

712th Transportation Railway Operating Battalion

Dave Kaufman

The U.S. Army Transportation Corps has the task of moving personnel, equipment, and supplies. Members of the Corps perform the task by a variety of means. During World War II, utilizing rail service was one of the means, and was a little-publicized successful aspect of the war.

With the outbreak of WW II, the War Department was faced with the serious problem of moving vast amounts of personnel, supplies, equipment and vehicles over great distances in the shortest time possible. The solution was to utilize the American railroad system. The flexibility and historic readiness to expand railroad operations provided a substantial benefit to the U.S. economy emerging from the Depression. That was the fact that American manufacturers went into overdrive producing literally thousands of anticipated locomotives and freight cars. U.S. forces were expected to run recaptured railroads, supply U.S. combat forces, and improve Allied rail capabilities. The strength of America's railroads lay in its management, corporate direction, personnel, and equipment. The US Army Military Railway Service (MRS) was formed, from a nucleus of several reserve railway units. While some 25,000 railroad personnel ended up in the MRS, more than 351,000 railroad personnel served in all branches of the armed forces during the war. (1)

Railroads "sponsored" MRS units, putting their railroad personnel into the same MRS unit. In many instances, individual railroads had employees drafted (or enlisted) together and who served together. Former railway employees in civilian life became military engineers, military brakemen, military yardmen, and military office workers.

During WW II, the mission of the MRS included taking over and rehabilitating (when necessary) railroad facilities, trackage, etc., turning them over to operational control of their previous civilian bosses, and then coordinating military freight trains and civilian passenger trains.

This was also to be true in Korea. Prior to the Korean War, the vast majority of the Korean National Railroad (KNR) had been built, maintained, and operated by the Japanese from 1905-1945 (including in what



Personal souvenir patch of 712th TROB

would become North Korea). There were very few jobs Korean nationals could even hold on the KNR. Once the 3rd Transportation Military Railway Service (TMRS) had set up command following the start of the war, its mission was exactly the same as in WW II. With the especially fluid situation on the Korean peninsula playing out in 1950, it was a tremendous challenge for the Transportation Corps. As United Nations forces units began moving towards the 38th parallel, the greatest challenge for 3rd TMRS, KNR, and Army of Corps of Engineers was repairing track, tunnels, railway facilities and especially bridges north of Pyongyang - Ansong - Wonju - Samchok line. The 3rd TMRS had to restore rail operations to forward area as quickly as possible.(2)1 There was great destruction; scarcely little exception, every bridge which had to be rebuilt was destroyed by friendly forces. Until mid-1951, the movement of troops and especially ammunition were top priorities of the 3rd TMRS.

The 712th Railway Operating Battalion, as it was designated during WWII, was activated 25 October, 1943 at Camp Harahan, LA. Its duties overseas were in the ETO, and the battalion received credit for several campaigns. It was inactivated 11 January 1946, at Camp Kilmer, NJ.

After WW II, events were occurring which would have an affect upon the civilian and military railroad relationship. In early 1946 there was a strike of civilian RR workers, and in May 1946, President Harry S. Truman ill-advisedly decided to draft the railroad workers into the Army. Truman's proposal in support of this occupation-specific draft was supported initially in Congress, but was subsequently rejected by

