



CHAPTER 3 - FORCE SIGNALS (THE BEGINNING)

The Increased Force

Australian Army forces in Vietnam were increased in April 1966 to a task force (1 ATF) of two battalions, with a third battalion added in December 1967, and supporting combat units. The Australian Logistic Support Company that had been in theatre since May 1965 was also expanded to a logistic support group (1 ALSG). A squadron of RAAF Iroquois helicopters, a flight of Caribou transport aircraft and a squadron of Canberra bombers were added to the Australian forces in theatre. The RAN maintained a destroyer on station off Vietnam.

HQ AFV remained in Saigon. 1 ATF was established at Nui Dat, some 65 kilometres from Saigon to the east, whilst 1 ALSG set up at Vung Tau, also 65 kilometres away from Saigon but to the south east (Vung Tau to Nui Dat was about 25 kilometres). The RAAF 2 Squadron operating Canberra tactical bombers, occupied a base at Phan Rang, about 275 kilometres north east of Saigon but the other RAAF units were based at Vung Tau.

145 Signal Squadron

The first elements of force signals, 145 Signal Squadron, arrived in South Vietnam, 1st April 1966. The unit was formed on the 'brick' system and had initially a headquarters and a number of Signal Troops (506, 520, 552 and 581 plus 527 and 709 absorbed into the Squadron) with a total strength of about 165 all ranks.



Photo 3.1 - 145 Signal Squadron at Vung Tau (Back Beach). Note the AN/TRC-24 Antennas (1966).





Major John Bird, Officer Commanding 145 Signal Squadron, had the additional task of Staff Officer Signals at HQ AFV. It was not until March 1967 that Major Dave Commerford was posted as SO Sigs, allowing Major Bird to concentrate on commanding his squadron.

Communications Changes

By June 1966 the Australian signal centre and switchboard at Bien Hoa had been closed and the SDS from Saigon to Bien Hoa ceased.

Telegraph communications were opened over US bearer circuits from HQ AFV to HQ 1 ATF and to 1 ALSG, from 1 ATF to 1 ALSG and from 1 ALSG to the RAAF Communications Centre at Vung Tau.

US Bearers also provided two voice channels from HQ AFV to HQ 1 ATF. A voice channel was established to the 1 ALSG switchboard, code named '**EMU**' and the 1 ATF switchboard '**EBONY**'. These names were unchanged when the switchboards closed more than 6 years later.



Photo 3.2 (left) - Lineman climbing pole (1966).

Photo 3-3 (right) - Lt Brian Stevens, 145 Signal Squadron with pet monkey on VC Hill - AN/MRC-69 in background (1966).

Theatre Communications

The rear link from Saigon to Melbourne continued to provide one secure duplex RTT traffic channel and an insecure engineering channel over the HF SSB circuit.





Availability of the traffic channel in each direction was a little over 21 hours per day, propagation conditions being the major cause of outages.

With the increase in the force being effected it was hardly surprising that the total number of messages handled by force signals (rear link and in-theatre traffic) rose from around 6,000 in January and February 1966 to over 11,000 in May, the rear link accounting for nearly 7,000. It seemed a lot then, but in a few years traffic levels were varying by that much a month with the rear link alone handling an all time record of 38,888 in May 1971.

By July 1966, 145 Signal Squadron had installed VHF radio relay trunks using the AN/MRC-69 Radio Relay system. This interconnected HQ AFV at Cholon to 1 ALSG at Vung Tau via a repeater at VC Hill in the Vung Tau area. Another link from Nui Dat to Vung Tau provided channels from HQ 1 ATF to 1 ALSG and HQ AFV.



Photo 3.4 (left) - 145 Signal Squadron AN/MRC-69 Shelter sandbagged at Vung Tau (1966).



Photo 3.5 (right) - 145 Signal Squadron AN/MRC-69 Shelter sandbagged at Nui Dat Hill (1966).

A daily force Aerial Dispatch Service (ADS) was established using a Sioux helicopter from 161 Recce Flight of 1 ATF. This run included HQ AFV, HQ 1 ATF, 1 ALSG, RAAF Base Operations Centre (Vung Tau) and the US Headquarters II FFV located at Long Binh and having operational control of 1 ATF.

A communications centre was opened at Vung Tau by 581 Signal Troop (part of 145 Signal Squadron) on 7th July 1966. At Nui Dat, the task force signal squadron opened its communications centre, along with cipher, radio, switchboard and SDS services.

On the 28th March 1967 the first signal death occurred, when Signelman B. A. Logan from 145 Signal Squadron (552 Signal Troop) was KIA when an ACV was hit, whilst attached to US 11 ACR on Operation PORTSEA. The search and destroy operation, involving US, South Vietnamese and Australian forces in the most eastern region of Phuoc Tuy Province.



