or burning an ambush force off the backs of the trapped friendlies.

Deep in a starless night, officers bend over plastic maps, huddled under naked light bulbs, orchestrating in red grease pencil all the movements of a military operation as a generator hums background music from somewhere outside the tent.

In a dusty wooden barracks, a private grows tired of chasing the mosquitos that always win anyway and sets his can of insect spray down to begin his nightly letter to his wife.

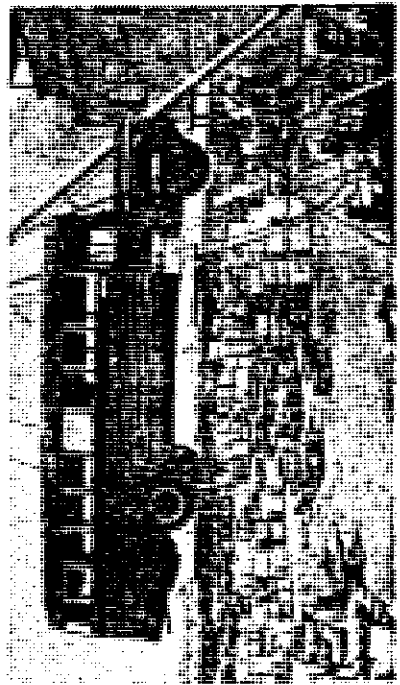
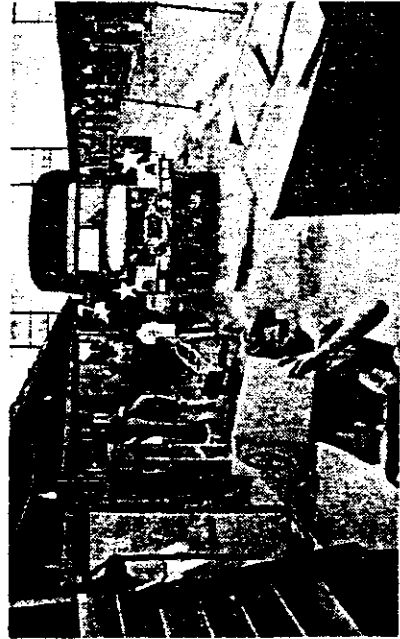
A guard on the camp perimeter shakes the raindrops from his poncho and reaches into a dry corner of his pack for a cold can of chopped chicken.

Steaks sizzle, tantalizing and succulent, to a crisp brown on the open grill of an officers' club dining room. Glasses and laughter tinkle from the bar. A moment's recreation, a breath of fun and relaxation in the dirty stench of war.

Victory may sometimes be "the beautiful, bright-colored flower", but war is often a bloody nightmare.

Supply has always got to be there. Always. No victory and no warfare is possible without it. It is the "stem", the artery, the road to the top and to success.

At dawn, every day, as sunlight seeps into the canyons just beyond Qui Nhon and the sea, the 8th Transportation Group truckers get ready to roll. The loads, stacked and bound on trailers during the dark, are checked one last time. There is a quiet briefing, the men pull on flak jackets and helmets and a hundred engines snort complainingly into life. In minutes, they're out on the blacktop, rolling in endless dirty brown caravans north and west. Red dust billows as the asphalt withers and dies, leaving only dirt and mud in its trace. All day, every day, they grind on, back and forth.



Cargo is boated, trucked and helicoptered to wherever it is needed in Vietnam—a never-ending job to keep units equipped.

The 8th Trans. Group is part—only a small part—of the Army's 1st Logistical Command: The ungainly, amorphous and staggeringly big management agency that has responsibility for everything in the supply chain—from ordering more "widgets" to putting them in the hands of the men who use them.

It is a job so big that it defies the imagination. There are 120,000 servicemen, U.S. civilians and Vietnamese and Allied employees engaged in it.

Virtually every supply item used by the American and some Allied forces here must be ordered, accounted for, unloaded, warehoused, classified, transported, accounted for again, transported again and issued. It's a virtual mountain of supplies that can be tabulated intelligibly only in figures of hundreds of millions of dollars (the exact amount is classified).

Most GIs think of supply in terms of an overweight sergeant who uses his practiced, fish-eyed stare of suspicion masterfully whenever a new-issue mess kit is mentioned or of a helicopter or Caribou churning into woods and paddies with pallets and boxes of ammo and C-rations in the middle of a battle. It is only partly that.

The rest is a complex story of movement and management, the management that takes place in unseen, obscure offices and the movement that takes place, every day, on Ambush Alley and a hundred worn trails like it.

