



STRATCOM

1st Signal Brigade Aviation Vietnam History 1962 - 1972 by David Anderson Satellite 33



1st SIGNAL BDE

Background



21st Signal Group UH-1H at Nha Trang Troposcatter site

In May 1960 the Strategic Communications Command (STRATCOM) hired a private firm, Page Communications Engineers, to build a 7,800-mile Pacific Scatter System for the Army along the island chain from Hawaii to the Philippines. In 1962 the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved plans to build a military submarine cable system, known as WETWASH, from the Philippines to South Vietnam to improve the unreliable radio communication links to Vietnam. In January 1962, Page Communications Engineers, began installing Troposcatter equipment (best known for its "billboard" type antennas) within South Vietnam to provide the backbone of a strategic network known as BACKPORCH, which would connect five major cities in South Vietnam with Thailand

During 1962, eight company-size aviation units, two specialty aviation detachments, and two maintenance support companies were deployed to Vietnam to support and train the South Vietnamese. The number of US military advisers was increased from 700 to more than 3,400 by the end of 1962. The size of the new deployments and the new mission made an increase in communications support imperative. The first unit of the U.S. Army ground forces to arrive in Vietnam was a communications unit, the **39th Signal Battalion (BN)**, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Lotus B. Blackwell. First contingents of the battalion arrived in Vietnam in February 1962; the complete battalion was there by July. Incidentally, the 39th was the last US Army ground force to leave Vietnam in 1973.

Also to ensure higher echelon avionics maintenance support for the aviation units, six signal detachments (avionics) arrived in Vietnam during 1962: the 69th, 70th, 255th, 256th, 257th, and 258th. These detachments filled a vital need in supporting the communications and electronics equipment of the aviation units already in Vietnam and of those that followed.

At the height of the Vietnam War, the 1st Signal Brigade grew to a strength of almost 23,000 personnel. This level of strength, roughly the size of a division, would make the unit one of, if not the largest, brigade-sized units to ever serve in country. The 1st Signal Brigade motto was - "**Keep the Shooters Talking.**" At its peak, the Brigade was authorized 45 aircraft: 9 twin-engine, turbo-prop, fixed-wing aircraft; 12 light observation helicopters; and 24 utility helicopters, distributed in three small aviation units to support the strategic communication system spread over all of South Vietnam and Thailand. By pooling the aircraft, the brigade could accomplish by itself one-third of the maintenance that otherwise would have had to be done by aviation general support maintenance personnel. Without this organic airborne transportation, the brigade could not possibly have supplied some 300 signal sites twenty-four hours a day, on the shortest notice.

These small Signal Aviation units were not separate aviation companies and always a small part of a BN, Group (GP), or Brigade (BDE) Headquarters company, and as such there is little official history documentation available. The units were made up from modified Signal unit Table of Organization and Equipment (TOE) lists. Unique to most aviation units in Vietnam, the individual signal aviation units started out with fixed wing only assets and grew into hybrid units with both fixed wing aircraft and helicopters. This history has come from several books and articles written about Communication during the Vietnam War, unclassified Quarterly BN, GP, and BDE Operations reports, former pilot and enlisted crew member recollections, and my own memories as a rotary wing pilot with 1st Signal BD Aviation Detachment in 1971-72.

The Signal Aviation units in Vietnam starting in 1962, changed unit definitions from Sections to Detachments and commands from the 39th and 41st Signal BNs and then to 2nd, 21st, and 12th Signal GPs, and lastly to 37th and 73rd Signal BNs and 1st Signal BDE. The mission was always the same, with the rotary wing sections carried men, supplies, and spare parts to isolated signal sites throughout South Vietnam, while the fixed wing sections did long haul missions throughout South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand and provided airborne tactical radio relay as required.

As the troop buildup continued, so did the size of each aviation detachment. As US combat units and their organic Division signal battalions left during the withdrawal that started in 1970, the 1st Signal Brigade took over additional duties. Many signal sites were phased out or were transferred to the ARVN. During this Vietnamization period, Federal Electric Corporation was contracted to run the parts depot in Long Binh and advise the ARVN at many of the existing signal sites. 1st Signal Aviation continued support of many of these sites and it wasn't until late in 1971, that aviation support requirements began to lessen.

39th Signal BN Aviation Section 1962 - 1965

Signal Aviation support in Vietnam all started with the 39th Signal BN Aviation Section. By July 1962, the 39th Signal BN was fully deployed to RVN and assigned to Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), but operationally controlled by STRATCOM. Their mission was to take over control of the strategic communication network being built by Page Communications, expand the network, and to provide communication support to MACV.

The 39th Signal BN setup headquarters in Saigon and stationed its companies in Saigon, Nha Trang and Da Nang. The companies were spread out over wide areas from the Delta to the DMZ. The mission of the aviation section was to move men and critical material between the far flung signal sites in Vietnam. In 1962, the TOE aviation assets for a Signal BN were two each U-1A "Otter" fixed wing aircraft.

Apparently, all aviation support was provided from Tan Son Nhut in Saigon. As more signal companies were assigned to the 39th BN, aviation support was also increased. Per the picture below, in 1963 at least one U-6A "Beaver" was added to the BN fleet.

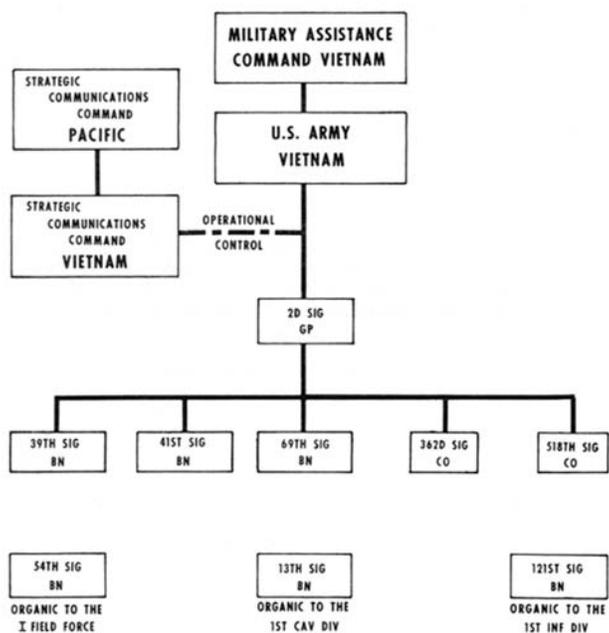


39th Signal BN U-6A at Vung Tau circa 1963-65

The 39th Signal BN remained very busy through mid-1965 and established communication networks throughout Vietnam and Thailand. Its small aviation section moved men and material between Soc Trang in the South and Hue in the North.

2nd Signal Group Aviation Sections 1965 - 1966

In May 1965, the first US combat units were deployed to RVN. Additional communications help was badly needed and in June 1965, STRATCOM activated the **2nd Signal Group** to meet the rising requirements for communication. It took command of the 39th Signal BN and activated two new battalions and companies to support communication growth and control in RVN. By December of 1965 the strategic communication systems in Southeast Asia had grown considerably and 2nd Signal Group had grown to over 6,000 personnel.



2nd Signal GP Organization in Vietnam, December 1965

The 2nd Signal Group organic aviation support was provided by the **39th BN Aviation Section** from Saigon and the **41st Signal BN Aviation Section** from Qui Nhon.

The **39th Signal BN Aviation Section** remained at Ton Son Nhut and consolidated support of III and IV Corp areas. It is estimated that 39th Signal BN Aviation Section had grown to two U-1A "Otter", two U-6A "Beaver", and four UH-1D aircraft in early 1966. The section used the call sign "Cable".

The **41st Signal BN Aviation Section** deployed to Qui Nhon in June 1965 for support of I and II Corp areas, but occasionally ventured as far south as Soc Trang in the Delta. The section was issued two brand new UH-1D helicopters and in August the 586th Signal Company aviation assets of two O-1D and one U-6A arrived in country and were added to the 41st Signal BN Aviation section. This section used the call sign " Cable Runner".

WO1 Drew Bartlett provided: " I was a dual rated aviator with the 586th Signal Company. We joined the 41st Signal BN Aviation section in August 1965 with our fixed wing aircraft. We left our OH-23s back at Ft. Irwin, CA. The flying was routine with lots of long flights in I and II Corp, with an occasional flight as far south as Saigon. We took occasional VC ground fire when landing, but fortunately, they always missed and we mostly just ignored them. One time, we did request a gunship to take out a "bothersome" VC gun near Qui Nhon.

