



## **CHAPTER 9 - CLOSING DOWN**

### **Relocation of all AUSTCAN links to Vung Tau**

With the national rear link receivers relocated in Vung Tau in late 1969 and the move of the transmitters from Nui Dat to Vung Tau begun in mid-1970, only the Saigon major relay station needed to be moved to concentrate 110 Signal Squadron's major facilities in Vung Tau.

Planning for the move of the MRS was well underway in early 1970. In September the squadron took delivery of six AN/TGC-5AX transmit consoles and six receive/monitor consoles on loan from the US Signal Corps. These were installed in the Saigon MRS in place of the Australian equipment which was then moved to Vung Tau where the old building was being rehabilitated. The squadron undertook the complete change-over and installation from within its own resources and MRS Vung Tau was activated on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1970 while MRS Saigon closed a few days later.

A notable feature of the campaign was the extraordinarily willing assistance received from the US and the good working relationship between the US and Australian Signal Corps. This came through units of US 1 Signal Brigade which operated five Signal Groups throughout Vietnam and Thailand. It was commanded first by Major General Rienzi and later by Major General Foster, Jr. Lieutenant Colonel Robert Cowley on his last day as CSO HQ AFV in January 1971 was surprised by an unannounced and informal visit by the Major General. Major General Foster wished to pay tribute to his work and make a presentation, indicating the esteem in which Lieutenant Colonel Cowley and all members of the Corps were held by the US Signal Corps.

There were delays in completing the transfer of the transmitters and it was not until January 1971 that the installation was complete and operations began from Vung Tau. The station at Nui Dat remained on standby for another month until the last transmitter was moved and then the horizontal log periodic antenna was also relocated in Vung Tau.

The squadron was supported in the upgrading of its horizontal and vertical log periodic antennas at Vung Tau with a rigger team from 127 Signal Squadron. This team, led by Captain Bill Files, had been working on antennas of 9 ANZUK Signal Regiment in Singapore and no doubt found their sojourn in Vietnam a little different.

Much of the technical work in early 1971 was managed by 110 Signal Squadron Supervisor Technical Telecommunications (STT) Warrant Officer Class One Harold Cook. Harold was a veteran of the Second World War and one of the few Australian soldiers to serve in both wars.