The story of a supply part begins months before it is ever seen, sometimes even before it exists, in an office at Long Binh Post, near Saigon, that sits behind the doorplate "ICCV": Inventory Control Center, Vietnam.

The ICCV is something like an Army Sears & Roebuck. It trades in mail-order, but on a vastly sophisticated level. It must keep track of what parts and supplies are needed everywhere in Vietnam, how many of each there are in Vietnam, how many are on order, how many are being used, how many will be needed a day or a year from now, where all the items are on order or in stock in Vietnam, and when they will get where they're going.

When stocks run low, or a need for a new part is born, ICCV must find out what it is and order it—there are now somewhere between 150,000 and a quarter of a million separately identifiable types of items in use here, from eggs to tanks.

The Center then decides where to get the items. Tanks come from depots in the U.S., eggs come from local farmers here in Vietnam or from back home, and many supplies come from other overseas command depots throughout the world. Parts that do not exist must be described and ordered from manufacturers.

Once ordered, the goods are shipped: ICCV follows the whole operation, making sure tanks are loaded in ports in the U.S., or eggs are put on the truck in Dalat.

Most of the items, whether special, seldom-used orders like exotic radar tubes or daily-demand stock levels like rations, come into the country by ship. This is where the physical arm of the 1st Log takes over.

To be able to manage the huge input of supplies, 1st Log has broken the country into four semi-autonomous regions. These are called Area Support Commands. One is in Saigon, serving all of III and IV Corps (this is the largest—its geographical area is about one-third of the whole country), one at Qui Nhon, one at Cam Ranh Bay (both serve the II Corps highlands area), and one at Da Nang (this is the smallest—the Marines and Navy in I Corps handle most of their own supplies through Navy channels).

Each Area Command has a port. Saigon, the biggest, has three: The city port, the Army's new multi-million-dollar Newport and Cat Lai ammunition unloading point, eight miles downriver from the capital. There's also a smaller port at Vung Tau where cargo is transhipped from sea-going freighters to small lighters which haul goods by water into the Delta, and a commercially owned petroleum port and tank farm at Nha Be, also just south of Saigon. The Army buys most of its gas and oil from commercial firms here in Vietnam.

The biggest port operation is the 4th Transportation Command, at Saigon. It unloads 400,000 tons of cargo a month—60 per cent of everything used in Vietnam—at Newport, Cat Lai and Saigon.

With 11 deep-draft berths, plus smaller LST and barge ramps, constantly in use. The 4th uses 7,000 men each day, around the clock, to push cargo. Included in this small army are military and Vietnamese-contract stevedores (who work 12 hours a day in the 100-degree-plus holds), civilian truck drivers and hundreds of specialists, ranging from accounting experts to keep tabs on cargo and ship movement to specialists in maritime law, who make sure shipping agreements are met and contracts fulfilled.

The job of dragging cargo off the ships is complicated enough but the 4th is responsible for even more. It must deliver all cargo it takes off to the hands of the consignee, which means the Army depot or government agency that placed the original order. It does this with a fleet of 650 civilian and military contract trucks that shuttle in and out of the ports every day.

It must account for every crate, every item unloaded, through to delivery. With an operation this big, "management is the thing", as one 4th TC officer puts it.

The cost of unloading has dropped steadily from \$9.50 a ton in January to \$7.50 a ton last month and is still dropping. New computers are on order to handle the massive paperwork of accounting. The string of ships that used to wait at sea off Cape St. Jacques for a vacant berth for up to 40 days is gone now. Turn-around time today averages three days.

Complex security programs make sure the goods are not stolen in the confusion of the crowded ports. Gone are the days when theft losses, according to some sources, ran as high as 30 per cent of all the cargo coming in.

"There's no comparison to what it was like in the early days of the build-up," says one officer. "There was no management, no system then, nothing. The stuff was dragged off and tossed aside to make room for more. You could almost take what you wanted."

"Pilferage is something you have to live with," says Lt. Col. David J. Poel, provost marshal of the 4th TC. "We catch one, two incidents of petty theft out here every day—people hiding small items in their clothes, that sort of thing. But most major attempts at theft are one-shot jobs, done by amateurs."

Despite "very frequent attempts" to hijack trucks loaded with PX goods, often ranging in value to \$15,000, outside the port itself, Poel has never lost a truck—"We recover damn near everything. There's probably less pilferage here than in any Stateside port or terminal area."