My new roommate, WO1 Jerry Clark, was a brand new fixed wing pilot. On 15 December 1965, when Jerry was returning to Qui Nhon from dropping off a LTC, he reported that he had a battery explosion and was low on fuel. I believe he was tracking the Qui Nhon beacon to descend below the clouds over the ocean. Nha Trang had a "unofficial instrument procedure" to cross the beacon and then fly east, descending below the cloud cover, before turning back to Qui Nhon. He crashed 8 miles south of Qui Nhon in shallow water off the village of Tuy Phong. A UH-1 in the area responded to the Mayday call, but was driven off by heavy enemy ground fire. I flew an O-1D over the area later to drop reward leaflets for information and spotted the wreckage. I never saw Jerry again and believe that he was killed outright or captured and then killed."

According to the accident report, villagers reported that the pilot survived, swam to shore and then returned to the aircraft to recover his weapon. Some reports claimed that he swam back to shore and escaped in the jungle, others claimed that he was shot by a sniper while still in the water. He was declared as MIA and later KIA.

The 41st BN also reported combat damage to a O-1D on the ground in Da Lat and a U-6A by ground fire in April 1966.

By May of 1966, the unit had grown to two U-6A, three O-1D, and two UH-1B aircraft. The original UH-1Ds had been sent to some other needy aviation company.

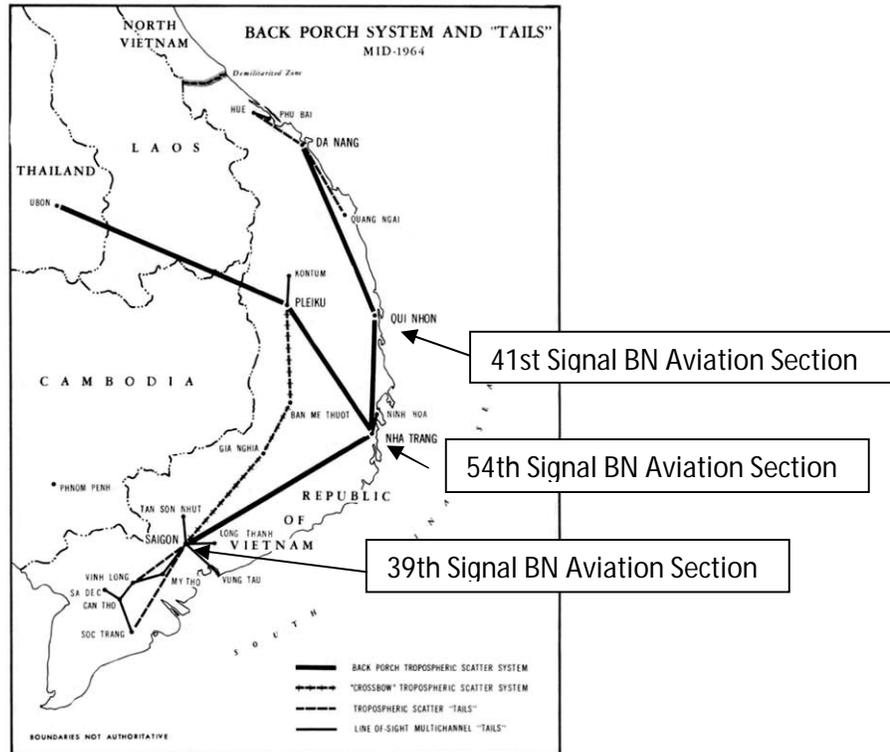
WO1 John McKenna provided: "In May 1966 the 41st had two really old B model ex-gunships. They had L-9 engines and were very weak making our mountain work very exciting. We were very happy to only pull rpm down to just 6200 on takeoff! Mid- summer we received a 1964 B model from the 334th AHC (Playboys) which had an L-11 engine which made a world of difference."



Ex-gunship from the 334th AHC (Playboys)



41st Sig BN U6-A "Beaver" at Qui Nhon in 1966



Signal Aviation Section Locations 1965 -1966

When MACV activated Task Force Alpha in August 1965, there was no signal organization to support it in central Vietnam. Interim communications support was provided by the 2nd Signal Group. But on 15 September 1965 the organic 54th Corps Signal Battalion of Task Force Alpha started to arrive and by 1 October began to relieve the 2nd Signal Group. The **54th SIG BN Aviation** Section began relieving the overtaxed 41st Signal BN Aviation Section in Qui Nhon.

The **54th Signal Battalion** was not part of 2nd Signal Group, but was unique in the fact that it was not assigned to a division and had its own organic aviation support. It reported to I Field Force Headquarters (IFFV) under MACV, headquartered in Nha Trang and coordinated communications between the tactical US, ARVN, allied units in the II Corp area and the 2nd Signal Group strategic communications network.

The Aviation Section was started with two U1-A airplanes and a couple of OH-13 helicopters. On 18 November 1965, the 54th lost an OH-13S (CW2 Lindsey Crow) in the water off Nha Trang. This may have been the earliest recorded loss of a Signal Aviation aircraft during the Vietnam war.

The 54th Signal BN Aviation Section was a small unit that had a similar mission as the 2nd Signal Group Aviation Sections. Aircraft, Section Operations, and enlisted personnel were based at Nha Trang Air Base. The 54th flew people, parts and supplies to remote signal sites in II Corp and VIPs and Techs to and from Saigon and Vung Tau. Most flights were within II Corp from Nha Trang north to Pleiku to the south to Phan Thiet. They used the call sign "Super Coach".

The 13th SIG BN (organic to 1st CAV) and 121st SIG BN (organic to 1st INF) also were also not part of 1st Signal BDE and did not have organic aviations sections. Every major US Army Division that served in Vietnam had their own organic Signal BN attached. These BNs were responsible for providing tactical communication within their Divisions and connecting the Division to the strategic communication system operated by the 1st Signal Brigade. Aviation support for these signal BNs was provided by their own division aviation resources.

Interestingly, the 13th Signal BN was the first to employ airborne radio relay with the CV-2 "Caribou" fixed-wing aircraft equipped with twelve powerful FM radios. The aircraft flew in orbit at 10,000 feet over the widely dispersed combat units and retransmitted FM voice messages for most of the key command nets directing the operation.

This new concept with airborne radio relay was used successfully in the famous Ia Drang valley campaign in 1965 and paved the way for extending a commander's ability to control the action on the battlefield. This operation highlighted the importance of the FM airborne relay in supporting far-ranging and swiftly developing campaigns.

1st Signal Brigade Aviation Sections / Detachments 1966 - 1972

As hostilities increased throughout Vietnam and additional combat US combat units were deployed, a larger communications system was needed. With approximately 12,000 personnel, the 1st Signal Brigade was founded on 1 April 1966, headquartered in Saigon and later moved to Long Binh. It took command of the 2nd Signal Group and in June 1966 the 21st Signal Group was activated in Nha Trang. The 2nd Signal Group consolidated control of III and IV Corp, while the 21st assumed control of the I and II Corp areas.

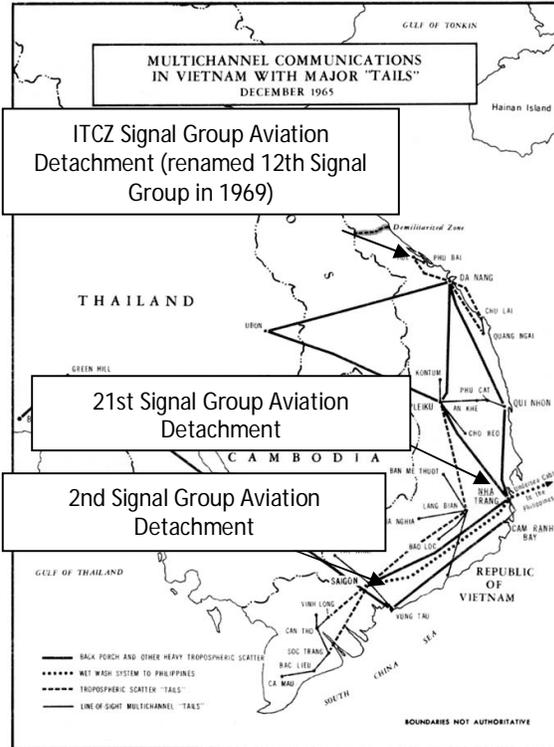
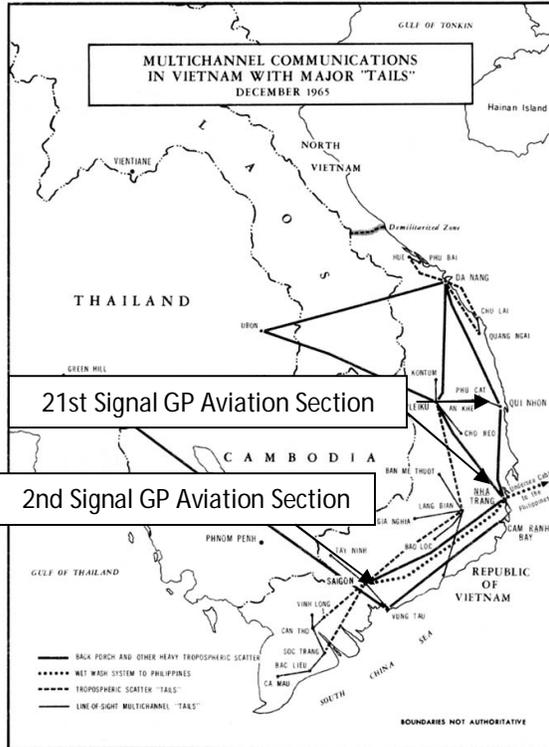
The 1st Signal Brigade used its own aviation support to move personnel and small material and supplies within Vietnam and Thailand. Larger signal equipment was transported by Air Force Aircraft and Army Transport helicopters as required throughout Vietnam. Signal site logistical supply of fuel, food, personnel needs, and ammunition was generally supplied through Army logistics channels.