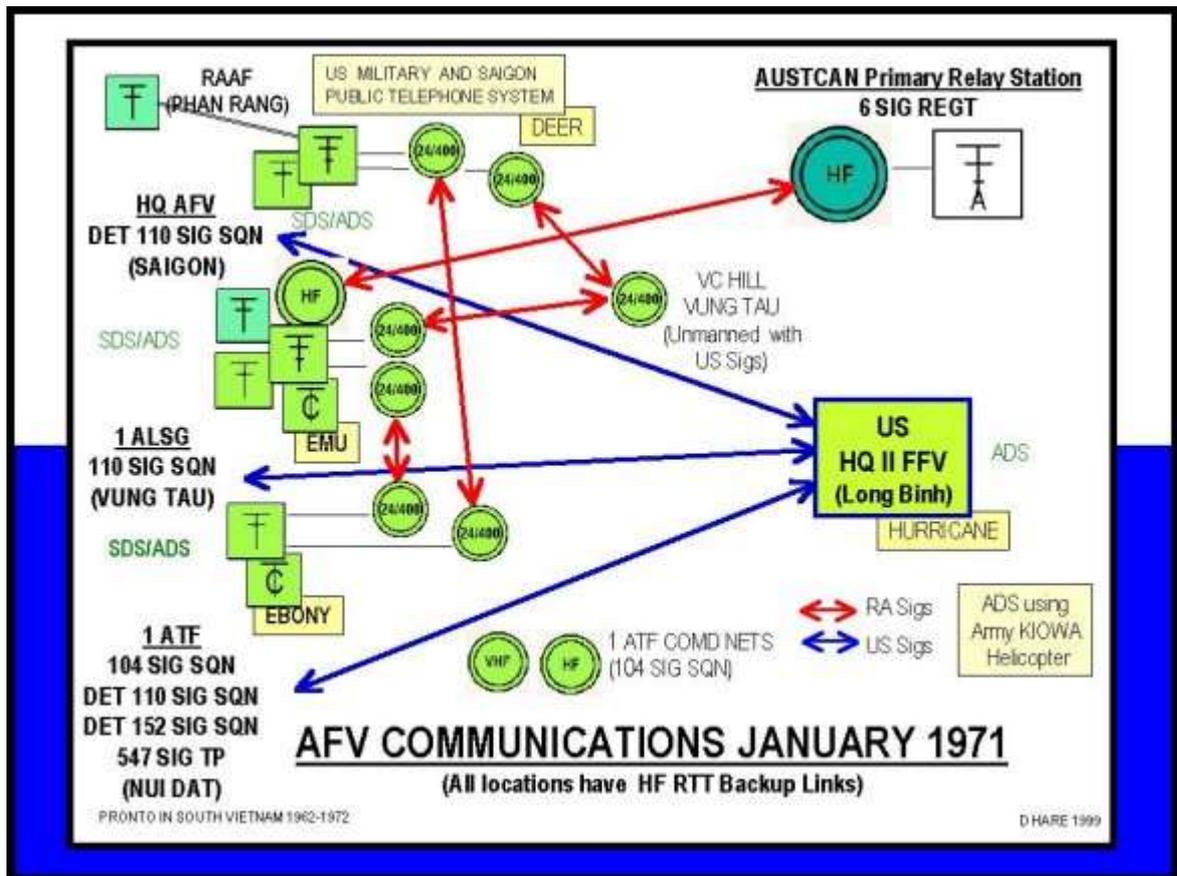


Diagram 9.1 - AFV Communications (January 1971)

By March 1971 US forces were withdrawing steadily and AFV was undergoing similar reductions. Signals units had to make their contribution and most came from 110 Signal Squadron as a result of the relocation of the MRS in Vung Tau. The force reduction had no effect on communications requirements within the force but the load increased. The squadron handled 156,000 messages in May of which 117,800 passed through the MRS, the greatest number ever handled by an RA Sigs MRS in Vietnam.

Circuit availability of the national rear link declined due to propagation conditions and teething problems with the relocated transmitter station and MRS. This caused a continuing dialogue involving HQ AUSTCAN in the Directorate of Signals, CSO AFV, OC 110 Signal Squadron and CO 6 Signal Regiment. The secure telex conference facility provided more than the usual service as a result. By July 1971 a study was being made in Canberra and Saigon to see what alternative circuits might be available.

The monsoon thunderstorms produced more than QRN. In May 1971 a sizeable fireball appeared in the Saigon system control. The CSO, Lieutenant Colonel George Mapson, reported that it ***"proceeded to methodically and maliciously***





***blow all the fuses it could find, diminishing in size as it went, and burning out a Siemens Halske power supply module. Last seen disappearing up a tag strip in the SYSCON it reappeared in AFV COMMCEN where it dissipated itself in an orgy of blown fuses and increased adrenalin."*** QRN is not always as anonymous and abstract as it sometimes appears in outage reports. Unfortunately there is no Q or Z code for 'I have a fireball in my Syscon!'

### **Australian Forces to Withdraw**

On 18<sup>th</sup> August 1971 the Prime Minister announced that the force would be withdrawn. Generally the resulting Plan INTERFUSE required to have the combat elements home by Christmas and as much as the logistic element as was prudent. The signals plan was to maintain the existing communications system as long as necessary and to deactivate it piece by piece as the requirement ceased. Withdrawal of the force through Vung Tau simplified the signals plan.

Perhaps not surprisingly in August the EMU switchboard (Vung Tau) handled an average of 8,000 calls a day - the highest load ever.