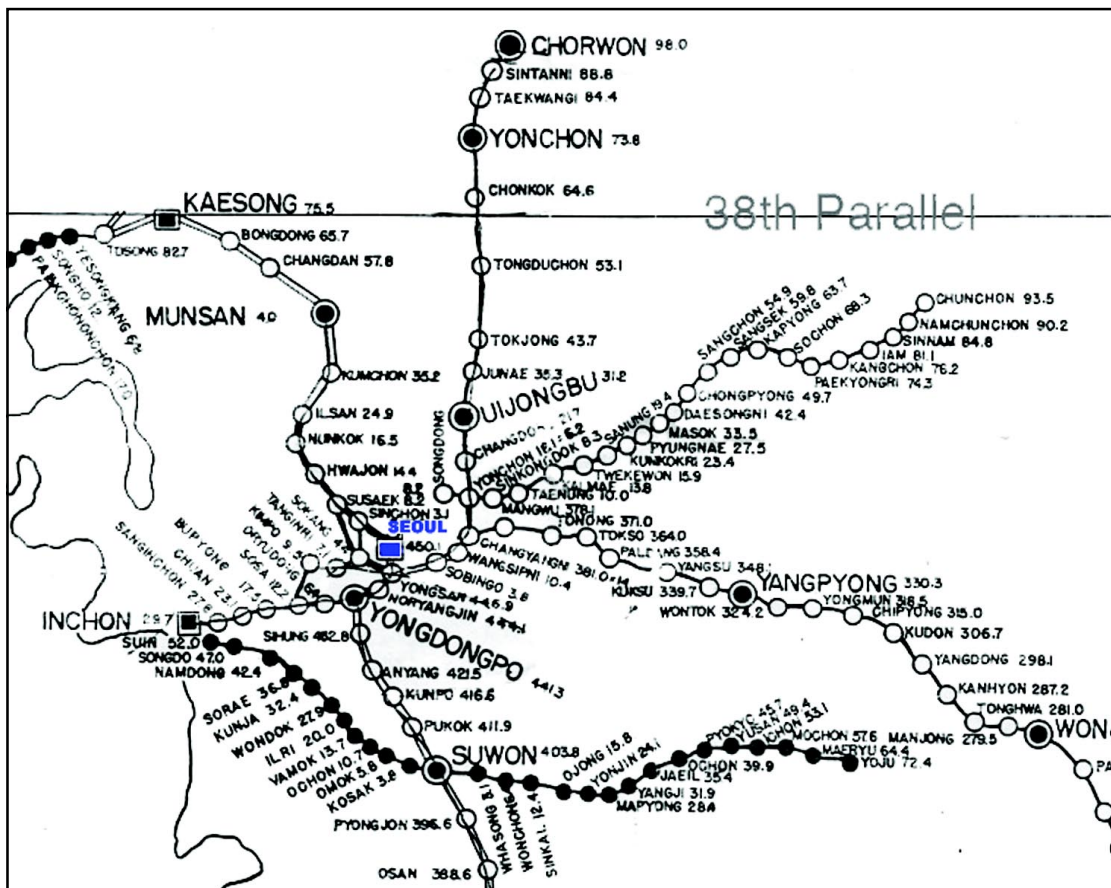


Variant of 712th TROB SSI

the U.S. Senate.

The Korean War story of the 712th TROB started as a reserve unit sponsored jointly by the Reading Company (RDG) and the Central Railroad of New Jersey (CNJ). Similar units, such as the 724th, were in place on the Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) and other railroads, which sponsored other MRS units. Following in the footsteps of earlier predecessors, a number of railroaders who had served in World War II joined the Organized Reserve Corps and returned to their railroad jobs. In 1948, the Reading opted to sponsor a railway operating battalion, and a sufficient number of men volunteered to cause the 712th to be reactivated, now designated as the 712th Transportation Railway Operating Battalion.

The first reserve training occurred in September 1949, and from that small nucleus, the numbers of the battalion who attended summer training the following May increased. The sponsoring railroads made up the difference between railway company and Army pay. The notice of a call-up went out in late July and August, with the actual report date of 5 September 1950 at Fort Eustis. At the time, the 712th was made up of 16 officers and 60 enlisted men. Most were from the Reading Railroad, a few from the Central Railroad of New Jersey, and a few with no railroad skills. Other military railway units activated and deployed to Fort Eustis, the home of the Army Transportation School, were the 724th TROB, 729th TROB, 756th TRSB (Transportation Railway Shop Battalion), all under the direction of the 702nd TRGD (Trans-



This map is the northern portion of the 3rd Transportation Military Railway Service (TMRS) operating map used during the Korean War. The 3rd TMRS controlled all military rail movements of troops and war materials during the war. Headquartered in Yongsan in the old Yongsan Middle School complex, it was composed of the 712th and 724th Transportation Railway Operating Battalions (TROB) and the 765th Transportation Railway Shop Battalion (TRSB). The 712th TROB, headquartered at Yongdongpo, handled all rail traffic north of Taejon. The 724th, headquartered at Pusan, handled all rail traffic from Pusan to Taejon. The 765th was headquartered at Pusan.

In its northern sector, the 712th operated three main rail lines: the Munsan Line northwest of Seoul, the Chunchon Line to the northeast, and the Sintanni Line north of Seoul. In its northernmost extent, the Sintanni Line ran through the Ch'at-an-ch'on Valley where it supplied the war effort in the central sector of the Main Line of Resistance.

Taekwangni was the last rail station north and located in an old, beat-up box car. Sintanni, two to three miles north of Taekwangni, was the last railhead north, and was primarily an ammo dump. (Courtesy Mr. Dewey Maclean)

portation Railway Grand Division). The 712th TROB and 724th TROB were the only units scheduled to be deployed in full to Korea - and both ended up there. The 756th TRSB and 729th TROB were retained as training units at Fort Eustis and as a source of replacements to meet requirements overseas. The sixty officers and men of 756th TRSB served mainly as instructors for the military inductees who had no railway shop experience.

