

# THE UNCLASSIFIED HISTORY OF 547 SIGNAL TROOP IN SOUTH VIETNAM



Written by J. Fenton, H. O'Flynn, S Hart, P. Murray

Edited by M. J. Davies

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## PREFACE

This book has been coordinated by 72 Electronic Warfare Squadron to record an unclassified history of 547 Signal Troop in Vietnam. It aims to outline the events, personalities and some of the more humorous aspects of this period, both in base at Nui Dat and on operation in Phuoc Tuy province.

It is twenty years since the Troop first deployed to Vietnam and as many of its members disappear from military service it is fitting that this history should now be written. The creation of this history is the result of a number of people, starting with Ian Bowen who did the initial collation of the sources as well as Jack Fenton, Herbie O'Flynn, Steve Hart, Peter Murray and Bill Hughes who at various stages since the Troop's return from Vietnam did most of the writing.

Numerous other veterans of the unit have also contributed much by providing pictures, stories and advice.

Lieutenant Murray Davies, Editor.

1<sup>st</sup> December 1987  
Borneo Barracks  
CABARLAH





## FOREWORD



### *Brigadier Trevor Richards*

It was an exhilarating and satisfying experience to have served with 547 Signal Troop due to the highly trained, professional and innovative soldiers and NCO's who served with the unit. They took intense pride in their work and had a significant impact on the war in South Vietnam far in excess of their actual numerical strength. They adapted modern electronics to the battlefield to give unique solutions for this particular war. The history of 547 Signal Troop is a story of Australian soldiers yet again gaining an international reputation for skill and effective results in the real world of military operations.

The decision to send 547 Signal Troop to South Vietnam was made only two months before embarkation. The Troop was the last unit added to the order of battle and was limited to only 15 men due to the overall manpower ceilings imposed by the Government. My original orders were to act primarily as an agency through which US radio research was to be relayed to the Australian Task Force. However the key planner to Army Office, Major Colin Cattanach, added some radio equipment and operators and said, "See what you can do Trevor, besides acting as a post box."

From this inauspicious and limited objective there grew an organisation of approximately 35 personnel with access to aircraft, APCs, scientists and various US agencies. From an isolated unit (which initially no one wanted to know even at the Australian Task Force HQ) they emerged as a force with a high reputation for producing the right information in time. It took four months to come to grips with the technical problems and to thus determine the right Organisation and equipment required. After six months the Troop started to expand in numbers and to experiment with specifically designed equipment which had been produced in record time by the Defence scientists at Salisbury in South Australia. From there the Troop went from success to success.

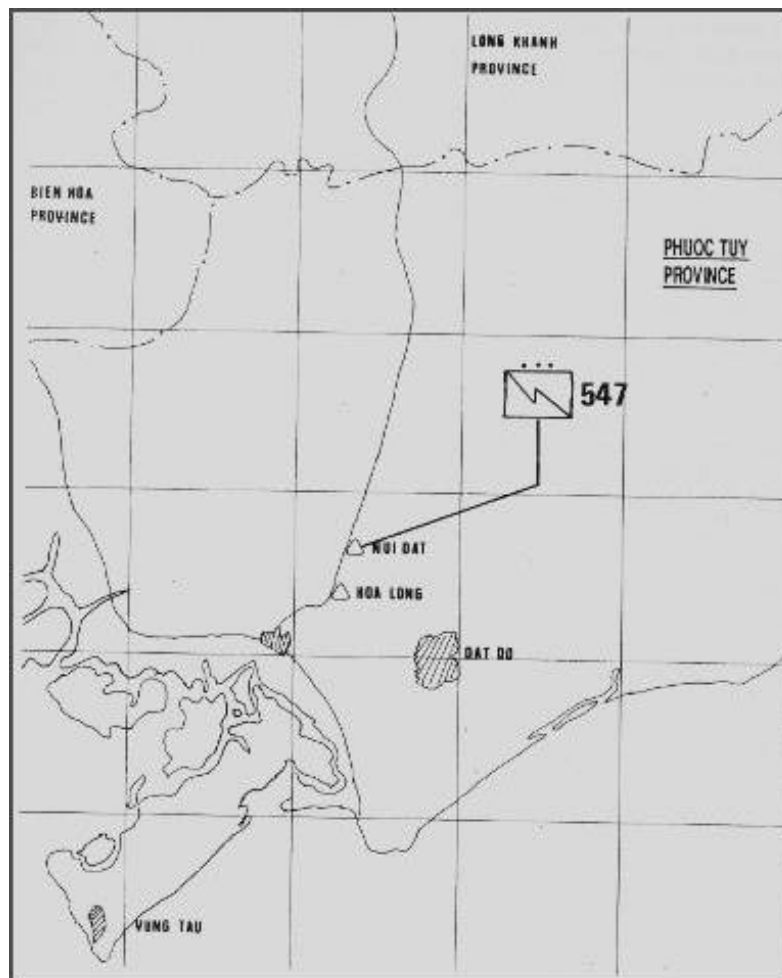
To achieve results such as these it meant that soldiers, public servants and scientists





with flair, determination and attention to detail were needed. These qualities are also associated with the characters of this world and this book is the story of some of those characters.

**Editors's Note:** Brigadier T.J.M. Richards graduated from the Royal Military College, Duntroon in 1959. From there he served in a number of R.A. Sigs. postings until May of 1966 when he raised 547 Signal Troop for Vietnam. After his return from Vietnam he served in a number of specialist and general corps postings, including CO of 2 Signal Regiment. Brigadier Richards retired from the army in February of 1986 after 29 years service. He is currently employed as a business consultant in systems analysis and Organisation of small business firms.



**Map of Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam**





## CHAPTER ONE - THE DEPLOYMENT

547 Signal Troop's involvement in Vietnam began in March of 1966 when Army Headquarters proposed that the troop be allocated in direct support of the 1st Australian Task Force. The Task Force was due to assume the responsibility for Phuoc Tuy Province in May of 1966. The Troop was initially only established at half strength of fifteen men. Captain Trevor Richards was appointed to command the troop. This was an appropriate appointment as Captain Richards had been involved with a similar unit during the Borneo Campaign.

The need to deploy the troop in Vietnam was largely due to the appreciation of two officers, Lieutenant Colonel Ken Whyte and Major Colin Cattanach. Major Cattanach spearheaded the Troop's deployment with a visit to Vietnam. Whilst in Vietnam he made contact with local Australian and Allied authorities and did much to ensure that the unit would be committed to a solid role and enthusiasm was reflected in the high standard of commitment and tasking which he set for the Troop.

In a frenzied round of visits between 12 and 20 May 1966 the details were settled for the troop's deployment. The troop was to take its own weapons, stores and vehicles but would receive its maintenance and administrative support from 103 Signal Squadron which at that time was serving as the Task Force Signal Squadron. In the subsequent years a strong bond of friendship was built between these two units.

On 21 May 1966 the unit left Borneo Barracks for embarkation at Sydney. Sergeant Jim Rayner and Corporal Clarrie Day drove the first two landrovers out of the Barrack's gates and they were followed by three trucks loaded with stores. At Cunningham's Gap the convoy rendezvoused with 161 (Independent) Reconnaissance Flight, and the line of vehicles stretched out along the New England Highway to Sydney. The two landrovers of the Troop made hard going of the trip with their frequent breakdowns but fortunately the mechanics of 161 were able to ensure that the convoy arrived in Sydney on time.

For the last part of the journey Sgt. Rayner had to nurse his vehicle without a handbrake and it was with some relief that he drove up the Bailey Bridge between the dock and H.M.A.S. Sydney. His relief changed to terror, however, when a sailor stepped out onto the bridge and demanded to see his pass. Jim figured that compliance with this order would result in a pile-up of the vehicles following him up the bridge.

With a hasty rejoinder, "You've got to be joking mate! See me on the flight deck!" he drove past the sailor who was forced to take some quick evasive action. This problem was sorted out shortly after but was followed by others, no space had been allocated for the Troop's stores, so the pallet loads had to be broken up and thrust into nooks and crannies all over the ship. The Navy claimed that there would be, "No sweat in getting them all together again, your green-over-white-over-green code will stand out." It did not, however, stand out that well as it bore a similarity to the green-over-grey-over-green code belonging to 161 Flight.





The stores trucks returned to Borneo Barracks after being unloaded and the advance party sailed on 25 May 1966. The days at sea were monotonous, broken only by the comical sight of Sergeant Rayner parading Corporal Day on the deck, calling the roll, issuing paludrine and then dismissing him. On board the advance party of 547 Troop was fostered by a troop of 145 Signal Squadron. The troop was commanded by Captain Mike Thorne. \*

On 8 June 1966 landing craft of H.M.A.S. Sydney deposited the advance party of 547 Signal Troop on the beach at Vung Tau. There was some initial confusion as 161 Flight had been allocated most of the Troop's stores and to add insult to injury someone had mistakenly driven off with one of the Troop's landrovers. Finally all the stores and vehicles were located and the advance party awaited the arrival of the rest of the Troop.

*\* **Editors Note:** Captain Mike Thorne was to join 7 Signal Regiment before the end of the war. Whilst serving as the OC of 121 Signal Squadron (Singapore) he was killed when a bomb exploded aboard a civil airliner on which he was travelling over Vietnam en route from Bangkok to Hong Kong. 7 Signal Regiment held a memorial service to inter Captain Thorne's remains in the Toowoomba Crematorium. A plaque in the Solder's Wall at the Crematorium commemorates his loss.*





## **CHAPTER TWO - COMMENCEMENT OF OPERATIONS**

Back in Australia, Captain Richards had completed his round of briefings. Canungra had been unable to absorb the Troop into its pre Vietnam training, so an ad-hoc course was run at Greenbank. The demand on physical fitness was not as great as in the subsequent battle efficiency course but the weapon handling, infantry minor tactics and all other aspects of living in the field were well covered.

The main party of the Troop consisted of soldiers taken from 7 Signal Regiment's outposts throughout Australia. It was moved by air from Sydney to Vung Tau via Saigon. On 14 June they met up with the advance party and the following day headed off to Nui Dat. There, the OC of 103 Signal Squadron, Major Peter Mudd allocated the Troop a position opposite the Task Force Headquarters, fairly close to where the communications centre was later to be built.

