

VIETNAM AND 7 SIGNAL REGIMENT [EW]

A Normal Day at Nui Dat by Jack Fenton

It's late at night and it has been just another normal day in Nui Dat. I am making this first entry on this first page of an AAB72, the cover of which bears the title: '547 Signal Troop War Diary 30 Jun 70 - ...' So scribed, over ambitiously, by me some weeks ago. When I took over from Errol Poultney and enquired about a War Diary, he'd broken up, "There's buggger—all time for the luxury of a War Diary". Later, I spoke with Zic Hugh (HJ) Nichols who then enlarged his fixes from Short Cell and Air D/F to include daily highlights of VC DEV and Task Force reactions/results from our output. Should form future, valuable material for MI8 and 7 Sigs. Errol was right: there is buggger-all time for a diary but I'll have a go at jotting down the daily minutiae of our unit from my position, for a time at least.

Keith Zeller has good and bad news - his weekly internal check of stores has one, only one, item deficient, but it's GS-controlled. U.S. happy for Generals to write \$1 million off for each enemy killed but we Australians are not so cavalier. If this item not located, then must plead to higher authority to write off \$6 value at public expense. Keith and I both relish Prince Edward cigars that we buy from U.S. friends and in PXs so we light up fresh ones. He is a great raconteur with a dry humour. Then, "Go get Frank Watkins to double check." He heads for Tech Maint. "Hey, Frog, OC says drop everything and come and help me!" Frank replies in colourful language as he joins search. Have recommended him for Warrant Rank; when he gets it, wonder if he'll pull rank on Sergeants then?

Draft a billet-doux to RAEME at Vung Tau as to why they really can't have their three 10 KVA's back, even though several loan periods already extended and again overdue. All part of Norm Gilbert's on/again off/again saga of his Cell. Looks like CO's Hour: Bloke with a problem, not a Dear John but he's heard his fiancée being free with her affections. I feel I wasn't much help. As he leaves, a ring at the gate: An Operator from unit next door was a colleague at Cabarlah. The SP Book he runs in danger from TF clamp-down. (Andy Cockburn said he had no problems with his Book). So just lie-low a fortnight and try again? No chance! His OC, Maj Bergin, a regular punter, even scared off. Get him to accept the situation. Missing GS item turns up in Tech Maint. Zug gives Frank heaps then completes Q documentation and heads for Set Room. Bookie now raises his homesick and frustrated problem. Easy! Get twenty bucks worth of Piastre; go down on the sunset choppers to this great little bar in Vungers. A few drinks of Ba-Muoi-Ba in different world; chat up, maybe dance with a hostess, whatever. Can bunk down with 110 Sqn before curfew. Return here on dawn choppers. You'll be a new man. Aw! Thanks a lot. On your way! Next! No more, but HJ pops in - no Duffa till tomorrow arvo. I'll tee up with O.C. 161 Flight. Talk turns to his kids. A proud dad, Hugh. Do a bit more paperwork then to Set Room for a brew. Tea is luke warm, not so Bill Samson's shout, "Ba Long's up." Bloody hell! Middle of the night? Grab cans and check. Bill's right but none of us can find the other station. Nor can Ba Long who retires 25 minutes later. Me too!

A 155 mm H&I hurts the ears almost enough to wake up, coming-to fully as we face yellow, rubbery balls AKA scrambled eggs in the Mess. In unit, TSM Bryan Russell at panic stations. Our second Landrover broke and in workshops, one only left. No sweat. It does Admin in the morning; Duffa runs only in arvo. Yeoman of Technical Aids, Jock McCartney, reports that 'Cell' off air with Garth Brown in attendance. "So Normie can help out and do a Duffa run". Funny man, Shug. Andy Coyle yells, "Mail Call." I hate it. Blokes' faces light up as they open letters but 15 mins later, "This place sux," as they remember how many more days and a wakey. Laundry HO! In go my dirty clothes. Barry Jonathon and Glen Adamson in our lone 'rover, coordinated for water collection and rubbish disposal, now ready for Baria'sTuyetNga (orphanage) Laundry. Andy has typed my letters; swap my signatures for new official mail. A buzz from Ebony's (104) switchboard: A money (MPC) change is in the offering. HJ brings his dirty cloths out to the delight of the work party. Too late. Three U.S. chopper pilots call, all kosher so no need to drop Ops windows. Store their KY 38s in Comcen with Clarrie Whitehorn watching over them . Jock offers one flight with Jim Danskin. "What? An unprotected, slow, low level, long, direct flight line near an enemy battalion HQ? I'm not crazy!" "Aw! They're just milk runs that we do two or three times a day," tempts Jock. Nice try; lads a bit naïve. Soon leave for Cu Chi.