At Fort Eustis, while the cadre of the 712th was training, fillers, mainly WW II vets on inactive reserve status, started to arrive to bring the battalion up to its T/O of 880. Many of these people had some railroad background and were quickly slotted into berths. The 712th TROB was commanded by Major Arthur C. Palmer, who

was the assistant division engineer for the Reading Railroad.

The battalion's three companies followed the WW II TO; HQ Co (dispatchers, telegraphers, track platoons, bridging platoons); B Co. (minor repairs), and C Co. (train crews). Those without any railroad experience were assigned to C Co.

While the track length at Fort Eustis post railway was not large, it had several miles of running track, a wye, grade crossings and other features. Those unskilled or who had eroded skills were taught block operations, operating rules, coupling and uncoupling cars and boarding, riding and exiting equipment. For inexperienced personnel in the 712th TROB, railway training was fairly perfunctory at Fort Eustis and continued on the way to Korea and later,

on-the-job. The 712th TROB used their unassigned steam locomotive engineers and gave other unit members on-the-job training to serve as conductors. Some personnel received training from the US Navy in the use of quad .50 caliber AAA guns, defensive weapons MRS units never used in Korea.

Mid-November 1950 saw the 712th starting to pack, and sloughing off the personnel who would not be going overseas. Automotive equipment was loaded on flat cars and a train departed for the west coast with a number of C Company personnel.

On 7 December 1950 the personnel of the 712th TROB departed Fort Eustis on a troop train for the West Coast, where Company C was airlifted in advance to Korea, arriving there on 23 December 1950. The



This sign was at Battalion Hq in Yongdongpo and was designed by a Lt who attended Princeton, which just happens to have a tiger mascot.

rest of the battalion embarked on the USMSTS General M.M. Patrick for the voyage to Korea. The USMSTS General M.M. Patrick was usually used to transport military dependents overseas, which was fortunate as it had a large day room the 712th turned into a battalion headquarters and used as a classroom to continue training the non-railroaders in the battalion. Clearly the training at Fort Eustis was literally basic, if training had to continue en route to Korea and a considerable number of unit members were an unknown quantity as far as professional experience and work abilities went. The battalion (less Co C) arrived in Pusan on 3 January 1951 and established battalion headquarters at Sindong. On 28 February 1951 the 3rd TMRS assigned the 712th TROB to operate all lines north of Taegu. The battalion learned later than when Co. C arrived in Japan, some uniformed GI made a serious mistake when he attempted to assign these railroaders to an infantry depot. He had not reckoned with the company commander.

“C” Company moved through Japan to Korea and settled in the school grounds at Sindong, and the remainder of the battalion started assigning block operators at several locations.

While this was happening, unassigned C Company personnel were set to work unloading box cars that had been placed on a siding at Chichon. These were cars that had been loaded by Army soldiers and/or Marines following the breakout at Chosin

when the Chinese entered the war. This unloading operation was the introduction to the war. Orders were to unload, break down and classify items according to Quartermaster guidelines for inclusion or dispersal to interested entities as necessary. Boxcars contained foodstuffs, arms, ammunition of all sizes, truck parts, rations, a little clothing, small unit records, and on two occasions, a body, protected with cardboard, surrounded by a ring of frozen canteens, some empty, some not, some partially consumed C Rations.

In the meantime, to keep things moving, troops from C Company had been riding as observers on trains operated by Korean crews, as it was difficult for a train to make

much progress toward the fighting. These GI observers argued their trains’ way through block stations, helped stuff GI soap and pack wet grass in journal boxes, and stopped the locomotive firemen from wasting time by stopping for water every ten miles, among other duties. In early Spring 1951, one of the first trains run by Company C was across the Han River. All the bridges had been blown in various actions over the preceding months. What made this trip so precarious, taking supplies north, was that it was over a ponton bridge built by U.S. Army engineers.

On 30 March 1951 the battalion base moved to Yongdongpo and occupied the managers’ apartments of a large silk mill, a



Company C, which provided the train crews, had this sign.



