

Building a Jeep on the Cheap

By Samuel J. Hall

About halfway through our 1966 Da Nang deployment in Vietnam, MCB 11 located at Camp Adenir across the road from Marble Mountain East of the Tourane River, East of Da Nang on the Tourane peninsula. Mike Swift and I were operating the big M-52 wrecker out of the Alpha Company light shop (similar to photos.) We were both 19 year old CMH2 Heavy Equipment Mechanics and both Third Class Petty Officers. I was a mechanic with a Navy license to operate any vehicle up to 50 tons so I drove this rig. Like others in the battalion, we stood perimeter watch together every other night and worked together during the day which involved traveling throughout the Da Nang area in the wrecker. With the many “newbies” entering the battalion, Mike and I had more time to stay away from camp while making our runs leaving to the new guys most of the routine, preventative maintenance duties in the shop. After company muster each morning we traveled throughout Da Nang, Red Beach, which is North of Da Nang, Camp Tien Shah and the rock crusher, located at the base of Monkey Mountain. Our job was straight forward--to pick up vehicles that were damaged from land mines or had blown engines or were otherwise disabled, hauling the damaged vehicles back to camp for repairs. Traveling around and through the Da Nang area could be tricky at times. For example, driving across the river on the weird floating pontoon bridge with our large, heavy rig was a challenge.



Maybe to break up our routine, we sometimes visited the 3rd Marine Division “damaged equipment” facilities near Hill 327 and collected their seriously damaged vehicles with our wrecker, hauling the junk back to our camp. There, we stripped the damaged vehicles down, returning the frames back to the 3rd Marine Division so they could exchange the vehicle for replacement. MCB 11 had a “first echelon maintenance” capability. We could repair anything, and use any parts that were available. It seems that the 3rd Marine Division had but a third or fourth echelon maintenance capability meaning that their mechanics could only swap in major parts—we could really fix things.

Their salvage yard and a refueling station was located near Hill 327, in this case not an outpost like the hills around Khe Sahn (measured in meters of height above sea level) but the location of the very large Navy Exchange and 3rd Marine Division Headquarters. Not so co-incidentally, there were a few houses of prostitution in the immediate area—we called them skivvy houses. I think this situation was cleaned up later in our deployment.

One day we were in this area and a big USO show was being held at Hill 327. Mike and I drove our wrecker to the Exchange area and saw what looked like several thousand troops gathered in front of a stage that had, it turned out, Ann Margaret and Jonny Rivers as the stars. While we couldn’t get close enough to get one of Ann Margaret's pictures, we did enjoy the show—there wasn’t much to compare at our own small club.

On another occasion in this area, one of our Chief Petty Officers was apparently drinking and driving along the road back to camp and failed to stop before plowing his jeep into the back of a stopped low-boy tractor trailer. The jeep was totaled. But this was no real problem because on our many trips to collect damaged vehicles in this area, Mike and I regularly stopped by that salvage yard and collected jeep parts that had been discarded over time. It didn’t take long before we were able to find enough salvaged parts to build another jeep—all but the transfer case linkage and the tie rods. So, thinking “Can Do,” Mike and I headed back to Hill 327 and the Navy Exchange parking lot. We simply waited until a Jeep-load of Marines showed up to shop and when they walked away, we quickly slid under their jeep and borrowed the needed linkage and tie rods, returning to camp and just as quickly completed our project

jeep. Within days, we had checked out some new numbers from supply and pasted the new numbers on the hood of our old, rebuilt jeep. We had us a new-old replacement and nobody was in trouble or any the wiser.

Time in the Navy and Career Since

I was in the Navy from November 29, 1963 to October 25, 1967. I was 17 years old when I enlisted. I was a high school drop out in the 11th grade and came from a large family. I guess that the Navy was my way out of my past. I went to Class "A" school for Construction Mechanics and onto my first duty station Midway Island where I was stationed for one year. I worked in the island's power house on the industrial diesel engines. My second duty assignment was MCB 11, Alpha Company, 6th Platoon. I was on the 1966 deployment to Da Nang and the 1967 deployment to Dong Ha reaching the grade E-5 in my third year in the Navy as a Second Class Heavy Equipment Mechanic. After my discharge, I completed high school, and then attended college for the next four years. I got a degree in Water Science and worked in the water field for the next 30 years. I'm sure that "Can Do" (and maybe that Jeep experience) was part of my career success.

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