Around June 1966, the 39th Signal Aviation Section was renamed the **2nd Signal Group Aviation Section** and in July 1966, the **21st Signal Aviation Section** was started in Nha Trang with one U-6A, one UH-1B, and crew including pilot WO1 John McKenna, transferred from the 41st Signal BN in Qui Nhon. The 21st Group assumed command of the 41st Signal BN and kept two older UH-1Bs and four fixed wing aircraft with the 41st in Qui Nhon to support I Corp and the northern area of II Corp.

With such a large area to cover, the need for brigade aircraft support became a major issue in late 1966 and early 1967. Signal Battalion quarterly reports indicated that communications delays and outages were a problem due to lack of organic aviation support to provide timely delivery of critical material to remote signal sites. Operating under a modified Table of Organization and Equipment, the brigade had acquired fifteen aircraft by the end of January 1967. All the brigade's UH-1B helicopters were swapped out for UH-1Ds in order to give the unit greater lift capacity. Also one U-1A was transferred from 2nd Signal Group to the 21st Signal Group in January 1967. In early 1968 the 1st Signal Brigade was scheduled to receive six additional U-1A airplanes to supplement its original complement of aircraft. This addition of air support was especially beneficial to remote signal sites where resupply and access was limited by other means.

Note: It is not clear, whether these six U-1As were ever delivered. The U-1A was being employed as a transport and radio relay aircraft at the time. In 1968, two U-21As were assigned to the 2nd Signal Group Aviation Section per Bill Bodkin. One of these U-21As stayed with 2nd Signal Aviation Section when they moved to Long Than North and it wasn't until the summer of 1969 that 8 new U-21As (6 equipped for radio relay) had been issued to the 2nd Signal Group Aviation Detachment.

In August 1968, 1st Signal Brigade activated the **I Corp Tactical Zone (ICTZ) Signal Group (provisional)**. It was renamed **the 12th Signal Group** in July 1969. In September 1968, the remaining two UH-1D aircraft and six pilots from the 21st Signal Group / 41st Signal BN Aviation Section were transferred to Phu Bai to start the ICTZ Signal Group Aviation Section. This group took over support for I Corp from 21st Signal Group, however the section also would occasionally support in areas of II Corp and even IV Corp with stops in Saigon as required.



1966 - 1968

1968 - 1972

1st Signal Brigade Aviation Unit Locations

Also note the more extensive communication channels.

In November 1968, 1st Signal Brigade Aviation was reorganized into 3 group aviation detachments. One was based at Bearcat, near Long Binh, to support the 2d Signal Group in III and IV Corps Tactical Zones; the second in Nha Trang supported the 21st Signal Group in II Corps Tactical Zone; the third supported the 12th Signal Group (originally designated the ICTZ Signal Group), which was originally at Phu Bai and later at Da Nang in I Corps Tactical Zone. This command decision to re-designate the aviation sections to provisional detachments, did not materially change much, since the sections had already been in place for many months or years.

These three 1st Signal BDE Aviation Detachments remained at these locations until standing down between June and November 1972. The following chapters detail more information about each of these Section/Detachments, including the 54th Signal BN Aviation Section that stood down in April 1971.

2nd Signal GP / 1st Signal BDE Aviation Section / Detachment



The 2nd Signal GP Aviation Section (originally 39th Signal BN Aviation Section) continued to grow and by early 1968 had grown to two U-1A, two U-6A, two U-21A, and four UH-1D aircraft.



**2nd Signal Group Aviation Section in front of a U-1A "Otter"
Tan Son Nhut circa 1966-67.**

(From 21st Signal GP Facebook page - from unknown member of the Section)

WO1 Anthony Hoetker, 2nd Signal GP, provided: " I joined 2nd Signal as a UH-1 pilot in March 1967 and extended through October 1968. I was billeted with 15-16 other guys in a Villa in Saigon. We had our own cook and bar. We were right across the street from the Continental Air Services billets. We had four UH-1D helicopters stationed at H3 heliport and two U-6A, one U-21A, and one U-1A aircraft located as short distance away on the tarmac of Ton Son Nhut.

When I first arrived our helicopters were unarmed and had a large Signal Corp emblem prominently displayed on the bottom of our helicopters. We all joked that the VC were probably using our radio relay sites and therefore they did not shoot at us. A new LTC took over the BN and had the emblem removed and guns installed. After that, we got shot at!



Signal Corp Emblem

I flew 5-6 days a week. Long flights as far south as Cau Mau and north to Nha Trang. All single ship mostly routine missions transporting men and material. I only recall one accident during my time with the unit; it was a U-6A that struck a barrel during taxi and caught fire. The pilot was badly burned when pulling his passenger to safety.

During TET in 1968, I had a record day of 22 landings. The roads were closed between Tan Son Nhut and Phu Lam [major Signal Site on the southern edge of Saigon]. We ferried personnel between H3 and Phu Lam all day.

After returning from leave in June 1968, I returned to the unit and we moved to Long Than North. A big step down from our Villa in Saigon!"

1LT Al Turgeon, 2nd Signal GP, provided: "In June of 1967, I joined 2nd Signal after spending his first six months with the 116th AHC down in the Delta. After landing in Saigon [after R&R in Hawaii], I walked, baggage in hand, to my villa. We lived in a handsome place called the Excellence. It was a far cry from the muddy hooch at the 116th in Cu Chi. We had two Vietnamese maids, a driver, and an Army cook to care for the nine of us. If you had to be in combat, this was the way to do it. I flew transport missions almost every day, all single ship, no formation flying. We covered the entire southern half of South Vietnam and occasionally made flights up the coast to Nha Trang. Our cook would always rise early and provide a good breakfast. Our Vietnamese driver would meet us at 0630 hours and take us to the flight line. The crew chief and his assistant would be there at the helipad with everything ready to go, including the day's itinerary. The armorer would help me into a shoulder holster containing a 45-cal pistol; then, he would fix an M-16 rifle onto the back of my seat by its strap and place a pouch with additional magazines of ammunition for both weapons under the seat. After a quick preflight inspection of the aircraft, we'd "light the fire" and take off.

The days were long but without the excitement that so frequently marked my tenure with the 116th. It's not that our work wasn't hazardous; we were constantly overflying enemy territory and, with each landing and takeoff, were exposed to the possibility of enemy fire. And there was always the prospect of an engine failure and an emergency landing in Charlie's back yard. In fact, it happened one day when I least expected it. It was midday and we were flying with perfect horizontal visibility but with a solid bank of clouds below—a condition called "VFR on top." Because I couldn't see the ground (and because I was bored), I was experimenting with a newly installed Decca Navigator. Mounted above the instrument panel, it contained a rotating map on which a pilot could accurately fix his position over the ground. As the underlying terrain was mostly tall jungle, I was using the Decca Navigator to maintain a flight path just above Highway 13. Suddenly, there was a noise and we started losing altitude; we were having a partial engine failure. We entered the clouds at about 2500 ft AGL. According to the Decca Navigator, we were a couple of kilometers north of Chon Thanh, a good-size village along Highway 13. We were autorotating on instruments - a new and rather frightening experience. At 700 ft AGL, we broke out and saw Highway 13 just to the left. I had enough time to line up the aircraft and initiate a flair in preparation for landing on the road. I leveled the aircraft, pulled pitch, and landed softly on the pavement. Thank God for the Decca Navigator. We issued a mayday call on the way down and, in no time at all, there was help on the way. We arrived at the Saigon Heliport at about the same time as our sling-loaded helicopter."



