



D/16TH ARMOR VETERAN

From Bone Yard to Honored Display

MANY OF YOU are familiar with the National Infantry Museum at Fort Benning and the beautiful 173rd Airborne Brigade Monument that is adjacent to it. What you are unlikely to be aware of, unless you have visited the NIM in recent months, is that a Herd “veteran” of combat in Vietnam went on display there in early December. This “veteran” is a key component of a new display by the National Armor and Cavalry Museum, which is temporarily using space in the NIM until its own building is completed nearby. The Armor/Cavalry display presents the history of US Army armor through a series of dioramas, featuring a French tank from World War One, a Stuart light tank from World War Two, and a Vietnam era M-113 armored personnel carrier that was badly damaged by enemy action. The M-113 APC, or “track” as they were sometimes called, belonged to Company D (Airborne), 16th Armor, 173rd Airborne Brigade!



(All photos on this spread) The new Armor/Cav Display at the NIM, “Herd Veteran.”

IDENTIFYING AND RESTORING THE D/16TH ARMOR VETERAN

The Army’s Armor Restoration Center, part of the Armor School which moved to Fort Benning from Fort Knox a few years ago, played the central role in building the display. The two tanks and the M-113 APC were selected from its inventory of American and foreign armored vehicles. The Center’s mission was to create a display in which the three vehicles would be restored as accurately as possible to what they looked like when on active service.

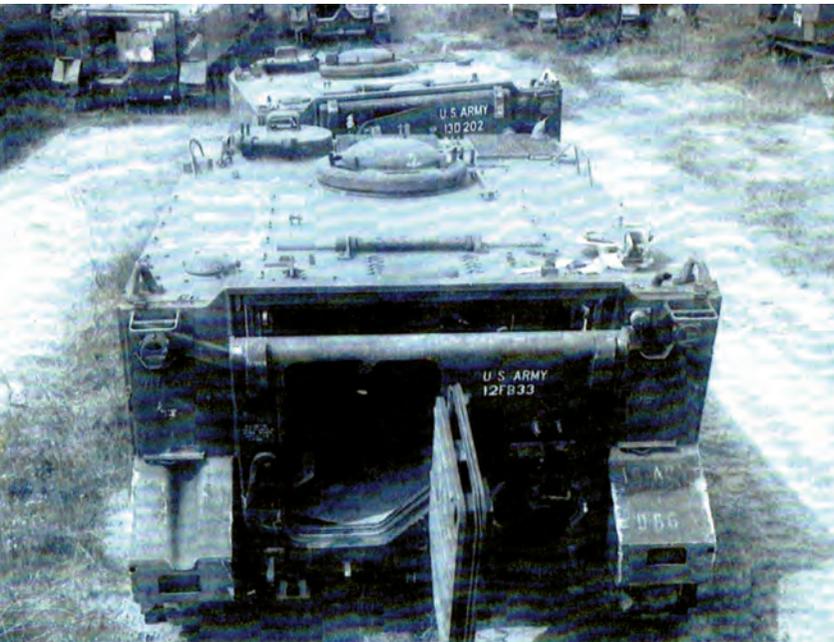
Getting the history “right” for the M-113, however, had a surprising twist according to the Center’s Director, Len Dyer. Mr. Dyer said this particular M-113 was displayed for a number of years at Ft. Knox with 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment markings. When the Center’s staff researched its history, they learned that it had belonged instead to D/16th Armor. The key to their discovery was the vehicle’s serial number, 12FB33. The staff found

1971 photos of 12FB33 parked in an armor graveyard in the US along with many other damaged M-113s. Its markings in the photo indicated the APC had belonged to D/16th Armor, 173rd Airborne Brigade. Moreover, it was marked with *D-66* indicating it had been a D/16th Armor company commander’s track.

M-113 Armored Personnel Carrier
 This M-113 is a combat veteran used by Company D, 16th Armor in Vietnam. This company was attached to the 173rd Airborne Brigade, with service in Vietnam from 1965 to 1969. The company was originally equipped with M-56 SPAT's and M-113's. This diorama is based on photographs taken by 16th Armor tankers during the Vietnam War.

The next task was to learn more about 12FB33. The Center’s staff contacted a group of D/16th veterans who responded with photos and other information that helped complete 12FB33’s history. Using documents and the vets’ memories, the Center concluded 12FB33 was the D/16th company commander’s track that was damaged by enemy action on 28 August 1966 during Operation Toledo in the vicinity of Xuan Loc. D/16th’s *Historical Report for 1 January 1966—31 December 1966 reported*

While on a roadrunner/ search and destroy mission of Rte #2 and the area around Ap Cu Be, the HQ APC was



1971 Photo of D/16th M-113 in an Armor Boneyard



D/16th Armor on the Move in June 1966



D/16th Armor Motor Platoon Conducting a Fire Mission

damaged beyond repair at 0925hrs, 28 Aug 66, on the highway at YS458898.

The report further stated the driver was slightly wounded and the only casualty. Captain John Waters was the company commander at the time this D-66 was damaged.

With this information, the Center staff and D/16th veterans concentrated on accurately depicting a D/16th Armor APC as it would have looked and operated in the summer of 1966, including weapons and ammo, other equipment, personnel and uniforms, markings on the track, etc. Over several months, the vets provided comments and suggestions as the APC was restored and the display was constructed.

