



## **CHAPTER 5 – SPECIALIST SIGNALS**

### **PART 2 – DETACHMENT 152 SIGNAL SQUADRON**

#### **Introduction**

Members of the Royal Australian Corps of Signals (RA Sigs) have a long history of involvement with Special Forces because of the critical role good communications plays in the success of any special force operations. With the forming of the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Air Service (SAS) Company in 1957, Corps members were sourced along with other specialist skills within the Army to help develop the SAS in Australia. The Australian SAS was modeled on the British SAS and the company included a Signal Platoon as part of its establishment.

In September 1964 the SAS Regiment was formed consisting of a Regimental Headquarter, two SAS Squadrons and a Base Squadron. In April 1965 a third SAS Squadron was approved. The first operational deployment was 1 SAS Squadron to Borneo in February 1965, which included a small SAS signals element. In 1966, 2 SAS Squadron replaced 1 SAS Squadron in Borneo. Borneo played an important role for the Regiment and developed its communication skills for its later squadron deployments to South Vietnam - it enabled the SAS to overcome communications weakness in the use of ground waves, morse code and One Time Letter Pad (OTLP) codes.

On the 31 August 1966, the RA Sigs component of the SAS Regiment was expanded to become 152 Signal Squadron, with Captain Ross Bishop as its first commander.

#### **Deployment to South Vietnam**

In March 1966 the Prime Minister, Harold Holt, announced the increased commitment to South Vietnam of an Australian Task Force. Included in this commitment was a SAS Squadron.

Unlike other Australian Army personnel, SAS members did not do jungle warfare training at Canungra but did special training exercises in New Guinea. The first Exercise Traim Nau in April/May 1966 prepared 3 SAS Squadron and its Signal Troop for service in South Vietnam.

The main body of 3 SAS Squadron flew from Perth to Saigon on a chartered Qantas Boeing 707 on the 15 June 1966. Included in the Squadron were members of 152 Signal Squadron as a 3 SAS Squadron Signal Troop, commanded by Sergeant Daryl Croucher. From Saigon the SAS Squadron arrived in Nui Dat via Vung Tau on the 17 June 1966.





## Setting Up at Nui Dat

The SAS Squadron on arrival at Nui Dat was allocated positions on the Nui Dat perimeter facing Hoa Long but after a few weeks were moved to an area near 103 Sig Sqn. After digging in and a few days to acclimatize, SAS patrols commenced using vintage A510 Radio Sets until batteries and crystals were located for the AN/PRC-64 Radio Sets. Deficiencies in the signals equipment restricted communications, which included shortages of AN/PRC-64 batteries and AN/URC-10 Radio Sets, and of all things no OTLP codes.

A visit to US 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group at Nha Trang by the OC, Major John Murphy helped the SAS Squadron when AN/PRC-64 batteries and three AN/PRC-47 Radio Sets were obtained.

SAS did not move onto Nui Dat Hill until 3 SAS Squadron was replaced by 1 SAS Squadron and its detachment of RA Sigs members from 152 Signal Squadron in March 1967. From that time, the task force soldiers affectionately knew Nui Dat Hill as SAS Hill.

## SAS Communications



Photo 5-2.1 (left) – AN/PRC-64 HF Radio Set



Photo 5-2.2 (right) - R-391/URR HF Receiver

Because of the nature of SAS patrols, the usual means of communication from a patrol to the base at Nui Dat was HF radio. The highly reliable, lightweight AN/PRC-64 radio used only in the CW mode was normally the patrol equipment operating to an R-391/URR receiver and AN/PRC-47 radio at the base. Patrols operating close to Nui Dat also used the VHF AN/PRC-25 Radio Set however it took up a lot of pack space and rations plus water had to be split up amongst the other patrol members. An adaptor was sometimes fitted to the AN/PRC-25 radios, which enable the patrol signaller to transmit to base in morse code while the base station could reply in





voice. Many of the SAS patrols included 152 Signal Squadron members, normally of course, in the patrol signaller role.



Photo 5-2.3 – L-R Pte Geoffery Hannaford, Sig Doug Abbott, Sgt Ronald Gilchrist, L/Cpl Allan (Jim) Gallegos and Pte Neville (Harry) Rossiter preparing for a Patrol in 1970



Photo 5-2.4 – SAS COMM-CEN - L-R L/Cpl Robert Taylor, Sig John Dodd, Sig Wayne Mason, Sig Eric Barnett and Sig Kym Paull. The first four Sigs are on radio watch for SAS Patrols and the last is manning the unit switchboard 'Envoy' (1971).

The patrol normally had two routine signal schedules in code using OTLP to keep each day, and these were at different times for each patrol out on operations. This allowed the base station manned by the SAS 152 Signal Squadron operators at Nui Dat to deal with only one or two patrols at any one time and provided for an orderly





flow of traffic. The SAS 152 Signal Squadron operators manned the base station COMMCEN 24 hours a day for scheduled and non-scheduled traffic while ever SAS patrols were deployed.

Communications to the base station at Nui Dat were often poor as the patrol, generally, was unable to erect more than a low random length of wire as an antenna for the small HF Radio, so communication difficulties were experienced in the more remote areas of Phuoc Tuy Province. It was not unusual for the first or subsequent attempts to receive no response, requiring a reorientation of the antenna or even a complete change of location by the patrol to a new lay up position (LUP).

During 1968 and later there were many experiments conducted to improve communications for SAS patrols. One was the use of a tethered balloon, which could lift two AN/PRC-25 radios in a retransmission configuration. A special 'on loan' high angle log periodic antenna (LPH-17) was installed in 1968 on Nui Dat Hill for SAS HF communications. In addition two man detachments of SAS signals were deployed late in 1967 and most of 1968 to monitor and relay patrol communications back to Nui Dat. Detachments were located with the US Advisors at Xuyen Moc and Duc Thanh plus occasionally on VC Hill depending on the location of the patrols. The signal detachments would be for 2 weeks or until no longer needed.



Photo 5-2.5 (left) – Preparing the SAS VHF Retransmission Balloon at Nui Dat Hill  
L-R Sig Allen Mulhall and Sig Richard Gray (1969).

Photo 5-2.6 (right) – Checking the SAS Model LPH-17 Antenna base on Nui Dat Hill  
L-R Sgt David Lawson and 2Lt Peter Fitzpatrick (1968)





### Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol Wing

Many SAS members including Signals were involved in training and patrolling with ARVN soldiers from the Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) Wing at Van Kiep, near Baria. Members of the AATTW mostly ex SAS Warrant Officers ran the wing and SAS plus signal techniques were taught. Many of the Vietnamese Chieu Hoi students end up as 'Kit Carson Scouts' – forward scouts for American patrols after their training was completed.



Photo 5-2.7 – Sig Gary McDonald in front of E Troop after returning from a Patrol (1971)

### Summary

The SAS Squadron was a vital element in the intelligence gathering process for the task force and worked on the intelligences gained by 547 Signal Troop (See Part 1 of





this chapter) for the commander. The specialised communications available to SAS through its detachment of 152 Signal Squadron enabled it to function in a most unorthodox and sometimes almost incredible fashion, patrols being inserted and extracted in the midst of enemy units, and communicating information as they acquired it. It is good reason the VC came to call them 'Ma Rung'.