June is the beginning of the monsoon season in Vietnam. The sides of trenches and weapon pits collapsed almost as soon as they could be dug. Drains overflowed and formed new water courses which floated items of stationery and personal equipment away. Restoration and rebuilding was left in the hands of those off-duty and perseverance eventually won out.

The troop at this time consisted of a diversified group of specialists, all experts in their respective fields. Apart from Captain Richards, Sergeant Rayner and Corporal Day the unit also comprised Warrant Officers Doug Rodgers and Eric Grace, Staff Sergeant Bill Irwin, Sergeant Alan Clarkson, Corporal Keith Innes, Lance Corporals Kev Lever, Frank Young, Ray Pratt and Murray Cooper and Signalmen Andy Aird, Bob Brown and Slim Bartlett. Corporal Sammy Rogers came across from linguist pool at Australian Headquarters Vietnam after crunching his way through the jungles with 5 Battalion. The Troop also received a bonus in the form of Signalman Ray Hyland who came from 103 Signal Squadron.

Operations commenced on 24 June 1966 and were continuous for the next five and a half years. About six weeks after the Troop's arrival at Nui Dat it was moved to another site 100 metres north-east of the original site. The Task Force perimeter was extended and the troop members strived to build a permanent home. The original Troop members had built two buildings, one fifty by twenty foot and the other forty by twenty foot. They mixed concrete by hand and scrounged nails and galvanised iron.

The buildings were indeed a boon. As operations were on a 24 hour a day basis, the old 11 by 11 tents emitted a bright glow at night. The only way to overcome this tactical hazard was to hand sew thick woollen blankets around the interior, making the tents unbearably hot on tropical nights.

At the same time the members of the troop were also building equipment racks, completing wiring and erecting aerials. The aerials were originally nothing more than







star-pickets which had been welded together to a height of 32 to 35 feet. Sergeant Gary Fizzell of 103 often came down to give assistance with the aerials during his spare time.

Radio equipment also provided some problems as it had suffered a rough passage and was not handling the local heat very well. Repairs had to be effected under adverse conditions without the services of a technician. During the first five months of operation, 83 sets had to be replaced from the theatre reserves before a newer model was introduced. It was not until 4 February 1967 that the Troop welcomed its first technician, Sergeant Eddie Jones and he was greeted with a mountain of work.

Operationally the Troop was committed to a role of intermediary between allied radio research units and the Task Force Headquarters. This was implemented quickly but with a few teething problems. Within a fortnight of arrival at Nui Dat, independent research began. This research was to show that much of the information being received by the Troop was out of date. Gradually reliability was improved with many tangible examples occurring.

547 Signal Troop was, in many respects, superior to its allied counterparts. The Troop possessed men with well over twenty years experience in Signals and who thrived on remote detachments. Other allied forces were not so fortunate. For example the United States Army only gave its operators six months training and then relied heavily on 'on the job training'.

With the close liaison established with the HQ 1 ATF it became apparent that 547 could perform more than an intermediary role. In fact, some agencies soon began to request more of the Troop's results and soon became dependent on the Troop as a source of information. This fact was acknowledged in a letter of commendation from the Troop's operational control to the highest authority concerned.





### **CHAPTER THREE - EXPANSION OF THE TROOP**

In October 1966 Colin Cattanach and Bob Botterill flew in to inspect the unit's operations and to warn the unit of its impending expansion. In November the unit welcomed the arrival of Warrant Officer Graham Stewart. Meanwhile in Australia, Lieutenant Bill Hughes had been warned that he was to replace Captain Trevor Richards. Lieutenant Hughes was to be accompanied by a squad of nine men from 7 Signal Regiment. The nine in the squad consisted of Corporal Clem Foster, Lance Corporal Bob Maher and Signalmen Hugh Dixon, Ray Hannett, Nev Derry, Mark Pritchard, Dave Wardell, Woody Wardell and Flynn Dennis. They were put through Canungra and then in January 1967 left for embarkation in Sydney.

Early in 1967, Troop workload was increased with the introduction of aerial experiments. Operators, who seldom ascended more than twenty feet up a mast, now found themselves hurled around the sky in a Cessna. Despite all efforts the equipment under test failed. However, bigger and better equipments were already being made in the workshops of Australia.

With the installation of a secondary communications circuit in December, thoughts turned to upgrading the existing antenna system. Captain Richards set out on a search to allied units and returned jubilantly with the news that he had acquired four concrete poles., each of 45 feet.



***From L-R, Ray Hyland, Clarric Day, Bill Irwin and a GI friend.***

With the hard work of acquisition over, all that remained was for Jim Rayner to go down to Saigon and get them back to Nui Dat. The poles arrived on a semitrailer but the rest of the tackle remained under Jim's watchful eye. He took case after case of it to Tan Son Nhut Airbase to hitch rides on aircraft. It was some time before the tackle was to be fully together.

Erection proceeded with off-duty members labouring over the masts until they towered over the old masts. A rigger was borrowed to install the bi-conical arrays but unbelievably he was afraid of heights! So the task fell to Jim Rayner. By mid-March the new aerials were erected and giving excellent results.

Close liaison with other allied units was difficult for the first few months as U.S.





colleagues seemed distant. Some regarded the troop as enthusiastic amateurs while others stood in awe of the troop's expertise. The convivial can of beer proved to be a great unifier though. The ration of one can of beer and one of soft drink seemed to present few problems. American troops also sold or gave the Troop beer to grease the wheels. Weaker in strength alcoholically, the U-S. beer was nonetheless palatable and the daily garbage run to the dump with dozens of empty cans was undeniable testimony of the generosity of American friends.

Barriers between allied units were lowered when combined operations were launched. Lieutenant John Cochrane of the U.S. Army brought down his Fly Away teams to which 547 operators were attached. The teams operated from various sites including Nui Dat Hill, Van Kiep, Baria Airfield and Phy My. Results, though not startling did produce some minor successes. Operators on these teams often found themselves drawing enemy fire. John Cochrane was killed by a mine which also injured several of his team.

Generally though, the men of 547 were lucky. One close call came on an operation in March 1967, when Trevor Richards, Murray Cooper and Jim Rayner and a GI paused to speak with a school teacher. After resuming their journey they noticed a burning smell, on investigation it proved to be smoldering webbing in the back of a vehicle. The webbing was hastily ejected from the vehicle and only moments later the attached grenades exploded. The suspected cause was a lighted cigarette thrust into one of the basic pouches during the short halt.



***Right: Flynn Dennis 1967.***



***Left: Bugsey Harper 1967.***





## CHAPTER FOUR - ARDF

Allied visitors to the Troop were surprised by its capability. Counter invitations followed and social exchanges started between related units, operational exchanges were not to come until much later. Helicopters were the main means of transportation - in fact rumour had it that Bob Brown had invented a heli-taxi service, the Playboy Choppers.

Incoming reinforcements included quite a few men who were making their first tour of duty overseas. The 'old-timers' like Clem Foster and Bob Maher provided the necessary continuity. Corporal Chick Hanks and Lance Corporal Peter Ashton arrived to help on the teleprinters and to release some of the operator signals back to their normal employment. Corporal Lance Townsend arrived in January as the Troop's first clerk. He was soon able to test out his administrative knowledge handling the batch of newcomers.



***From L-R, Bill Irwin, Trevor Richards and Jim Rayner at Christmas 1966.***

Bill Hughes was promoted to Captain and joined the Troop, initially as 2IC. By Christmas, 1966 the communications centre had moved into one of the buildings. The centre remained there until the unit left Nui Dat. An air conditioner was obtained through the Engineers and it was to run night and day for the best part of five years with only a few troubles.

In March 1967 the staff of the communications centre received an unexpected windfall. Corporal Wayne Cowan appeared outside the compound gate. Captain Hughes had no advice of his arrival and was puzzled when Wayne announced that he had been sent as a keyboard operator. Captain Hughes handed him over to the duty supervisor. A short while later Captain Hughes probed into the matter and found out from him that he had been posted to 104 Signal Squadron. "Well what the heck are you doing here?" asked the Captain. "Don't ask me," was the reply. "You're the Captain and you told me to go to work in your comcen and that's what I've done!" A check revealed that 104 were unaware of any keyboard operator being posted to them, so 547 graciously accepted Corporal Cowan as a spoil of war. Towards the end of Captain Hughes' tour, he heard from the new commander of 104, Major Norm Munroe, that his Squadron was short of keyboard operators. "You can





borrow your bloke back from us for a while," offered Bill. Needless to say 104's new OC kept a very close eye on his manning tables from then on.



***Above, one of the Cessna 180A aircraft used by 547 Signal Troop for ARDF missions.***

On Anzac Day 1967, Captain Bill Hughes took command of the Troop. The initial members of the Troop were replaced over the next few weeks, Sergeants John Bull and Bob (RC) Howell arrived and Sergeant Bob Field relieved Alan Clarkson. Jim Rayner had been ill for some time now and his failure to respond to medication made his evacuation back to Australia necessary. Lieutenant Jim David Brockett came in May to be the Troop's first Troop Officer and to serve as second in command. He was accompanied by Sergeant Barry Hampstead, Corporal Peter Bradley and Corporal John Bramston. In the same month the Troop welcomed Corporals Roger Harrison and Jock Lamont also Lance Corporal Blue Thomas and Signalmen John Zeller, Danny Clarke and Geoff Hall. Graham Stewart returned to the fold to replace Eric Grace while the last arrival for the financial year was Corporal Garth Brown, whose coming doubled the strength of the maintenance section to two.

By June of 1967, all of the original batch had departed leaving a fresh and larger component in its place. Counter-offensive Phase III started on 1 June. During the campaign the Troop was committed heavily to supporting allied troops. Lance Corporal Ray Pratt, always in the vanguard of forward operations, was awarded a Mention in Despatches for his remarkable efforts in the theatre.

Clive Luckman came to Vietnam in July and regularly visited the Troop from his base at Bien Hoa. In his U.S. Army field dress, he popped in and out of all the associated units and unassumingly made his points to those who counted. An expert in many fields, he showed talents befitting a diplomat as he eased open barriers hitherto closed to operational liaison. He became known as "that funny little U.S. Colonel with the Australian accent." While on liaison duties with a Radio Research Company in Bien Hoa Province during the Tet counter offensive the unit was subject to a heavy attack by the Viet Cong using mortars, machine guns, grenades and small arms fire. The attack continued for more than three days with several suicidal attempts to overrun the unit. Clive was the only non-combatant in the unit and though fearful of the outcome never lost the sense of humour which endeared him to his US Army





comrades.