Phone from Emu. Des Overstead suspects his lads smuggling Whites and Greens into Nui Dat. Assure him, not my mob, never happen, no way! Des was our 2ic 2nd looey in Singapore so, unfortunately knows us well. (Wonder what was in that cipher box yesterday?) To OC 161 Reece Ft. 2 Flights OK, not 3 due to overdue maintenance. Will you or I tell the Brigadier he cannot have his 3 enemy positions this arvo? He phones the Brig who accepts full responsibility for the problems arising from overdue maintenance. 3 flights confirmed. I raise question of QRM from ARVN on our air/ground comms. PRC-77/KY-38 too low powered (1.5w). Yes, he'll accept installation of more powerful eqpt provided not too much reconfiguration. Means a Porter has to go to Vung Tau Airfield for 24 hours with an official US 'contractor'. Agrees, but OC 547 to accept full responsibility. What kind of radio? Don't know as it's classified, used by US blokes in our game. Invite him to 104 Offrs BBQ Sunday. Previous engagement, sorry. Back home. Cleaning the lines, SAL and Club almost done. Ray Seiler cutting Ray Schneider's hair. Colin Potter, man of a 1000 talents overseeing work on 'driveway', huge blue boulders which twist ankles, and working from the TSM's blueprint for a double garage to shelter the two unit Landrovers. Charlie Bennett and Leon Douglas shirtless and sweating. I sweat too when Deputy Commander phones and blasts me sky high for yesterday inviting a U.S. officer into his mess with muddy boots. Gives me a right royal serve! Just then II FFV LO arrives for his brief and report. As he bids farewell, Colonel Joe's [Ulatoski] LO lands in his Loach. Into my office Mr Malone with your muddy boots! He still hasn't cleaned them!

Clive Sheppard and Bob Ward give HJ the bad news. D445 changes his QRX to next hour and no rover to take Jim Danskin to Luscombe for a Duffa run. Insufferable situation; Errol's or Steve Hart's third vehicle was permanently commandeered by TF HQ. TSM; '104 has no spare wheels nor has Survey'. I hasten to HQ where first vehicle spotted belongs to CO 2 RAR talking nearby to Deputy Comd. 'Colonel Church, I need a vehicle to get to Luscombe to fly off and locate 445 in 30mins'. 'Sure, take mine and let me know where he is. I want that

bastard.' The Red Knight of PhuocTuy takes off on time. Return the 'rover', taking an indent for our third vehicle and copy of our Establishment. This Deputy Comd doesn't know the history. Before his time; and now he has witnessed the operational urgency for more wheels. Worth a punt! He checks docus, ultimately signs his approval in silence. Gives me another serve about muddy boots but can't dampen my delight as I can submit the indent. Ordnance later says about 2 weeks before delivery of the extra vehicle. Clear much of the IN tray (this diary takes a lot of time). HJ brings in Weerep (weekly report) and we discuss. Shows me a signal he'd like to send; proud of his prose until I change imply to infer. Flight Lt Stan Harding arrives from Vung Tau to sight the Weerep. Brings 20 cans of green, Jock pays him with cash and suitable flattery to ensure future supplies. Stan sniffs pointedly – I haven't cleaned my pipe for a few days.

