

COMPANY D (AIRBORNE)
16TH ARMOR
173RD AIRBORNE BRIGADE

1. **1963 FORMATION ON OKINAWA:** D/16th Armor was an original component of the 173rd Airborne Brigade when the Brigade was formed on Okinawa. It provided an organic anti-tank capability to the otherwise very light airborne brigade structure and some early documents identify it as Company D (Anti-Tank), 16th Armor. For nearly two years, until its deployment to Vietnam, the company had three line platoons equipped with the M-56 Scorpion/Self-Propelled Anti-Tank System (SPATS). The SPATS were equipped with a 90mm gun, had a 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.

2. **DEPLOYMENT TO VIETNAM IN 1965/EVOLUTION OF VEHICLES:**

According to the Armor School historian, when D/16th deployed to RVN along with the rest of the Brigade in May 65 it was the first US Army armor unit in country. (The Marines had taken some armor in with them a bit earlier.) A number of changes came about at roughly the same time as the deployment. As the company was on “lock-down” preparing to depart Okinawa, two of its line platoons turned in their SPATS for M-113 Armored Personnel Carriers armed with a 50 cal machine gun. The Armor School historian speculates that the M-113s were sent to the company because the M-113 had been deployed with some effectiveness by the ARVN for several years. In addition, doubts about the capability of the SPATS in the Vietnam environment and the lack of an armor threat may also have played roles.

-- Another key change came almost immediately after the company arrived in Vietnam with the creation of a fourth line platoon equipped with 4.2 mortars mounted in M-113s. The mortar platoon was originally manned by members of the Brigade’s Davy Crocket (tactical nuclear weapon launcher) platoon, who were available because the Davy Crocket was not deployed to Vietnam. The mortar platoon often operated with Brigade infantry units to provide additional indirect fire support. It also deployed at times as a dismounted infantry unit.

--D/16th’s TO&E was further modified over time. The remaining SPAT platoon was reequipped with M-113s in late 66 and the mortar platoon was deactivated in early 1967. The SPATS had proven hard to maintain in the Vietnam environment and were largely used for base security in their final months in the company. From early 1967 on, D/16th had three line platoons equipped with M-113s or eventually, its diesel version, the M-113A1. It also standardized in late 68 with three machine guns per track –the 50 and 2 M-60s mounted on the sides after several years during which the machine gun array varied considerably from APC to APC.

3. **OPERATIONS IN VIETNAM:** D/16TH participated in nearly all 173rd operations from its deployment to its deactivation in late 1969. The company conducted search and destroy missions, road and firebase security, operations with other 173rd units, including infantry, cavalry, and engineers, and later often with Vietnamese infantry units. It sometimes conducted dismounted infantry ops on its own. This unit 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. Twenty-five D/16th paratroopers were killed in action and many more were wounded.

-- 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 had attacked an ARVN compound and dug-in. The three D/16th line platoons, with air and artillery support, almost completely destroyed two enemy battalions during the course of the fight, one VC and one NVA. Eight D/16th paratroopers were killed and another 20 or so wounded. The company commander that day, Captain Robert Helmick, was awarded the DSC, and many other awards for valor were earned by D/16th soldiers.

4. **DEACTIVATION:** The Army staff officially deactivated D/16th Armor in October '68. As a sign of the company's value, however, the Brigade leadership ignored the deactivation for a year, wanting to keep the capability D/16th delivered. The Brigade did not officially change the company's name until April 1969, when it became the 173rd Provisional Tank Company (sometimes Tuy Hoa Armor Company). The company remained intact and in the field until October 1969 when the men and equipment transferred to the 173rd Airborne Brigade's cavalry unit, E Troop/2nd/17th Cavalry and continued the fight.