

Ordnance Museum move:

Riggers, trailers and cranes ... oh my!

Story and photos by

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Sixty ordnance treasures made the 200-mile trip down treacherous Interstate 95 to Fort Lee, Va., during Phase 1 of the Ordnance Museum relocation Aug. 3 to 7. Powering the historical move were drivers from the Meadow Lark Transportation Company and crane operators and riggers from A&A Transfer Inc. out of Virginia.

Robert Cade, the Meadow Lark project manager, was responsible for the safe transport of the artifacts, which ranged from 2,000-pound guns to 100,000-pound tanks.

Cade said he assembled the finest team he could to undertake the operation.

“We’ve been here several times over the past three or four years for walk-thrus in preparation for this,” Cade said. “Once we got the word ‘go,’ it all came together within two weeks.”

Cade’s force of operators descended on the museum grounds, which were closed to the public throughout the operation for safety reasons, and worked almost ceaselessly from sun up to sundown despite temperatures that hovered in the 90s each day.

Cade, with assistance from Jim Hardy, from the Ordnance Mechanical Maintenance School’s base realignment and closure office, and Toni Probst, installation transportation officer, worked into the night every evening planning the next day’s activities.

Along with determining which items would be loaded and when, they had to coordinate the movement of the riggers, trailers and cranes between the museum grounds, Fanshaw Parade Field and two other artifact storage areas near the Restoration Facility in building 5045.

In addition, they had to coordinate traffic control with police officers from the Directorate of Emergency Services as well as with Maryland and Virginia state troopers and transportation officials for loads that were especially heavy or required escorts.

Cade moved from site to site checking on progress and delivering Gatorade and water to his crews.

Altogether, Cade’s crew included 10 truck drivers, six riggers, two rough terrain forklifts, one 120-ton crane, one 90-ton crane, two crane support trucks and two rigging support trucks.

All week APG motorists had to slow down for the slow-moving caravans.

While the Patton Museum of Cavalry and Armor at Fort Knox, Ky., is moving to Fort Benning, Ga., and the Air Defense Artillery Museum at Fort Bliss, Texas, is moving to Fort Sill, Okla., - also due to BRAC - the Ordnance Museum relocation, when completed, will be the largest move in the history of the Army Museum system.

Vic Abrams, A&A crew chief, called the operation “challenging” and “different.”

“We have a very professional crew, and we’ve all worked together before,” he said, “but this is the first time we’ve worked with items like this. They’re not only valuable, they’re priceless.”

The loading process was slow and meticulous. After assessing the weight of each item, rigger crew chiefs had to determine which lifting materials to use. Most often they used heavy-duty nylon or Kevlar slings, but chains were sometimes required.

Another time-consuming but necessary process was the loading of counterweights on the back of the heavy cranes. On the 120-ton crane, up to 50 tons had to be added to the 5 tons already in place behind the driver’s cabin to



1. Gerald Gilbert, a driver with the Meadow Lark Transportation Company, left, and David Mateer, a rigger with A&A Transfer Inc., get ready to secure two World War II German anti-tank guns to a flatbed trailer during the final day of the Phase 1 relocation of the Ordnance Museum to Fort Lee, Va. Aug. 7.



2. Riggers with A&A Transfer Inc. guide a 1918 full-track Skeleton Tank, the only one in existence, which is being lifted by a 90-ton crane (not shown) onto a trailer on the Ordnance Museum grounds.



3. A&A riggers Ben Thiesing, left, and David Mateer, right, take the slack out of lifting slings before a rough terrain forklift lifts a 1940 German PAK38 anti-tank gun for loading.



4. From left, riggers Ben Thiesing and Joe Santos, crew chief Vic Abrams and project manager Mike Sturgill attach chains to heavy duty lifting straps before lifting “Tiny Tim” - a Vietnam Era self-propelled Howitzer with a sharp collar weighing more than 90,000 pounds.

counter the weight of items weighing in excess of 50,000 tons. Once a load was lifted over the trailer, as it dangled weightless in the air, riggers and drivers used guide ropes that were attached to the load and hand signaled the crane operator to coordinate its lowering. Pieces had to be placed on the trailers evenly. Any overlap had to be even on both sides. If the load was uneven, it had to be lifted again and re-lowered until both sides were even. Once the artifacts were in place on the trailers, the drivers assisted the riggers in securing the loads.

“I always participate to make sure to get my weight right,” said Bob Rathke, a Meadow Lark driver from Wisconsin after helping secure the “Steady Eddie,” a 72,000-pound World War II Sherman tank to his trailer.

Mike Sturgill, A&A project manager, after overseeing the loading of “Tiny Tim” a 90,000-pound Vietnam era self-propelled Howitzer, said his crews “had to pull out the chains for this one.” “The tank had so many sharp edges it might have cut my lifting straps,” Sturgill said. At the operation’s conclusion on Aug. 7, Cade expressed thanks to the installation.

“APG was wonderful,” he said. “They were helpful, knowledgeable and willing to help with any function we needed.”

He thanked Hardy, Probst, Dr. Joseph Rainer, the museum’s director and his staff, the EDSI restoration facility and the OMMS BRAC Office staff for their assistance. “Everyone has been wonderful to work with,” Cade said. He also had much praise for his drivers and riggers.

“They’re all dedicated, they don’t rush, they take their time and make sure it’s done right,” he said, adding proudly that “there were no accidents and no damage to any piece. That’s almost unheard of with a commitment this size. We’re proud of the work we’ve done here at APG and hope to do more in the future.”