Sergeant Ted Blacker and Signaller John Dean joined the unit in August. Major Cattnach and Major Zeb Jeffery came in September to test more airborne equipment. With the aid of 161 Flight and 146th Aviation Company, the new equipment was put through its paces in a Cessna. It showed more promise than the earlier equipment. At this point the thought of danger money for flying arose and naturally Major Cattnach had already set an argument in motion. A few years later when flying pay came in it was made retrospective to the Troop's flying crews.

Special tribute should be paid to the courage of 547's ARDF operators. Without exception they were volunteers. Their war was dangerous and it was quite amazing that none ever became casualties. They flew at least once and often twice a day, every day of the year without respite, at low altitudes over enemy territory. They always flew along straight paths within machine gun range with no manoeuvre or evasion allowed. Not only was enemy fire a constant hazard but they flew in an environment where fast flying jet attack aircraft, flying close to the speed of sound, could easily have collided with them, their pilots being distracted by other duties. Several near collisions did occur, sometimes being avoided by a matter of metres.

In October Warrant Officer Jack Parker and Signaller Trevor Herd arrived. They were followed shortly after by Lieutenant Colonel Williams. Colonel Williams was visiting his sub-unit enroute from Singapore to Hong Kong and he brought the news that the Troop was soon to receive a further five men. He was accompanied by Major Peter Taylor. Pete succumbed to the temptation to taste the local 33 Brand beer, better known as Ba Muoi Ba. He blamed this brew for his subsequent weeks of illness. Also in November another three operators marched in, Signalmen Clive Clarke, Bill Pearton and Paul Talbert.

Jim Brockett gave weekly briefings on operations to the Troop. They were supplemented by talks on other pertinent matters. Barry Hampstead's lecture on incendiaries and explosives was most appropriate in view of his burning tent episode. In the interests of fitness, a volley ball court was made and weapon pits improved. During brief periods off duty, Captain Hughes took members of the Troop to the village of Ap Suoi Nghe to erect dwellings for the inhabitants.

An old RAAF colleague, Flight Lieutenant Mac McConville showed up as air liaison officer. He had not been seen in the Army field of operations since late in 1950 in Singapore. He was replaced by Flight Lieutenant Phil Phubbard, another acquaintance of the older troop members. In December, three more men marched in, Corporal John Murray and Signaller Bluey Stone, both operators and Corporal Roy Johnston who took over as Troop clerk.





## **CHAPTER FIVE - THE BIRTH OF THE LONG HOA DANCE AFFAIR**

On 30 January 1968 the countryside exploded into the Tet counter offensive, the counter offensive was to last until 1 April. Restrictions on movement were intensified and even Captain Hughes had difficulty getting to Saigon. Movement around the capital was dangerous and he could only get out by hitch-hiking in helicopters from one fire support base to another. When he eventually returned to the Troop he was given pride of place at the administrative parade and was fitted with a combat helmet covered with bullet holes and red splashes. Jack Parker and Barry Hampstead introduced him as the Saigon veteran and invited him to recount his experiences. Never one to be caught out, he responded in his inimitable style as the modest hero.



***Above from L-R, Bill Irwin and Sammy Rodgers at the front of the Administration Building.***

Those who arrived in January in time to witness Tet 1968 break out included Corporal Bruce Fitzsimmons, a keyboard operator and four operator signals, Corporals John Grace and Ken Trewartha and Signalmen John Bailey and Dennis Nicholson. During the first month of Tet, there was quite a turnover with Staff Sergeant Don Appleby going into the communications centre and Corporal Bill Dunn relieving Eddie Jones in technical maintenance. Corporal Fred Hawkes and Signalmen Bob Rolleston and Snowy Turner were additions to the operations area.

Major Peter Murray chose February to arrive. His description of his arrival in Vietnam is worth noting as it was typical of most 547 arrivals after the first batch:

*"Drafts reported to Mascot Airport, Sydney, at 11.30 p.m. After the usual farewells and roll calls we boarded the big Boeing bound for Perth. There we took on a contingent of SAS and flew to Singapore. On landing we donned white shirts which we had been ordered to carry in our packs. The Singapore Government refused to allow soldiers to pass through Singapore to Vietnam but agreed that 200 fit young men wearing khaki trousers, black boots and other military trappings couldn't*





*possibly be soldiers if they wore white shirts! We filed off the aircraft to an airport restaurant for a two hour breakfast. After breakfast we returned to the aircraft at 9 a.m., replaced our khaki shirts, and took off for Vietnam....."*

*"We landed at Tan Son Nhut at 10 a.m., one of Saigon's three large airfields. This airfield must have been the busiest in the world. Huge passenger jets, bombers heavy with under slung bombs, fighters with napalm or rocket pods drooping from their wings, helicopter gunships, small Cessna type observation aircraft and Hercules cargo planes come and go like peak hour traffic in Swanston Street .... Machine gun fitted jeeps hurtle around the enormous base driven by wild eyed negros who struck more terror into our hearts than any VC could. We assembled into an empty bay, sorted our gear and we were hustled aboard a Caribou aircraft bound for Nui Dat .... In 30 minutes we touched down on the dusty strip called Luscombe field at Nui Dat at 2 p.m. From Sydney to the combat zone in 14 hours!"*

Captain Steve Zagon replaced Jim Brockett in March. By this time the layout of the compound had changed considerably. The tents of the OC, Warrant Officers and Sergeants were vacated as the occupants took up residence in the 104 Signal Squadron lines. The operations area was in the eastern building where the operations and research section were also located. The western building housed the workshop, communications centre, commander's office and orderly room. The living quarters tents were relocated north of the communications centre for the noncommissioned officers who were 'on call'. North of the operations building stood the Q-Store tent. Construction began on 21 March of another building to house stores and the operations team. This building was large enough to convert the eastern end into a Troop Club. The Corporals and Signalmen lived in 104 lines in tents parallel and close to the western fence of the compound.

April saw a large batch of replacements arrive. Sergeant Jim Brill and Corporal Jock Kinder were soon allocated for flying operations. Sergeant Laurie Duell, Corporals John Hunter and Haydon Hunter and Signalman Tom Williams joined Steve Zagon's section with Corporal Tex Middleton into the operations area.

A team from the Troop deployed to Firebase Coral came under very heavy rocket and mortar fire in late April. Sergeant Jim Brill and Corporals Fred Hawkes and Jock Lamont kept their heads down and managed to maintain operations. The bombardments soon became routine although the section never really got used to it. They sustained only minor damage to their tents and only one of their sets.

One notable visitor around this time was Brigadier General George S. Patton Jnr., the son of old 'Blood and Guts' Patton. He arrived in full battle order - steel helmet, grenades strapped on his belt, an M16 in his hand, a low slung pistol on his right side and a mean looking Colt Cobra in a shoulder holster. Squatting in front of the big wall map he chewed on an unlit cigar as he received the usual briefing from Steve Zagon. On conclusion of the briefing he jumped up and slapping Steve squarely on the back barked in a heavy drawl "That's great stuff fella's! Keep it up! Remember, you find 'em and I'll kill 'em!" With that he strode off, grenades and guns slapping against his sides, leaving the operations staff rolling with uncontrollable laughter.







About this time the work of 547 was receiving recognition from the allied forces. 547's timely results had been brought to the attention of Lieutenant General Bruce Palmer Jnr., Commanding General of the II FFV. General Palmer insisted that a liaison officer visit the Troop every morning by helicopter so as to gain the latest results. On several occasions Lieutenant Zagon received commendations on behalf of the Troop for the standard of information being delivered. Brigadier General O'Conner, commander of the 9th U.S. Infantry Division, also noticed the Troop's results and research elements of his division and of the 2nd Cavalry Division worked as out-stations of the Troop at times.

In April off duty members of the Troop cut down hundreds of rubber trees to prepare a site for an incoming U.S. research team. The team, led by Staff Sergeant Sieber, worked hand in glove with 547 and 2 RAR (ANZAC). They stayed in Nui Dat until 1969 when they moved to Long Binh.

1968 also saw the start of the Hoa Long Dance Affair. In April a notice was displayed asking for interested persons to attend a dance at the Hoa Long Rice Mill the following Saturday night. The dance was supposedly sponsored by the Young South Vietnamese Ladies for Freedom and Democracy Association. The details, covering transport dress and weapons were presented on a phoney sheet. The whole thing had actually been dreamed up by 104 Signal Squadron and while it looked like the genuine article everyone except the march-ins knew it to be a joke. That night Laurie Duell, Tom Williams, Haydon Hunter and John Hunter arrived ready to go at 104's transport lines. After being reprimanded by 104's orderly sergeant, Sergeant Max Hardy, for not wearing ties they were taken for a two hour drive around the task force area then unceremoniously returned to 104's lines.

Laurie -Duell became known as the 'born loser' after that incident. After all who else would stand stark naked in a tropical downpour enjoying a wash only to be confronted by a helicopter depositing visiting U.S. Red Cross girls? Snowy Turner was not much luckier. He was allocated for a weeks detachment to 145th Radio Research Company at Long Binh but managed to catch the wrong Caribou out of Luscombe field. Snowy was missing for three days. When he finally turned up it was discovered that he had actually been flown out to Fire Support Base Hotel 3 well within the depths of tiger country.

Alan Patterson arrived in June with Corporal Jack Morgan and Signalman Bruce Wilson. Bruce also joined the birdmen later on. Signalman Adrian Lange also came during this month to work as a keyboard operator.

One of the best evenings held at 547 occurred as a result of Fred Hawkes being unable to get RR leave back to Toowoomba for his son's wedding. The Troop secretly planned a Buck's Party on the night of the wedding. Fred was rostered for duty that night to conceal the final preparations from him. At 7 p.m. he was called into the Troop's newly formed club for the party and to be informed that a present of linen had been sent to his son. Steve Zagon arrived dressed as a minister to marry the bride, Laurie Duell (complete with flowing gown) to Fred. The father of the bride, Dick Schafer also turned up suitably dressed.