### **Closing Down Task Force Communications**



Photo 9.1 (left) - SSgt Kenneth Nicholson, SQMS of 104 Signal Squadron preparing equipment for return to Australia (Aug 1971)



Photo 9.2 (right) - Cpl Raymond Hamerton and LCpl William O'Donnell of 104 Signal Squadron cleaning phones for return to Australia (Aug 1971)

By the end of September 1971 the withdrawal was in full swing with 104 Signal Squadron planning to cease operations by mid-October and 547 Signal Troop relocated on Logan Hill in 110 Signal Squadron's area at Vung Tau. 104 Signal Squadron withdrew with assistance from 110 Signal Squadron; this was not without problems, as many of the assets were fixed and had to be progressively replaced by mobile assets starting some 6 weeks prior to the final evacuation of Nui Dat. The Squadron boarded HMAS Sydney on 6<sup>th</sup> November 1971 to set up its new home in





Ingleburn. It left a special troop to provide tactical communications for 1 ATF which was now in Vung Tau.



Photo 9.3 - Sgt Ken Mackenzie (left doorway) and other members of 104 Signal Squadron stepping on to the flight deck of HMAS Sydney near Vung Tau - VC Hill in back ground (6 Nov 1971)



Photo 9.4 - Members of 104 Signal Squadron on HMAS Sydney (6 Nov 1971)





## Closing Down Force Communications

The alternative rear link was established in October 1971. The final solution was a combination of submarine cable, HF radio links and a number of radio relay systems. It was partly under the control of the US DCA and partly under Australian control. It was a rather marginal link, just acceptable for the low volume of traffic expected.

The HF rear link to Melbourne was closed formally at 0005z 16<sup>th</sup> December 1971. It had been operating continuously for over 6½ years and carried approximately one and three quarter million messages over the longest HF circuit operating from the theatre.

Meanwhile 110 Signal Squadron, with reduced manpower, welcomed the 20% fall in traffic because of the hectic activities which followed in closing down many facilities and packing equipment to be returned to Australia. Again 127 Signal Squadron provided a small detachment to help.

The MRS and Vung Tau was closed 19<sup>th</sup> January 1972 and an MRS opened at Saigon - Hindsight would have been handy as the MRS at Saigon need never have been relocated at Vung Tau!

The EMU switchboard was cut over to an SB-86/PT and then finally closed in February 1972. SDS continued in Vung Tau and Saigon until near the end of February whilst the ADS, using a Kiowa helicopter instead of the previous RAAF Caribou flight, continued until 29<sup>th</sup> February, after the Vung Tau Area COMMCEN closed 0001z 24<sup>th</sup> February 1972.



Photo 9.5 - 110 Signal Squadron flag pole and plaque on Logan Hill, Vung Tau  
Inset Plaque 'LOGAN HILL in memory of 38324 Sig B.A. (Lofty) Logan 145 Sig Sqn KIA 28 Mar 1967'





The last elements of 110 Signal Squadron left Vietnam 12<sup>th</sup> March 1972 and a new era started, but for less than a year, with the Australian Army Assistance Group Vietnam (AAAGV).

