

# Task Force Signals in South Vietnam

By Denis Hare, B.E.M.

## Introduction

The concept of Task Force Signals was only developed in the Australian Army in the early 1960's. Before this, Divisional Signals, was designed to support a division and really nothing smaller. 103 Signal Squadron was raised from 1 Signal Regiment manpower and equipment in December 1965 to be the first task force signal squadron for service in South Vietnam. 104 Signal Squadron was raised just before in November 1965 from little to prepare for service in South Vietnam after 103 Signal Squadron's tour was completed.

At this time, the Australian Army signals equipment was the old British design radio systems (C11/R210 and C42/C45) and the Army used British signal procedures. In fact, 103 Signal Squadron only received its new US radio equipment (AN/PRC-25, AN/PRC-47 and AN/GRC-106) about a month before departing for South Vietnam in early May 1966.

The training program was hectic and it was becoming apparent that the role would be larger than the original concept for a task force signals unit. Time ran out and although scheduled for all unit members to attend jungle warfare training at Canungra, only the units dozen or so National Servicemen got the pleasure.

Already in South Vietnam at the time of the task force deployment was the Royal Australian Corps of Signal 709 and 527 Signal Troops, maintaining communications for the 1RAR Group and the rear communications to Australia. At about this time the two troops were absorbed into the newly arrived 145 Signal Squadron to expand the Force Signals role in South Vietnam, the subject of an article on its own. Force signals established at Vung Tau quickly for the preparation for the arrival of the 1 Australian Task Force (1ATF) and the supporting logistics units.

## Setting up

The Task Force occupied what was known as the Back Beach at Vung Tau. Although 103 Signal Squadron had its communication centre fully operational other activities were mainly the deployment of some radio detachments. The squadron became acclimatised and familiar with their very new radios and the US Army signal procedures.

After about a month on Back Beach the Task Force moved up to Nui Dat in Phuoc Tuy Province June 1966. Some of the squadron went in their unit vehicles but mostly movement was by Chinook landing on what was soon to be known as Kangaroo Pad - immediately in front of the squadron's lines, guarded and patrolled by the squadron and its successors for years to come.

Nui Dat was a small hill. A pimple on a large flat area, it offered excellent very high frequency (VHF) radio communications over the area of operations of the task force. Radios were set up on this feature and remotely controlled from the headquarters over more than a kilometre of cable.

The squadron immediately established the VHF voice command net, and the high frequency (HF) radio telegraph net, essentially as envisaged by the unit establishment. The linesmen became possibly the hardest worked men in the squadron (most likely the complete task force) and by June the switchboard 'Ebony' had 56 subscribers.

Vehicle special delivery service (SDS) began with 4 runs a day as soon as the task force occupied Nui Dat. Each run took two Dispatch Riders (DR), because the area was not completely secure and one had to ride 'shotgun'. There was also a DR commitment to the aerial dispatch service (ADS). At the time the two manning DR's were stretched rather thin and the two bicycles did not fully cope with the requirement. In fact, even at this early stage it was apparent that the unit could not cope with its authorised manning and additional personnel were sourced.

The shelter telegraph terminal, AN/MGC-17, did not prove to be as useful as was intended. Both telegraph machines and crypto machines had a high fault rate and the confined space did not allow for a technician to repair some equipment while an operator was using other equipment. Also the AN/MGC-17 did not have the capability for the facilities which quickly became necessary so the equipment was dismantled and set up in a tent.

The first two of the many non-standard radio facilities were needed immediately. One was to the US Army advisors at Baria. The other was to alert the casualty evacuation helicopters (Callsign 'Dust Off') at night when they were withdrawn to Vung Tau. Later years, 104 Signal Squadron would have up to ten non-standard radios systems deployed over the Province.

The US procedures and field codes were new to the squadron but were adopted for conformity. Monthly signal operating instructions (SOI) were issued to give the necessary information to operate the various signals facilities in the task force. The US operations code and their numerical/authentication code were also adopted. All radio operators and other users suddenly found they were not using voice procedure as in Signal Training All Arms Pamphlet 7 but instead used ACP 125.

Over the first few months in Nui Dat, task force operations were aimed at gaining dominance of the TAOR (Tactical Area of Responsibility) so radio communications were mostly over ranges of only 5 or 6 kilometres, presenting no difficulties to 103 Signal Squadron. A requirement had arisen to retransmit using AN/PRC-25 radios and this worked well except for a high fault rate in the interconnecting cable, a problem that continued for a long time.

