



CHAPTER 6 - ACTION IN 1968

The Enemy's Aim

North Vietnam had the strategic aim to win at the Paris peace talks what was not being won militarily - ousting the United States and taking over South Vietnam. To strengthen her bargaining position she needed a victory capable of psychological exploitation on the world scene. Saigon was the obvious target.

From early May 1968, enemy forces were committed to heavy sustained action to the west, north west and north of Saigon with the aim of disrupting normal activity in Saigon and rendering government control impossible. The enemy committed a total of 11 main force regiments in the attacks against Saigon, including Cholon, and nearby areas.

The Phu Tho Incident

Phu Tho was a military compound on the road between the Saigon racecourse and the Tan Son Nhut airport. It housed in February 1968 the 110 Signal Squadron Headquarters and the HF transmitting station providing the rear link to Australia. Also in the compound were some US administrative units.



Photo 6.1 (left) - One of the Phu Tho compound guard towers under construction (March 1968)



Photo 6.2 (right) - Main 110 Signal Squadron Phu Tho bunker under construction (March 1968)

Although not directly threatened by the actions in the North Vietnamese Tet offensive early in 1968, it became obvious after this event that the area at Phu Tho could be threatened in any future offensives in the Saigon area. Its defensive capability was virtually non-existent. The perimeter consisted of a high single barbed wire fence,





which only served to prevent the neighboring refugee camps from encroaching further on the compound. This fence was only erected after the refugees had occupied the area of the rear guy wires for the 102 foot masts supporting both the rhombic and V antennas. The compound did have a number of watch towers which were manned at night by unit duty personnel and a detachment of 6 from the 1 ATF unit tasked on a cyclic basis as Defence Detachment.

After the Tet offensive the immediate action taken was to complete the installation of a reserve HF transmitter in the 110 Signal Squadron area at Vung Tau. In late March and early April 1968 intelligence reports indicated a threat of another offensive on Saigon. The squadron had initiated the development of a defensive area at Phu Tho by the construction of a smaller compound around the unit's area to include the hardening of the watch towers in the area, defensive wire fences and the construction of a number of bunker positions.

In April 1968 Commander AFV (Major General A.L. McDonald) visited the area and after a briefing and a tour ordered the cancellation of all stand down leave until the Phu Tho defences as planned were doubled. This was completed for the first red alerts in the latter half of April 1968. By the 5 May 1968 no alerts existed and just the normal duty team of a sergeant and 5 other ranks from the Squadron plus the infantry detachment of a Corporal and 5 remained at Phu Tho overnight.

At about 0600 hours on 6 May 1968 a Viet Cong force reached the north west corner of the compound then moved through the houses on the north of the compound. Helicopter gunships engaged the force and it was eventually halted by an ARVN force. No direct action was taken by the VC against the compound during this move, but during their withdrawal a small amount of fire was directed at the compound without inflicting any casualties.

When the first contact occurred at 0600 hours, the total duty staff of the US transport compound in Phu Tho appeared in the 110 Signal Squadron inner compound, including one man in a state of shock. The Duty Signals NCO had to thus find additional protected locations. These were constructed out of steel trunks and cement bags from the Q store.

An aerial reconnaissance by Captain Ian Willoughby in a borrowed helicopter ruled out the possible insertion of additional troops into the area by air, because of ground fire. Also the problem of providing a landing zone in an area containing nested rhombic and sloping V antennas, so two landrovers were used to insert additional troops into the Phu Tho compound.

As the battle proceeded between the VC and the ARVN in the village to the north of the compound a number of explosions occurred just outside the compound and some form of explosive projectile struck the unit's shower block just beside the watch tower. The explosions in the village started a fire, which spread quickly along the huts beside the compound. After watching the mast supporting the emergency V





antenna collapse, because its rear guy wire was burnt through, it became obvious that the end mast of the rhombic antenna would also suffer the same fate. The staff at FWMAO, were informed of this situation and a signal was dispatched to Melbourne. As the fire reached the antenna guy wires, the transmitter was closed down and the unit personnel watched as the mast fell. Even though the area was still under hostile fire, a small party from the unit moved out into the antenna field to cut the broken wires of the fallen Type 1 antenna away from the still standing Type 2 of the nested rhombics. This resulted in the circuit being re-established to Melbourne on the one remaining antenna after an outage of only 90 minutes.



