

Personal Memories of the 1st Signal Brigade

The Beginning

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Introduction

In order to understand the origin the 1st Signal Brigade you need to understand some of the major events in the buildup of communications in Vietnam and Thailand. Much of what is contained in this narrative is based on personal observations as well as research of specific government records.

Chronological Events

Phu Lam

Phu Lam was activated in November 1961 when HF transmitters were relocated from a previous location and activated. Phu Lam was a field element of the US Army Communications Agency which ran all of the Army strategic communications systems, world wide. Most of these systems were high frequency radio.

Backporch

In 1962 Page Communications Engineers was awarded a contract to install Air Force, 72 channel, AN/MRC-85, Tropo Scatter terminals at Phu Lam, Nha Trang, Pleiku, Qui Nhon, Da Nang and Ubon in Thailand.

Wet Wash

In 1962 a submarine cable system was approved to interconnect the Philippines with Vietnam. This system was called Wet Wash and was contracted to Page Communications Engineers. This cable system would greatly improve the communications out of Vietnam to other US military installations including Hawaii and Washington.

Bangkok – Saigon Tropo

In 1962 Philco Corporation was awarded a contract to install a 60 channel tropo scatter link between the US Army Communications Agency near Bangkok, Thailand (Bang Ping) to Phu Lam in Saigon.

Bangkok – Saigon Philco Tropo Failure

In early 1963, the Office of the Chief Signal Officer, Department of the Army, became aware that the recently Philco Corporation installed tropo scatter link between Bangkok and Saigon was not operational due to propagation problems. I was dispatched to develop a solution to this problem. As a result of this investigation, a plan was developed to reconfigure the system by relocating the Bangkok terminal to Green Hill in Thailand and the Saigon terminal to Vung Tau Hill in Vietnam. From these new

locations the circuits would be extended to Bangkok and Saigon via microwave links. This plan was approved and the reconfiguration was accomplished in December 1965.

Phu Lam Tape Relay Activated

The Phu Lam Tape Relay facility was activated in early 1964.

STRATCOM

On 1 April 1964 the US Army Communications Agency was combined with the US Army Signal Engineering Agency to create the US Army Strategic Communications Command (STRATCOM) commanded by Major General Richard J. Myer, and headquartered in Washington, DC.

Tonkin Gulf Incident

The Tonkin Gulf incident in August 1964 caused major communications problems. The HF communications between Saigon and Hawaii were not capable of carrying the load and the Wet Wash submarine cable system was not yet complete.

Satellite Communications

STRATCOM **rushed** an experimental satellite ground terminal to Saigon to bolster the communications capabilities. This satellite terminal only had a capability of one voice circuit and one teletype circuit. Two months later STRATCOM rushed a newer satellite terminal to Vietnam which had a capability of one voice circuit and 16 teletype circuits.

CINCPAC

The Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) was aware of the shortages of communications circuits within Vietnam. During the summer of 1964 Navy Commander Ray Ward, of the CINCPAC J6, developed a concept for major expansions of the communications long distance communications in Vietnam and Thailand. He envisioned the use of Philco tropo scatter equipment for expansion and improvements in Thailand. This equipment was initially intended for Indonesia and was in storage on the west coast of the United States. He envisioned using AN/MRC-85 type equipments for the expansions in Vietnam.

The Philco tropo equipment operated at 2 GZ and there was no experience in this type of tropo scatter in Thailand. I met Commander Ward in 1963 during a trip to the Far East and we had stayed in touch. In June 1964 Commander Ward requested some assistance from me as I began a trip to South East Asia. I had been transferred to STRATCOM and now was the STRATCOM Radio Officer. Commander Ward asked if I and my engineer could determine the feasibility of certain tropo scatter links in Thailand using the Philco equipment. This feasibility study was done over a weekend and it was determined that the proposed links were feasible. Commander Ward did not explain the reason for his request but did say that he expected to be able to tell them more upon my return.

When I returned in July, Commander Ward showed me a draft message that proposed the Intergraded Wideband Communications System (IWCS).

The following month, August 1964, CINCPAC officially proposed the IWCS to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

DCA Approval

The Defense Communications Agency (DCA) created a plan for the IWCS and submitted the plan to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) in December 1964.