**Australian Army Assistance Group Vietnam - Signal Detachment**

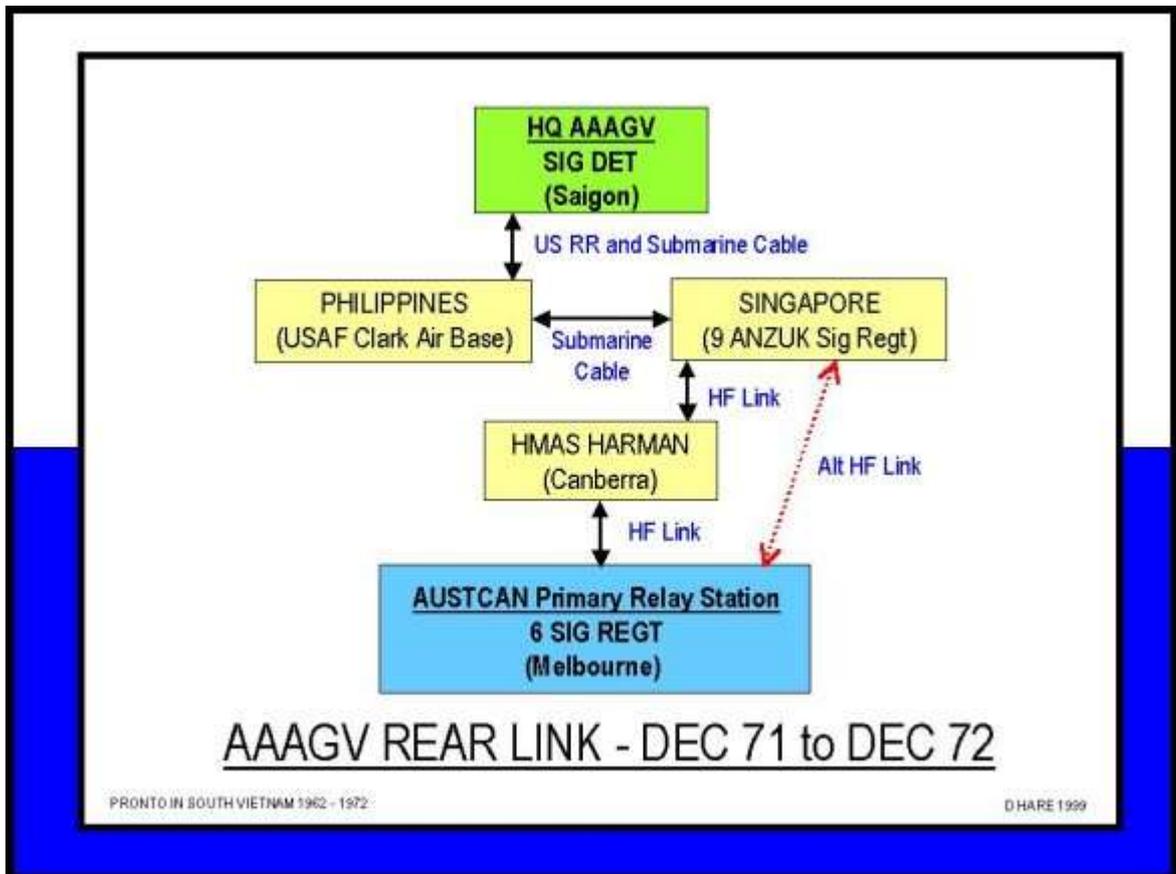


Diagram 9.2 - HQ AAAGV Rear Link (Dec 71 to Dec 72)

Signal personnel manned the AAAGV COMMCEN using three shifts of three (two operators and one technician). The communications back to Australia were very hard to maintain with problems always at sunrise and sunset.

Signalman David Winch detailed an incident with a code change. ***"One time when we met the other end in lowers, with a bloody terrific circuit, we couldn't get the correct card number agreement from the other end. When we finally worked out the people at the other end were not even using the right book we asked who they were - the other end informed us they were the 'American Communication Contingent at the Paris Peace talks in France'. Signalman Reg Napper and I nearly fell over!!! What happened was in the American SYSCON Shelter in Clark, some-one had plugged us into the wrong circuit"***





**Photo 9.6 - Sig Peter Cunnington preparing a message in AAAGV COMMCEN with Sapper Reg Dennis looking at camera - Black curtain behind Peter is offline cipher area with vault and online cipher equipment in same location (1972)**

The detachment maintained communications until 17<sup>th</sup> December 1972, when the Australian circuit was closed and the detachment plus other Australian service personnel were recalled to Australia by the new Labor government.



**Photo 9.7 - Members of AAAGV arriving back in Australia - Sig David Winch wearing the Beret (Dec 1972)**

