

A Soldier's Story
Photos by Barry DeVita
Text by Charles Kelley
“The Beginning”

Reactivation and displacement of the 2nd Battalion 94th Artillery Regiment to Vietnam
(January 6 1966 to October 21 1966)



Barry DeVita (then LT US Army Artillery)



GENERAL LEROY ELTINGE (USNS)

(The last combat use of the General Leroy Eltinge (USNS) had been during the Inchon, Korea Invasion.)



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BATTALION MEMBERS TAKING IN THE LAST VIEW OF HOME

Account by one of the enlisted men (lost name) with 2/94th at Sill regarding his arrival at Sill and embarkation : “Seven of us graduated AIT as 45B20’s, Small Arms Repairmen. This was at the time of the airline strikes so we had to ride the train to Fort Sill. We really stopped at Oklahoma City and then took the bus to Fort Sill.

When we got to Sill, we found out that we were assigned to an artillery Battalion that was forming up to go to Nam. As soon as we got over to the 2/94th they gave us our gear, set us up with a rack, and then told us if we wanted leave we had better go now or we would not have time before we shipped out.

When I got back I helped load the trucks on the rail cars for shipping.

After all the trucks were gone, we made sure all our gear was straight and packed, and three days later we boarded a troop train for the coast. I spent three or four of the most boring days of my life. The train passed through my town of Van Nuys, and I could almost see my house, I was so close.

The next day, the train stopped on the dock. We got our gear, got off the train in single file, marched over to the ship, and walked up the gang plank.

The Leroy E. Eltinge was a troop transport from WW1 that had been converted from a coal burner to a fuel oil burner. It had so many leaks that there was the smell of oil all over the place, and the smell was enough to make you sick.

Speaking of sick there was one guy in my Battery that got sick going up the gangplank and was sick the whole time till we got to Nam.

After we were on the ship for thirty days they knew we were going nuts, so we stopped for the afternoon in Okinawa for a picnic. We then got back on that damn boat for another five more days. We docked at Da Nang Harbor, got off the ship, got on buses, and were taken to the airport where we picked up the guns and trucks. I do not remember any other artillery group on the ship.

We had lots of time to talk to everyone on board and I cannot remember any other units. I do remember that there were about 2500 men on the ship, but I do not know how many men are in a reinforced Battalion. I heard that after we got off the ship it went down to Saigon, and picked up 4000 ROK Tiger troops. I know that was tight, because 2500 artillerymen were sitting all over each other when we were on that boat.

As I was saying, we were bused to the airport to get the 175's and the trucks. The 1st of the 40th went their separate way because we never saw them again, at least I never did. We mounted up and then we convoyed up Route One to Dong Ha.

When we were still at Fort Sill we had put these large bows with canvas over them on the SP bodies. The idea was that Charlie was not going to be able to tell that this was a 175 artillery piece, but no one seemed to think about the front half of a forty three foot tube sticking out the front of the canvas with CONG KILLER written on the end of the tube.

This was of course Army thinking?

When we got to Dong Ha we made a left turn and went the 18 Kilometers to Camp JJ Carroll. The Marines were real happy to see us, because it gave Charlie more things to shoot at.

I talked to some of the guys that were in the advance party and they told me that they waited at Fort Sill for about 25 days and then they got to fly over on an airplane, and up until yesterday I had never heard anything about a ship called the Purdue Victory."

Account by one of the first enlisted (lost name) with C Battery: "C Battery had a very long and tall black guy by the name of Sam P. Cothran. Sam started puking his guts out while standing on the pier just listening to the water lapping against the pilings. He did not stop until we reached Vietnam. What I do remember was the ship's paper. Lieutenant Barry DeVita was in charge of it and named it the Albatross. We also got lots of canned figs, large gobs of very sweet Golden Slim. Also little pyramid shaped cartons of sterilized milk, tasted like sour milk. It is no wonder the decks were covered with Puke."

Account by Lieutenant DeVita referenced in the above account: "The USNS General Leroy Eltinge was 0 for 4 in previous attempts to cross the Pacific, before it was pressed into service for 2/94th (and 1/40th). That is why, as the designated "Editor of the Ship's Newspaper", providing daily news to the troops, I

originally chose "The Eltinge Epitaph" (liked the alliteration and thought it appropriate to both the Eltinge's record and our mission) for the name of the paper. However, someone (forget who) higher up the 2/94th chain of command said, "NO"! Thus, I chose "The Eltinge Albatross", (for the obvious Ancient Mariner reference, which nobody in the Army hierarchy seemed to note or at least object to), although it did NOT please the ship's captain one little bit . . . ! (He had NO sense of humor; and noted his ongoing displeasure daily . . .)