**2nd Signal Group UH-1D at H3 in Saigon 1968. Note the Signal Flag Nose art.
(Courtesy of Al Turgeon)**

WO1 Ron Dorville, 2nd Signal Group, provided: " I arrived at 2nd Signal Aviation Section in June 1967 and was billeted in the Excellence, the former Qui Minh Hotel. I recall that in late 1967, while taking off in a UH-1D, after a food delivery to a mountain top Signal site near Tay Ninh (probably Nu Ba Dinh), the aircraft had a bleed band failure and lost power. The A/C had the crew throw everything out that they could and then they themselves jumped before going into the wire. Still settling , the A/C asked Ron to jump out also. That was just enough to maintain a hover and Ron helped guide the A/C back to the pad.

On 30 January 1968 I recall an Infantry CPT handed me a M14 and ordered me to go down the block in front of the hotel and check out what was happening. It was the start of the TET offensive. Lots of bullets flying about and not sure who was shooting who. I helped set up defensive barriers and later lots of bullets were shot out through the Excellence."

WO1 Bill Bodkin, 2nd Signal Group, provided: "I arrived in country on 20 January 1968 and was flown down to H3 in Saigon from the Long Binh replacement center. I moved into the 2nd Signal Aviation Section officer quarters Villa, the Excellence, near H3. Ten days later, I moved to the 69th Signal BN officer quarters a few blocks away. That afternoon the TET offensive started. Myself and one other WO were the only ones armed with M16s and were employed as infantry, setting up a defensive position and rotating guard duty. It was three days later, after the US Army units and ARVN retook the city, that he was able to get back to H3 and finally get an in-country check ride."

WO1 Bill Leeds provided: " I arrived at 2nd Signal Aviation Section in April 1968 and flew all around III and IV Corp. I was billeted in the Villa in Saigon, with individual rooms, real bathrooms, our own cook, and a bar. Then in July, the whole group moved to the "boondocks" of Long Thanh North!"

In August 1968, the 2nd Signal Group Aviation Section moved from Tan Son Nhut to Bearcat (Long Thanh North AAF) with four UH-1Ds, two U-6A, one U-1A, and one U-21A aircraft. In November it was redesignated the **2nd Signal Group Aviation Detachment**. The Detachment consisted of 7 officers, 8 warrant officers and 38 enlisted men. The call sign was also changed from "Cable" to "Satellite".

Between August 1969 and July 1970, the 2nd Signal Aviation Detachment was commanded by Major Robert D. Price of Columbus, Georgia. During this period the Detachment turned in all its UH-1D model helicopters and U-6A and U-1A fixed wing aircraft, and by April 1970, the detachment had twelve UH-1H, two OH-58A, eight U-21A, and one U-8F aircraft. In April 1970, around the time of the peak personnel deployment in Vietnam, the detachment was the largest aviation detachment of the 1st Signal Brigade.



**2nd Signal GP / 1st Signal BDE Aviation Detachment, Long Thanh North HQ (L)
U-1A "Otter". Note the 1st Signal Brigade Emblem. (L)**



**CPT Bill Brandt with "Cherry Girl", 2nd Signal Group, Long Thanh North circa mid- 1970 (L)
U-21A SN 038 in revetment at Long Thanh North circa 1971 (R)
The UH-1s used these same revetments in 1972 and had to pulled out to start.**



**CW2 Tim Zarkos and Crew Chief SP5 Garry Harp with OH-58A circa 1971
(courtesy of the 1st Signal Brigade Aviation Detachment 1971 Yearbook -published by Radio
Operator Rick Holt)**

In July 1970, Major Thomas G. Randall assumed command of the 2nd Signal Group Aviation Detachment. From August 1970 until December 1970, the Detachment constructed a hanger utilizing its own personnel in a "Self-help" type project. The construction of the hanger provided a suitable facility to perform maintenance of both fixed wing and rotary wing aircraft. Prior to this time, maintenance was performed in the revetments.

CPT Dave Yensan, 2nd Signal GP Detachment XO, provided: "I started my second Vietnam tour in June of 1970 as the XO of 2nd Signal Group Aviation Detachment. We were authorized nine U- 21As, but we had only eight and we were force issued a U8F. We had 2 OH- 58As and 12 UH-1H helicopters. We had just gotten rid of our last D model a month before I arrived. Major Tom Randall was the CO and he was fixed wing only and I was rotary only. The 2nd Signal Group Commanding Officer, COL Stivers, wanted me to assume command when Tom left in December, but Brigade had other ideas. In December 1970, MAJ Bob Brokaw who was Navy test pilot school, dual

rated, etc., assumed command. I knew I had to have a command, so left the detachment and took command of A Company/52nd Signal Battalion in Can Tho. I flew pay hours only down there and did ash and trash."

CPT Jim Strye, 2nd Signal GP Aviation Detachment, Operations Officer, provided: " I started my second Vietnam tour in October 1970 as the Operations Officer 2nd Signal Group Aviation Detachment. Dave Yensan outranked me by one day! My first tour in 1967-68, I flew a O-1A in support of Special Forces out of Camp B41. This time I was U-21A qualified. As Operations Officer, I did not fly regularly. Scheduling 23 aircraft and crews took all my time. I did get to fly occasionally to Phu Bai, where my future wife was stationed as a nurse. We had met at Ft. Gordon and we did get married in 1971. I also flew to Cambodia several times in civilian clothes. We supported to the US Embassy in Cambodia. In April 1970, I left the detachment and took command of C Company/52nd Signal Battalion in Vinh Long. In 1973, I ferried U-21A SN 000 (one of the original detachment U-21As) from Singapore to Germany and started a Signal Aviation Detachment for 7th Army."

In December 1970, Major Robert B. Brokaw assumed command of the Detachment and the detachment's only U8F was replaced with a U-21A. According to several pilots who were there at the time the U-8F suffered a fire in the nose cone that caused on-going electrical problems and become a "hanger queen".

From May 1971 until August 1971, the Detachment was commanded by CPT John D. Dixon. From August 1971 to June 1972, CPT Alex Woods Jr. assumed command of the Detachment. The 2nd Signal Group deactivated during this period and the Aviation Detachment was re-designated as the **1st Signal Brigade Aviation Detachment (Provisional)**.

CW2 Larry Krieder, 1st Signal BDE Aviation Detachment, provided: " I joined to detachment as a U-21A pilot in mid 1971 and was appointed as the Detachment Supply officer. I had previous experience with supply working with the ASA and Special Forces. Shortly after the detachment was re-designated the 1st Signal Brigade Detachment (provisional), we were investigated by CID, because the unit did not have a valid TOE. I kept a low profile and fortunately several senior NCOs at Brigade straightened it out. This was at a time when our newest UH-1H was ready for its 22nd PE. I helped the Maintenance Officer get permission to trade up for newer aircraft.

From June 1972 CPT Mullady commanded the unit until stand down in October 1972.

The detachments twelve helicopters supported all of III and IV Corp tactical areas and occasionally were sent into the southern half of II Corp as needed. Almost all missions were single ship, supplying personnel, small spare electrical parts, classified documents, and sometimes food and other supplies to the widely distributed signal sites.

The nine U-21A fixed wing aircraft had the same mission, but for longer flights all over Vietnam including as far south as Phu Quoc Island (South Vietnams POW Camp location) and also supported the 29th Signal Group in Bangkok, Thailand. One over night to one week long TDY missions to Bangkok were routine. Most of the helicopter pilots got at least one night in Bangkok during their tour. I even got a few hours U-21A co-pilot time, IFR to Bangkok for an overnight. I have a civilian fixed wing rating, but the Army never let me use it! Six of the nine U-21A fixed wing aircraft were specially configured for radio relay. Two secure and one clear radio relay systems could be installed in these aircraft. They were frequently sent TDY to Da Nang, Pleiku, and Nha Trang. See Appendix A for more detail about radio relay.

CW2 Larry Krieder, 1st Signal BDE Aviation Detachment, provided: " In support of the US Embassies in Cambodia and Laos, the U-21As were also tasked to fly classified missions. I flew many classified missions to Cambodia and Laos and sometimes wore civilian clothes on these operations. We picked up civilians and flew them around. Suspect that the CAC U21s would not use unimproved short PSP airstrips and the Signal Corp picked up this mission."

I joined the 1st Signal Brigade Aviation Detachment on October 1971 through end of August 1972. The troop withdrawal had started in 1970 and the day I signed in to the detachment, I learned that the unit had turned in two helicopters in the past month and four more on this day. We were down to six UH-1Hs and two OH-58As and

an excess of pilots and no quarters available. I spent my first two weeks, using rooms of pilots that were TDY on Bangkok. I recall we always seemed to be trading aircraft during my tenure with the unit. Not all of them upgrades! One of them had flames painted on the sides, like an old hotrod. This did not go over real well when General McKinnon (1st Aviation Brigade Commander) spotted it at the USARV pad on day. Our poor crew chief took the heat, while myself and the AC remained a safe distance away! The aircraft was turned in shortly after this event.