***Above: Barry Wilson hard at work in Tech Maint***

The Troop club owed its existence to a very active committee. Warner Madden, Roy Johnston and Tex Middleton were the main instigators but everyone kicked in with labour and cash. The committee were given much of what they needed and then stole the rest! A \$10 debenture levy and a private loan financed the purchase of a refrigerator and bar stock.

Without a cook or any other form of general duty support, the members of the Troop had to eat at different messes - officers at the Task Force Mess, seniors at 104 Sergeant's Mess and the corporals and signalmen at the 104 Rank and File Mess. The acute shortage of mess staff coupled with an increase in the attached strength precluded this from continuing and so in June 1968 Headquarters Rank and File Mess absorbed the junior ranks of 547.





## CHAPTER SIX - THE 'CELL'

Rest and Recuperation leave provided a brief respite from the dust noise and work of Nui Dat. The U.S. authorities extended this service to Australian troops and ran it as a very effective Organisation. Up to a week could be spent in Manila, Tapei, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Singapore, Penang or for the homesick, back in Australia. Those who spent their R and R in Toowoomba usually returned with several dozen meat pies, donated by Mr. Meagher of Dianne Bakeries Toowoomba. The pies were of the best quality and absolutely impossible to obtain in Vietnam. In appreciation for his kind gesture the Troop presented Mr. Meagher with a Task Force plaque.

The other means of enjoying an official rest was to go to the R and C Centre for a maximum of five days. The centre was located at Vung Tau where beach space and recreational facilities were available. The night life had a sleazy if glittering quality the only hazards being the local loutish lads known as 'cowboys' and the avaricious bar girls.



*Above, Dick Schaffer's plane after it was recovered to Nui Dat.*

Flying certainly had its dangers as Corporal Dick Schaffer found out. His plane was forced to make a crash landing on one operation, as Dick and his pilot crawled out of the wreckage they were confronted by a patrol dressed entirely in black. As Dick prepared to shoot it out one of the patrol put his hands in the air and called out "Don't shoot! I'm an American advisor!" Dick had been rescued by a SAS patrol. Zeb Jeffery found out that lying down on his bunk could be just as dangerous as flying. After returning from one mission he discovered a three foot cobra under his sheets,





he quickly despatched it with his machette.

Major Steve Hart became the new troop commander in September of 1968 and was pleasantly surprised to find a 'Guard of Honour awaiting him at Long Binh, formed by his U.S. colleagues. Warrant Officer Jack Hooker also came at this time and enthusiastically followed on with the policy of improving the living and working areas. This period was also the beginning of Phase V of the Counter offensive and American forces came pouring into the Country. 547 also received more new blood, Corporal Speed Peters joined technical maintenance and Corporal Tom Oswin went into operations. A new Troop clerk in the person of Signalmen John Lechte came in October.



***The Cell under test before deployment to Vietnam. L-R Captain John Duncan, Warrant Officer Jack Hooker and Corporal Speed Peters.***

Also in October 1968 Captain John Duncan brought more experimental equipment. The equipment was to be located within the Nui Dat perimeter but away from the Troop's main operational base. A site to the north west of Nui Dat hill was cleared for the new installation and nick-named 'Cell'. Aerials were erected and the equipment shelters installed. The project was of a much more complex nature than previous ones, demanding the use of a computer. Fortunately, the shelters were air conditioned so it was possible to contend with the electronic and atmospheric problems without the added hazard of climatic heat.

The site was close to the Task Force ammunition storage area. One of the early considerations was whether the Cell's high-powered transmitters would activate the ammunition fuses in the bunkers. A technical investigation proving that there was no risk of this, did not, however, stop everyone blaming any sort of electronic interference on them regardless of whether it was turned on or not. Three 10KVA generators supplied the power. The team found compensations for their starting work early (5am) every day. A pair of peacocks cavorted around the base of SAS Hill. Small brown deer skirted the edge of the aerial farm and wild pigs searched the





undergrowth for roots. Snakes found the coolness beneath the shelters a refuge from the sun and small numbers of gurami fish could be found in puddles after the rain.

The cell was a source of interest to many allied units. Streams of visitors came. Once the complexities of its functions were mastered and the operators and technicians gained confidence the project went on to produce valuable results. Its high powered transmissions were sometimes a nuisance but its returns far outweighed moments of inconvenience.

November arrivals included Sergeant Len Scott as supervisor of the communications centre and five operators, Corporal Gordon Greaves and Signalmen Tony Bridges, Lofty Hayward, Jim Yule and Barry Nisbet. Another operator, Lance Corporal Barry Poole, came in early December and was to be the last replacement of the year.

The Troop area immediately to the north of the compound was used to erect tents for the signalmen and corporals. These were wired, sandbagged and provided with mortar protection shelters. The shelters were dark, dingy, musty and uninviting, nothing but rocket or mortar fire could induce the soldiers to enter them. The Task Force commander, on one of his inspections, agreed that the social facilities were inadequate and approved extensions to the Troop club. Jack Hooker returned from a liaison visit with fifty bags of cement, 250 sheets of galvanised iron, timber and paint. The building programme hotted up. Shower and toilet blocks were constructed and these were soon added to by the construction of a laundry. The showers were fitted with a hot water system and a barbeque was installed outside the Club entrance. As the year progressed, the interior of the club was wired for lighting and fans and repainted. On top of all this activity, a block of concrete was laid for the construction of a further building to meet the expanding needs of the unit.

With the Task Force Headquarters deploying forward in operations it was necessary to improve 547's representation at the forward HQ. An armoured command vehicle (ACV) was allocated to the Troop and was fitted and wired for the necessary communications equipment. By working on 547's own links, the Troop's representative was able to give rapid replies to staff questions. It became a principle of Task Force operations to take 547 forward in an ACV 84 Delta. The appellation, "547 Armoured Radio Research Cell (Airmobile)" came jokingly into being.





## **CHAPTER SEVEN - BUILDINGS AND BOOMERANGS**

The January 1969 newcomers were Sergeant John Harding, to technical maintenance, Corporal Brian Kinsella to operations and Corporal Murray Chamberlain to the communications centre. Signaller Jeff Payne went to air operations, while Corporals Mal Onn and Ken Perry and Signaller Earl Rush went into the operations area. As Tet 1969 got underway in February, Signaller Bob Thompson was hurried to fill the vacancy of clerk left by John Lechte, his time as a National Serviceman had expired. Sergeant Bob Hartley came up to join the flying team, while Signalmen Bob Baldwin, Mick Guillot and Daryl McPhee undertook the challenges of the operations area.

Clive Luckman returned to Australia after a somewhat extended term and David Churchus took over. Captain Steve Zagon handed over to Captain Brian Doyle. Brian was to give an impetus to relations between 146th Aviation Company and the Troop. Signalmen Paul Stock and Nev Hampton reinforced the Troop for a few months then returned to Singapore to await their full tours of duty at a later stage. Another air operations candidate, Lance Corporal Mike Conaghan, came in March, the same month as Corporal Peter Jenkins went into operations.



***From L-R: Stu Malone, Mal Raymond, Jack Fenton, Zeb Jeffery, Tom Billard and Kevin Condon at Bien Hoa.***

Corporal Harry Martin arrived in April to become Troop carpenter as well as an operator. It was under his skilled guidance that the fourth and final building was erected in the compound. It was to house the unit stores and to provide an office for the commander. Bed space for both the officers of the Troop was also included as well as a small room housing a refrigerator and some chairs. Officers and senior NCO's used the room as an after work refreshment area. Known as the 'Blue Room', it was suitably decorated with pictures from Playboy and Penthouse.

Sergeant Daryl Houghton came in April to assist Captain Doyle and Corporal Stan Marks moved into various jobs, ultimately taking over in the operations area. Corporal Roy Dean went to the sets as an operator while Frank Finch joined the flying team. Corporal Bill Wood came into technical maintenance in May and a fortnight later Signaller Adrian Bishop joined the operations staff. The sets





received another fresh intake in June with the arrival of Signalmen Daryl Hancock, Colin King, Tony Luck and Phil Rutherford. They were followed in July by Corporal Brian Lacy and Signalman Les Wotherspoon into the Cell.

The second Mention in Despatches award for the Troop went to Jack Hooker. Jack after many years of devotion and service was given his just recognition by the award.

Captain Errol Poultney replaced Major Hart in August 1969 and Warrant Officer Andy Cockburn took over Jack Hooker's place as troop Sergeant Major.

During the Task Force Commander's round of farewells in August, Brigadier Pearson and Sergeant Len Scott discussed how an ARVN soldier had been wounded by an enemy arrow. Len suggested that our side should be armed with boomerangs for retaliation. Under a barrage of questions from the Brigadier, Len admitted his capabilities as a maker and thrower of boomerangs. As a result of this discussion Len found himself detached to Xuan Loc. It seems that the Brigadier had presented Brigadier General Giai, commander of the 18th ARVN Division, with a boomerang, General Giai could not, however, make the boomerang come back to him. When Brigadier Pearson was asked for a tutor he sent Len.

On arrival at the throwing area, Len found a group of soldiers standing by as boomerang chasers. Len's first demonstration was perfect and the boomerang came straight back into his hands. The Vietnamese acted as though this was magic. After an hour of instruction, the General still looked awkward but was getting them within five feet. The only casualty of the day was a broken windscreen on the jeep of the Senior U.S. Advisor. It had been parked too close to the General's field of fire.

For each occasion of levity, there were moments of sadness too'. Captain Barry Donald of 161 Reconnaissance Flight, one of 547's regular pilots, was killed when his Porter aircraft was brought down by enemy fire just north of Nui Dat. Major George Constable, OC of 161, had been killed in a similar incident the year before.