Message in from Chau Duc. They're short of tucker and will go for re-supply. G2/3 Int informed. TF firm plans changed. Speak with Stan Bryant, OC Div Int Det awhile then we make up a foot patrol with a group of Sigs, Int and Stan Harding. Check for possible routes; find old, raw rice on trail between Hoa Long and our last D/F fix on Chau Duc. This reported to HQ who make plans to include an ambush by 8 RAR there this evening. Missed lunch but missed nothing. Get Jock, Frank and Ross Hutton and talk about new radio configuration for Porter. Last time we saw 'contractors' in Vung Tau, they guaranteed not to drill many holes and to ensure compatibility with our D/F and speech security equipment. Jock raises concern antenna for radio; the one for PRC -77 probably a mismatch. If so, will have to get help from 161 or fabricate ourselves. We fix a date with 161 for Porter to go for fitting. Jock and/or Ross to go down tomorrow and see if date convenient for 'Air America' Engineer. If delayed, arrange to stay overnight at 553 CIA Cell near Grand Hotel. No. 2 'rover repaired and remaining 2 Duffa flights no problems. Morning flight against D445 fixed him within 200metres; The Red Baron has done it again. R&F Club want to ask for beer 'on the quiet' from 110 Sqn. Forget it!

Check Comcen. Frank and Clarrie making adjustments. Many breakdowns but I still get first class service. A KW-3 a bit iffy; needs an exchange at Comsec, Tan Son Nhut. Frank (The Saigon Tiger) keeps his bag ready under a bench in Tech Maint; he is said to hold the Unit record of social activity in Saigon. WO2 material. HJ gives a rundown on Op progress. Items for briefing Commander, Sheldrake et al, will be fixes on 445, Long Dat, Ba Long and 274 plus the text of Chau Duc's coming foray (no doubt into Hoa Long as usual). Set room still like an oven. An air-con would go well there. A Yank Ssapper of some rank had guaranteed Jock that he'd provide and install one. His price: one Australian SLR. Out of our range, Sgt Bilko. Rover drops me at Cell on way to pick up Lloyd Giles after his Duffa run. There is aircon here (for the equip) and it blasts me as John Kaarsberg opens the door. Computer going OK again but Norm and Combat say no results of great consequence today. Despite tech problems with Cell, it turns up a variety of enemy stations and the paddocks in which they operate leaving ARDF to go and locate exactly what spots in the paddocks. Outside, one KVA a bit cranky, not so Ken Peterson sweating with his shovel, tidying up their weapon pit; Kev had a letter from home, says his family all doing great.

Rover RTUs and Gilesy's results are computed and collated by Duffa Wing while HJ frets. Result jotted down beside those of Jim Danskin and Harry Lock, then off goes HJ to give

today's briefing. Our wall map brought up to date with Loyd's fix and 8 RAR ambush location. HJ returns to Blue Room. Doggie Brown, 'Your shout, Sir.' 'I rather thought it might be.' Instead, we shower and go to Mess. Tom Oldham, G3, has an interest in PRD-1. Tell him, it's great in the desert, very poor in rain forest. I join Civil Affairs and 2 guests, Taiwanese experts, who hope to get three crops of rice annually here. Is there enough space between the bomb craters? Deputy Comd, now friendly, joins us. 'Practising your Chinese?' I hadn't been, but now forced to expose my rotten accent. Check boots for mud before entering mess tent for dry turkey and sickly sauce. After meal, join DAAG at bar, ask about Air Force Awards for other than 161 personnel. Reply discouraging; so is his wngo for me to be Court Martial Board member next week in Vung Tau – charge of attempted murder (fragging) at the reinforcement unit. HJ disappears when I propose he go instead. DAAG disabuses me – HJ hasn't had CM experience. What a good chance to get some! No way.

Brig engrossed with G2 Int and an ARVN Colonel. I'm beckoned; asked about B65 Sapper Battalion. Am chary of this Colonel; B65 is only a 'could-do'; too many 'must do' and 'should do' ahead of him so don't know where he is. Ask around! Check with Kevin Condon. Long Binh - nothing known. Return, but Brig now with CO 8 RAR and lost interest in B65. – ARVN info so often suspect. Set Room still go-go even though fewer operators than on days. John Gehle spins right knob, writes, spins left one and keeps going, pauses and cocks head aside. Then the Pope swears at set, cajoles some sender, writes and shouts, 'Outstation on 4845. Bewdy!' Ashtrays heaped up, mugs half full of tea, log sheets and carbons flutter in breeze from fans but shirts, ears and hands awash with sweat. Three positions away, Dennis Dean yells, "He's down. Thank Christ!" Deano puts his pen down, stretches; a mouthful of tea, a grimace then stands up. Seat of trousers soaked in sweat. Rod Spragg from Comcen, cadging a cuppa, asks him if he is incontinent, but in less elegant terms. 'Pissorf, Spraggie!' Dennis starts to top and tail messages. Ross emerges from behind sets with a soldering iron and co-ax. 'I wish you bloody Operators weren't so ham-fisted.' Desy Williams retorts with the 547 War-cry, 'ArgettyDuppyah, Rosco!' Spraggie leaves and Bill Pollock comes soon after looking for me. Message from Bien Hoa ref the 3 Yank Chopper pilots here today. One shot down near Tay Ninh, died later. Cypher gear safe. Brian comes to the Set Room; he is immaculately spruced up in a U.S. flying suit. Paul Stock asks, 'What's with the overalls Sir? Going to work under the Landrover?'