COMPANY D (AIRBORNE), 16TH ARMOR

In developing the Vietnam portion of the display, the Armor Restoration Center was also interested in placing 12FB33's operational experience in the context of D/16th Armor's history. This effort proved to be an important element in restoring 12FB33 accurately because D/16th changed considerably over its lifetime. It was an original component of the 173rd Airborne Brigade when it formed on Okinawa in 1963. The company's mission was to provide the Brigade with an organic anti-tank capability. To perform this function, D/16th deployed three line platoons, each equipped with five M-56 Scorpion/Self-Propelled Anti-Tank Systems (SPATS). The SPATS had a 90mm gun and four-man crew, and could be airdropped. The company reported directly to the Brigade Commander. It was the only independent armor company in the Army.

D/16th deployed with the rest of the 173rd to Vietnam in May 65, becoming the first US Army armor unit in RVN. In addition to the challenges of deploying into a combat zone faced by all 173rd units, D/16th's officers and men had to cope at the same time with significant changes in the company's structure, equipment, and missions. The first big change came while the company was already in "lock down" waiting to load its SPATS on ships for the trip to Vietnam when two platoons were directed to replace their SPATS with M-113APCs armed with a 50 caliber machine gun. The crews spent much of their first weeks in country learning how to operate their M-113s and training to use them in tactical operations.

The decision to replace most of the SPATS with M-113s just as the unit was departing Okinawa was probably based on lessons learned from ARVN units that had been operating with M-113s for several years. It also reflected a shift in the company's basic function—in Vietnam it would not be focused on anti-tank operations because the enemy did not have armor. Search and destroy, road clearing, convoy and firebase security, and mechanized infantry type operations became D/16th's main activities. On these missions, the M-113s would often carry 173rd infantry, cavalry, and engineers, as well as ARVN units. The M-113s were better suited for these roles than the SPATS.

The second significant change came almost immediately after the company arrived in Vietnam when a fourth line platoon was added equipped with 4.2 mortars mounted in a specially configured version of the M-113, the M-104 mortar carrier. The mortar platoon, which was manned by infantry troopers, gave D/16th an indirect fire support mission.

A third mission change also occurred shortly after D/16th arrived in country. Especially during the years '65 - '67, including the time 12FB33 was in the unit, it was tasked at times to leave its armored vehicles in base camp and take the field either as a small infantry company or as small platoon sized elements.

Over time the company changed considerably from this original



D/16th Armor M-113 crossing the Song Ba River near Tuy Hoa. Brigade Infantry aboard.

mix of two M-113 APC platoons with one 50 cal machine gun per vehicle, a mortar platoon, and a SPAT platoon. The SPAT platoon was reequipped with M-113s in August 1966, about the time 12FB33 was damaged. The mortar platoon was deactivated in early 1967 after which D/16th deployed three line platoons each equipped with five M-113s for the rest of its tour. In late '68 the company completed the process of standardizing with three machine guns per track—the 50 and two M-60s mounted on the sides. After several years, the machine gun array varied considerably from APC to APC as the company added whatever machine guns could be obtained to its arsenal. Because 12FB33 was hit in Aug '66, it probably had only the one 50 cal machine gun and that is how it is displayed.

D/16th participated in nearly all 173rd operations from its deployment to its deactivation in late 1969. It could bring a great deal of firepower to a fight and the enemy learned to oppose it primarily with mines, ambushes, indirect fire, etc., and generally to avoid standup fights. D/16th's largest battle took place on 4 March 68 at North Tuy Hoa, when it was called into action after a large enemy force attacked an ARVN compound and then prepared strong fighting positions in three adjacent villages. D/16th, with air and artillery support, almost completely destroyed the two enemy battalions, one VC and one NVA. Eight D/16th paratroopers

were killed and another 20 or so wounded. Captain Robert Helmick, D/16th company commander, was awarded the DSC, and many other awards for valor were earned by D/16th soldiers.

The Army staff officially deactivated D/16th Armor in October '68 for doctrinal reasons, but as a testimony to the company's value the 173rd leadership kept D/16th together and in the field. The Brigade did not change the company's name until April 1969, when it was renamed the 173rd Provisional Tank Company

(sometimes Tuy Hoa Armor Company). The company remained intact until October 1969 when the men and equipment all transferred to the 173rd's E Troop, 17th Cavalry, and continued the fight until the 173rd returned to the US.

REUNION

The Armor School invited the D/16th veterans to be guests at the Grand Opening of the National Armor and Cavalry Museum display in late January and the group planned a reunion for that time. Unfortunately, a snow and ice storm all but paralyzed the region and caused postponement of the event. The D/16th veterans pressed ahead, nevertheless, with their first ever reunion, although their numbers were reduced somewhat because of travel disruptions. The reunion was superbly assisted by the Armor School and the Ft. Benning Public Affairs Office. The reunion highlight was a ceremony at the 173rd memorial, including a "reading of the names" of D/16th's killed in action. Other highlights included watching a basic airborne class make qualifying jumps at Fryar Field and a visit to the Armor Restoration Center where some drove and rode an M-113 for the first time in over 45 years! The D/16th veterans gave heartfelt thanks to the Center's Director, staff, and volunteers for going the extra mile and getting the story of 12FB33 "right." We hope any of you visiting the National Infantry Museum will take the time to see this Herd "veteran" in the National Armor and Cavalry Museum Gallery.



D/16th Armor Vets at 173rd Memorial during January 2014 Reunion