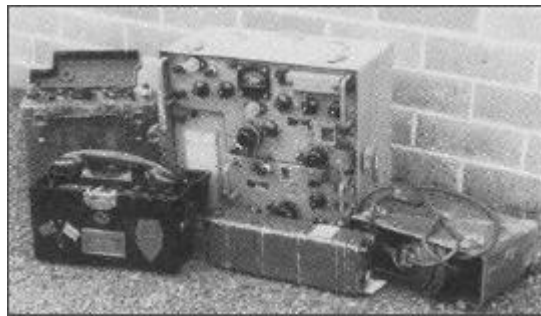
Garth Brown marched-in for a second tour with the Troop, this time as a Sergeant, in August. Corporal Max Starr and Lance Corporal Les Whitney arrived and Corporal Jim Danskin, soon to become known as the 'Red Baron' of the flying team, joined the Troop in September. Signalman Bob Harland moved into the operations area, Signalman Rod Spragg into the communications centre and Corporal Glen Trussell became a clerk. Corporal Barry Jonathan and Signalman Dick Ward were also October arrivals in the operations area. Sergeant Clarrie Whitehorn came to take charge of the communications centre. Private David Schnieder came as an expert in operations in November, as did Sergeant Des Williams who was earmarked to the flying team. The last two to come for 1969 were Staff Sergeant Clive Shephard and Signalman Glen Adamson, a set operator, both arrived in the unit in early December.





## **CHAPTER EIGHT - 'A VC BODY COUNT'**

In December 1969, the Troop erected its cinema screen and, by an exercise of charm with the amenities people managed to secure a different film every night. Adrian Bishop, Les Whitney and Phil Rutherford spent a few torrid days at the Horeshoe in October while Andy Cockburn, Bill Wood, Barry Jonathon and Bob Harland rattled around in the ACV to Fire Support Base Picton in November. Just before Christmas, Roy Dean was at Fire Support Base Barbara for nearly a fortnight, after which he spent a week at the U.S. research station in Bien Hoa. Tony Luck and Mike Guillot went to the same station late in December.



***Above, captured Viet Cong equipment presented to the Troop by 6 RAR.***

Besides the films, there was more reason for contentment - a badminton court had been completed. Instead of sandbags around the tents, blast walls lined with galvanised iron and star pickets had been built. The Troop enjoyed the Christmas party, Blue Danskin made a fine and friendly Santa Claus distributing gifts to all the members of the Troop. Memories of the New Year 1970 were already starting to dim when Sergeant Keith Zeller took charge of the operations area and signalman Charlie Bennet went to operate for him. Signalman John Gehle was allocated to the Cell and Signalman Harry Lock finished the rest of his tour as a flyer.



***Above: pictures of Viet Cong operators. This film was developed from captured film.***

Warrant Officer Hugh McCartney came to supervise both air and Cell operations. Signalman Lloyd Giles became one of his flyers. Lance Corporal Colin Potter and Signalman Dennis Dean joined the operators, although Colin also found himself







looking after the unit's landrovers. Signalmen David Cochrane and Ross Hutton were, like Jock McCartney and the others, February arrivals. David went into the communications centre and Ross into technical maintenance.

Captain Hugh Nichols was another February arrival and took over from Brian Doyle. He moved into the sleeping area next to the Blue Room. Hugh was joined by Staff Sergeant Bob Ward in March when Daryl Houghton went home. John Duncan returned for yet another short stay while Lance Corporal Jim McLean went into the shorter period as he opted for his discharge after a few months. Kevin Condon replaced Clive Churchus who returned home to Melbourne.

Signalman Leon Douglas reached the Troop during April to toil away in the operations area. Staff Sergeants Norm Gilbert and Frank Watkins also arrived. Norm took over the Cell project and Frank, the technical maintenance department. Norm was joined by Signalman John Kaarsberg down at the Cell in May while Signalmen Ray Seiler and Kev Patterson arrived in the same month, both to be employed by Norm as well. Signalman Bill Sampson went to the flying team as did Paul Stock who came up for his second and longer tour. Corporal Ron Biddle went to Captain Nichols' section and his past experience resulted in his appointment as watchdog over unit health and hygiene.

547's liaison with 6 Battalion aided the battalion's success in its May Tao operations and a lot of useful equipment and documents were captured. The battalion commander acknowledged the Troops assistance with the presentation of an inscribed captured enemy morse key.

Ross Treharne arrived with new airborne equipment, suitable for installation into 161's Pilatus Porter aircraft. In June 1970 Major Gordon Best brought up an engineered model of the aerial installation. It proved to be a joy to operate and a vast improvement on the older models, much to the delight of the operators and technicians. Signalman Bill Pollock, a National Serviceman and proud of the fact, joined the staff of the communications centre.

The Task Force supported needy institutions around the province from time to time. Toward mid 1970 men of the Australian Intelligence Unit became aware of the plight of the Phuoc Le Cao Dai Orphanage in Baria, 547 joined forces with the intelligence boys and began a programme of assistance to the orphanage. The Troop arranged a monthly visit for the children to the sea. The Troop also organised a party for the children at the Club. The children came along to watch helicopter stunt flying, enjoy a ride in an APC and to eat their favourite Vietnamese party dishes. This was probably the first time that large numbers of the local people had visited the Task Force socially. In November something more ambitious was attempted, a trip to the capital of the Republic, Saigon. Twenty seven children were cramped into the unit's two vehicles one Sunday morning. The task of controlling twenty seven excited children was a tremendous problem, for they spoke no English. If a Father of the Year had been elected that day, John Kaarsberg would have won hands down. He produced ice cream, watermelon and soft drinks. Wherever he went he recalled games and tricks which delighted the children. The funds donated by the Troop were more than adequate to cover expenses. Of course the sight of all these good things





to eat attracted a few 'ring-ins' from the city's children, the orphans noticed this and quickly closed ranks to exclude the interlopers.



***Above, the children of the Phuoc Le Cao Orphanage, Baria, on an outing to Saigon with the members of 547.***

The children were eventually delivered back to the orphanage on time, far less exhausted than the soldiers who had been looking after them. It was interesting to note that this was the first outing at which there were no Vietnamese adults participating. The eldest child was only 11 years old.

The wives back in Australia responded to a Troop request early in the year to provide summer clothing and toys for the children. Not only did this result in their active support, they also solicited aid from the Toowoomba newspapers. The response was so generous that many children in the Baria area were soon seen running around in Australian clothes and playing with toys not usually seen in Vietnam. Lieutenant Colonel Alan McDonald was able to see the children after a beach picnic and to visit the patroness with another gift of clothing.

In June 1970 the welcome party for Captain Fenton who was taking over was also attended by Major Cattanach and Kevin Condon. The guest did not, however adhere to the standards of protocol when asked to draw the club's raffle. Kev Condon drew out Captain Fenton's name as first prize winner, Captain Fenton drew Major Cattanach's name for second prize and the good Major drew out Kev Condon's name for third prize. Little wonder that Blue Danskin refused to draw the "33 Club" lottery that night.



***Above from L-R, Mrs. G.F. Hughan and Mrs. L. Fenton help sort clothes for the children of the Baria Orphanage. This photo appeared with an article in the Toowoomba 'Chronicle' on 6th August, 1970.***





Before Gordon Best departed he was able to witness a notable event in the history of the unit. The Troop had discovered that a VC ambush had been set over the area which the 547-161 aircraft was flying, a company of American infantry were moving towards it. Captain Hugh Nichols and Corporal Ron Biddle worked frantically to ascertain the identity of the company in danger. It was soon discovered that the company was part of the 199th Light Infantry Brigade and word was immediately passed via the aircraft to the Brigade HQ. The Brigade HQ promptly ordered the company to redeploy and attack the ambush site. In the ensuing battle 30 VC were killed for only one American casualty. The company commander sent a short note of thanks, endorsed by the Brigade Commander with the comment, "instead of a U.S. body count we were able to do a VC body count."



***Above, some of the wives of the members of the 547 Sig Tp. This photo comes from an article in the 'Chronicle' on the 22nd July, 1971.***

The caption reads;

*"Try some of these ... Mrs. Barbara Murray (far right) was the hostess yesterday at a curry luncheon for the wives of the men from Borneo Barracks, serving in Vietnam. Pictured are, back (from left): Mrs. Dawn Power, Mrs. Dell Quarrell, Mrs. Eileen Watson; front (from left): Mrs. Judy Phelan and Mrs. Yvonne Beaver. Fifteen wives attended the function organised by the president and committee of Wives' association, Borneo Barracks."*



***Above, a picture of some of the wives of the members of 547. This picture was also taken by the Chronicle at the Curry Luncheon. Starting at the top of the stairs from L-R, Mrs. Yvonne Beaver, Mrs. Dell Quarrell, Mrs. Marlene Russell, Mrs. Dawn Power, Mrs. Judy Phelan, Mrs. Eileen Watson, Unknown (Editor's apologies), Mrs. Pat Maywald, Mrs. Vicki Marshall, Mrs. Helen Waite, Mrs. Iris Howell, Mrs. Coral Abrahamson, Mrs. Jean Flynn, Mrs. Margret Kirby.***





## CHAPTER NINE - THE MELBOURNE CUP

Over the period May - August 1970, the U.S. 25th Infantry Division deployed the bulk of its 2nd Brigade to Firebase Lynch, twenty kilometres north of Nui Dat. Colonel Joe Ulatoski, its commander became a regular visitor to the Troop. His liaison officer, Lieutenant Stewart Malone, was at first a little apprehensive of the Australians but turned into a real battler and a good friend. His off-siders, Harry (Horatio) Nelson, Dave Audette, 'Pineapple' (the lad from Hawaii) and Snapper, their mascot dog were almost part of the roll book. The connections remained with the unit even after they had left to set up at Xuan Loc. To help them meet their schedules 547 volunteered their help, Ross Hutton struggled with a Yagi atop a 215 foot high tower while Jack Fenton and Frank Watkins clamped up poles in climbing irons to rig high frequency antenna. Stu Malone stated that the thing, "that really blew my mind" was seeing Jock McCartney cleaning and polishing his boots before going straight out into the mud again.



***From L-R, Jim Kanowski, Fred Robinson, Phil Waite in the movie area in front of the Troop Club.***

John Murdoch paid the unit a visit in July as did Mr. Reg Swartz, MHR, and the Director of Army Aviation, Lieutenant Colonel Deacon. Major Malcolm Raymond stayed for a longer period than most visitors while he installed a new computer. After he had finished the Troop were sorry to lose him. Lloyd Giles spent a week in the jungle with an SAS patrol working communications. He afterwards gave the Troop an interesting rundown on what it had done and seen in the May Tao Hills. The unit also received a visit from the Director of Signals, Colonel John Williamson and Gerry Gorman.