Now, Col. "Mac" McCandless, 4th TC commander, is working on a system whereby major ordering units with open truck routes to Saigon can pick up their own stuff right at shipside, eliminating the costly hauling and handling procedures of the depots.

Depots, of course, are the next major stop.

The Army Depot, Long Binh, is the biggest in the world. Its round-the-clock operations mean bullets and beans to about half the entire U.S. Army force here. Over \$600 million worth of supplies and parts — from washers to 20-ton cranes — are on hand in the depot's yards at Long Binh Post, the central supply yard for III and IV Corps.

Other depots at Qui Nhon, Cam Ranh and Da Nang serve the other two corps.

A new centralization program will give the depot some 3.7 million square feet of storage pads and close to one and a quarter million square feet of warehouse. "Our depot will be competitive with the finest depots in the United States when it's finished in late Fiscal Year '69," says Col. Thomas B. Mahone Jr., depot commander. "Now we ship more than twice the tonnage of the next largest (military) depot."

The depot is the major breakdown point for Vietnam supply. It routes the massive tonnages that the ant-like streams of trucks pour into its yards and onto its shelves out to the units that use them. The system that keeps the goods flowing through evenly and must answer instantly any call for emergency supplies is as sophisticated and complex as the computers that are its backbone and heart.

The heart of the depot's operations is an air-conditioned room in the "Stock Control" building, in the middle of the depot's cluttered and seemingly chaotic stock yards. Its nerves reach to the farthest supply shelf, to the most exotic and obscure and trivial pieces of equip-

ment carried on the depot books. It brings the subtle fibre of "system" to what otherwise would be confusion.

The IBM 7010 and 1460 computers serviced and fed data and cared for by 155 military and civilian technicians, rattle and spin and hum to themselves 90 per cent of every hour, every day in the week. Not a single item moves anywhere in the two corps without their knowing about it.

As any GI who has ever eaten a "Meal, Combat, Individual" knows, every supply item the Army has is identified in numbers — stock numbers, part numbers, serial numbers, manual numbers. When shipments arrive in Vietnam and at the depot, these numbers are punched into cards and fed into the tape memory banks. The computer must know where the parts are put in the depot, where they came from, where they're going, how long they'll be in any given place.

When a requisition is filed, the computers identify the unit and the part, and it's the depot's job to match up the two. The computers digest all information they have on the part and spit out an issuing order. Some 3,000 of Mahone's "stockpickers" locate the needed goods on shelves or in yards and move them by forklift and truck to marshalling points, where trucks, either under contract to the depot or in military convoys from the units, pick them up regularly.

When emergencies arise, "need-now" requisition is rushed through the system with the highest priority, by human hands. The computer is informed of the action later, even though it has the capability of processing top-priority requests within four hours.

Even four hours sometimes is too much. For this reason, major units keep radio-equipped couriers stationed at the depot to hurry their combat emergencies through the stock control agencies. "I have sat here," says Maj. William Hannen, chief of the Stock Control Div., "and listened to a 1st Inf. Div. man right outside this office window talking to his outfit on the jeep radio, and knew what he was going to order before he was finished talking." The parts move, fast.

The 3,648 trucks of the 1st Log's transportation groups are the major movers from depots to forward areas and the 54 major base camps to which the convoys run from the four Support Area depot yards. That's 1.7 million miles of broken pavement, mud and dirt driven by lumbering tractor-trailers and gut-twisting deuce-and-a-halves every month. The 8th Transportation Group is part of this fantastic mileage network and "Ambush Alley" is only one of many gauntlets the Log truckers must high-bail through every day.

When the truckers reach the forward operating bases, the supplies are dragged and kicked off the trucks and logged over to the FSA, Forward Support Area.

Typical is the one at Bong Son, temporary home of the nomadic 173rd Airborne Brigade. Capt. Kenneth Allred,

commanding a 110-men FSA detachment, has one of the busiest jobs in the war business.

He's supply officer to the 6,200 men of the 173rd. He requisitions every part, every ration, every bullet needed by the brigade, and must see that they get to the field on time. He must keep a safe level (at least three days) of supply of everything on hand, and must know at every minute where it all is. He must fix and keep running all the equipment of half the brigade's units, he must haul and heat 25,000 gallons of fresh water every day for showers and laundry for the muddy men of the 173rd, and process the bodies of the men killed in action. All with just 110 men.