On a more mundane matter, it was particularly galling that every day the troops had to wind their way down 4 or 5 flights of stairs to eat gruel (ox tail) and drink swill (Tang), while the officers dined on far finer cuts of meat, fresh shrimp, etc., while drinking fresh milk, concentrated OJ, etc. . . . ; but the real pissing point was that the doorway to the officers' mess was open to the stairwell that the troops had to descend, so that they had to endure an unnecessary indignity daily.

Made me wonder how the Navy did not have mutinies with regularity . . . (?)”

Comment by chronicler: With all the seasick guys and the record of this, I hate to call it a ship. It is a wonder you guys made it at all much less then have to crawl on the smaller boats to Dong Ha and have enough stuff left to head up to Carroll. Sure glad I missed this party! I am sure I would have been sick. I got a little woozy just reading about it.

Account by Lieutenant Greg Smith with C Battery: “Regarding the seasickness on the way over - the officers had cabins on the main deck of the Eltinge and ate in a formal dining room with civilian waiters etc. All I could do for the first week was grab some crackers and an orange to suck on and had to pass up all the great food for fear of not being able to keep it down.

The enlisted men were housed "below", where there were no windows to get a fix on the horizon, slept in racks with not much vertical space between each and ate in a cafeteria style setting. When the enlisted men went "on deck", they went to the deck above the main deck.

If you were on the main deck during the first week the one thing you did NOT want to do was to go out on deck by the rail, because there was pretty much a steady rain of vomit coming down over the second deck rail.

It seemed like after finally going through the vomiting stage, everyone was immune to further seasickness, because we actually went through a pretty bad storm, with footlockers sliding across the rooms, etc., a few days before getting to Okinawa and I was not aware of much sickness then.

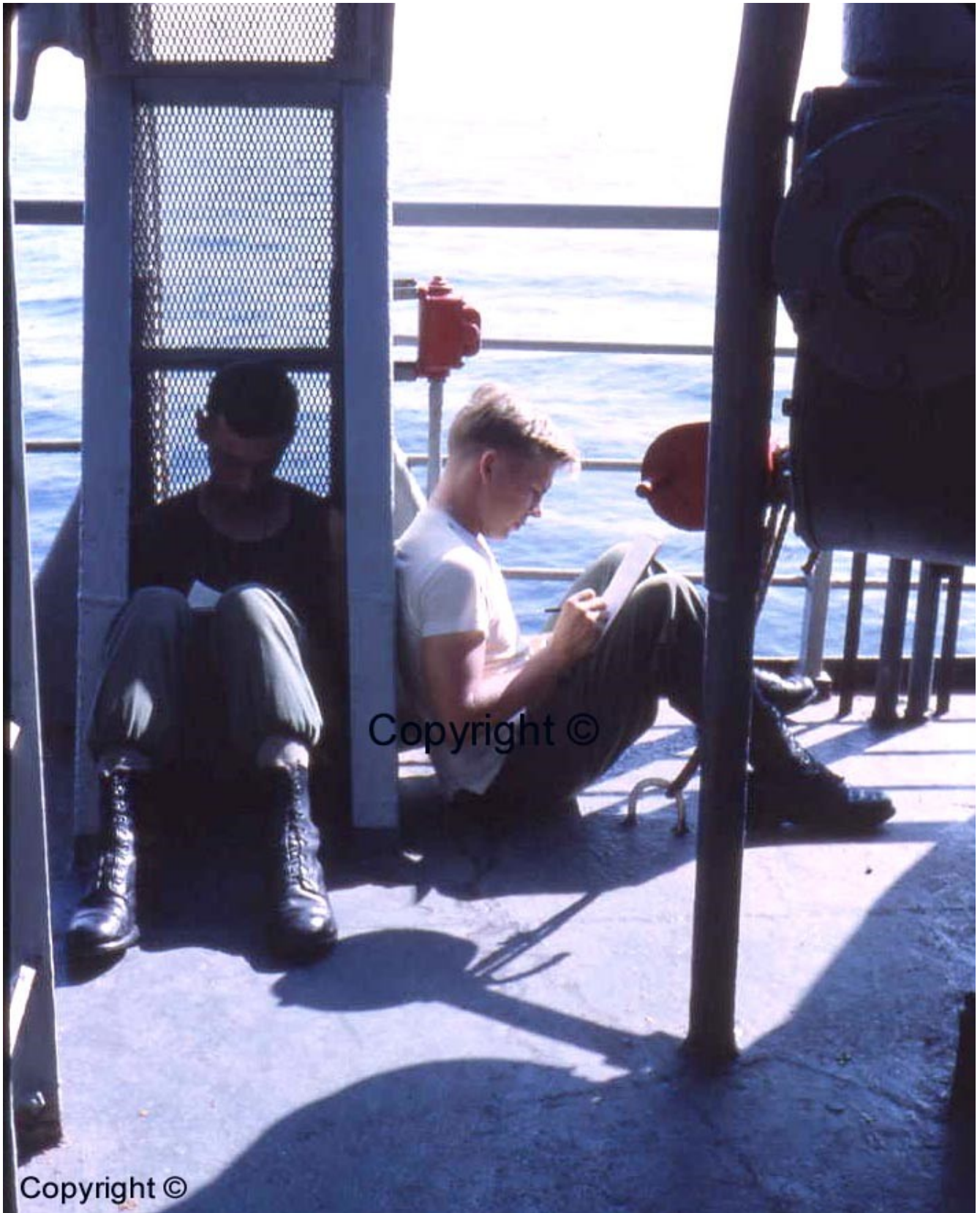
Specialist Jim Fisher and Specialist John Green were my main two guys in FDC, although neither one originally had a FDC MOS. I pulled them off trucks at Sill and had them transferred to FDC because of their GI and math scores in their personnel files. I trained them on the way over. We'd sit up on one of the Eltinge decks with firing tables, doing met messages, day after day.”