Warrant Officer Brian Russel took over from Andy Cockburn in August and the work area improvement continued. The twin garage for the unit's two vehicles went up with little problem, however some difficulties were experienced in the construction of the new toilet block. When it was finally completed it was quite an impressive structure, for which Colin Potter deserves a lot of the credit. The old site was concreted over, covered with a cross and helmet and inscribed, "Here lies the remains of 205 members of 547 Signal Troop."

August also saw new replacements in Signalman Andy Coyle, a Clerk and Corporal Alan Thompson (on his second tour) going into technical maintenance. Signalmen





Tony Arday and Mal Simpson were both destined for flying duties and Signalman Vince McQuillan was snapped up by the operations area. The next month, September, provided only three arrivals, Sergeant Brian Abrahamson and Signalman Ian Hunter, another two candidates for the air team and also Signalman Pat McGrath who joined the staff of the communications centre. Two operators came in the following month, Signalmen Jim Kanowski and Fred Robinson. Also on October's list were Staff Sergeant Danny Mathews and Private Ralph Schwer, both allocated to operations and Sergeant John McKenzie, the new supervisor of the communications centre.



***From L-R, Brian Russel, Col Clee and Lofty Watson in front of the 547 latrine.***

The system of Troop Club management was changed to that of an elected committee. Corporal Ron Biddle, the President, and his committee organised a Melbourne Cup Party. A dozen of the lighter members of the troop, brightly gowned in Vietnamese silks and jockey caps "mounted" the heavier members for a 300 metre dash down the Kanga Pad. The Military Police ensured that traffic was directed away from the course and Charlie Bennett in a Fedora and striped suit, gave the odds and took bets. The purple incendiary starting signal was fired too early and complete confusion reigned while the horses were brought back for the start. When the field was finally away, interference was evident as horses changed places with jockeys and ring-ins joining the race. The winner was 'Backwards' Mal Simpson ridden by Lloyd Giles. As horses, riders, officials and onlookers dispersed, a group of Vietnamese Bushman Scouts drove off shaking their heads in bewilderment.

The race was followed by entertainment. Kev Condon supplied huge steaks from Saigon and a six man band was obtained from the 1st Cavalry Division. The highlights of the evening were a Paul Stock - Bill Sampson, Ray Seiler rendition of "My Boomerang Won't Come Back" and a strip tease by John Kaarsberg. The Task Force Commander presented the race prizes and competed with the Colonel Ulatoski at joke telling. Each of them was given the Troop cheer of "Hooray for Briggy" or "Hooray for Joe". Colonel Ulatoski's aide blanched at hearing his commander being referred to as a horse's derriere but the Colonel eased the situation by saying that his Troop and only his Troop could call him that whenever it pleased.

The last arrivals for the year came in November. Signalman Peter Munroe went into the operations area and Staff Sergeant Bob (R.J) Howell, future flyer, was welcomed by his colleague Abe, with the often repeated comment that, "Nobody has 365 days to go!"





Christmas Dinner was served by the officers and senior ranks at the 104 mess. The flying team, who could not be present at the dinner, dropped an incendiary a few feet from the operations area window as a cordial gesture to those members on watch who also could not attend.

January 1971 saw a large batch of replacements. Lance Corporal Peter Cooke, Signalmen Rod Maywald, Brian Phelan and Duncan Finlay went to operations area duties; Signalman Nev Hampton (on his second tour) went into air operations; Signalman Colin Clee moved into the Cell and Signalman Barry Wilson joined technical maintenance. Sergeant Stan Myatt had various jobs, including Q man. Stan had barely started air training when he fell victim of an unusually nasty mosquito. It kept him in hospitals in Vietnam and Australia for some months.

By the time that Sergeant Bob Watson came to take over the Cell, it was clear that Tet 1971 would be quiet. Most of the enemy around Phuoc Tuy moved into the Nui Be hills east of May Taos. Subsequent events showed that they regrouped for fresh onslaughts during the Winter-Spring 1971 campaign. After the Tet Truce, American forces poised around the Nui Be hills to flush out enemy units hiding there. Colonel Ulatoski asked 547 for assistance. Captain Alan Cunningham and Warrant Officer Keith Delaney responded to a Troop request for help and provided their own services to fill the shortages. The Troop's two vehicles moved up Route 15 then Route I and stopped near Fire Base Carol. Each vehicle went bush to its appointed position, set up communications and commenced work. Bob Watson's detachment finished their job without any hitches but the other detachment was 'sprung' by a platoon of U.S. infantry just as Stan Myatt was winding up operations. As the detachment had no clearance papers, it took some time to convince the platoon sergeant that it was an authentic operation and not a cunningly disguised group of VC.

It has been said that the way to really attract attention is to construct a high fence. The Troop's 10 foot security fence was a challenge to one of the members of another unit. He appeared in the operations room at 0300hrs one morning and surprised the already astonished men on duty as he was naked save for a piece of well-placed newspaper and a pair of sandshoes. The lads quickly removed the intruder and justice took its course. The fence was soon heightened and no more nocturnal prowlers appeared.





## **CHAPTER TEN - 'THE ELLIOT NESS AFFAIR'**

Colonel Ulatoski's Brigade operations ceased in March. Prior to his leaving he visited the unit and with a simple, "Thanks an awful lot fellows" presented the unit with a magnificent plaque covered with all the insignia of the 25th Division's units.

The 25th was replaced by the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division. The 3rd Brigade had control of its own helicopters and 547 soon made unofficial contact with their research flying teams and exchanged duties with some of their operators. Hugh McCartney put their gear through its paces on a couple of missions and finally conceded that it was a very useful installation. Those of the Troop who tried out the helicopter system still preferred their system which seemed a better all-round installation providing unrestricted observation of the terrain.

Warrant Officer Robby Burns became Lieutenant Bowen's assistant in March. Signaller John Clancy came the same month to operate in the communications centre as did Sergeant Joe Flynn, to take over operations area supervision before going into air operations. Flight Lieutenant Stan Harding, a regular visitor on operational matters and a great help socially, was replaced by Flight Lieutenant Trevor Miller.

The Cell gear had been playing up for some time and 547's experiments in the ionosphere fell short due to lack of parts and failures of sensitive circuitry. The Americans did their best to repair them and even acquired parts from Japan. The Troop was depending on the return of Zeb Jeffery and Mal Raymond in April with a load of spares to get the equipment functioning. During spells of inactivity Norm Gilbert and Bob Watson caught up with a few outstanding jobs. They created a four man fighting pit, complete with overhead protection and then reconditioned the generators. Zel and Mal arrived with the spares and did achieve some results, albeit small.

Staff Sergeant Slim Beaver was another April arrival and he took control of the technical maintenance department. Lance Corporal Tony Bridges moved into operations and Signaller Jim Marshall and Bob Elworthy went to flying. Corporal Herb Power also came in April to work in the operations area and to reassure the Troop that the rank of Corporal still existed in the Army. Jim Marshall took over the job as unit barber from Ray Seiler and moved his hairdressing centre from the compound to the lines. He set up a one chair stand complete with umbrella, noticeboard and even the traditional striped pole.

More equipment arrived for aerial research. It was installed in a second aircraft. Thus began the final saga of 547 air operations with two aircraft in the air at the same time, either on separate or joint missions. Major Kev McDonald, the Task Force Air Operations staff officer helped with the project. An official visit from Major General Vincent to the Troop was a significant gesture from an ex-Signals officer. Major General Dunstan, who had visited the unit in 1968 as Deputy Commander of the Task Force, visited the unit again, this time as the Commander of the Australian





Force Vietnam.

It became possible to spend a night and a day in Saigon occasionally as every sixteenth day was now free. Not many of the Troop took the opportunity though, as the word had already spread about the general decay of the city. Vince McQuillan and Charlie Bennett did go and managed to find the race track where they won a few piastre. Kevin Condon had a fair amount of business in Saigon and although he was a non-drinker he was more fun than most of the Troop's city based hosts. A born bargainer with a no-nonsense attitude, he could still change a mediocre night into a few hours of adventure.

The Task Force had not received rockets since Tet 1969 and alerts were confined to practise drills held only (according to the soldiers) when the Officer's Mess had no films to show. One moment of excitement occurred when someone heard a siren and pushed the Troop's own siren. As members of the troop heard the siren they scrambled into their pits and someone at Task Force HQ hearing 547's siren set all the other sirens in the Task Force off. When radio contact was made everyone in the area was trying to find out who had pushed the first button. Cowards that the 547 lads were they could not bring themselves to confess, for it had been learned that the initiating noise had in fact come from the Club's television which was screening Elliot Ness's police car.

Old jokes die hard and the Hoa Long Dance reared its head once more. Signalman Steve Thuell, who arrived in May, bedecked himself in his civilian finery and fronted up ready to go to the Rice Mill. Nev Hampton set him up nicely and a few others collaborated to embarrass Steve. Two other operators arrived in May, Signalmen Danny Conroy and Larry Gilbert. Signalman Peter Dencher went to technical maintenance to replace Al Thompson, three months before Alan was due to go home. Possibly one of the longest takeovers in Vietnam, it was necessary in view of the complex nature of the equipments operated by the Troop, Stu Malone received his "drop" of a month and opted for discharge in the USA planning to drift and enjoy himself before he felt the urge to settle down. He had been a really ambitious man earlier in his tour and the Troop members wondered if perhaps they had influenced him in some way? Perhaps also, his R and R in Hong Kong under the tender care of Doug Rodgers, an original member of 547, had some effect?

Major Herbie O'Flynn arrived in June to take over command. A visit to Vung Tau area as a precaution against an Australian withdrawal to that area was included as part of his itinerary. Other June arrivals were Signalman Ken Borserio, a communications centre operator and Signalman Phil Waite, an operations area man. With the medical evacuation of Stan Myatt, the Troop lost a good NCO. The unit internal checker, Brian Abrahamson, hastily took over his job as it was becoming obvious that a move was imminent.







## **CHAPTER ELEVEN - WITHDRAWAL TO VUNG TAU**

First news of Australian withdrawal came in August 1971. Because newspapers took freight time to reach the troops in Vietnam, the most reliable and up-to-date medium was the Australian Forces Radio station. The Prime Minister's announcement was therefore listened to avidly by all but strangely enough was not greeted with wild cheers.