EMD SW8 Diesel Locomotive powered supply train operated by the 712th TROB taking supplies to the front lines during the Battle of White Horse Mountain. Note locomotive number 2034 matches that on the first insignia depicted (Courtesy of Mr. Dewey MacLean)

two-story building used by the HQ. The rest of the complex consisted of 72 apartments, of which 71 were habitable. There were several deep tubs and a beauty shop, all of which were converted to showers by A and B companies, putting enough boiler tube together to reach the Han River – and a very large heavy duty pump.

The 712th remained at that base until the early May breakthrough, at which time they loaded into box cars and moved to Hodong. A few days later they relocated to school house in Taejon.

An enemy offensive which led to a breakthrough north of Seoul overran a two-man signals office. The two soldiers were told to join up with the infantry for security. A month later, the two men reappeared at their office, mentioned that they had buried their phones and signal equipment, uncovered the equipment, and were back to work. Both were eventually awarded the Combat Infantryman Badge, an unusual accomplishment for MRS personnel.

The battalion obtained the new SW8 locomotives built by the Electro-Motive Division of General Motors. By this time, the 712th had staffed more stations and terminals. From the outset they had established a courier car that, when hooked to the KNR Locomotive PC511, was used to take mail, fresh food, freight, etc., to the men in the

Railway Transportation Offices (RTO). They were able to provide service to the RTOs on an every third day basis, and mail was carried by train riders to the RTOs so their personnel would have the news from the home front. By this time the EUSAK Express had been introduced, and hospital trains were running from Uijongbu, but they also came from a station further up, almost at the 38th Parallel.

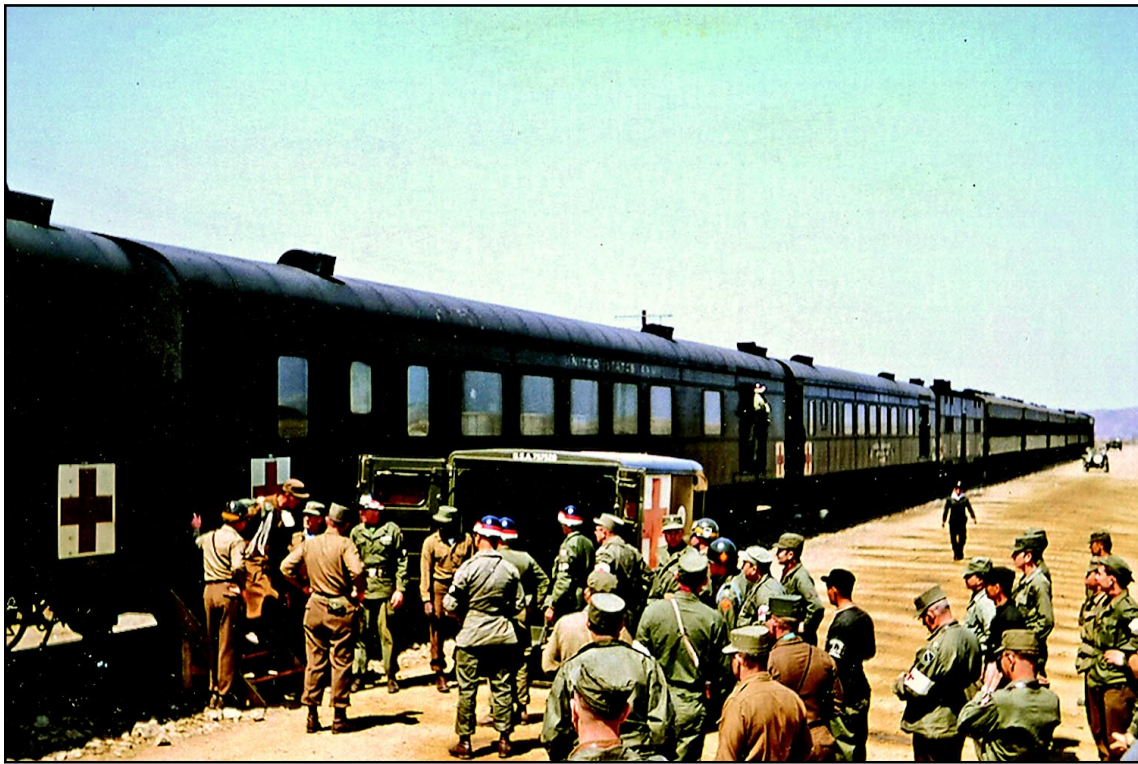
One of the still hotly contested areas was in Iri. After dark, no Korean would operate a relief engine from Taejon to Iri. At that time, the ROK Army used the area for the final two weeks of recruit training, saying it was a good way to get the feel of being fired up while being able to shoot back at a real target. From the beginning, each train operated with two guard cars, one ahead of the engine and one at the rear of the train. The cars were gondolas with about two feet of sandbags around the inside and level with the top of the car. There were sandbags through the middle of the car which made two pockets and mounted in the pockets were .30 or .50 caliber machine guns.