The first major task force contact occurred near Long Tan on the 18 August 1966. The base at Nui Dat received some 60 mortar rounds in the early hours of the morning and that day and the next, company size patrols of 6 RAR patrolled and searched for the enemy. D Company bumped a force thought to be on its way to attack the base camp. It consisted of a VC battalion, a North Vietnamese battalion and another VC battalion nearby but not in the firefight. The enemy dead totalled 245 whilst D Company 6 RAR suffered 18 dead and 25 wounded. Throughout the battle communications on the task force, 6 RAR and artillery nets were good. Artillery was able to give very close fire support and there was good control over the dispatching and movement of reinforcements for D Company - important contributions to the success of the battle. This action is now known as the Battle of Long Tan. Unbeknown to many Australian Veteran Veterans a Special Signal Unit (547 Signal Troop) at Nui Dat was tracking the enemy for 14 days to the Long Tan battle site but that's a story for another article.

Late in 1966 during a cordon and search operation at Hoa Long, between Nui Dat and Baria a few kilometres to the south, it was decided that the task force would deploy a tactical headquarters for the first time. 103 Signal Squadron had only to provide a radio detachment to communicate the short distance to Nui Dat and there were no difficulties. This was the start of a new phase of communications for the squadron, a phase that had been concerning Signals Officers because the squadron was almost fully committed in the base and there was little fat to provide for a main task force headquarters away from Nui Dat.

## Unit Change over Problems

104 Signal Squadron replaced 103 Signal Squadron as the task force signal unit in May 1967 and communications suffered because with almost all ranks being replaced at the one time. Problems occurred because there was a lack of background and experience to cope sufficiently quickly with some complex communications problems and interface with other units (including ARVN and US Military). Fortunately task force operations imposed no special strains on 104 Signal Squadron at the time, but it was the last occasion that the task force signal squadron was relieved as a unit. Same with force signals (110 Signal Squadron who replaced 145 Signal Squadron) about the same time, the communications problems were the same. Both 104 Signal Squadron and 110 Signal Squadron also became interwoven with manpower as the task force moved away from Nui Dat to engage the enemy with many 110 Signal Squadron signallers having more sense of belonging to task force signals instead of their own force signals unit.

## Problems highlighted from Actions in 1968

Operations by 1ATF increased in size and in distance from Nui Dat during 1967. Then during the period 24 January - 2 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 1ATF since its arrival in South Vietnam and it involved the main headquarters of 1ATF being away from its base longer than on any previous occasion.

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

Initially 1ATF 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 1ATF (Main) was established at a US Army base Bearcat and the communications were much the same as for Operation COBURG.

On 12 May 1968 major elements of 1ATF were airlifted into an area north of Saigon eventually to be known as Fire Support Patrol Base (FSPB) CORAL. This was to intercept the movement of 7NVA Division to Saigon and cut off its withdrawal. The advance party of HQ 1ATF included the Officer Commanding (OC) of 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 13 May 1968 the base came under attack from enemy mortar, rocket and small arms fire, causing 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. One Signalman was WIA during the fighting.

The main body of 1ATF arrived later on 13 May 1968 bringing the strength of the signals group to 51 including detachments from 547 Signal Troop, 110 Signal Squadron plus an detachment from the US Army 53 Signal Battalion. Also not included in this manning were the 104 Signal Squadron radio detachments operating with the task force main units including the two battalions. The unit began setting up and 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 all operated satisfactorily. The signal centre was also flooded but not so badly.

At 0240 hours on 16 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 Young was KIA during this action and two other Signalmen were WIA. Also during this attack the 110 Signal Squadron Radio Relay Detachment truck was in a dug out and shrapnel passed through the Shelter door and back wall without taking out the radio systems but took out the windscreen and back cabin window of the truck. This multi-channel radio telephone system and the other good communications were very important to the survival of the task force at FSPB CORAL.

## Changes because Coral Action

104 Signal Squadron (547 Signal Troop, 110 Signal Squadron and US Army detachments) personnel did not have time to prepare sleeping bays with overhead protection as all members deployed were required to install communications for the deployed TF HQ. All had to be sandbagged including the line and power runs plus signals roles had to be preformed. Little time was available in the first few days for sleeping protection. On the other hand, Infantry and other units deploy and dig-in!

Task force SOP's changed because of CORAL, 104 Signal Squadron deployed communication equipment in ACV's so that they were fully functional at the time of deployment and would not need digging in. The unit deployed its own defense personnel to ensure its security and that defenses were addressed timely including overhead protection.

The real lesson for Signals from CORAL is to have your equipment mounted in armoured vehicles so there is little setup time and live to fight! After South Vietnam, 104 Signal Squadron has retained ACV for this reason.

