

Visit to 547 Signal Troop

By Ron Estes, USASAPAC, US Army



AO	Area of Operation
TDY	Temporary Duty Assignment
USASAPAC	United States Army Security Agency, Pacific
ARDF	Airborne Radio Direction Finding
	Single Station Locator (aka 'The Cell')
SSL	See 'Pronto in South Vietnam 1962-1972, Chapter 5' for details
AFB	Air Force Base
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
VC	Viet Cong
Blue Room	Secret boozier in the 547 compound
Pucker Factor	Pilot in bad situation will 'Pucker' his arse and pray!

In September, 1970, as a young First Lieutenant, I was on a TDY trip from Headquarters, USASAPAC, to 547 Signal Troop at the Australian base camp at Nui Dat, South Vietnam. The purpose of my mission was to take a look at the newly developed Australian Radio Direction Finding System known as SSL, or "the Cell." SSL was state of the art at that time. I landed at Tan Son Nhut AFB, and spent the first day at the Radio Research Field Station at Bien Hoa. It was my first trip to the Republic of Vietnam. The next morning I flew down to Nui Dat. After a busy and eventful trip from Bien Hoa (Red Carpet Pad) to Nui Dat (Luscombe Field), and a warm welcome, complete with a fair amount of beer drinking, I arose the following morning to the sound of a light aircraft over the Luscombe Field. I walked over where I could see better, and an Aussie NCO, also watching, said to me, "say mate, aren't you the Yank who is down from Bien Hoa." "Yes," I replied, and then remarked about the flying ability of the pilot in the plane, which it was easy to see was excellent. The NCO then launches into a long technical discourse regarding the aircraft, a PC-6 Porter, and its characteristics and airworthiness. Then he said, "by the way, according to the technical specs, the Porter's airframe will break in half if it is flown through a loop." While we were talking, he pilot above was putting on quite an aerobatics show. He was diving, then climbing up into a loop, which he had not been able to complete to that point. He continued to try again, and again, and again. A very persistent young pilot. About the time the NCO told

me the aircraft would break in half if it were flown through a loop, the pilot zooms skyward and finally completes a beautiful full loop. With a very serious demeanour, the Aussie NCO looks at me and says, "by the way Mate, that is your pilot this afternoon." It created a low level pucker factor.



Left - PC-6 Porter at Nui Dat Right - View from the aircraft over the mission area

The mission itself was fairly uneventful, over a rubber plantation north of Nui Dat. I immediately noticed that the only armament consisted of one M-16 rifle, and one ammo can of M-16 clips. I was armed with a borrowed government issue M1911 45 cal. pistol, and only one clip of ammo. Being reasonably intelligent, I figured if we were shot down, the 45 was to shoot myself with. While taking some pictures, I noticed puffs of smoke rising from the jungle below. Suddenly it struck me that it was an artillery strike, and this was a for real deal. About the same time, I realized that we were flying low enough to be in range of small arms fire from the ground. The pucker factor increased a few more points.



The Cell (SSL) at Nui Dat near the end of Luscombe Field

Just before we were to return to base, a VC manual morse operator came up, and we began to fly a series of ARDF lines. At the end of the run, the pilot would dive into a tight banking turn, and come back on his straight line of flight. I think we flew the line from point to point

four or five times. By the time we were finished, I was sicker than hell....but not about to upchuck on an allied aircraft. Needless to say I didn't want much beer that evening. There was a U.S. Army Staff Sergeant along on the flight, to "escort" me I suspect. He quickly jumped into the co-pilot's seat before we took off, leaving me the seat in the rear with the ARDF operator. Since then I follow his lead when flying small planes. Of course I didn't have a flaming clue what the operator was actually was doing, but I can assure you that he was real busy. He was a short stocky fellow with red hair and freckles if I remember correctly. The experience gave me increased respect for the men who flew the ARDF missions. They were dedicated professionals who were definitely in harm's way.

I remember the Blue Room very well. It was the watering hole, complete with some very interesting pictures on the wall. I have a photograph of the front door somewhere. That evening we had mess with a large group of officers at what was probably the 104 Signal Squadron mess hall. The next day we drove down to the the SSL site and looked it over. I sketched the antenna configuration for my boss back at ASAPAC after I left your AO. My Australian hosts were superb. Major Malcolm Raymond was my official host. He was a delightful fellow, and made me feel very welcome. I received a Christmas card from him back in the 1970's, but I have long since lost contact with him.

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