

Baron v Brass

By Jim Danskin

I am sure most of us, if not all, would agree that the VC/NVA practiced excellent communication security and procedures. This was always in evidence when Central Office Vietnam (COSVN) transmitted his all stations (CQ) skeds. Safety situated in the May Tao mountains, COSVN made two or three CQ skeds daily to outstations in the Task Force area of operations. These stations included D445 VC Bn, elements of 274 & 275 Regiments of the NVA and other units situated in the AO. At different times we fixed stations in the Rung Sat swamp area, the Hat Dich, Nui Thi Vai and Nui Dinhs, Long Hai hills, Phuoc Hai village and D445's traditional area – the Long Green.

On most days I would ask the Pilot to be ready on established DF run ready to fix COSVN and ascertain the order he would receive traffic from his outstations so as to position the aircraft for maximum efficiency – maybe south from May Tao's to the Courtney rubber, to the Long Green, to the Long Hais and west to the Nui Thi Vai or the Rung Sat.

One particular day, fully expecting COSVN to transmit his CQ, at the appointed time he was no show. I informed the pilot and said that I expected an SOI change had occurred and would have to search the frequency spectrum for activity. At the same time I tried to contact the unit on my secure air to ground only to discover that my cipher unit was having a bad day. Unbeknown to me they were trying to contact me with the news that D445 was back on the air for the first time in many weeks.

Some time previously he had suffered a severe defeat during a Task Force Op and had not been heard of. For reasons unknown the unit could not read his transmission (probably due to the fact he turned out to be using a low powered set aimed directly at COSVN) but knew he was active as COSVN had contacted him on his designated SOI sked and was receiving traffic from him.

With the equipment in the Porter aircraft the operator could search quickly and the visual display would fill with a green colour as the frequency was being acquired. Suddenly the VDU was full and I remarked to the Pilot that we were right on top of a target and could he please get a reference to the ground for an estimated position. As I tuned the station he sent a callsign which coincided with D445's for the day and just then COSVN closed him temporarily to call his CQ and let the other stations know he was busy and to arrange another sked with them. I hurriedly explained to the pilot what was happening and asked him to stand off 5 – 6 kms and be ready to fly a box around the target. With comms re-established with COSVN, D445 began to send his traffic which I recorded using the on board recorder. When the sked was complete I was happy that we had a good result and suggested to the pilot that we needed to scrap the remainder of the mission, return to Nui Dat so I could inform our Ops people of the location.

The pilot called in his "Ops Normal" and asked Luscombe tower to call the unit and arrange a pick up for me. He gave me the estimated grid reference when I indicated we were over

target. As we taxied to the revetment area I noticed the late great H.J. (Hughie) Nichols waiting for me. HJ was standing legs astride, hands on hips, looking extremely peeved. Indicating the cloudless sky he asked "and pray, Baron, what is the problem – cloud cover too low – aircraft problems?" Hughie never did master sarcasm. "Well Sir, if you do not wish to know the location of D445 we can go and fly the rest of the mission." "Dear, dear boy, Baron, pray tell me." As soon as we arrived at our compound HJ, armed with the pilot's estimation, heads for TF HQ and tells me to bring the actual fix as soon as I have finished the plotting. The story at TF HQ, as told later, went something like the following. The TF Commander had one of the RAR COs and the SAS boss with him when Hughie is ushered in that D445 is in the foothills of May Taos. "How does he reach that conclusion?" "The Baron told me." "Who the (Expletive) is the Baron?" Hughie starts to explain but how do you describe to Infantry officers that 3 letters of the alphabet and a four figure frequency on a given day belongs to and identifies an enemy unit? On arrival with the fix, only metres different to the pilot's estimation, I had a grilling and when the RAR CO said that there couldn't possibly be an enemy force in the area, both HJ and I suggested not a force but perhaps a command group with a radio operator. While that was being kicked around by the brass one of the unit diggers arrived with the first decrypt from my recording. Hughie scans, beams and announces the message is from the CO and political officer of D445 en-route from the training area to their operational area to resume the war with the puppet armies.

Daily fixes tracked the group into the Long Green and once more, with the use of a more powerful set, the Bn was back on the air and providing us with invaluable intelligence. Some time later, the Task Force inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy force.

Using the same system of learning what order COSVN would call his out stations enabled me to fix five of the targets in less than an hour when it was obvious we were going to lose our operational ceiling. On the return trip to Luscombe we received a tip off and request to fix a "Fred" identified by SSL in the area of the Nui Thi Vais which was carried out. A fine example of co-operation between ARDF and SSL.

There is no doubt that employment of the aircraft was risky and there was always the chance of danger, flying on a direct heading, reasonably slow and at a low altitude. For me the scariest episode was when we had just finished a request job for the Americans east of Xuyen Moc. The pilot who I think was Capt Bob Smith – Ops Offr 161 Recce Sqn, had just received a severe tropical storm warning. All aircraft were to return to home base or the nearest airfield. Nui Dat's Luscombe was our only option and flying west we flew into the storm. The rain was horizontal with the wind force and it was almost impossible to see. Possum Ops had given us Carte Blanche to land as there was no other aircraft in the vicinity. Just then the pilot said "Oh expletive". "Not fussy about that boss." said the Baron. Look over my shoulder at the air speed indicator. We were virtually hovering with hardly any forward movement. Down to the trees, hoping that the bad guys were as handicapped as we were, gained a bit of forward movement and airspeed, over the outer perimeter and onto the strip. The pilot had warned me it was going to be rough – he was right. Couldn't brake just let the plane run out. Assisted by the water on the strip we rolled to a stop.

Definitely time to change the kimbies.