A typical helicopter mission would start out early with a stops in Long Binh, Saigon (H3), Vinh Long, and Can Tho. From Can Tho we might go to Ca Mau in the far south or Rach Gia or Ha Tien along the Cambodian border. Sometimes, we were sent to a levy with just grid coordinates somewhere in the Delta. After a long day, it was a long flight back to Long Thanh North. Other flights in III Corp would take go everywhere including Vung Tau, Xuan Loc, Lai Khe, Tay Ninh, and on top of the mountain Nui Ba Dinh. Occasionally a helicopter would be dispatched to Da Lat or Nha Trang in II Corp. We also made frequent maintenance trips to the USS Corpus Christi Bay, anchored in Vung Tau Bay. The ship was a depot maintenance ship that repaired the radio relay equipment used by the U-21As.



**1st Signal UH-1H parked on front pad of the USS Corpus Christi Bay circa 1972.
Note the nose "art". 1st Signal Emblem was dropped in favor of just signal orange. Great target!**

The U-21s and UH-1s also did Priority flights for Hazard to Communication (HAZCOM) incidents. Brigade prioritized these missions and sent them down to the detachments. This was when a Signal site went down for a critical parts failure or combat damage. Most of these seemed to happen at night and Brigade rarely told us what caused of the failure. My first HAZCOM was to Xuan Loc, in the middle of the night, to deliver a spool of cable to repair a line blown up by VC sappers. The AC, CW2 Greg Kaiser, navigated us through the moonless night and when he sensed we were near, he called the site and they turned on headlights on a jeep in a clearing. I was impressed that he found it, but wondered if the VC were still about! My last mission in Vietnam in August 1972 was a HAZCOM to Lai Khe. They failed to tell us that Lai Khe was under rocket and ground attack from the NVA. The ARVN artillery were using 155's like mortars and the VNAF A-1Es were strafing the perimeter with 50 cal. Our technician we brought from Long Binh did fix the signal site radios and we were all very glad to leave after being on the ground for about an hour! The picture below was taken a few months at Lai Khe earlier during the evacuation of An Loc in April 1972.



VNAF evacuation of civilians from An Loc during Easter Offensive in April 1972. We were parked at Lai Khe, when these pictures were taken. WO1 Zandy DePriest was Peter Pilot that day.

Since 1st Signal was the only UH-1 helicopter unit at Long Thanh North, it picked up other base duties such as:

Medical Evacuation - usually to the 24th Evacuation in Long Binh or Ben Hoa for Vietnamese civilians.

Flare Drop - every evening a crew was assigned to a priority helicopter to drop flares in case of a ground attack. Only time that this was used was to help search for a "Blue Max" AH-1G that crashed during a night maintenance flight.

Mosquito Abatement - we picked up a spray rig (same as used for Agent Orange) in Long Binh and aerial sprayed the Long Thanh compound with something that took paint of the aircraft. I guess it killed mosquitoes too!

Parachute training for the Special Forces detachment - they ran base security and trained ARVN Special Operations men. We sometimes dropped static line jumpers from 2500 feet, and HALO skydivers above 14,500 feet, from a perfectly good helicopter!

The Detachment was also responsible for about 1/2 mile of perimeter defense. The pilots rotated as Officer of the Guard at night, and we also got volunteered during our non-flying days for fun things like burning brush and grass to improve fields of fire and reinstalling trip flares in the wire. We even added 6 foot U-channel fence posts to hold the claymore mines. A favorite VC sapper trick was to crawl up in front of a bunker and turn the claymores around. At least they would have to stand up and maybe our security platoon enlisted men might see them!

The unit did several self-help projects during my time. A few of us strung telephone wire from Operations to the officer area for our own local phone service and we replaced the broken down wood walkways around our hootches with concrete in the officer area.



WO1 Andy Windham Stringing phone wire. He was a prior enlisted Signal Corp linesman. (L) Pilots laying concrete walkways in early 1972. A real government job - Seven supervisors and two workers! CO CPT Woods sitting on left side of picnic bench. (R)

In February 1972, one of the unit OH-58As, needlessly flying very low level, crashed into a Vietnamese delivery truck on the way back from Vung Tau and was destroyed. The nameless pilot walked away with only a scratch on his knee and was grounded until he was sent back to the states. Our other OH-58A had a engine failure the next day and the OH-58As were not returned to service. This was a paperwork nightmare for a rookie aviation safety officer (me). The 1st Aviation Brigade Safety Office was a major help in investigating this accident.



What's left of a OH-58A after colliding with a truck. This was taken the next morning and even the seats had been removed. So much for ARVN Security!

WO1 Zandy Depriest provided: "I joined the detachment in early spring 1972 (probably March). I left 31 May 1972 for 164th Combat GP/18th CAC in Canto, along with WO1 Mike Grant, WO1 Curtis Loftis. We had too many pilots in 1st Signal. Later we were joined by WO1 Tom McPherson and we all left on the last flights out in 1973."

As the troop draw down continued, on May 15th, WO1 Tom McPherson and WO1 Rich Sparkman transferred to 1st Signal from the 21st Signal Group. They brought one UH-1H, which took small arms fire over Xuan Loc and was out of service for several weeks. Maintenance found a bullet lodged in the pilot seat's mounting hardware. McPherson only remembered his foot jumping up and was not aware that they had been hit.

On 1 April 1972, the Easter Offensive started and the 37th Signal BN transferred one UH-1H and one OH-58A to the 1st. The OH-58A was turned in and the 1st now had five UH-1H helicopters in service, but only six helicopter pilots. Of course, we had too many pilots the day before! As assistant operations officer, I recruited helicopter pilots from other units to fly for us. One was a U-8A pilot and had not flown a helicopter since flight school. I don't recall his name, but it went OK. Also, in this period our U-21As were on frequent radio relay alert. That meant that us few helicopter pilots did extra guard duty and some flew as co-pilots in the U-21As, flying circles for 5 hours at a time at 10,000 feet over An Loc. This was also a time, when we were advised of the SA-7 infrared missile threat and our helicopters were modified with infrared suppression kits (knick name - the toilet bowl"). We finally did get a few new pilots in and stayed very busy through August of 1972.



UH-1 Infrared suppression kit. Parked on USS Corpus Christi Bay.

On 4 August 1972, our next door unit, the 1st CAV / 362nd Aviation Company (Fly United) stood down. More work for me, I picked up the duty of Mess Officer for our detachment. The day after the last CH-47 left and the remaining pilots were waiting for transport to Saigon, Long Thanh North became a rocket target area for a NVA Battalion to our South. The first rocket hit the now empty 362nd hanger across the road from my hootch, as I was packing up my reel-to-reel tape deck for shipping home. The brass made a decision to close Long Thanh North. By this time our post security was mostly provided by Montagnard troops, supervised by a small Special Forces unit.

On 17 August 1972, Long Thanh AAF was closed and the detachment began moving to Sanford AAF in Long Binh. 1LT Tom Wright (Supply Officer) and myself (Mess Officer) were left behind with a small group of enlisted men to clear out the remaining detachment property. On 20 August 1972, the move was complete and we drove to Long Binh. I received my DEROS orders on the 21st. My orders were written to leave on the 20th! I made it out of Ton Son Nhut on the 22nd.

I have not been able to find out the exact date when the detachment stood down. I did find out from WO1 Tom McPherson that he and several more helicopter pilots were reassigned to other units shortly after the detachment arrived in Long Binh. I also, spoke to LTC (then CPT) Bill Pohlman who was assigned to 1st Signal Brigade Aviation Detachment for about three weeks in September 1972. He then took command of the 14th Signal Company in Da Nang until the final US troop withdrawal in March 1973. He flew about 45 hours in those 3 weeks.

The remaining U-21As were all turned into the Command Airplane Company (CAC) by 5 November 1972. The CAC apparently took over the radio relay mission as they dedicated three U-21As to it. My best guess is the detachment stood down completely by the end of October 1972. An interesting fact: I discovered a picture of three of 1st Signals U-21As (009, 038, 061) taken in early 1973 at the Joint Casualty Resolution Center (JCRC) in Nakhon Phanom (NKP), Thailand. They were part of the 70th Aviation Detachment.



1st Signal Brigade Headquarters moved to Korea on 7 November 1972 and Long Binh Post was turned over to the ARVN on 11 November 1972. The 39th Signal BN (1st BN size ground unit to arrive in Vietnam and last to leave) remained until March 1973 to turn over the remaining communication duties to the ARVN.

