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Aids in Montagnard Harvesting 'Magic Bus' Runs For Help

By SP4 Hans Lange

BAN ME THUOT — The "magic bus" slowly makes its way up and down the steep inclines near the hamlet of Due Lap in the Central Highlands.

On its westward run it is usually empty. But on its eastbound trip there are often as many as 15 Montagnard refugees aboard . . . along with everything they can carry. And that's a load even the magic bus struggles under.

The bus really has no magic, nor is it a bus. It's a standard Army three-quarter ton truck which First Lieutenant Harry F. Bernard of Pittsburgh, civil affairs team officer of the 2nd Brigade's 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry, has turned into a shuttle vehicle for 2,500 Montagnard refugees temporarily housed in Due Lap.

The refugees were forced to make their homes at Due Lap when driven out of their villages near the Cambodian border by retreating North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers after the heavy fighting at the Due Lap Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) Camp.

The "Cacti Blue" civil affairs team has been aiding them since they began arriving. Medical aid, food, even shelter has been provided. And now the truck.

Once the refugees were settled and assured of their safety, they began heading back to their destroyed villages every day to harvest crops.

It meant about a four-mile walk twice a day, once carrying only their tools, once with their baskets heavily-laden with food, plus anything else salvageable.

Lieutenant Bernard couldn't put the truck and his men at the disposal of the refugees all day. There was still other vital civil affairs work to be carried out. But he was able to use the truck for a few hours each afternoon when the Montagnards returned from their fields.

"At first, they were skeptical," says driver Private Hardy D. Eason of Waterbury, Conn., "but they soon realized riding that distance was better than walking it, especially with the load they were carrying on their backs."

"We finally convinced them," says Private First Class William E. Carlson of Lander, Wyo., the interpreter for the Cacti Blue civil affairs team.

"These people are proud," he continued, "and change is something they do not really accept. Once they saw that we were helping them accomplish what they were doing, they accepted us and the truck. That's when they started calling it the magic bus."

"They have really grown accustomed to us," adds Private Eason. "You should see them rush up to us when we pull into view. I don't know how they can carry so much stuff and still be able to run, even the women. When they get to the truck, Bill (PFC Carlson) and I give them a hand getting aboard and then we head to Due Lap and their temporary homes."

The truck makes as many as 15 trips a day, shuttling about 200 Montagnards from their fields to the three main refugee centers in Due Lap.

And it will continue until the refugees are able to rebuild their villages, which is the next project for the Cacti Blue civil affairs team.