***From L-R, Kev Lever and Keith Innes.***

Over the next few weeks many details became known and many discussions were held with the Task Force commander on the role of 547 in the withdrawal. The decision was a difficult one because of the unique position of the troop and the invaluable service it had rendered throughout the years. For a while it looked as though the Troop was going to be the last unit to leave Vietnam. Finally in early September a decision was reached and the Troop was ordered to redeploy to Vung Tau by 6 October, with no loss of circuit time and to withdraw from the theatre on an unspecified date after 4 RAR was withdrawn.

The plan allowed for the maximum use of the Troop's services until the deployment of any fighting force against the enemy was possible. Once these parameters were known the first of many Troop conferences was held. The withdrawal called for a change in the posture of the Troop's work without interruption to work, therefore priorities of work had to be established.

Warrant Officer Fred Mitchner, who arrived in September was immediately thrown into the A/Q side with the enormous job of preparing the Troop's Q-Records prior to return to Australia and their closure. The Cell was to close on 15 September and Bob Watson moved to the job of the chief packer of stores. Over the next few months he was to become an expert in packing and juggling crates. Cell enthusiasts Col Clee and Duncan Finlay were redeployed to the sets once the Cell had been closed. It was reported that more than a few tears fell when the Cell was finally closed.

Warrant Officer Phil Reid who arrived in a torrential down-pour in August, went quickly to work as the Troop Administration Officer and then moved to control the operations area and work as a member of the flying team.





Whilst the initial discussions with Brigadier McDonald were taking place, discussions were commenced with Major Peter Watkins, OC of 110 Signal Squadron at Vung Tau, into the feasibility of the Troop occupying some of his territory at Vung Tau. It was initially agreed that it was possible and two huts were made available on the eastern end of their complex and adjacent to their receiver aerial farm. Half a hut and the roadway were finally allocated as living accommodation.

August also saw the arrival of Warrant Officer Peter Weir-Smith, Staff Sergeant Dan Mooney, Corporal Jack Morgan and Lance Corporal Ash Terrell. Jack Morgan had already completed one tour of Vietnam.

On 15 September the advance party left Nui Dat, commanded by Warrant Officer Weir-Smith and Staff Sergeant Mooney. Although the Troop carried no carpenters on establishment, Dan Mooney, Jim Kanowski and Jack Morgan soon became professionals and by 29 September the structural changes to the two buildings had been effected. New doorways, covered walkways, security fencing complete with metal gates and office partitions were some of the work under-taken by the advance party. Peter and Barry Wilson worked feverishly on the technical side of the new site and established all aerals and lighting which was required. The communications centre had to be sealed and air conditioned with the circuits ready to take over from Nui Dat by 1 October. By sheer work and determination by the advance Party the new site was in readiness by 1 October.

During September whilst all preparations were underway Private Stev Innes and Signalmen Daryl Singleton and John Fulton arrived. They were accompanied by Daryl Hancock who had already served a complete term with the Troop.

On 26 September prior to the move of the main body, the last social function was held in the Troop Club. It was a colourful evening and a fitting end to the Club. Films were shown to mark the occasion and the comments proved more worth than the films. Exorbitant prices were paid at the auction of the Troop's property. Major Herbie O'Flynn's moustache fetched \$10 to Ron Hall and \$25 to Jim Kanowski who delighted in shaving it off - one half at a time. The profits from the night were put towards the Troop's final party at Vung Tau.

On 29 September the main body commenced the move to Vung Tau which was completed by 1 October with no loss of circuit time. Tented accommodation was soon established and the new set room was fully operational by 1 October.

The rear party, commanded by Lieutenant Bowen remained at the old location. Ian Bowen and Peter Dencher were housed in the troop's ACV, with a circuit to Vung Tau to facilitate the quick passage of information to the Task Force HQ. Fred Mitchener, Bob Watson, Daryl Singleton and Jock Fulton also remained as the rear echelon and continued the task of documenting, packing and tidying up the troop area. Huts were going to be left in going condition so as to be able to be occupied by the ARVN. The first shipment home was made at this stage, one container of stores, two shelters of Cell stores and some generators.

On 7 October the rear echelon joined the Troop at Vung Tau, whilst the ACV





remained at Nui Dat, still with its two man rear party. On 16 October it left Nui Dat along with the Task Force HQ. The 547 ACV was the last vehicle to leave Nui Dat.





## CHAPTER TWELVE - GOING HOME

Life at Vung Tau was not on first impressions appealing. The accommodation was poor and the club was owned by 110 and only shared by 547, The sergeant's Mess of 110 soon welcomed the Troop's seniors and life started to improve socially. Swimming, mini-golf and beach parties soon became all the rage in off duty hours and the lights of Vung Tau city also provided some distractions.

During October Sergeant Paul Keys arrived to take charge of the new signal centre. Warrant Officer Dick Wroe arrived to take charge of the operations centre and Signalmen Trevor Williamson and Larry Osborn went to the sets. These were the last replacements to arrive for the Troop. Jim Kanowski delayed his departure until mid-December to allow the Troop to remain at full manning for the withdrawal.

Prior to the withdrawal announcement the Troop had decided to supplement the usual gift of clothing to the Baria Orphanage with a set of swings. The money was raised by the 7 Signal Regiment's Wives Association. The Playgym arrived in October and on 6 November a party left Vung Tau to erect it at the orphanage. Bob Watson, plan in hand, held off the enthusiastic amateurs whilst Peter Weir-Smith welded the structure to star pickets to ensure stability. The children waited politely for the playgym to be constructed. Once it was finished all politeness was forgotten and no fewer than sixteen children occupied the set at any one time.



*From L-R, Tony Bridges and Ralph Schwer.*

The Americans, who were to undertake the Troop's work after departure, took an increasing interest in the Troop's operations. Visits and exchanges were organised. Corporal Herb Power, Lance Corporal Peter Cooke, Signalmen Jim Kanowski and Col Clee were despatched at various stages to Bien Hoa and Long Tanh as an aid in 'on the job training' of the US operators. Ron Hall, who arrived in June as DLO to replace Kevin Condon, paid numerous visits. His praise of the Troop's abilities was hard to live up to and his support and advice was always sought on the technicalities of the trade.

Few changes were made to the new layout owing to the limited period of occupancy. Aerials were changed and rechanged until the best one was found. Initially a long wire antenna, a biconical antenna, two dipoles and a V antenna were constructed. Once established it was found that the biconical was poor while the dipoles were only fair. 110 came to the rescue and lent the Troop a Jamaican Antenna which proved to





be much better.

The flying team kept up their expert and unique facility. The Vung Tau airstrip, some 3km from the camp, was used. At times two aircraft had to be used in order to meet the Task Force requirements. Technical maintenance, the communications centre and the orderly room remained unchanged throughout the deployment to Vung Tau. Only essential maintenance was carried out in October and Peter Weir-Smith's 'Steptoe' yard reached an all time high in tidiness.

In November Private Peter Schwer was married in Saigon to a Vietnamese girl. Corporal Tony Bridges attended the wedding as the unit's representative. Ralph, who at times was more of a local than the locals left the Troop to join 'A' Branch in Saigon as an interpreter.

As Task Force Units began to leave Vietnam more and more emphasis was placed on the Troop. Major Jim Graham who arrived just before the withdrawal from Nui Dat to replace Major Mike Peters as G2 INT on Task Force HQ, kept the Troop informed on all aspects. In November it was decided that some Troop representation was required after the Troop had discontinued operations. The Task Force commander, after considering many alternatives decided on W01 Robbie Burns as the Troop's representative.



### ***The SIGCEN of 547 at the Vung Tau location, 12 Nov 71.***

As the day of the Troop's cessation of operations approached work activity increased. Each senior NCO was detailed a special project in order to achieve the eventual withdrawal. The Task Force HQ thinned out early in December. On 1 December a farewell to the Task Force parade was held. 547, along with other units stood at the edge of the parade ground and watched 4 RAR being paraded.

On 13 December 547 Signal Troop closed down. The flying team and operations area ceased at 1200 hrs and the communications centre at 1800 hrs. The silence of the sets that night was almost unbearable but the dismantling activity started to compensate. While a Sergeant kept a nervous and watchful eye on all the stores to ensure it return to Australia correctly.

The technical maintenance section, under Warrant Officer Peter Weir Smith, started dismantling the technical facilities while Warrant Officer Phil Reid organised work parties to dispose of the items that were not to be returned to Australia.





***Above, the Troop position at Vung Tau.***

Staff Sergeant Dan Mooney's energy was diverted to the preparation of the unit's three vehicles and one trailer. The vehicles had to be cleaned, serviced, painted and then presented to the Australian Quarantine Service prior to loading. His work force of Signalmen Daryl Singleton and Dan Conroy soon mastered the art of spray-gun painting and the vehicles were passed on first presentation, an unusual occurrence by the Inspector. Sergeant Joe Flynn's project was the preparation of a 2.5KVA generator. This also passed the inspector first time.

Warrant Officer Dick Wroe became the disposer of all sorts of unwanted items while Lieutenant Ian Bowen acted as the archivist and secured documents of historical interest for retention in Australia.

By 17 December the unit's lines looked denuded. The antennas were down and the barbed wire security fence just a memory. In all but name 547 Signal Troop had ceased to exist in operational terms and thoughts of Australia loomed high.

Although many small farewell functions were held between 17 and 22 December, the main Troop party was held on 18 December. The format was a beach bar-b-que in the afternoon to which official guests were invited, while in the evening a more informal party for the Troop and its friends was held in the lines. The whole day was a success, with Representatives from the Task Force HQ, 161 Recce Flight, 110 Signal Squadron and the U.S. Allies being invited. The afternoon ended with a swim in the Peter Badcoe pool and even those who did not want a swim or had not brought swimming costumes went swimming. Most of the visitors arrived in their own helicopters and after the 'refreshments' that afternoon they probably regretted the bumpy flights home. The evening farewell soon turned into a sing-song with Signalman Bob Elworthy acting as choir leader. The renditions of 'Silent Night' will never be matched again.

On 23 December in the early hours of the morning, 547 Signal Troop boarded the buses for the airport. Thoughts of the Troop's brief stay in Vung Tau were mixed with thoughts of homecoming. At 1000 hrs, 23 December 547 Signal Troop departed Vietnam. No press photographers farewelled the troops, not even the flies bothered them. Some said, "Have we left the war or is this just going to be a long R & R."