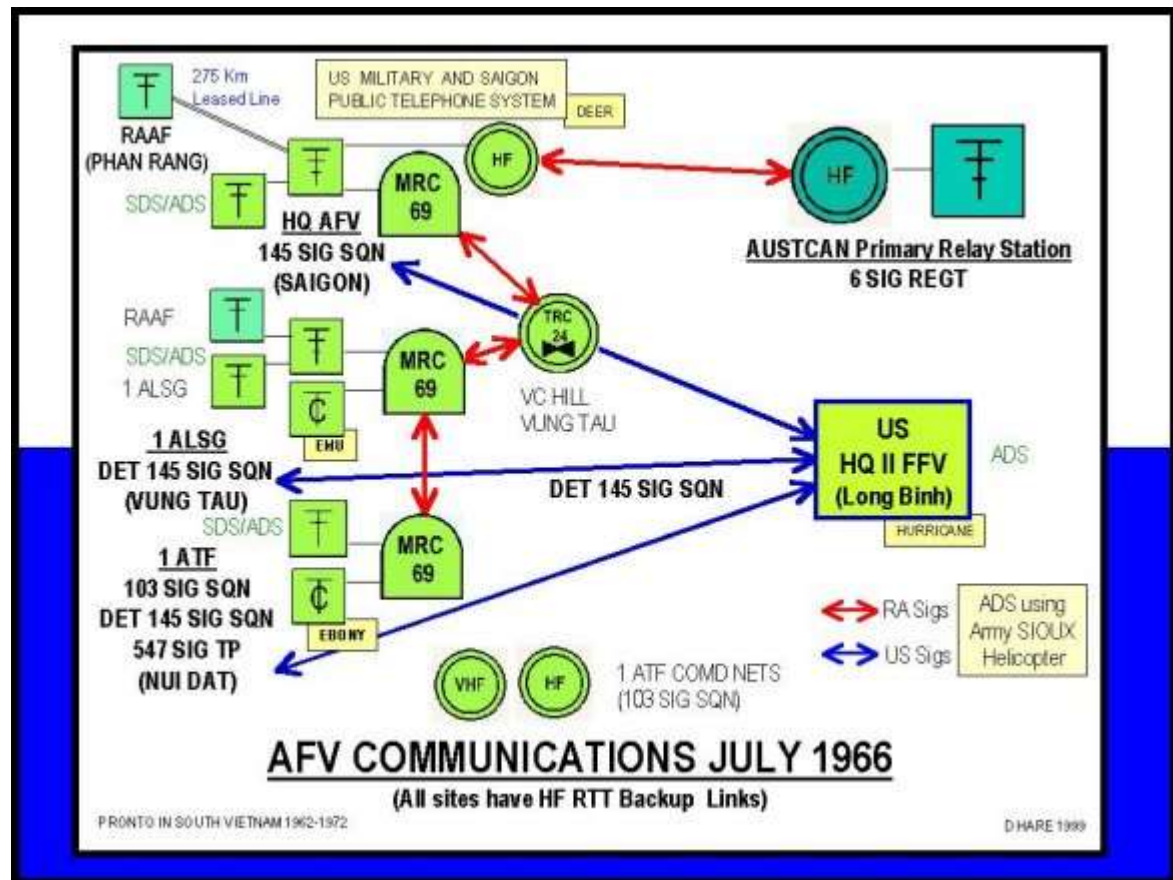


Diagram 3.1 - AFV Communications (July 1966).

110 Signal Squadron

In April 1967 elements of 110 Signal Squadron, commanded by Major Ted Hynes, arrived to begin the relief of 145 Signal Squadron and by May 1967, 110 Signal Squadron had taken over all responsibilities for force signals. This was the last occasion on which unit relief was conducted for RA Sigs units. Individual relief was adopted and unit designations did not change.

With basic facilities established, improvements were installed. By early 1967 a comprehensive system of telegraph and voice channels, with various alternatives, existed over radio relay, line and radio circuits and through the SDS. But the system, including the fixed facilities at Nui Dat, hovered near collapse with marginal radio relay circuits, switchboards being used well beyond the role for which they were designed. Keying lines frequently subject to damage, unreliable generators and overworked battery chargers, insufficient men for all the tasks now required, equipment defects and other difficulties. The SO Sigs and two squadron commanders wondered if they could hold on long enough until the problems were overcome.





Photo 3.6 - Setting up Vung Tau for 110 Signal Squadron (1967).