21st Signal GP Aviation Section / Detachment



The 21st Signal GP Aviation Section started in Nha Trang in July 1966 with a U-6A and one UH-1B transferred from the 41st Signal BN, and left one U-6A, three O-1D fixed wing aircraft, and two UH-1B helicopters in Qui Nhon to better support I Corp. At some point in time in 1967, the 41st fixed wing assets were moved to Nha Trang, leaving only two UH-1D helicopters in Qui Nhon.

The following picture shows most of the remaining personnel with the 41st Signal BN Aviation Section at Qui Nhon in the spring of 1967. Commanding officer MAJ Hart is sitting on the left front.



21st Signal GP/41st Signal BN Aviation Section Spring 1967

WO1 John McKenna, 21st Signal GP, provided: "In Aug of 66, I landed in a UH-1B at the Quang Tri advisory team HQ. As our passengers got out, two guys in civilian clothes carrying UZI's jumped onboard and said aircraft down and pointed to where they wanted to go. Usually there were one or two HH-3's there but none today. We started heading north and after a while I noticed the freedom bridge to my right rear as we continued through the DMZ we came upon a river and we saw an AF Bird Dog sitting on a sand bar. The pilot was working on the magneto with no luck. After 10 minutes or so we took him back to Quang Tri.

On 16 Nov 1966, after a day of hauling equipment in our newest UH-1B to mountain tops in Da Lat we returned to Nha Trang where we were asked to fly some class A rations to Hon Tre Island, as the water was too rough for the supply boat. As we hovered off the pad we began to spin. We rotated about seven times and managed to get back on the pad. The tail rotor failed and ripped the vertical fin off the tail boom. It also destroyed most of the drive shafts.



21st Signal Group AVN Sec UH-1B before and After November 1966

In January 1967, the original UH-1B that aircraft was damaged by a tail rotor failure had been repaired, and on 22 February 1967 it suffered an engine failure and crashed on a mountain in Da Lat killing the gunner.

In the March-April 1967 time frame we took passengers in a UH-1D to Bao Loc. Upon landing advisors ran to the aircraft and told us that an ARVN patrol had been ambushed with claymores. We headed for the site. Action was still in progress and the fast movers were dropping ordinance nearby. Of the 30 troops, there were 11 KIA and 19 wounded. We made three trips to evacuate the WIA."

WO1 Ron Dorville provided: "After my first 12 months with 2nd Signal Aviation Detachment, I was transferred to the 21st from late Mar 1968 to Jan 1969. At 21st Sig, they didn't have much and I recall a ground attack at Dalat, when many civilians mobbed my helicopter and it was too heavy to fly. I finally got some people off, and made it out."

In November 1968 the 21st Signal Group Aviation Section was redesignated the **21st Signal Group Aviation Detachment**, remaining in Nha Trang with two UH-1Ds, two U-6A, one U-1A, and one O-1D aircraft. The call sign was "Manifest".



**Bill Comrey in front of 21st Signal Aviation Section Operations (L)
1LT Rod Stewart (First 21st Section Commander) by his O-1D "Birdog" (R)
(courtesy of Bill Comrey - 21st Signal Group Aviation Vietnam Veterans Group)**

This detachment grew and by July 1969, the detachment had eight UH-1H helicopters and had turned in all their remaining fixed wing aircraft. By April 1970, the 21st had received five OH-58As.

CW2 Mitchell (Mitch) S. Thompson provided: " My home in RVN was the 21st Signal Group Aviation Detachment. I spent 8 months in Nha Trang (mid-April to December 1970) living in a wooden barrack with plywood walls & doors. Twenty yards allowed me to open the backdoor to the officers club. Our shower was in the next building south and offered abundant water for showers until the dry season introduced water rationing. At this point two 55 gallon barrels suddenly appeared being filled daily by the hooch maids to serve shower duty. In each barrel a large Ritz cracker can floated at the water levels top. After a day of sweaty, humid exposure wearing Nomex, boots, gloves and a helmet, I became very fond of Ritz cracker can showers!

In November 1970, our unit was informed the USAF had lost their lease at Tuy Hoa Air Base about a forty minute (Huey time) flight up the coast. This allowed Army Helicopter units to swarm in from all over and infest this concrete mega-structure during December. Delightedly, I could now execute three to four consecutive practice autorotations on a nearly two mile long concrete runway. For the final ten months in Nam, Tuy Hoa provided a plush officer's club on a lovely, sandy beach. There was a movie theater, a larger PX, and my favorite, a cooled PX trailer stocked with frozen meats and other delights. This river valley was wider at Tuy Hoa providing a much improved area for test flights and instructional training flights. Myself and roughly twenty to twenty-five other pilots in unit did not miss the USAF!

21st Signal Group Aviation supported these Battalions:

73rd Signal BN at Cam Ranh Bay and west to Bao Loc south to Phan Thiet.

41st Signal BN at Qui Nhon; north to LZ English and west to Anh Khe Pass

43rd Signal BN at Pleiku - east to Anh Khe; north to Dak Pek/Ben Het (special forces) area, SW to Cheo Reo.

Almost all of our flights were single ship supporting all of II Corp. There were weekly overnight missions to Qui Nhon and Pleiku. We occasionally flew north to Danang and monthly to Saigon. Our flight operations credo: fly 5,000 feet or more for 50 cal areas, 1500 feet minimum for small arms, and tree top level if weather or abnormal factors interfered.

While we flew to many mountain signal sites in II Corp, these two stand out. At these two mountain sites, all approaches with the OH-58A were to the ground. Takeoffs were at or near max TOT diving off the mountain Pray for wind; No room for error.

Lang Binh Mountain: 7,000' uncorrected elevation from Da Lat Tower (highest helipad in Central Highlands)

Praline Mountain: 6,000' uncorrected helipad elevation from Da Lat Tower

All 21st Signal Group aircraft displayed a painted version of the First Signal Brigade insignia of a lightning bolt sword on the nose battery door. With humor, I referred to it as the "melted butter knife"!

Over time, I concluded 'Charlie' relied upon our communications network to vent his displeasure over our presence in his green & red homeland. That became my minimalist viewpoint since we were very seldom shot at while executing slow, normal approaches into isolated mountain sites. Mortar attacks, however, were not coincidental as the first round would arrive as an aircraft touched down at a compound. During my eighteen months flying for the 21st air detachment there was one unique month of at least one event daily when mortars were lobbed toward the compound I was landing within. Only one 21st pilot was wounded (right knee & forearm) during my eighteen months. Two aircraft suffered engine failures, and one overloaded aircraft crashed (fell thru) on approach to Praline Mountain."

The 21st Signal Aviation Detachment continued to grow and in August 1971, they had ten UH-1H and seven OH-58A helicopters. The following two pictures are from the 21st Signal Group Aviation Vietnam Veterans Facebook page.



**UH-1H Helicopter at Nha Trang Troposcatter Signal Site (L)
UH-1H on top on a rare 2 ship mission) (R)**

CW3 Dave Baggott provided: " I was assigned to the 21st Signal Aviation Detachment from April 1970 to April 1971. We moved people and parts around to and from many mountain top signal sites in II Corp. A mostly quiet tour other than one successful landing after an engine failure."



**A 21st UH-1H at Dalat Lake Pad in 1970 (courtesy of Dave Baggott) (L)
Mike Wix (pilot) in front of UH-1H almost on top of Praline Mountain in October 1971 after an
engine failure on approach (R)**

WO1 Mike Wix provided: "I joined the 21st on 4 August 1971. On 1 October 1971, I was the "Peter Pilot" on a UH-1H , when we lost power on approach to Praline Mountain. We were lucky that the aircraft did not slide down the mountainside. The unit did not have enough OH-58A pilots and I transitioned in country. I flew both during my tour. In March of 1972, the 21st moved briefly to Cameron Bay and the next month moved back Nha Trang (Red Barron). In May 1972, during the Easter offensive, the 21st participated in the evacuation of Kontum."

On 2 June 1972, a flight school classmate of mine, CPT Joe Eubanks, was killed flying a 57th AHC UH-1H, when a 51 cal or B40 rocket brought his aircraft down. In this battle from March to June a total of 150 helicopters were hit by ground fire and 21 were destroyed.

In April 1972, the 21st Signal Group deactivated and the pilots were reassigned to the 73rd Signal BN.

WO1 Mike Wix also provided: "On 15 June 1972, myself and the remaining pilots in the unit, ferried down our last five UH-1Hs to Can Tho to turn into the ARVN. I flew back on a U-21 to Nha Trang and left RVN on 16 June 1972".