The painting 'Signals in Vietnam', which proudly hangs in the foyer at the home of the Royal Australian Corps of Signals, is a representation of a task force deployment after the Battle of Coral.

## Assisting in Defence of the Task Force

Another activity, whilst not concerned with communications but certainly affecting the task force signal squadron, began in late 1968. 104 Signal Squadron began providing complete section patrols for one or two days each outside the 1ATF base perimeter. One patrol in June 1970 on the second afternoon of a patrol under the command of the Squadron Sergeant Major (SSM) observed some enemy about 4 kilometres east of the task force base. They were engaged with small arms fire of the patrol and by artillery fire, shortly after, at 1700 hours, a gunships light fire team began supporting the patrol and estimated that there were about 20 in the enemy party. The 104 Signal Squadron patrol was then engaged from three sides with small arms fire and it withdrew through several defensive positions it established while artillery fire was brought down and an APC mounted infantry was dispatched to flush out the enemy and help withdraw the signallers.

The patrol commander spoke somewhat proudly, of the members of this patrol and points out in his report that "by strict adherence to his orders, sound control of fire and expeditious use of fire and movement" the patrol was able to extract itself from a situation where the "odds" were by, no means in their favor. Also their VHF radio set enabled a swift response by the task force.

## Summary of Task Force Signals

About 120 soldiers served in 103 Signal Squadron during its war tour and then over 800 soldiers served in 104 Signal Squadron during its 5 years on war service. 104 Signal Squadron lost three members on active service during the period.

At the 1ATF base at Nui Dat, the 1ATF Communications Centre (COMCEN), manned and owned by task force signals, played the key role in keeping Australian and Allied units in contact with each other. More than 1,000 telephone and telegraph circuits fed into the COMCEN, including 70 microwave channels from bases outside Nui Dat. Staffing the COMCEN were 50 men, working two shifts to keep communications operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In the telegraph area, the soldiers handled over 700 messages on some days. Next door, the 200-line switchboard averaged 4,300 connections each day. In peak hours, two switchboard operators handled 3 calls every 10 seconds. Messages received in the COMCEN were registered, and prepared for dispatch by clerks. Depending on the priority of the message, it was either delivered by special delivery or the more usual DR. Regularly during the day, the SDS would visit the major units of the task force delivering and picking up messages, packets and other correspondence. The route covered about six miles and took the signalman DR one hour to complete the task. The COMCEN also controlled an ADS, which used helicopters and fixed wing aircraft to deliver correspondence to outlying units and bases. Working behind the scenes in adverse conditions, maintaining and repairing the telephone lines plus electronic communication equipment, was a team of linesmen and technicians. In addition, clerks, drivers, cooks, storemen and other soldiers played a vital role keeping the task force signals unit fully operational.

The COMCEN was not the only means of communication between units, however. 103 and 104 Signal Squadron's had a Radio Troop as well. These men controlled and manned radio (voice, telegraph and morse code) links into and out of the task force and were found in all the major units of the 1ATF and with the Liaison Officers (LO) attached to Allied units. The task force signals also planned, issued and managed the callsigns and frequencies required by all the task force units.

When the Task Force HQ moved forward from Nui Dat the COMCEN and key radio links at Nui Dat were reproduced in the field. After the Battle of Coral in 1968, an ACV was specially fitted out to carry the actual COMCEN and on all following deployments, the ACV COMCEN was ready to transmit telegraph messages between the forward HQ and the rear HQ, within 20 minutes of arriving on site.

As well as running the Task Force communication system the unit was responsible for its own area defense and for conducting Tactical Area of Responsibility Patrols.

**An Army in an operational theatre requires an efficient, rapid communications system. The task force signal veterans with assistance from their force signals colleagues provided it during the Vietnam War!**

**Footnote:** 103 Signal Squadron still serves proudly as part of 3<sup>rd</sup> Combat Signal Regiment (3CSR) as its communication squadron in Townsville for the 3 Brigade. 104 Signal Squadron still has ACV's and serves 1 Brigade (old 1ATF) as the communication squadron which is part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Combat Signal Regiment (1CSR) in Darwin.

**About the Author:**

Denis Hare was with 104 Signal Squadron in South Vietnam in 1968 and served over 22 years with the Royal Australian Corps of Signals. He is the Webmaster of the 104 Signal Squadron Web Site '<http://www.au104.org>' and the Author of the Web Book 'Pronto in South Vietnam 1962-1972' which is featured on the Pronto in South Vietnam Web Site '<http://pronto.au104.org>'.