

# Goodbye Cape Charlie

## Guardsmen dismantle air station

By SP5 John Stevenson

**Riddle: How do you accomplish a million-dollar radar site dismantling job at only 10 percent of the expected cost?**

**Answer: Call the National Guard.**

That's what happened in June, when a radar site at the Cape Charles Air Force Base had to be dismantled because of the base's closure. The equipment was to be shipped to other locations for reuse, such as Cape Canaveral, Fla., and a Navy research lab in Pensacola.

A civilian firm had bid \$1.4 million to do the job—more than Uncle Sam wanted to pay. National Guardsman and Air Guardsman from Southwest Virginia; St. Louis, Mo.; Worcester, Mass., and Beaumont, Tex., were called instead. The Virginia Guardsman were from the 1033rd Transportation Co. in Gate City and the 1032nd Transportation Co. in Big Stone Gap.

Their job: to drive the dismantled equipment on four big tractor-trailers from Cape Charles to Langley Air Force Base, from where it was to be shipped elsewhere.

In all, eight members of the two Virginia transportation companies were on the job. Four of the eight were coal miners who happened to be on strike at the time.

The equipment being dismantled was not small. One of the radar assemblies was about 37 feet high and 57 feet wide. A search antenna alone weighed 20,000 pounds.

"It's what we in the business call heavy radar," smiled Master Sgt. Denver Baldwin of the Missouri Air National Guard.

The time allotted for the job was 30 days, only about a third of the time such work would normally take, according to Baldwin. The Guardsmen not only met this schedule, but they accomplished their task for only about \$100,000

instead of the \$1.4 million that the contractor had wanted.

The work went on through some of the hottest days in June. Cutting torches sputtered and spat as items were disassembled inside two large radar towers, driving the interior heat above 100 degrees. The air conditioning had long ago been shut off.

Then the disassembled items were lowered by crane to the ground and placed on the trucks from Southwest Virginia. The Virginia Guardsmen, two in each truck, took it from there. Across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel they drove, next skirting Norfolk on the interstate highway, and finally trundling through the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel to Langley.

Five-ton M818 tractors were used. The trailers had open tops.

"It's really realistic," said Staff Sgt. Don Sturgill, the noncom in charge of the Virginians.

Sturgill added that he and his men particularly enjoyed working with Air Force people in Cape Charles. "For the first time, it's given us a chance to work with a different branch of the service. It's been a real pleasure to work with the guys. I hope in the future that we keep things like this a-going. Everybody worked together as a team, and I guess you might say that's what kept the ball rolling."

Occasionally, it became a little stuffy in the non-air-conditioned trucks, Sturgill conceded. Also, a few tires were lost.

Other than that, however, the mission was accomplished with no problems.

Staff Sgt. Robert Coates, a member of the 1032nd who was Sturgill's assistant at Cape Charles, said that the radar job "gave us a great deal of responsibility. We're doing small-unit operations away from our home base, and anything

we need we've got to find it ourselves. We don't have a commander sitting around who you can tell, 'Hey, I need this.' It's making better leaders of us as well as better drivers."

Coates shared Sturgill's assessment of the mission's realism, characterizing the Cape Charles job as better training than what the transportation companies often do at Fort A. P. Hill.

"I don't really think that if the big balloon went up, we'd be operating as a full company," the staff sergeant mused. "We'd probably be operating at a smaller level. That's what we've got here. At A. P. Hill, you've got your whole company to support you. There's always somebody next in line to turn to. But out here, you are the next guy in line. For the most part, we pretty well have to solve our own problems."