The ocean voyage must have seemed a well-deserved vacation to the men, with the exception of some being seasick, who had worked hard and fast to launch their new fighting force. The pace of work and necessity for cooperation throughout the Battalion created a pride and unity few organizations have duplicated. Pride in their swift and sizable accomplishment over the period of just a few months, and thoughts of the larger tasks for which they were headed, accompanied them across the Pacific.

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BATTALION MEMBERS STAYING IN SHAPE



A QUIET PLACE TO WRITE HOME AND PERHAPS REFLECT ON THE UPCOMING CHALLENGES

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BATTALION MEMBERS ENJOYING THE CRUISE???
(Just think civilians had to pay for this!)



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BATTALION MEMBER DREAMING OF HOME OR WHAT IS TO BE?

The 2/94th was accompanied by the 1st Battalion 40th Artillery, a 105mm SP outfit, and an Army Finance outfit (not sure of the size). All on the ship were to land in and unload in the Saigon area. The 2/94th was the last scheduled off the ship so it's equipment was loaded first.

Comment by chronicler: It is my guess the finance unit was the 192nd Finance Center. This unit would be in the Da Nang area to support the Army units that were now being sent to the Marine Controlled I Corps Theatre. As I arrived in 67 they were the finance center for that area.

On the ship, they had to learn the new fire mission procedure as everything changed from "on the way, over" to "shot, over" along with some other refinements.

The voyage did have its problems, as the plan was to have the laundry done at Okinawa and resulted in an extensive loss of individual clothing.

On 30 September 1966, the Advance Party from the Battalion arrived in Vietnam.

Account by Lieutenant Andy Tenis with A Battery: "I am glad I was with the advance party. We flew to RVN on a C130; with stops on every island. Played a lot of cards on the aircraft (pinochle). I remember Wake Island because we stayed there for a while to fix something on the aircraft. Anyway, the booze flowed at the local base club and all had a good time. Wouldn't want to live on Wake Island; not much happening and the runway extends over the water on a coral bed. When landing an aircraft, it's like coming down on the water. I think only the pilot can see the LZ."

On 11 October 1966, the USNS Drake Victory, that had left from the Texas Port with some of the vehicles and other equipment, arrived at Da Nang. It was off-loaded and the vehicles and equipment were being processed and guarded by a 25-man advance party team.

Comment by chronicler: Restating here, it is thought this team actually came over on the Drake Victory.

On 11 October 1966, after departing Okinawa, the rest of the Battalion on the Eltinge was diverted from its original destination (Qui Nhon), RG4 to Da Nang, RG3 to debark the 2nd Battalion 94th Artillery as well as the 1st Battalion 40th Artillery.

