

## Chapter 5

### The Great Cement Mixer Hunt

Early one morning, Sergeant Caldwell came to my “houch” with the news that our cement mixer was missing. The men would park it next to the barracks at night, when it was not at a job site. It was very big and required a 5 ton truck to pull it. Who would steal a cement mixer on an active US Air Base in the middle of a war? Especially, with a contingent of 50 men sleeping within a few feet of where it was parked. It just didn’t make sense.

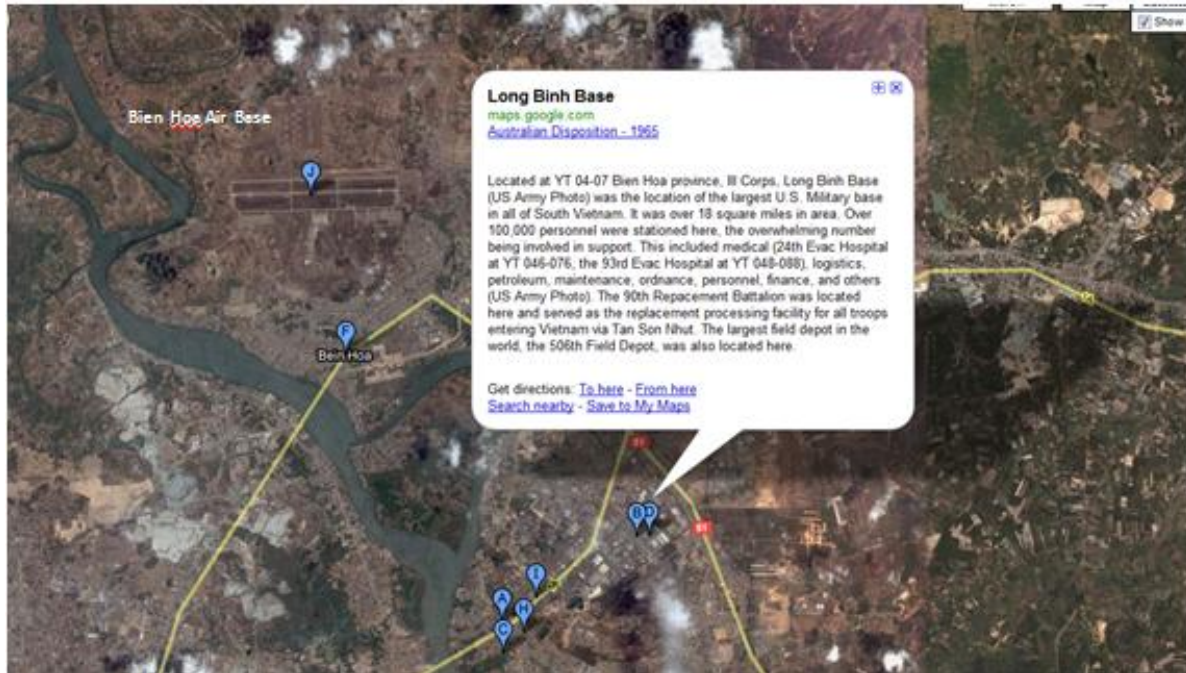
So Sergeant Caldwell and I drove around the entire Bien Hoa AB looking for the cement mixer. The base was quite large as can be seen from the video in Chapter 1. We spent a few hours driving though out the base. Not an easy thing to hide. After making a circuit throughout the base, I had an idea. I told Sgt. Caldwell to drive to the front gate. There was Air Police at the Front Gate 24/7 so if the cement mixer left the base the guards would have seen it.

Arriving at the front gate, I walked over to the guard building and found the “Sergeant in charge”. I asked him if he had seen a cement mixer come through the gate last night. He hesitated and then said, “Yes, I did. This Army Captain came through pulling a cement mixer with his jeep. The jeep was overheating and he asked me he could use my phone to make a call and get some support”. He said that a little while later a 6X6 Army truck pulled up. They unhooked the jeep, hooked up the cement mixer to the 6X6 truck, thanked the Sergeant and drove off. I hesitated, and then asked the Sergeant how long was the time interval between the time between when the Captain made the phone call to when the 6X6 truck arrived. He estimated that it was about 45 minutes.