I go to Comcen to read the text then chat with the pair. Bill, our only Nasho, impressed by his Regular colleagues, may join them. Go to tackle my IN tray. Have to wind up and defer this diary; Errol's words ring true: too time consuming. In nest up behind my chair, Beauregard panics suddenly, sending leaves, twigs, and crap all over desk. Sprints along window top, out door, climbs along power line, disappears into rubber tree. Work party can clean up tomorrow. To Command Post. All quiet so chat with Duty Wallahs. CO 8RAR, Lt Col O'Neil comes in later and glares at me. "

'I know you. Where did we meet?' 'At a Monday arvo Commander's Briefing, Sir.' Like a chicken I lie but he accepts it. Actually we'd met in Enoggera where I had to tell him, Offrs and Senior's that his Battalion's Comms were too insecure for service against the VC.

At 2100, Acting Sgt ic Ambush radios in that large party allowed to pass his ambush and to enter Hoa Long; then radio silence but CP suddenly noisy as runners dispatched, everyone

busy. Noisiest is the CO 8 RAR who threatens to strip the A/Sgt among other things, for not springing his ambush. I go to mess, drink with Russell? ... (Bomb Disposal Offr). At 2230 check CP, but no news. Request phone call if ambush sprung.

Call wakes me at 0400. Coffee, cigar then rouse HJ with news 18 KIA, no friendly KIA/WIA, at Hoa Long ambush. I'm heading off to check for comm equip docus, freqs, callsigns, names, anything useful to us missed by other checkers. On way, ponder on the remarkable complexities of skills and efforts of 38 blokes that make up 547s contribution, not just this one success, but to all the other successes as well. This morning's battle won't rate much of a mention in the Monthly Return to MI8. Routine stuff.

To the left of the Nui Dinh, a piccaninny dawn heralds another normal day in Nun Data.

GLOSSARY

1. 2ic; Second in Command; unit strength was 2 officers and 38 other ranks.
2. Short Cell; Its function is clarified later in the Diary.
3. VC Development involved the demanding skills of finding and copying enemy target transmitters with their outstations all of which changed callsigns often, frequencies sometimes every few minutes. Enemy radios outside our area were reported to US Allies.
4. Task force reaction, e.g. 547s Dev in 1966 found the new boy on the block (275 Main Force Regiment), reaction to which has been described in Sept 1999 Newsletter.
5. 7 Sigs; Our parent Regiment supported for decades by MI8, Ken Whyte and Colin Cattanach, the Regt's big picture professionals.
6. Some stores were of such importance that they were under strict control of the General Staff.
7. PXs; US Canteens, out of bounds to all except US forces and cunningly disguised Diggers.
8. 10-KVAs; 3 generators on loan to 547 for 6 months over the previous few years.
9. CO's Hour; A time for troops to voice their problems privately to Officers.
10. Piastre and Ba-Muoi-Ba; Vietnamese currency and beer respectively.
11. 110 [Signal] Sqn; Des Overstead's unit in Vung Tau providing long distance, and international, communications.
12. Sunset/Dawn Choppers; 9 Sqn RAAF took their Huey helicopters to Vung Tau each evening for security and maintenance; they returned early to Nui Data each morning.
13. Duffa; Nickname for Aerial Radio Direction Finding [ARDF].

