

ENHANCED COMBAT SUPPORT DURING THE VIETNAM WAR (26 SEPTEMBER 1966–25 JULY 1970)

By Mr. Ronney Z. Miller

During the Vietnam War, the primary functions and duties of the U.S. Army Military Police Corps significantly expanded. For the first time in branch history, a brigade level command was deployed to an active combat theater of operations. The 18th Military Police Brigade, which was activated on 14 June 1966 at Fort Meade, Maryland, became operational in Vietnam on 26 September 1966; that same day, it assumed command and control over all nondivision U.S. military police units in the Republic of Vietnam.

The 18th Military Police Brigade was comprised of three major subordinate commands—the 16th Military Police Group, the 89th Military Police Group, and the 8th Military Police Group (Criminal Investigation)—and more than 5,000 personnel. A combined seven military police battalions were assigned to the three military police groups; the battalions of the 16th and 89th Military Police Groups contained a mixture of military police and infantry companies. For the remainder of the war, the 18th Military Police Brigade and its subordinate units provided direct tactical and logistical support to commanders throughout the Republic of Vietnam.

In November 1966, during the introduction to Operation Deckhouse V, military police units conducted convoy escort and traffic control for elements of the II Field Forces. In January 1967, the 18th Military Police Brigade directly supported the 173d Airborne Brigade during Operation Cedar Falls; and afterward, at the request of the 173d Airborne Brigade, a platoon from the 66th Military Police Company, 93d Military Police Battalion, was assigned to Landing Zone Uplift—with one caveat: All members of the military police platoon would be required to cross-train as artillery observers. In February 1967, the 18th Military Police Brigade supported the 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions during Operation Junction City and the 1st Cavalry Division during the latter phase of Operation Thayer II. In April 1967, military police units supported Task Force Oregon with the newly arrived Americal Division. In June 1967, the 18th Military Police Brigade supported the 1st Infantry Division during Operation Billings; in July 1967, it participated in Operation Paddington with the 9th Infantry Division and the 1st Australian Task Force; and from 21 July to 14 September 1967, it participated in Operation Emporia with the 9th Infantry Division and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. All of these combat support missions were conducted within the first 10 months of the arrival of the 18th Military Police Brigade in Vietnam.¹

On 20 October 1967, the 18th Military Police Brigade was assigned supervisory oversight of a 22-square-mile tactical area of responsibility (TAOR), marking the first time that a military police unit had been assigned a TAOR in a combat zone. The mission of the 18th Military Police Brigade involved locating and destroying Viet Cong and North Vietnamese army forces, enhancing the security of the Long Binh Post and Bien Hoa Air Base, and aiding South Vietnamese forces in upgrading the outposts occupied by regional forces/popular forces in the TAOR. Company B, 720th Military Police Battalion (Bushwhackers)—which was comprised of a headquarters platoon; three ambush platoons; a small, rigid-hulled patrol boat, river (PBR) unit; and a 12-man, 81-millimeter mortar section—was designated to conduct the main effort. Along with the standard issue of M-16 rifles and .45-caliber pistols, Company B was equipped with extra M-60 machine guns, M-79 grenade launchers, and M-72 light antitank weapons. The “Bushwhackers” of Company B represented the first U.S. Army military police unit to engage in a sustained infantry counterinsurgency mission; the unique service was conducted under the codename “Operation Stabilize.”

During Operation Stabilize, Company B conducted infantry type missions, including combat patrols, search-and-destroy operations, and the defense of local villages. Military police successfully utilized military working dogs on a large scale throughout the Vietnam War, and the Bushwhackers were often reinforced with teams from the 212th Military Police Company (Sentry Dog). The entire western and southern borders of the TAOR assigned to the 18th Military Police Brigade were impounded by a freshwater tidal basin—and rivers served as the principal network that the Viet Cong used to transport men and materials. Consequently, in early 1968, the U.S. Army converted the 458th Transportation Company (Light, Amphibious Resupply, Cargo) into a PBR company. Headquartered at Pershing Field, near Ton Son Nhut Air Base, Saigon, the 458th Transportation Company (PBR) was placed under the operational command and control of the 18th Military Police Brigade. The crews of the 458th consisted of two U.S. Army mariners (coxswain and engineman) and two military policemen who served as gunners. An assigned local national, who served as an interpreter, was also onboard.

