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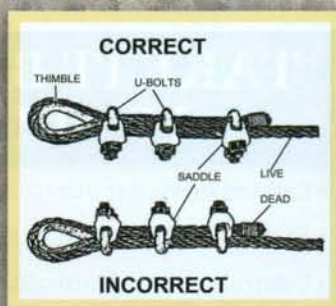
Past—Vietnam



Present—Afghanistan



# A T O W E R F O R H I L L 3 5



Sometimes you get an unusual job during normal times. Sometimes it is a normal job during unusual times. Hill 35, South Vietnam, spring of 1968 was an unusual time. Company A, 26th Engineer Battalion was in Direct Support of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade. The brigade headquarters, Company A, and others shared Hill 35 along with an artillery unit. The hill was an elevated saddle with each occupying their respective knob. The other brigade units included Troop F, 17th Cavalry (Armored), and the 8th Support Battalion (Forward) plus an attached helicopter unit. The brigade had a search and destroy mission coupled with pacifying their area of responsibility. The tower on Hill 35 was a peacetime construction mission adapted to a special wartime need.



By Lt. Col. Doug Lehmann, USA (Ret)

**T**he engineer company operated full throttle doing combat missions on a routine basis. Squad and platoon missions usually lasted 1 to 2 days. Mission changes occurred daily. Typical missions included base camp, fire base, berm, bunker, fencing, and tent frame construction plus mine clearance and road repairs. These combat missions were re-prioritized each day, tasks adjusted, and completion results accelerated. It is hardly routine but the pace became the normal course of events in a well trained and cohesive unit. For a 28-year old Captain, commanding this bunch was the most difficult, exciting, and rewarding experience of my career.

One night at the daily command briefing, CO Colonel Gelling said "Captain Lehmann, I want you to build a tower so I can place a searchlight up there." I gave him the only acceptable answer of "yes sir." I glanced at the Brigade Supply Office (BSO) and he knew I would be visiting him before the night was over.

The company's three platoons were led by two Platoon Sergeants and one 2nd Lieutenant. We were full strength except for officers. The company XO was kept busy with this shortage so I used my supply background to design and create the Bill-of-Materials (BOM) needed for any new job. It did not take long to calculate the necessary materials and this included:

- 4 telephone poles, the tallest stocked in theater
- 3x12 lumber for bracing
- 2x4 lumber for flooring and the ladder
- Wire rope with clamps for anchorage
- Bolts and nuts to fasten bracing
- 8 large spikes to ground the guy lines

**FACING PAGE IMAGES CLOCKWISE: 1.** *This 1957 Forest Service fire lookout tower at Nooksack Fire Station near Deming, Washington is similar to the one at Hill 35. The Hill 35 version has a single exterior ladder replacing the interior stair cases and the top platform did not extend beyond the 4 corner poles and was unroofed. (Photo courtesy of the Skagit River Journal, see [www.skagitriverjournal.com](http://www.skagitriverjournal.com))* **2.** *Jeep mounted 23-Inch Xenon Searchlight, 100 amperes DC, 125 million candlepower, beam width 10 mils (pencil beam to 4 kilometers) to 120 mils (spread beam). (Photo from August 1967 Field Artillery Magazine, Vietnam Operations by CPT Gary E. Schultz, Page 53)* **3.** *30-Inch Xenon Searchlight, Battery I, 29th Field Artillery, at Fire Support Base Horseshoe, February 1970. The 196th LIB had a smaller 23-inch version. (Photo courtesy of the U.S.A. Center of Military History books, Vietnam Studies, Field Artillery, 1954-1973, by Major General David Ewing Ott.)* **4.** *Wire rope law "Never put a saddle on a dead horse."*

We had nails, cement, and river-run gravel. We also had 2x4 inch lumber but took the opportunity to order more to maintain stocks. I visited the BSO and gave board foot totals for the lumber and a range of diameters acceptable for the wire rope and bolts. (Since this was 43 years ago, I cannot recall these ranges and the quantity/lengths required.) This BOM dictated the only possible design. This took less than an hour. Combat engineering is expediency at its most rapid rate.

I only handed the BSO a hand written note with this BOM. He knew it was required and that's the way we worked. The whole brigade was a unified team and no one questioned a legitimate request. These materials became the Support Battalion's immediate top priority. It did not take more than a day or two for these materials to arrive and delivered to a spot that was designated for the tower's location. At that point, the Platoon Sergeant took over. The final design, all adjustments, and the construction flow and techniques were delegated to this platoon leader.

The tower went up pretty fast. We had no crane but you can do amazing and imaginative operations with dump trucks, took kits, and sappers. I checked the site once or twice daily. I could not witness every step as I also checked our other projects that took me to fire bases and other locations. However, daily progress was spectacular. I only made one change as CO. The wire clamps were put on backwards and I had the Squad Sergeant working that portion redo them to meet the time honored homily of "never put a saddle on a dead horse," (see Figure 1).

Using our block and tackle, we helped the searchlight guys lift the 23-inch xenon searchlight (250 pounds) to the tower's top platform. The tactical unit sandbagged the four sides of this platform. The searchlight was used every night thereafter and searched a circular area with a radius of 4 kilometers.

Everywhere I went at night in Vietnam was dark except for large encampments. The 23-inch xenon searchlight was normally jeep mounted and ran from the jeep's alternator. I'm sure ours was the only tower searchlight in a forward area used in this fashion. The tower stands out today in my memory in front of all the hundreds of other missions we did operating out of Hill 35. I believe we received 60-foot "telephone" poles and only buried those 2-feet with concrete footers (see Figure 2.) The erected tower definitely was tall and changed the landscape of Hill 35. There may have been a stray shot or two taken at the tower but I have no knowledge of this. So, the tower received next to no small arms fire and never found or fired on VC movement. These two negatives add up to one positive of "mission accomplished." **AE**

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*The author is a regular contributor to AE Magazine and manages the Unit Links page at [armyengineer.com](http://armyengineer.com).*