Defense Communications Agency – Southeast Asia Mainland (DCA-SAM)

The Defense Communications Agency established a center in Vietnam in April 1965. In September this center was re-designated the Defense Communications Agency – Southeast Asia Mainland (DCA-SAM).

Funding and Approval by the JCS

The US Army Communications Systems Agency (USACSA) at Fort Monmouth was responsible for the procurement of major communication systems. The Commander was Lieutenant Colonel Hugh F. Foster Jr. (later 1st Signal Brigade Commander as a Major General and retired as a Major General). His staff officer for the procurement was Major Emmett Paige Jr. (later Chief of the IWCS element of the 1st Signal Brigade Communications Engineering and Management Agency as a Lieutenant Colonel and still later Commander of US Army Communication Command (formally STRATCOM) as a Major General, later a Lieutenant General). The US Army Strategic Communications Command (STRATCOM) was responsible for the engineering. The Director of Engineering was Colonel Kinji Hino and his Deputy was Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Keefer. I was responsible for the engineering.

Major Paige took the lead to brief Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine and JCS staffs on the IWCS and the need for the required funding. His efforts were successful and the IWCS was approved by the JCS in August 1965.

IWCS Procurement Specifications

Prior to the official approval, I together with Major Paige and two STRATCOM engineers, created the procurement specifications for the IWCS. We made two additions to the IWCS that were not in the original plan. We added a microwave system for the Saigon area and a Communications Control Center that was later turned over to the Defense Communications Agency- Southeast Asia (DCA-SAM).

Contract Award

They said it couldn't be done and he did it. Major Paige said he would award contracts in 30 days and everyone said it couldn't be done. Contracts were awarded in September, 30 days after JCS approval.

STRATCOM –Southeast Asia

During the months prior to contract award, STRATCOM was planning a new headquarters in Saigon to command all of the existing long lines units and the additional that would be required to operate the IWCS. In August 1965, Major Albert Cervini was transferred from STRATCOM to Saigon as the advance party to arrange for facilities. Colonel Henry Schneider and I were transferred to Saigon in September. We three became the first members of STRATCOM – SEA which was located in a villa off of Plantation Road between Cholon and Tan Son Nhut. The 11th Signal Group and the Phu Lam facility were the first units under the command of STRATCOM-SEA.

During the latter part of 1965 information was received that Colonel Robert D. Terry would arrive in January to create a signal brigade. Colonel Terry had been selected for promotion to Brigadier General (later a Major General).

Colonel Schneider had to return to the United States in December 1965 due to a medical problem and his replacement was Colonel Bruce Cowan.

Brigade Planning Group

Colonel Terry and staff of several officers arrived in January and began the planning on a Signal Brigade. The initial plan was that this new commander would be responsible for all communications in Vietnam. Colonel Terry would have a Deputy at the Brigade and a Deputy on the US Army Vietnam staff.

Colonel Terry and his staff were all “airborne” Signal Officers. They wore fatigues and combat boots. This was in contrast to the STRATCOM personnel who wore kaki and low quarter shoes. STRATCOM was not a combat outfit. There was some concern among the STRATCOM personnel that these “combat soldiers” did not have the background and experience to command a Brigade that was primarily composed of fixed station, long distance, strategic communication systems. This view only lasted a few weeks when it became very apparent that Colonel Terry and his planning staff were all outstanding officers and well qualified. STRATCOM personnel began to identify with them. It did not take long before for all STRATCOM personnel begin to wear fatigues and combat boots and became a part of this new endeavor.

IWCS Engineering and Management Office

Approximately one month prior the activation of the 1st Signal Brigade, Colonel Terry directed the establishment of the IWCS Engineering and Maintenance Office (IWCS Office) to manage the installation of the IWCS systems. The IWCS Office was quickly staffed with 23 men and officers. Each Thursday I gave a two to three hour briefing to Colonel Terry on the installation progress and problems of the previous week.