All U.S. Army Transportation Corps PBR mariners were volunteers, and they participated in specialized training with the U.S. Navy on Mare Island, California. In contrast,

the Bushwhackers relied exclusively on on-the-job training in individual combat skills, patrolling techniques, combat intelligence, scouting, and tracking, as experience proved to be the best teacher for those skills.²

The primary 458th Transportation Company (PBR) mission consisted of policing the Dong Nai, Bien Go, and Buong Rivers and their many backwater tributaries. The company was specifically tasked with performing river security for military and civilian traffic, guarding the various supply barges that transported ammunition and fuel, and checking civilian vessels for contraband and infiltrators. And like their road-bound counterparts in military police gun jeeps, the PBRs responded to any other contingencies that arose on the (brown-water) “highways” within the assigned TAOR.

Sergeant Richard Walker of Company A, 720th Military Police Battalion, was responsible for forming and supervising the first PBR unit attached to the 720th; it was comprised of volunteers from all three organic companies assigned to the 720th. That PBR unit provided firepower and logistical support to battalion tactical operations and day/night transport and logistical support for the ambush platoons of Company B. It also had a small fleet of Boston Whaler “Skimmers.” Driven by a 25-horsepower outboard motor, these boats could “skim” along the top of the water at high speeds and operate in areas of restricted mobility. For 9 months, Companies A and C, 720th Military Police Battalion, had participated in combat patrols as part of Operation Stabilize; however, on 26 June 1968, those two companies were detailed to other commitments. (The previous year, Company C had become the first unit to field the V-100 Cadillac Gage Commando—a vehicle that had been specifically engineered as an armed convoy escort vehicle for the U.S. military police during the Vietnam War—and convoy escort was one of the most hazardous missions conducted by military police units during the Vietnam War.) In concert with the Tet Offensive of 1968, Operation Stabilize had an enduring impact on the history of the Military Police Branch.

On 14 October 1968, the Military Police Corps was designated as an arm and a service (permanent branch) and was officially redesignated from a combat service support branch to a combat support branch—an initiative that was justified by the battlefield performance of military police units in Vietnam. The redesignation reflected reality and provided long-overdue formal recognition of the types of missions military police have consistently performed since the Revolutionary War. For example, during the Tet Offensive of 1968, military police units fought significant battles in several major cities in South Vietnam. And during the Battle of Saigon, the 716th Military Police Battalion and its attached units emerged as the first line of defense in the most intense battle that military police units have ever fought. Employing small-unit infantry tactics, military police units fought block-to-block, street-to-street, house-to-house, and floor-to-floor—effectively disrupting the enemy’s battle rhythm and providing the margin necessary for infantry and armor units to arrive on the scene.³

During Operation Stabilize, the Bushwhackers frequently engaged the enemy in direct combat. On one such occasion (23 February 1969), North Vietnamese regular forces and Viet Cong insurgents initiated a coordinated series of 125 sapper attacks and 400 artillery and/or rocket bombardments against military targets across South Vietnam. Labeled as “Tet 1969,” the attacks of this campaign were concentrated against military installations instead of urban areas. Long Binh Post, Vietnam’s largest U.S. logistical base, was an obvious target. In anticipation of an impending attack, an 11-man patrol (Ambush and Reconnaissance Team 76) was deployed outside the southern perimeter of Long Binh. Upon occupying Hill 15, Staff Sergeant Donald J. Meador (Company B, 720th Military Police Battalion) observed flashes from mortars and rockets launched against the post. He immediately called for and adjusted accurate indirect fire on enemy positions, eliminating the threat. Soon thereafter, his small patrol intercepted a large, hostile force. Meador fearlessly exposed himself to small-arms and automatic-weapons fire while he adjusted artillery and mortar fire and called for close air support. He was ably assisted by Corporal Thomas Watson. When their position was on the verge of being overrun, the patrol was ordered to withdraw. As his comrades retreated, Watson remained behind to cover them with machine gun fire and hand grenades, while Meador continued to direct air strikes and artillery fire. At least 50 enemy fighters were killed, and their attack faltered. The ambush and reconnaissance team was credited with breaking the thrust of the attack on the southern perimeter of Long Binh Post. As a result of their efforts at Long Binh Post, Staff Sergeant Meador was subsequently awarded the Silver Star Medal (for gallantry in action) and Corporal Watson was awarded the Bronze Star Medal (for battlefield valor).