ITCZ / 12th Signal Group / 37th Signal BN Aviation Detachment

In August 1968, 1st Signal Brigade activated a provisional Signal Group in Phu Bai. This was the I Corp Tactical Zone (ICTZ) Signal Group. In September 1968, the remaining two UH-1D aircraft and pilots from the 41st Signal BN were transferred to Phu Bai to start the ITCZ Signal Group Aviation Detachment. This group supported I Corp initially with two UH-1Ds and 6 pilots. The pilots and crew were actually assigned to the 63rd Signal BN. This was the smallest of the three Signal Corp Aviation Detachments. The original call sign was "Scrub Fire" and they called the revetment parking area, the chicken coop. Nobody liked the call sign at it was later changed to "Cavalier".



ITCZ Signal group Aviation Detachment

Aviation Detachment leader was 1LT Bill Bell (tall guy middle), WO1 MacDonald (holding dog), WO1 Joe Martin (all the way to the left) and WO1 Bill Bodkin (in front of Lt Bell).

CW2 Jerrold Kelley and WO1 Jack Mayers were flying this day.

WO1 Bob Nielsen joined the group the next day.

30 Oct 1968

(Courtesy of Joe Martin)

Joe Martin, ITCZ Group, provided: " I was one of the original pilots in the ITCZ Group and recall an early mission with the detachment - I think I was left seat the first time I flew into Khe San, probably Oct/Nov 1968, with a generator to drop off and a few passengers. A flight I will never forget. The circling approach, "hiding" in a revetment parked, meeting Marines that hadn't showered and covered in dust, bare armed wearing flak jackets and helmets, looking at the crashed C130 on the side of the runway, and watching the Air Force drop napalm on the southern perimeter. I was 20 years old, too young to fully realize and appreciate what was happening around us. And when finally leaving, almost ready to pull pitch, the door gunner telling us to wait as a Marine was running towards our aircraft and literally throwing on a duffel bag full of mail and running back to cover. A memory I have never forgotten."

in July 1969, the ITCZ Signal Group was renamed the 12th Signal Group and by October 1969, the detachment grew to three UH-1H helicopters. By April 1970, the 12th had four UH-1H helicopters.

In August 1971, the 12th Signal group stood down and the aviation detachment was reassigned to the 37th Signal BN in Da Nang. By this time the detachment had four UH-1H and three OH-58A helicopters.



**37th Signal BN Aviation Detachment Helicopter loading food at Quang Tri Signal Site for a remote signal site in late 1971
(Picture found on Internet)**

As combat units stood down, the detachment started turning in some helicopters. On 1 April 1972, the 37th Signal BN Aviation Detachment transferred one UH-1H and one (their last) OH-58A to the 1st Signal Aviation Detachment in Long Thanh North. 1LT Larry Cheek delivered the UH-1H. Larry and I were flight school classmates. In late August, I caught up with Larry at Camp Alpha, in Saigon, on our way home from Vietnam.

On 3 April 1971, the detachment dispatched two UH-1Hs to evacuate Quang Tri Signal Site as the NVA came south over the border in the beginning of the Easter Offensive. The first helicopter flown by pilots - CW3 Larry Zich and CW2 Douglas O'Neill, flew high above the cloud cover to avoid SA7 missiles in the area. It is believed they may have been hit with a SAM missile or other radar guided weapon. The UH-1H and crew were lost and the crash site has never been located. The second helicopter flown by 1LT Larry Cheek, flew low level below the cloud cover and was able to evacuate about half of the site personnel. The Federal Electric employee in charge, with the rest of the ARVN signal men evacuated south on foot as the NVA overran the Quang Tri Signal Site. This group was rescued a short time later by an Air Force HH-53. The Federal Electric employee was interviewed at Brigade and stated that, he thought he saw the crash site (UH-1H with an orange nose) about 500 meters south of Quang Tri, but did not have time to investigate. With the loss of Quang Tri Signal Site, a 1st Signal Brigade Aviation U-21A was sent TDY to Da Nang for radio relay standby for about one week, per WO1 Larry Kreider.

1LT Larry Cheek, 37th Signal, provided: " I joined 37th Signal in October 1971. I transitioned to the OH-58A and flew missions in both the UH-1H and OH-58A. After the 3 April crash, we searched the crash area for many days, but we were never able to find the crash site. When the Detachment stood down in June, I was assigned to the 11th Combat Assault Group, until DEROS in August 1972. I had an engine failure near Quang Tri. Got to ground OK and a CH47 picked us up and the aircraft. We were hiding in the bushes and saw tanks coming down the road from the North. The UH-1H oscillated during the lift and was punched off and destroyed."

With just two UH-1H helicopters left, the 37th Signal Battalion Aviation Detachment stood down in June 1972.



I Field Force



MACV



54th SIG

54th Signal BN Aviation Vietnam 1965 - 1971

The 54th Signal Battalion was not part of 1st Signal Brigade, but was unique in the fact that it was not assigned to a division and had its own organic aviation support. It reported to I Field Force Headquarters (IFFV) under MACV and they coordinated communications between the tactical US, ARVN, and allied units in the III Corp area and the 1st Signal Brigade strategic communications network.

When Task Force Alpha (later named I Field Force) was activated in August 1965, no signal organization to support it in central Vietnam was available. Interim communications support was provided for Task Force Alpha, headquartered at Nha Trang, by the 2nd Signal Group. But on 15 September 1965 the organic 54th Corps Signal Battalion of Task Force Alpha started to arrive and by 1 October began to relieve the 2nd Signal Group. The final elements of the 54th closed into Vietnam in October, thus freeing the overtaxed communicators of the 2nd Signal Group to work in other areas in Vietnam.

Here's a picture of the 54th Signal Battalion compound that was in Nha Trang, near the Airbase (east side).



54th Signal BN HQ and Aviation Section HQ

54th Signal Battalion Aviation Section

The 54th Signal BN Aviation Section was started with two U1-A airplanes and a couple of OH-13 helicopters. On 18 November 1965, the 54th lost an OH-13S (CW2 Lindsey Crow) in the water off Nha Trang. This may have been the earliest recorded loss of a Signal Aviation aircraft during the Vietnam war.

The 54th Signal BN Aviation Section was a small unit that had a similar mission as the 1st Signal Brigade Aviation Sections. Aircraft, Section Operations, and enlisted personnel were based at Nha Trang Air Base. The 54th flew people, parts and supplies to remote signal sites in II Corp and VIPs and Techs to and from Saigon and Vung Tau. Most flights were within II Corp from Nha Trang north to Pleiku to the south to Phan Thiet. They used the call sign "Super Coach".

WO1 Bob Dorr, 54th Signal BN, provided: "Myself and three of my flight school classmates were assigned to this unit as we arrived in Cam Rahn Bay in October 1968. The 54th had just lost a UH-1H and crew (WO1 Paul Driscoll and CW2 Steven Cavin) on 31 October 1968. During my time through October 1969, the 54th lost another UH-1H

due to ground fire with no casualties and I experienced a compressor stall coming off Qui Nhon mountain, but managed to land at Qui Nhon Bay airfield. Also, I had rubber transmission mounts on a UH-1H fail, resulting in emergency landing at Korean Fire Support Base north of Nha Trang."

Bill Comrey, 21st Signal Group Aviation Detachment, provided: "In October of 1968, the 54th Signal Battalion at Nha Trang suffered one of the largest loss of US personnel in one single Huey crash. The 54th Signal BN was located on the east side of the Nha Trang runway near the 8th Field Hospital. They had their own Aviation Detachment.

At about 0740, 31 Oct 1968, a 54th Signal Battalion UH-1H (tail number 66-16524) departed Nha Trang Air Base on an administrative flight to the battalion's outlying sites. Eleven men were aboard four aircrew and seven passengers. A brief stop was made at Dong Ba Thin where one passenger deplaned. At 0835 the aircraft departed Nha Trang West, and at 0840 made a "Mayday" call to the Nha Trang Air Base tower reporting that the Huey was going down about 5 miles north of Nha Trang. The aircraft then crashed and burned. The accident board concluded the Huey lost all or a portion of a tail rotor blade, which led to the failure of the tail rotor gearbox and loss of control. All ten men still aboard the aircraft died in the crash.