14. 161 [Recce] Flight; The friendly Australian Army Aviation unit which flew our D/F Specialists and equipment close to, and over, enemy HQs when active. Pilots under control of our Operators, had to react rapidly and be every bit as daring as the Operators.
15. Ba-Long; Viet Cong HQ Baria-Long Khanh who ran the enemy local provincial units.
16. Cans; Earphones.
17. 155 mm H&I-US howitzers. Friendly Artillery conducted Harassing and Interdicting fire, random shots lobbed about where friendly forces were not operating.
18. Norm Gilbert, ic Short Cell, competing with ARDF, declared he'd 'never deign to fly with them'
19. 104; Task force Signal Squadron which ran 'Ebony', Nui Dat's switchboard.
20. MPC; Military Payment Certificates in lieu of Allied currencies to counter the black market. (Best warnings of an imminent MPC change came from Mama Sans of Hostess Bars who were said to be notified by the VC.)
21. Kosher; Security cleared.
22. KY-38; Voice scrambler for the PRC-77.
23. 'Emu'; Vung Tau telephone codename.
24. Whites and Greens; Cans of Carlton and Victoria Bitter beers respectively.
25. QRM; Interference from other radio users.
26. ARVN; Army of the Republic of Vietnam.
27. PRC-77; The standard Army low-powered transceiver.
28. [Pilatus] Porter; Light Aircraft with many roles also by 161 and 547 for Direction Finding.
29. 'Contractor'; In this case, the US CIA's Air America.
30. SAL; Showers Ablutions and Latrines.
31. II FFVLO; Second Field Force Victor, Liaison Officer.
32. Colonel Joe (Ulatosky) – much loved Commander of 3 Brigade, 25 US Infantry Division; he used our information with good results, visited and praised us unsparingly.
33. Loach; A one-pilot, one-passenger helicopter.
34. D455 (Battalion); Enemy Ba-Long's dominant fighting force which we respected highly. Reported as 'wiped out' many times, he always resurfaced. (547 once recovered this Battalion HQ long-wire antenna).
35. QRX; Radio code for Close down.
36. Luscombe Field; The fixed-wing airstrip for Nui Dat.
37. Stan Harding; RAAF Intelligence Officer and colleague from Central Bureau days.

38. Chau Duc; An enemy District Guerilla Company whose stamping grounds were the nearby Nui Dinh and Nui Thi Vai hills, and the Chau Duc Valley, east and northeast of Nui Dat.
39. G2/G3 Int; The two Staff Officers (intelligence) at Task Force HQ.
40. 553Cell; US 2-Officer, secured compound where we obtained limited information on the enemy (and local watering holes) also a bunk for a 15-piastre sheets laundry fee.
41. The Grand Hotel; Rest and Convalescent Venue for Australian Officers (where, it is said, twelve French Officers had had their throats cut one night by the then Viet Minh.)
42. KW3; Telegraph security equipment.
43. Comsec; US Communications Security unit which exclusively controlled speech and telegraph security gear, located at Tan Son Nhut, Saigon's Airport.
44. Shelldrake; Task Force senior artillery officer.
45. Long-Dat; Enemy Long Phuoc-Dat Do Guerilla Company, ensconced in the Long Hai Hills. 274 was one of two North Vietnamese Army Main Force Regiments in our area, the other being 275 which never fully recovered after The Battle of Long Tan.
46. SLR; Self Loading Rifle cal 7.62 which replaced the Lee Enfield .303 in the 1950s.
47. Blue Room; The 6 square-metre space with small fridge used by Senior Ranks for debriefing.
48. PRD-1; High frequency Direction Finder.
49. DAAG; Senior Admin Officer at Task Force HQ.
50. Wngo; Warning Order.
51. Kevin Condon; Civilian, highly professional Liaison Officer from Australia's Defence Signals Directorate and a great friend of 547. He wore a GI uniform without rank and operated out of 303 Radio Research Battalion, 547's US operational control at Long Binh.
52. John Gehle copying down Control traffic from right set/earphone while searching for, and locating, spectrum-roving outstations promptings from the left set/earphone.
53. Bien Hoa; The large US Base of which Long Bing formed a small part.
54. Beauregard; Claimed by 547 as our unit mascot, this haughty mongoose mellowed enough to tolerate the Troop in its territory most of the time.