Photo 6.3 - Part of Phu Tho compound on fire. Note Antenna (April 1968)



Photo 6.4 - FWMAO Building, Saigon (1968)





During this period the remaining personnel had also been kept busy preventing the fire from destroying the two shelters containing stores or from spreading to the area of the masts supporting the inner rhombic.

The Phu Tho area was cut off from the rest of Saigon for two days during which time the VC were in some parts of the perimeter fence. Small arms fire, mortars, grenades and rockets were all received in the compound during this period.

Within 7 days unit riggers had reconstructed the outer rhombic. However, at this time planning had started to re-locate the transmitters for the rear link to a more secure location.

The AUSTCAN Receiver Station located at Long Binh with US STRATCOM receivers came in for its share of enemy action a few days later. On 11th May 1968 Long Binh was attacked with 120mm rockets. One rocket caused several casualties, including Signalman James Cole of 110 Signal Squadron and some minor damage to the 110 Signal Squadron installation.



Photo 6.5 - Australian Guard at front of Canberra BEQ (1968)

During the second offensive on Saigon in 1968, Signalman John Veall of 110 Signal Squadron was WIA early on the 1st June 1968. After all night fighting in Cholon, near the Canberra BEQ, enemy soldiers were observed moving into buildings close to the BEQ. Some members of 110 Signal Squadron engaged the enemy from the roof of the BEQ and Signalman Veall was shot in the upper arm, in the return fire.

In August 1968, 110 Signal Squadron vacated the Phu Tho compound, the transmitters being re-located to a new hut in the centre of the 1 ATF area at Nui Dat, and the squadron headquarters and Q store moved in with the Vung Tau Detachment.





FSPB Coral

Operations by 1 ATF increased in size and in distance from Nui Dat during 1967. Then during the period 24th January - 2nd March 1968, Operation COBURG was conducted in Bien Hoa Province some 50 kilometres from Nui Dat. It was the most extensive operation independently undertaken by 1 ATF since its arrival in South Vietnam and it involved the main headquarters of 1 ATF being away from its base longer than on any previous occasion.



Photo 6.6 - 104 Signal Squadron reconnaissance group for Operation COBURG. From left - Sig Robert Parkyns, ?, Maj Norm Munro, ?, Sig Geoffrey Molineaux and ? (1968)



Photo 6.7 - 104 and 110 Signal Squadron vehicles at start point Nui Dat for deployment on Operation Toan Thang. Note first truck (2½ ton) AN/MTC-7 and AN/MGC-17 Shelters, second truck (5 ton) AN/MRC-69 Shelter (April 1968)

The lessons learned by 104 Signal Squadron from this operation were put to good use in Operation TOAN THANG 25th April - 5th June 1968. This operation in turn exceeded COBURG in size and distance from Nui Dat (80 kilometres).





Initially 1 ATF operated with two battalions about 15 kilometres east of Long Binh on Highway One in Long Khan Province and one battalion in the Nui Dat area in Phuoc Tuy Province. HQ 1 ATF (Main) was established at a US Army base BEARCAT and the communications were much the same as for Operation COBURG.

On 12th May 1968 major elements of 1 ATF were airlifted into an area north of Saigon eventually to be known as Fire Support Patrol Base CORAL. This was to intercept the movement of 7 NVA Division to Saigon and cut off its withdrawal. The advance party of HQ 1 ATF included Major Norm Munro, now commanding 104 Signal Squadron and 5 other ranks. This TF HQ advance party had to establish a task force headquarters area.