That was the clue I needed, at least I knew to not waste time looking around Bien Hoa AB any more. Now, I calculated that my cement mixer was about 45 minutes away at no more than 20 miles per hour. I had Sergeant Caldwell drive me to the Base Civil Engineering office. There I told Col Maggart what I was going to do. We called the Base Air Police Office and told them that I was going to take the Civil Engineering Crash Alert vehicle and drive out to look for the missing cement mixer. The Crash Alert vehicle was an US Air Force Blue Plymouth station wagon with “US AIR FORCE” on the side in yellow letters. This vehicle was equipped with both air-air and ground-ground radios for communications with aircraft and the Bien Hoa Tower.

So, I said a prayer and off I went. Looking back on this I ask myself, I was either very brave or very dumb. How could I possibly find a cement mixer in the middle of this country that was at war? There was one highway that ran north-south through the entire country of South Vietnam, Highway 1. So I drove to the Front Gate where the Army 6X6 picked up the cement mixer. I drove out onto the highway that intersected Highway 1 in the city of Bien Hoa. I drove through the city to that ‘T’ in the road where there was a stop sign and checked my time. I wrote that time down and turned left (north) and drove at 20 miles per hour until I used up my 45 minutes. At that point I was in a suburb of Bien Hoa City with no apparent US Army presence. At that point I turned around and drove south backtracking my route to the ‘T’ in the road.

Arriving at the 'T' I checked my time and began the south leg of the time element traveling at the assumed 20 miles per hour that a 6X6 truck would travel. Looking at Google Maps today the city of Bien Hoa has grown substantially from what I remember in 1966. At the interpreted time interval of 45 minutes I found myself on the highway outside Long Binh Army Depot. A historical description is depicted in the below map of Bien Hoa City.



I drove up to the entry gate of Long Binh in my Air Force vehicle. The Sergeant at the gate asked me what business I had there. I told him that I was looking for my lost cement mixer and I had reason to believe it is on the Long Binh Base. He waved me on and told me to look around. I drove randomly through the base for a half hour or so and came over a rise and there was about 50 men pouring concrete using my cement mixer about a half a block ahead of me. Wow, I could not believe I found it. I immediately got on the radio and called Bien Hoa Base Operations telling them where I was and that I was going to await some support before I approached the men working. The Bien Hoa Base Operations called back, saying that a helicopter with Air Police aboard was on its way to my location and to hold tight. I got out of the vehicle and sat down on the hood of the vehicle. I was sitting there just watching the men pour concrete for 15-20 minutes. All of a sudden an Army Major walked up and asked me if I found what I was looking for. I said, yes I did, I believe that that is my cement mixer these fellows are using over there. He said, well I'll be darned. He then said "Lieutenant, the Colonel would like to buy you breakfast would you join him?"

Before I could answer a Huey helicopter came in and landed next to my vehicle. Out came an Air Police Officer. He asked me if everything was OK and I told him yes, I believe everything is under control and that he could leave. He got back into the helicopter and it took off.

The Major then repeated that the Colonel would like to buy me breakfast. So he and I left the vehicle and walked over towards an Army mess hall. We went in and there was a table with a few officers sitting at it. The Colonel motioned me over by him and I sat down and we were served some breakfast and coffee. The Colonel told me that his Captain got a little carried away and borrowed your cement mixer. He said that if I would let them finish their work that he would guarantee me that he would have it back this evening, all cleaned up, oil changed and ready for tomorrow's work. I told him that was fine, I was just worried about being able to finish our assigned tasks at Bien Hoa. He then gave me his business card and said that if I needed anything while I was in Vietnam, just call him and he would have it delivered.

So, I shook hands and left the mess hall, walking back to my vehicle to drive back to Bien Hoa. Back at home base I told the Base Civil Engineering Office what had transpired and they were dumbfounded that I was able to find the cement mixer. I saved our construction schedule. Without that cement mixer we would have been dead in the water. I then walked over to the enlisted men's "houch" where Sgt. Caldwell was, and we had a good laugh about the whole experience. That evening a 6X6 Army vehicle pulled up with a cleaned up and refreshed cement mixer ready for tomorrow's schedule, the Colonel kept his promise.