Meanwhile, in another sector of the perimeter, a second patrol was pinned down on Hill 23 and the point man was wounded. Specialist Fourth Class Fred H. Pazmino maneuvered against an enemy machine gun position and, although wounded, destroyed it with rifle fire and grenades. He then volunteered to rescue the stricken point man and, along with another Soldier, successfully completed the mission. Shortly thereafter, the enemy broke contact. For his heroic actions, Specialist Fourth Class Pazmino was awarded the Silver Star Medal.⁴

On 25 July 1970, the 720th Military Police Battalion relinquished ownership of its TAOR to the 25th Infantry Division. From 20 October 1967 to 25 July 1970, the Bushwhackers earned 24 Purple Heart Medals (13 of which were awarded posthumously); two military policemen were awarded the Silver Star Medal, and several others were awarded Bronze Star Medals. Despite the constant peril and close combat they experienced during Operation Stabilize, because the Bushwhackers did not hold Military Occupational Specialty 11B—Infantry, they were ineligible for the Combat Infantryman Badge. For decades, these military police “infantrymen” received scant recognition for their significant contributions during their service

in Vietnam. However, that oversight was abruptly rectified on 24 July 2023. On that day, during a ceremony held at Capitol Hill, Washington, D.C., veterans of Company B, 720th Military Police Battalion, were retroactively awarded Bronze Star Medals. These medals were also awarded to the military working dog handlers of the 212th Military Police Company. The event officially acknowledged the combat role performed by the Bushwhackers and their attached military working dog handlers and clearly honored who they were and what they did—and defined how they should be remembered.⁵



Endnotes:

¹Thomas F. Guidera, “A Report on the 18th Brigade’s First Six Months in Vietnam,” *Military Police Journal*, July 1967.

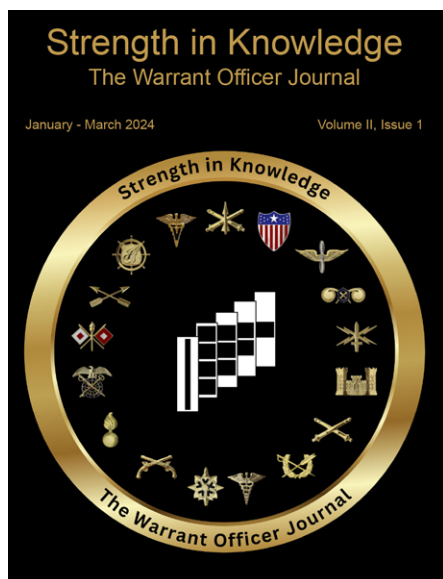
²*History of the 720th Military Police Battalion*, 720th Military Police Battalion, U.S. Department of the Army, 7 April 1970.

³Brent L. Richens and Russell B. Shor, “18th Military Police Brigade: Three Years in Vietnam,” *Military Police Journal*, September 1969.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Svetlana Shkolnikova, “Out of the Shadows: Military Police From Vietnam Receive Long-Awaited Awards,” *Stars and Stripes*, 25 July 2023.

Mr. Miller is the historian for the U.S. Army Military Police School, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.



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