By the end of the summer of 1951, the mission was starting to become routine. A few more messes had been established. Living quarters had been improved, day rooms added, and recreation facilities upgraded.

During the early withdrawal in December 1950, the 3rd TMRS had experienced numerous problems with locomotives running out of water due to pumps breaking down. Additionally, railway water facilities had been damaged in many places north of Taegu.

The 712th had a number of men from West Virginia who were assigned to Company A, which handled maintenance of way. In civilian life many of these West Virginians had been so called “cat-hole miners,” working for small mining operations. They were extremely skillful working with and repairing simple engines and water pumps. Company A was able to get water supplies flowing again at several water points. This improved the efficiency of railway movements, so trains could haul more cars loaded with supplies and equipment rather than supplemental water. Before water points were restored to dependable service in forward areas, locomotives ran a flatcar with a water tank and pumps mounted immediately behind them to supply water when needed.² Company A had overseen the relaying of some of the yards that had been destroyed by the enemy, and water points for locomotive water were all operational, removing the fear of reaching a location and being unable to take water.

From the onset, Company B troops



Communist prisoners of war detraining from a 765th Transportation Railway Shop Battalion (TRSB) hospital train that had transported them to the site of prisoner of war exchanges during Operation Big Switch from 5 August to 6 September 1953. (Courtesy August "Gus" Firgau, 712th TROB)

learned that extra gaskets to stop steam leaks could mean more cars per train. They also learned to cannibalize destroyed locomotives along the division line or in the shop. Additionally, the company renumbered passenger cars to eliminate the confusion existing with the Korean system of numbering cars by class which resulted in duplication of numbers, and each class having a certain series of numbers for each class. Company B also improved its operations in the icing of mortuary cars, working with engineer units in the construction of icing facilities at several points.

Company C was busy moving tanks and entire divisions to the north. The company also carried the ever-popular PX train, well stocked with nearly every item found in a post PX. These trains were essential to maintaining morale in the battalion.

In closely reviewing battalion command reports for March 1952-April 1953, Company C averaged 1.4M ton per month along the Main Line; 425,000 tons per month on other branch lines; 1.2M tons per month along the Inchon Line; and 25,000 tons per month along the narrow gauge. However, in April 1952, those numbers jumped to an all time high: 13,777, 389 tons on the Main Line; 303,385 tons on the Inchon Line; 922,325 tons on the other branch, and 21, 928 on the narrow gauge.(3) Also in April

1952 the original 712th members were relieved and sent home. Unfortunately, with the reduced strength, Company C was working 12 hour shifts, 7 days a week. To add to their workload, the Eusak Flyer, two trains in both directions, began daytime travel between Seoul and Pusan. The Eusak Express was like an American overnight train of the 1920s. It consisted of a mail car, a baggage car, two to four coaches for EM, and two Pullman-type sleepers for officers. At times, ornate observation cars for high-ranking officers were attached at the back of the train. It made the 300+ miles trip between Seoul and Pusan in a scheduled 12 hours, barring guerilla attacks. At least one train was shot up making the trip.

The battalion was concerned with obtaining more diesel locomotives for service on the railway division to better coordinate with the steam locomotives. Another concern was with the continually leaking unburied gasoline pipeline laid along the rails from Inchon to Chonkok. It was only a matter of time until railway traffic hauling other POL or ammunition passed by and a fire started. One major blaze burned a bridge. To alleviate the problem, the 82nd Engineer Pipeline Company was tasked with welding connection joints in the pipeline. Patrols were subsequently set up to guard for leaks and Korean civilians opening the

line to steal gasoline. With the patrols, the number of fire reports was reduced by one third, but the number of Korean civilian deaths from trespassing increased.

By this point the battalion had over 400 miles of track in its division and was responsible for another 200-plus miles. During WW II, most MRS units' divisions were less than 200 miles. (4) The 712th also coordinated the new track built to K-8 Airfield (Kunsan Air Base) from the city of Kunsan. Hospital buses were engaged in the transport of wounded servicemen, and their movement coordinated with a hospital ship ported at Pusan. This cut down the number of hospital trains to Pusan.