On 15 October 1966, after twenty-one days of crossing the Pacific and South China Sea, the USNS Eltinge arrived at Da Nang Harbor. Debarkation of personnel was satisfactory.

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DA NANG HARBOR

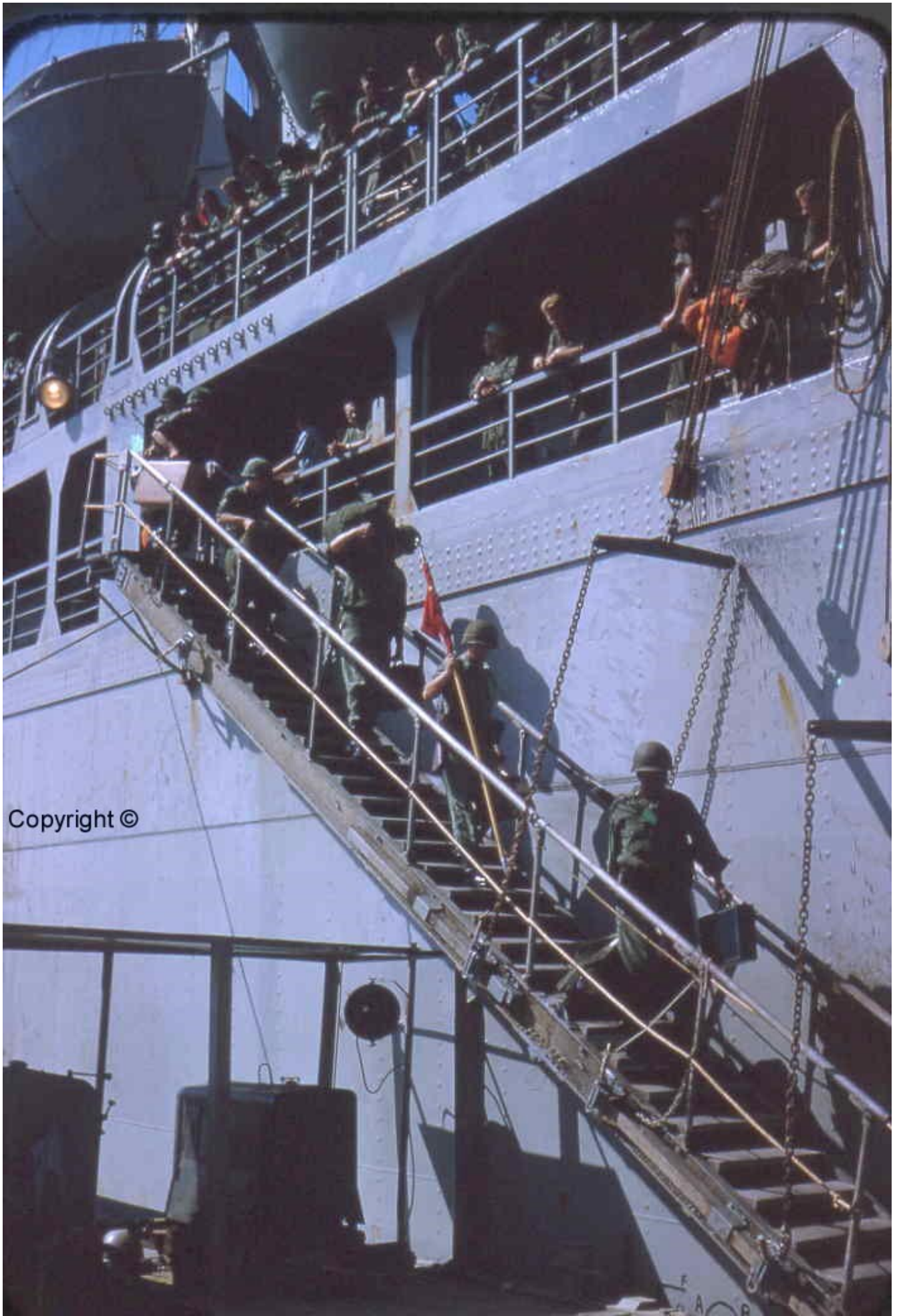
The Battalion had to wade ashore. For some reason the men were unloaded on to the smaller craft, landed, and waded ashore. Then the Eltinge was docked and the Battalion equipment was unloaded.

Comment by chronicler: It seems that the docks were either full or damaged during these few days therefore the unloading into smaller landing craft and wading ashore of the Battalion personnel.