He must unload all the truck convoys, make sure each supply gets to its proper place in the dirt yards, make sure it gets out again on time for issue, account on paper for all of it, haul fuel and oil out to "customers" in tanker trucks, dispense ammunition and get it to the chopper pads when it's needed by a company fighting up in the hills and deadline it and retrograde it when the lot is too old or damaged and dangerously volatile.

He must receive and forward all requisitions — the stack of order cards on his desk includes one for a potato peeler, one for two truck transmissions, one for air mattresses, a dozen others. The stack changes every day. The job and the constant stream of "must have" orders never does.

"The pressure's tremendous," says Allred. "It's the smoothness and organization of the system that keeps it all flowing, gets the job done."

Allred knows what he's talking about.

It is, in the last analysis, the "smoothness and organization of the system" that keeps the 1st Log in business. The operation is vast and varied, there are nine separate directorates in Log headquarters: Ammunition, Engineering, Food, General Supply, Maintenance, Petroleum, Procurement, Retrograde and Disposal, and Transportation. The Log would die of a "heart attack" if its control agencies had to monitor and constantly put the pressure behind every part moving through its arteries — the output of work would call for a full-scale Pentagon of officers.

Instead, the size of the agency is made to work for it. Once an efficient system has been figured out for any mission, it is left to function by itself. Part of the 120,000 men working for Log are responsible for keeping it working, men like Allred. The sheer inertia of the supply chain in motion tends to keep itself running automatically.

Allred is, in effect, the commander of the 1st Log in miniature. Nearly everything he is responsible for on a local, manageable level, Maj. Gen. Joseph M. Heiser Jr., is responsible for, also—throughout all of Vietnam.

"We learned long ago," says Heiser, a balding, stocky logistical expert, "about concentrating on more critical

functions to prevent small fires from spreading into great fires—things going right take care of themselves."

And the things that go wrong? Heiser and his men are there, on top of them, sometimes personally. Heiser is constantly dashing in and out of the office, tracking problems all over the country. He expects the same from his field commanders.

This "management by exception" does not neglect the rest of the system: "Attempts to adapt the system to the demands of the day will result automatically in the constant refining and streamlining of the system." Which means that lessons learned in one area can be applied to others, and changes made in one part of the system speed up the whole operation, making it all work better.

But more important than the methods used are the revolutionary new ideas that are making supply in Vietnam "not only more effective, but more efficient," in the words of one Log officer.

What Vietnam has taught Heiser and his men is that the day of the sprawling military marshalling yard is over. "We don't talk in terms of tons of ammunition. We talk in terms of rounds, because that 105 battery out there is firing rounds, not tons," says Heiser.

Learning this has brought the realization that delivery, on time, where the items are needed, is more important than simple stockages, or the amount of goodies a depot can count on its shelves.

"We know now that the maximum amount of efficiency can be gained by the least amount of stuff you put on the ground and leave there. You've got to keep it moving."

This is the key to Log's operations. Nothing should sit for long, nothing that isn't needed should be allowed to gather dust. Everything should move. Divisions mustn't keep more than three to five days of supplies on hand in the field — why do that when truck convoys replenish the stocks daily? Even big depots, like the one at Long Binh, shouldn't carry more than 60 days' balance at a time. Supplies gathering dust mean lost money and effectiveness.

An example is radio batteries. Because of the temperatures in Vietnam, dry-cell batteries lose their charges and deteriorate rapidly if they're left sitting. "So we've started treating dry-cell batteries like lettuce. We put 'em in reef-

ers and move the doggone stuff to customers as they use 'em." The batteries, which used to be half-gone before they even reached Vietnam, are now being stocked no further in advance than 12 days.

Instead of ten tanks growing cobwebs, nine are being used and one is kept in emergency reserve. There's no "fat".

But to do this requires a degree of management that approaches science. It involves privates as much as generals. Enough, but not too much, must be kept constantly on hand, with a little extra to back up combat emergency calls that can't be planned for. Constant, hawk-eyed watching and accounting are needed to keep that "fine-tuned" level of just enough and not too much.

Two major tools of the operation are Intensive Management and the Closed-Loop System.

The two are inter-locking.

Closed Loop, the over-all plan, is a cyclical supply system by which heavy items such as tanks, trucks, cranes, boats, etc. are sent to Vietnam, issued, used to the point of exhaustion, returned to port, shipped back to the States, overhauled, and shipped back to Vietnam.

"There are at least 150 items today," Heiser points out, "including tanks, APCs and artillery pieces, that are not being replaced by all-new production in the (U.S.) plants because we have rebuilt items in the Closed Loop System moving fast enough to satisfy our demand."