In September of 1952, the battalion had another recurring problem – daily grade crossing accidents. In forward areas, heavy equipment such as bulldozers and tanks raised havoc with the roadbeds, the rails, and rail equipment. It was often made worse by a lack of timely reporting. Programs of rail safety were increased in newspapers and on AFRS in an effort to reduce the volume of incidents.

The battalion's TO continued to be reduced, with a greater number of KNR personnel being assigned to the battalion to make up the difference. Additionally, personnel from the 765th TRSB were transferred into the 712th; unfortunately, they

lacked training in necessary skills. It was also noted that replacements that had civilian railroading skills were arriving in Korea, but with a combat arms MOS that resulted in them being assigned to units other than rail battalions.

By December of 1952, the battalion's division had increased to 800 miles under its control and 600 miles under its direct supervision. It was also recommended that speedometers be installed in Army locomotives in order to better determine speeds and reduce accidents.

As 1953 rolled around, passenger trains were added and several diesel locomotives went dead. Only through the hard work of Company B was the battalion able to get them back on line in the shortest time possible.

In April 1953, the 712th TROB was selected to provide a daily service train for the purpose of transferring wounded and sick POWs in Operation Little Switch. A special operating schedule was devised, numerous detailed briefings of all involved personnel were held, inspections occurred, and at least one dry run was made.

Following the truce signed July 27, 1953, the 712th also provided personnel while participating in Operation Big Switch, the prisoner of war exchanges which occurred from August to September 1953. By the end of the operation, more than 98,000 PoWs, Communist men, women, and children, were returned home to a land of their choosing. The PoWs were mostly able-bodied returnees, throwing propaganda leaflets along the route. Security not only had to guard the PoWs, but protect them against South Koreans throwing stones at passing trains and cars.

Each train had a complete intra-train telephone system, insuring contact between train commanders and the MPs in any part of the train. The 712th operated the trains north of Taejon and the 724th handling them south of Taejon; these trains ran 24 hours a day. Upon arrival at the dispersal points and obviously under orders, Chinese returnees solemnly ripped up their newly issued uniforms and rolled in the dirt to present as dismal a picture as possible for their propaganda photographers. The North Koreans threw canteens, shoes, crutches and clothing at U.N. roster officers. When possible, the North Koreans damaged cars so badly the cars had to be taken out of service. The 765th Transportation Shop Battalion just as quickly rehabilitated them and got them back on the

rails.

The 712th TROB was awarded a Meritorious Unit Citation for the period 1 Jul 52 - 30 Jun 53. It was the last remaining railway unit in Korea, being inactivated in Korea on 20 January 1955.

Upon the 712th and 714th TROBs return home, both the PRR and the RDG chose not to continue sponsoring these units. The affiliation program was in rapid decline resulting from members of the other railway sponsored reserve units being called to active duty to serve in non-railway units, in conjunction with President Truman's threat to draft railroaders into the Army. This was seen by railway management as violating an agreement between the Army and the railways and from August 1950 to 30 June 1954; the railways cancelled affiliation agreements for 24 units, which were then inactivated. Only sixteen of the authorized affiliated railway units remained in existence. All of the remaining units were very much under strength. This caused a worrisome situation for the USATC in the event of another major conflict in which theatre railway transport was necessary.

The Insignia

The 712th TROB was authorized the 8th U.S. Army SSI while in Korea; however, there are at least two other cloth insignia that have been found for the battalion. The first is a multi-part felt example that bears a resemblance to other known Korean War era SSI and pocket patches. The second is most likely a souvenir insignia. It bears the unit identification, the name of the station, and the locomotive is numbered. In fact, it is the same number as found in Figure 1. As with other GIs who had favorite vehicles, locomotive engineers had favorite locomotives, and the GI who had this patch made included the locomotive number. A distinctive unit insignia was approved for the 712th in mid-1954, only months before its inactivation; however, most of those who had served in the unit had departed by this time and it's unlikely the DUI was ever produced, much less worn. None of the veterans contacted for this article saw any examples of it.

Footnotes

1. Dave Kaufman, "725th ROB" Trading Post, Jul-Sept 1995
2. USNA RG 407 3rd TMRS "Command Re-

port (1 March to 31 March 1951)

3. Naughton, James P. Maj, Command Reports, 712th TROB, March 1952-April 1953
4. The TROB had identical operation and maintenance duties of a division of a Class I American railway company. It was capable of operating 150 miles of railway and had the authorized manpower to conduct Phase I operations without any assistance from local civilian personnel.

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OCMH "Eighth United States Army, Logistical Problems and their Solutions, p. 54"

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