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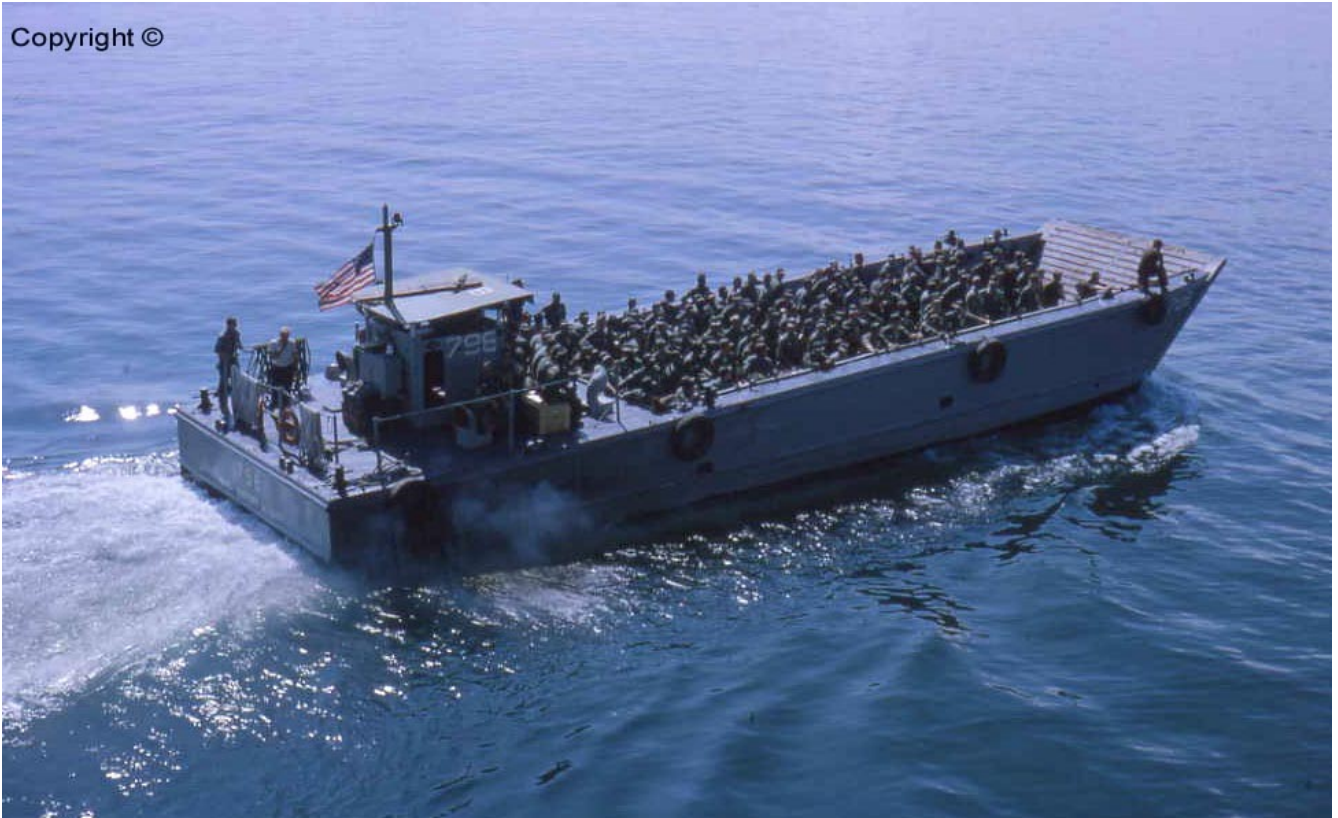
LANDING CRAFT ARRIVING TO TAKE THE BATTALION ASHORE



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BATTALION MEMBERS LEAVING THE ELTINGE FOR LANDING CRAFT
(Note Battery Banner)

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BATTALION MEMBERS ON LANDING CRAFT



BATTALION MEMBERS ON LANDING CRAFT

(Looks like the Battalion Colors on the left rear still cased?)

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BATTALION MEMBERS WADE ASHORE FROM LANDING CRAFT



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A "WELCOME TO VIETNAM" COMMITTEE

Equipment of the two battalions, however, was in the bottom of the ship's hold, since other units had been scheduled to debark first when loading was done at Oakland. All the equipment aboard the ship had to be off-loaded into lighters, and then much of it reloaded.

The process of off-loading took five days.