1st Signal Brigade Activated on 1 April 1966

The 1st Signal Brigade was activated in Saigon on 1 April 1966. The initial Headquarters was in a compound near Tan Son Nhut Air Base, which was only a mile from the Vila occupied by STRATCON-SEA, Regional Communications Group and the IWCS Engineering and Management Office.

This was a memorable week. Not only was the Brigade activated but I was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel three days later.

Another Special Event

On May 31st 1966, Colonel Terry, Major Albert Cervini, Captain Charles Cox and I, made a trip on an L-23 military aircraft to the 1st Signal Brigade subordinate headquarters in Bangkok. This was Colonel Terry’s first trip to this headquarters. We arrived late in the afternoon and were greeted by Lieutenant Colonel Harold Crochet who told Colonel Terry that he needed to call Colonel Gordon Cauble, his Deputy in Saigon. We then went to the STRATCOM – Thailand headquarters so Colonel Terry could make the call. After the call was completed, Colonel Terry told us that we had to return to Saigon the next morning.

What was all of this about? There was a ceremony scheduled for the next day where Brigadier General Lotz, JUSMAG J6, would be promoted to Major General and Colonel Terry would be promoted to Brigadier General. We then had a wonderful dinner and the team returned to Saigon the next morning.

Original Units

39th Signal Battalion

The 39th Signal Battalion commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Lotus B. Blackwell began to arrive in Vietnam in February 1962. The 39th was the first major Signal unit to arrive in Vietnam. The mission of the 39th was to operate the Back Porch system, all telephone systems and communications message centers in Vietnam.

The major units of the 39th were the 232nd Signal Company in the Saigon and Mekong Delta areas, the 178th Signal Company in Da Nang and the 362nd Signal Company which operated all of the long-lines tropo scatter systems through out Vietnam from their headquarters in Nha Trang.

2nd Signal Group

The 2nd Signal Group commanded by Colonel James J. Moran began to arrive in Vietnam in May 1965. In June the 41st Signal Battalion commanded by Colonel James G. Pelland arrived together with the 593rd Signal Company. The 39th Signal Battalion was assigned to the 2nd Signal Group. The 362nd Signal Company was also assigned to the 2nd Signal Group to operate all of the long-lines tropo scatter systems.

11th Signal Group

The 11th Signal Group, a subordinate unit of STRATCOM, arrived in Vietnam in June 1965. The 11th was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Jerry J. Enders.

69th Signal Battalion

The 69th Signal Battalion commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Charles R. Myer (later 1st Signal Brigade Commander as a Brigadier General and later a Lieutenant General) arrived in Vietnam in November 1965. The 69th took over all local communications support in the Saigon-Long Binh area. Two additional signal companies were attached to the 69th, the 593rd Signal Company which provided communications support in the Saigon area and the 580th Signal Company which had the capability to install large fixed cable systems.

40th Signal Battalion

The 40th Signal Battalion (Heavy Construction), under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Kirby Lamar, arrived from Fort Bragg in September 1966.

459th Signal Battalion

The 459th Signal Battalion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth R. Symmes, arrived from Fort Huachuca, AZ in October 1966.

Additional References

This description of the 1st Signal Brigade covered the period 1961 through the end of 1966. For a more detailed description of Communications Electronics in Vietnam read; *Military Communications, A Test for Technology*, by Colonel John D. Bergen, Center of Military History United States Army, 1986. Available from the Superintendent of Documents, Stock No. 008-020-01035-9. It can be purchased on line at <http://bookstore.gpo.gov/> for \$47.50.

For an excellent over all history of the War in Vietnam see *25-Year War, America's Military Role in Vietnam* by General Bruce Palmer, Jr., published by the University Press of Kentucky, 1982.

Division-Level Communications, 1962-1973 by Lieutenant General Charles R. Myer.

The complete book can be accessed from:

<http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/books/Vietnam/DivLevCom/index.htm>

Communications Electronics 1962-1970 by Major General Thomas Matthews Reinzi, 1st Signal Brigade Commander 1969-1970 (later Lieutenant General). (141 pages)

The complete book can be accessed from:

<http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/books/Vietnam/Comm-El/index.htm>

A condensed version of General Reinzi's book (31 pages) can be accessed from:

<http://www.MervNorton.com/Publications.htm>