The party was landed some 1500 metres from the proposed headquarters location and so the small signals element had to manpack its equipment which was to operate initially as a substation on the task force command net. This was no mean task as the equipment included an RT-524 radio (the receiver/transmitter of the vehicular borne AN/VRC-12 series VHF equipment), 150 amp hour batteries, 300 watt charger, RC-292 antenna, AN/GRA-39 remote control unit and an AN/PRC-25 radio. It was an effort to prove well worthwhile. Early on the morning of 13th May 1968 the base came under attack from enemy mortar, rocket and small arms fire, causing signals casualties to men and equipment (including the RC-292 antenna). Temporary repairs enabled the radio station to remain operational and it was the means by which Spooky (DC3 aircraft equipped with illumination and six miniguns) and helicopter gunships (Light Fire Teams) were called in to support the units under attack. The FSPB CORAL being partly over-run by the enemy during this action. Signalman Gamble was WIA during the fighting.



Photo 6.8 - Setting up strong point with AN/TRC-24 Antenna in back ground at FSPB (1968)

The main body of 1 ATF arrived later on 13th May 1968 bringing the strength of the signals group to 51 including two 3 man detachments from 110 Signal Squadron and





the 7 man detachment of US 53 Signal Battalion. It began digging in, including bulldozing 2 metre deep holes for the signal centre and VHF radio bunker. Next day an unexpected rain storm flooded the radio bunker swamping most of the radio equipment, but after draining the water out all operated satisfactorily. The signal centre was also flooded but not so badly.