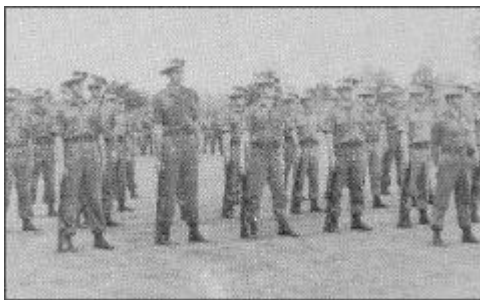


## CHAPTER THIRTEEN - THE RETURN TO AUSTRALIA

On Wednesday, 9 February 1972, Borneo Barracks held a special parade to welcome home 547 Signal Troop. A special feature of the parade was that instead of the usual VIP's as guests of honour, the Regiment chose to honour those local groups and individuals who had shown the troop kindness over its five and a half year tour. Despite the fact that the parade was held in the pouring rain it was quite a success as the Troop at last had the chance to thank groups such as the Dalby Country Women's Auxiliary for their many food parcels and Dianne's Bakery for the beautiful meat pies. It seemed a fitting end to 547 Signal Troop's tour of Vietnam.

547 Sig Troop's contribution to the Australian effort in Vietnam can be best summed up in the words of the then CGS Lieutenant General M.E. Brogan, CB, CBE, BE;

*"A 24 hour a day operational contribution of immeasurable value to the First Australian Task Force in its planning and successful execution of its operations in and around Phuoc Tuy Province."*

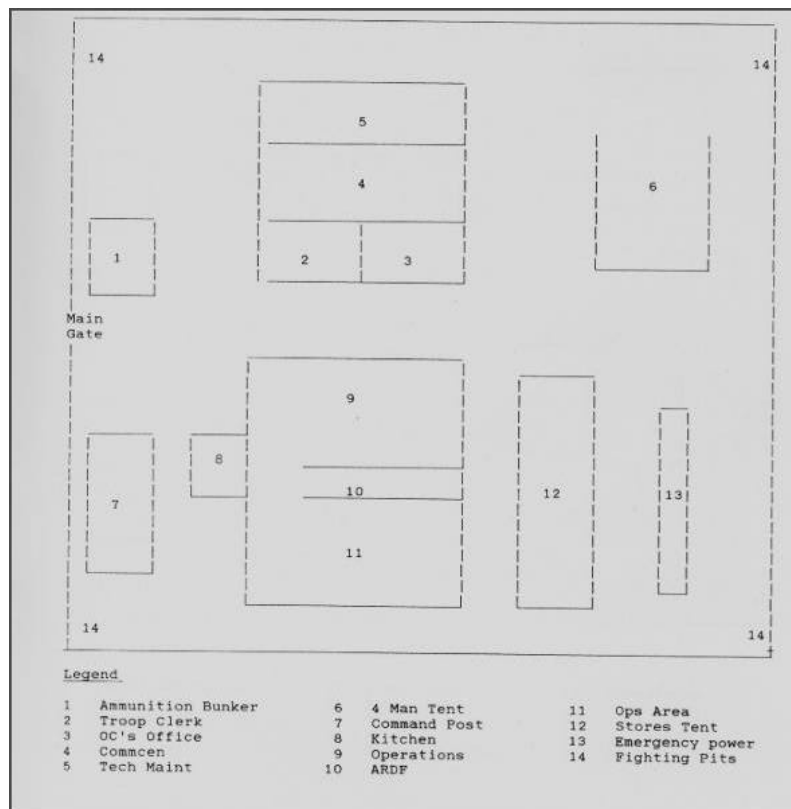


***Photos of 547's return to Cabarlah.***





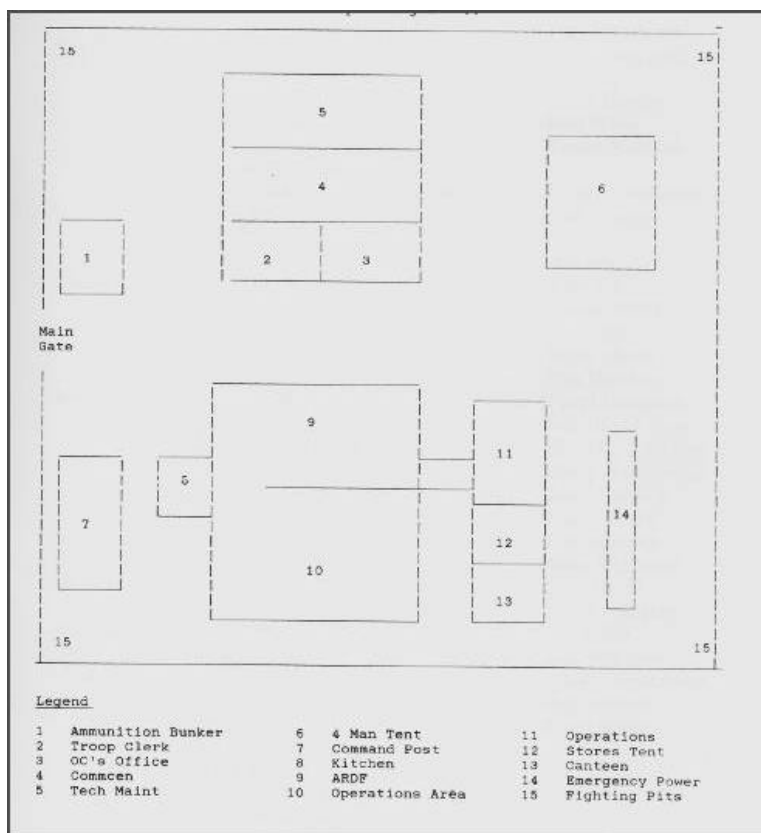
## ANNEX A - TROOP LAYOUT AT NUI DAT



***December 1967 - Troop Strength 25***







**October 1968 - Troop Strength 35**





**ANNEX B - 547 SIGNAL TROOP NOMINAL ROLE**  
**(MAY 1966 TO DECEMBER 1971)**

<b>Major</b>	<b>Captain</b>	<b>Lieutenant</b>	<b>Mr</b>
Colin Cattanach Steve Hart Peter Murray Herb O'Flynn	John Duncan Brian Doyle Jack Fenton Hugh Nichols Errol Poultney Trevor Richards Steve Zagon Davy Brocket Bill Hughes	Ian Bowen	Gordon Best Ron Hall Malcolm Raymond

<b>WO1</b>	<b>WO2</b>	<b>Staff Sergeant</b>	<b>Sergeant</b>
Robbie Burns Andy Cockburn Jack Hooker	Eric Grace Hugh McCartney Jack Parker Fred Mitchner Phil Reid Bryan Russell Doug Rogers Graham Stewart Peter Weir-Smith Dick Wroe	Dan Appleby Slim Beaver Norm Gilbert Bill Irwin Dan Matthews Clive Sheppard Jim Rayner John Thorpe Bob Ward Frank Watkins	Brian Abrahamson Ted Blacker John Bull Jim Brill Alan Clarkson Laurie Duell Bob Field Brian Flynn Bob Hartley Daryl Houghton Bob (R.C.) Howell Bob (R.J.) Howell Barry Hampstead John Harding Eddie Jones Dan Mooney John McKenzie Stan Myatt Sammy Rogers Len Scott Des Williams Clarrie Whitehorn Bob Watson Keith Zeller





Corporal	Lance Corporal	Signalman (1)	Signalman (2)
Garth Brown	Peter Ashton	Andy Aird	Ray Hyland
Ron Biddle	Mike Connagen	Glen Adamson	Steve Innes
John Bramston	Peter Cook	Tony Arday	Colin King
Peter Bradley	Murray Cooper	Bob Brown	John Kaarsberg
Murray Chamberlain	Flynn Dennis	John Bartlett	Jim Kanowski
Wayne Cowan	Kevin Lever	John Bailey	Harry Lock
Roy Dean	Jim McLean	Adrian Bishop	Tony Luck
Clarrie Day	Tex Middleton	Tony Bridges	John Lechte
Bill Dunn	Bob Maher	Charlie Bennett	Adrian Lange
Frank Finch	Colin Potter	Bob Baldwin	Jim Marshall
Bruce Fitzsimmons	Alan Patterson	David Cochrane	Pat McGrath
Clem Foster	Ray Pratt	Colin Clee	Vince McQuillan
John Grace	Barry Poole	John Clancy	Peter Munro
Gordon Grieves	Blue Thomas	Andy Coyle	Rod Maywald
Roger Harrison	Les Whitney	Danny Clarke	Daryl McPhee
J.E. Hunter	Frank Young	Danny Conroy	Bob MacDonald
Fred Hawkes		Clive Clarke	Mark Pritchard
Chick Hanks		Dennis Dean	Kevin Peterson
Haydon Hunter		Hugh Dixon	Bill Pollock
Keith Innes		N.W. Derry	Jeff Payne
Barry Jonathon		Jim Danskin	Joe Potter
Peter Jenkins		Leon Douglas	Brian Phelan
Roy Johnston		John Dean	Bill Pearton
Jock Kinder		Bob Elworthy	Brian Quarrell
Brian Kinsella		Duncan Finlay	Fred Robinson
Jock Lamont		John Fulton	Bob Rolleston
Brian Lacy		John Gehle	Earl Rush
Harry Martin		Mike Guilliot	Phil Rutherford
Warner Madden		Lloyd Giles	Rod Spragg
Stan Marks		Larry Gilbert	Blue Stone
Jack Morgan		Lofty Hayward	Ralph Schwer
John Murray		Bugsy Harper	Mal Simpson
Mal Onn		Daryl Hancock	Paul Stock
Tom Oswin		Bob Harland	Bill Sampson
Herb Power		Ross Hutton	Ray Seiler
Speed Peters		Trevor Herd	Snowy Turner
Dave Priebbenow		Ray Hannet	Al Thompson
Ken Perry		Neville Hampton	Steve Thuell
Dick Schafer		Ian Hunter	Daryl Singleton
Max Starr		Geoff Hall	Phil Waite
Alan Thompson			Dick Ward
Glen Trussell			Trev Williamson
Ken Trewartha			Bruce Wilson
Lance Townsend			Barry Wilson
Ron Williams			Woody Wardell
Bill Wood			Les Wotherspoon
			Jim Yule
			John Zeller

***and Beauregard the Mongoose, the Troop Mascot.***

