

THE EARLY DAYS IN AN OPERATOR SIGNALS DUTIES

(Extract from: Barry Hampstead's "547 Signals Troop in South Vietnam Deployment, Early Days and the lead-up to Long Tan The Soldiers' Perspectives")

The First Day: The operators enter the 'set room' (tent) and are assigned their positions. Each position is equipped with two HF radio receivers. There is a rudimentary antennae selection switch for each position or 'bank' and a headphone jack with the facility to listen to both sets at once or the left or right hand set in both earphones. Radio logs and message pads are piled high near each position. Operators ready their 'biros' and flex their fingers; headphones are settled comfortably. They're ready to go. As sets are switched 'ON' from Standby, frequencies and antennae selected, BFOs (beat frequency oscillators) zeroed and adjusted and volume levels set, the ops begin to 'log' anything they hear - noting the time of activity and frequency usage of each morse station logged. Assisted by a supervisor and with input from an Int Corps analyst, the ops are quickly advised of what is of interest and what is not - keeping in mind that they can also hear radio transmissions emanating from well outside the Troop's area of interest.

The operators are copying anything and everything: call signs, chatter, procedure and traffic. The operators, having picked up what looks like VC activity, will be searching on their second sets to try and find the control or outstation of the station to whom they have been listening. This is the sort of operating skill which sorts the wheat from the chaff. In time it will become second nature to all Troop operators but in the beginning, as they accept this new challenge, they work as a team - just as they have been doing for years - helping and encouraging each other because they knew how important their job is. This is not the place for any individual 'stars'; this is plain hard teamwork and their professionalism shines through.

Day Two and Beyond: Days pass and gradually, though not without difficulty because the American information is so old, identifications of various enemy elements are made. The Troop, as previously mentioned, has been apprised as to what units are said to be operating in Phuoc Tuy with emphasis applied to the comms of HQ VC 5th Light Infantry Division and its subordinate formations - the VC 274th Regiment and the VC 275th Regiment plus D445 (the VC Local Force Battalion) and ancillary elements. All are prime targets. The 547 operators can expect to be kept on their toes.

The VC (or at least the stations in which the troop has an interest), don't use plain language. Stations sending 4 & 5 short figure groups of traffic are worth a listen - the four or five figure groups are sent using the Short Figure Check (SFC) No 9 cut where A = 1, U = 2, D = 8, N = 9 and T = 0 with other numerals sent in full. One thing's for sure, there's plenty of activity. Note: 4 figure traffic was the type most copied.

And so it goes. There is a gradual 'sorting out' of what is on the air. The ops have to learn to distinguish the sound of the VC transmitters, to learn the VC method of operation, to get used to the vagaries of the VC operators, to put in long hours in a hot, uncomfortable environment and they thrive on it. It is an intense and hugely interesting experience and it will continue over the days, weeks and months ahead.