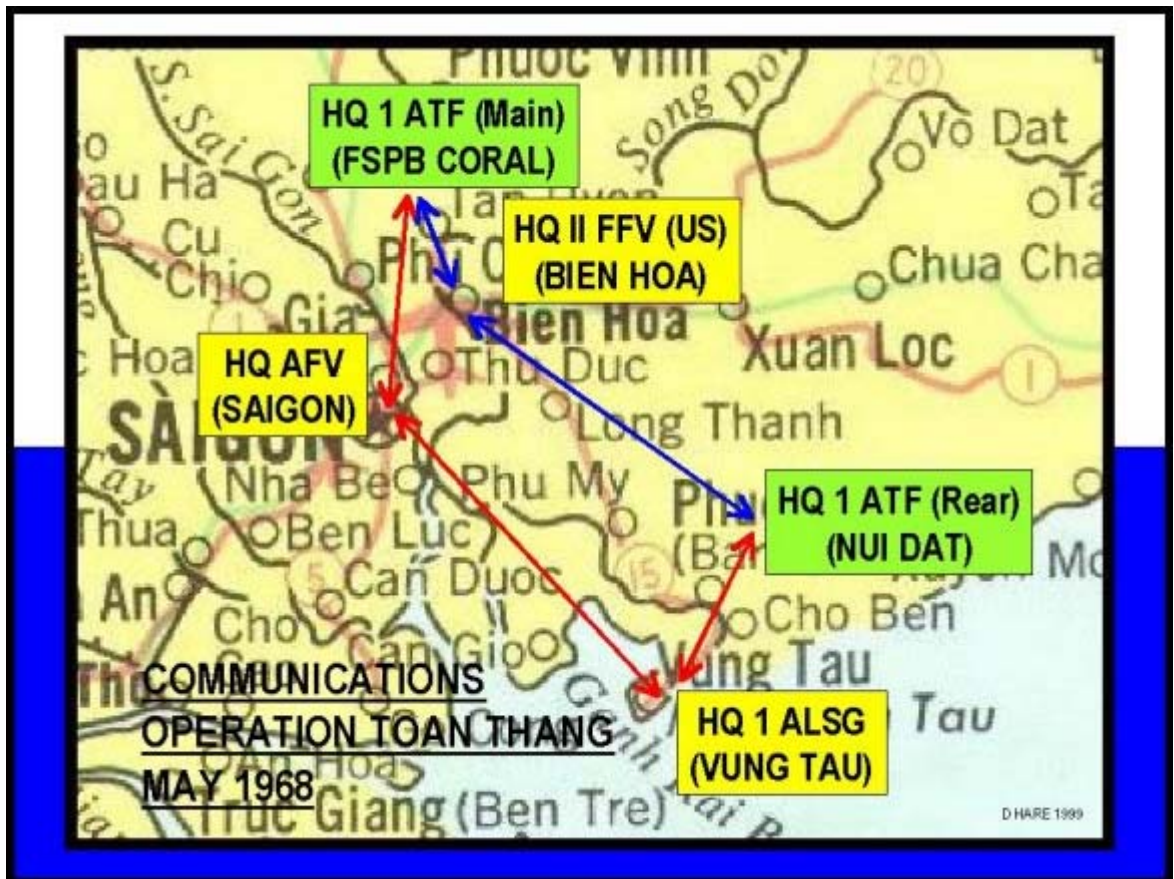


Diagram 6.1 - Communications Operation TOAN THANG (May 1968)

At 0240 hours on 16th May 1968 an NVA regimental attack was launched against FSPB CORAL. It started with 50 minutes of mortar and rocket barrage which included the signals area and was followed up by ground attacks, one enemy party coming within 50 metres of the signals perimeter which was directly protecting the task force command post. The enemy finally broke contact at 0645 hours. Signalman A.H. Young was KIA during this action and two other Signalmen (John Koosache and Ian Crosthwaite) were WIA.

The Deputy Commander of 1 ATF at the time wrote later. ***"For a period of approximately three weeks the task force was exposed to some of the heaviest fighting seen by Australians in Vietnam. Throughout these engagements' and a number of subsequent attacks by fire, the signals squadron not only held their ground but continued to maintain communications"***.





Photo 6.9 (left) - Entrance to 1 RAR CP at FSPB Coral (1968)

Photo 6.10 (right) - Weapons captured at FSPB Coral by 1 RAR - Sig Robert Parkyns M16 Rifle on the pile (1968)

Subsequently FSPB CORAL was developed and new bunkers constructed, radio relay vehicles lowered and bunkered and strong defences developed. Three more mortar/rocket attacks were experienced but damage was limited to soft equipment and exposed cables.

Operation TOAN THANG tested the task force signal squadron under most contingencies likely to arise in the theatre. Whilst maintaining all communications facilities at Nui Dat base, it undertook a deployment from Nui Dat to one field base and from there to another base (CORAL) in an enemy controlled area. It required the provision of the full range of communications facilities available to the squadron, and it involved maintenance of communications whilst under enemy fire. It is a credit to those concerned that at no time was there a loss of command communications. This saved many Australian lives.

It was at the time of the action at FSPB CORAL that 110 Signal Squadron was also most extended. It was operating in 9 locations, including several detachments in support of communications to CORAL, in which 23 men were involved. During this period the availability of the radio relay trunk bearer system to HQ 1 ATF (Main) averaged 97.5%. Again, a highly creditable performance, but this forward communications task of 110 Signal Squadron represented only a small part of all the facilities it had to continue to provide at the same time.





Photo 6.11 (left) - 1 RAR Switchboard (SB-22) at FSPB Coral (1968)

Photo 6.12 (right) - 1 RAR and Radio Detachment (104 Signal Squadron) returning to Nui Dat from FSPB Coral (1968)

Brigadier S.C. Graham, who had commanded 1 ATF during most of 1967, writing later about the mobility of the task force, commented. ***"The battlefield in Vietnam was the whole of South Vietnam and to some extent parts of neighboring countries. Whilst the allied forces involved were large in numbers the actual number of combat troops available and able to meet any kind of contingency over such an area was not large at all. Mobility exploited by communications enabled these troops to meet commitments which units of similar size in World War II or Korea could never have hoped to meet. Intelligence, which depended largely on communications, was good enough to obviate the previously inevitable volume of unproductive activity. Tactical and logistical risks could be taken with the secure knowledge that emergency reinforcement or resupply was always available rapidly if needed. All in all, this sort of situation made the Australian Task Force worth many times its actual size"***.