Here's a listing of the ten men lost that day:

- Donald H Bartlett: Helicopter Repairman
- Philip J Battaglia Jr: Radio Officer
- Joseph M Bowman: Helicopter Repairman
- Steven I Cavin: Helicopter Pilot
- Paul R Driscoll: Helicopter Pilot
- Patrick Epps: Communication Center
- Donald F Fletcher: Signals Officer
- Larry K Hendee: Signals Officer
- Faris E Holland: Telecommunications Operation
- Alfred R Mahoney Jr: Field Officer"

WO1 Ron Dorville, 21st Signal Group Aviation Detachment (previously assigned to 2nd Signal) provided: "I was getting ready to take off from Nha Trang that morning when a soldier came to my door asking if he could catch a ride. I told him we were full but pointed to another A/C across the way that was getting ready to take off (the one that crashed). After takeoff, I heard the mayday call. The second mayday I could hear a problem with the rotor blade. The third and last mayday there was no rotor blade sound in the background. We saw the smoke on the side of jungle covered hill. While hovering over the wreckage my VIP (a colonel) asked to repel down a rope but I nixed his plan as being too dangerous and I couldn't see how anyone could have survived the crash. I can't get the soldier eyes out of my mind that I sent over to that doomed aircraft."

WO1 Bob Dorr, 54th Signal BN, also provided: "In November 1968, the 54th Aviation Section had two U-1A "Otter" airplanes and two or three UH-1D (later upgraded to H models) helicopters. The section commander was a Major, two CPTs, two LTs as fixed wing/helicopter pilots, and 4 or 5 WO helicopter pilots. The U-1As were later destroyed by mortar fire in their revetments and they were replaced with two OH-6A helicopters." [Bob was with the 54th until DEROS in October 1969]. The following pictures are courtesy of Bob Dorr.

Retired Sergeant Major Art McGehee was with the 54th Signal BN Aviation Section as the senior maintenance NCO (E7) and aircraft inspector from January 1969 until November 1969. He was a UH-1 crew chief on his first tour. He provided: " When I arrived with the unit in Nha Trang, Major Eisner was the section commander. The unit has two U1-A "Otter" airplanes, six UH-1H and two OH-6A helicopters. I asked why the UH-1s were not equipped with M60 machine guns, as all other "slicks" had them. The gunner hand carried a M60 and the crew chief used a M16. They had removed the rear windows on each door to fire through and one gunner had cut off the flash suppressor to make a bigger flash to "scare" the enemy! Not the safest thing to do inside the helicopter. By February, I had obtained real mounted M60s and sufficient ammunition for each UH-1 in the small fleet. [This explains the picture below showing the gunner refueling through the missing door window]. In June or July 1969, the U1s were destroyed by mortar fire. These were old maintenance headaches and I remember that they seemed

really slow (120 Knots cruise speed) for an airplane. Maintenance was not sorry to see them go! Since I had a secret clearance and most of the crew chiefs did not, I flew about 150 hours during my tour to carry and return secret documents and equipment to the many signal sites in II Corp and never got an air medal!"

WO1 Hank Marshall, 54th Signal BN, provided: " I arrived in April 1969 and stayed until late March 1970. The section was based on the ocean side of Nha Trang Airbase, when I first arrived. When the Koreans moved out and the Vietnamese took over the area, the section moved to the other side of Nha Trang nearer the mountains. Turned out to be much better accommodations! The flights were scheduled from 54th Signal BN Headquarters. Each day, the crew chiefs had the day's mission schedule and when we got to the aircraft, off we went. We went to "every lump with a antenna" in II Corp. Some sites had as few as 2 signalmen. We flew along Cambodian border in the west, as far north as Chu Lai and occasionally as far south as Vung Tau, Long Binh, and Saigon. I remember once I flew the 1st Signal Brigade Commander, MG Rienzi, out to Hon Tri Island. Most of the time, I spent many hours flying over II Corp. I enjoyed flying with Bob Dorr and Jon Walpole who was with the unit from July 1969 to June 1970."

The I Field Force and 54th Signal BN stood down in April 1971.



Notice the sign on the door "IFFV Air Messenger" and the missing window for the gunner (L) 54th UH-1H at the Signal Site above Qui Nhon (R)



A 54th U-1A "Otter" and an OH-6A at Nha Trang

Appendix A

Airborne Radio Relay

With the role of air mobility vastly expanding, command and control had assumed a new importance. Because the usual reaction to the hit-and-run tactics of the Viet Cong was a quick airmobile response, it demanded a helicopter command post from which the Vietnamese commander, together with his adviser and a limited staff, could get quickly to an area under attack, develop a plan of action, and commit reaction forces rapidly. That procedure often meant briefing the reaction forces enroute to the objective, coordinating with other friendly forces, and husbanding additional support as needed; in short, using several radios at the same time. Trying to do that within the confines of a UH-1B helicopter passenger compartment, where space, weight, and power were at a premium, was no small task. The commander and his staff had to compete with the high noise level in the cabin to talk to each other and to the crew members. They also needed some sort of work surface for map layouts and overlays.

An early attempt to meet these needs was made by lashing down three FM (frequency modulated) radios (AN/PRC-10) together in the passenger compartment and mounting the antennas at 45degree angles on the skids. Although such a "lash up" was used with some success, it was cumbersome and provided only FM channels when very high frequency and high frequency single sideband were also needed because of the extensive range and variety of activities involved. The expedient also failed to provide for communications within the helicopter.

In early 1963, the Army Concept Team defined the requirements for an aerial command post for command control of ground and air operations. Four command post communications system consoles for UH-1B helicopters were fabricated. Each included an operations table and a compact five-position interphone system independent of the aircraft interphone but capable of entry into that system. Each console also provided equipment for two different frequency modulated radio channels, an independent very high frequency amplitude modulated radio circuit, a high frequency single sideband circuit, and access to the aircraft's ultra frequency amplitude modulated command radio-certainly a full spectrum of radio coverage to meet almost any contingency.

The first consoles arrived in Vietnam in December 1963 and were issued to the 145th Aviation Battalion and the Delta Aviation Battalion (Provisional) for evaluation. The battalions found the original design to be too ambitious. Because of the size and weight of the console, two single seats normally occupied by the aerial door gunners had to be removed, and the additional weight upset the helicopter's center of gravity. Nevertheless, when the map board and table were eliminated and the single sideband radio relocated, the console performed so well that in July 1964 the U.S. Military Assistance Command stated an urgent requirement for a heliborne command post (HCP) for each Vietnamese division and one each for the Vietnamese II, III, and IV Corps.



Early UH-1B Command and Control Radio Console

As the action of the war turned toward the remote valleys and plateaus bordering Laos and Cambodia, the cost-in terms of committed troops, expected casualties, and airlifts for seizing and holding high ground for radio relay installation appeared to be excessive, if not prohibitive. Airborne command and control was the first attempt at airborne radio relay in Vietnam

The 13th Signal BN, organic to the 1st Cavalry Division, was the first to employ CV-2 "Caribou" fixed-wing aircraft equipped with twelve powerful FM radios. The aircraft flew in orbit at 10,000 feet over the widely dispersed combat units and retransmitted FM voice messages for most of the key command nets directing the operation.

This new concept with airborne radio relay was used successfully in the famous Ia Drang valley campaign in 1965 and paved the way for extending a commander's ability to control the action on the battlefield. This operation highlighted the importance of the FM airborne relay in supporting far-ranging and swiftly developing campaigns.



13th Signal BN / 1st CAV Radio Relay Operators in a CV-2 "Caribou"



Typical CV-2 / C-7 "Caribou" STOL Airplane

Although these airborne relays extended the field commander's span of control and often provided the only means of communicating with ground troops in contact with the enemy, there were major limitations to the system. These limitations primarily involved the aircraft itself. The twin-engine Caribou airplane that the 1st Cavalry Division employed so successfully in 1965 had subsequently been taken from the Army's inventory and turned over to the Air Force who redesignated it the C-7. As a result, the airborne radio relay system was installed in the Army's single-engine U-1A "Otter" airplane. These older Otters were difficult to maintain. The radios installed were not capable of secure voice retransmission and were actually too heavy for the underpowered Otter.

U.S. Army Vietnam, asked that the "Otter" be replaced with a more powerful, all-weather aircraft and that the present radios be replaced with newer, lighter models designed especially for aircraft. In early 1968 four radio relay equipped aircraft were sent to Vietnam and flown by the 1st Cavalry Division. They were successfully tested in combat in February and soon were flying relay missions throughout the country. The airborne relays were particularly valuable in support of the 1st Cavalry Division's relief of Khe Sanh in the northern part of the I Corps Tactical Zone in the spring of 1968.

The 2nd Signal Group Aviation Detachment received six twin-engine U-21A, or "Ute," aircraft by the fall of 1969. Each was equipped with an improved radio console capable of relaying three simultaneous channels. But the most significant fact was that two nets could now operate and be relayed in the secure voice mode. The first missions involving this new relay system proved that a secure voice radio link of 140 nautical miles could be readily established at an altitude of only 3,500 feet. Since the Army's U-21A plane could stay aloft on station for several hours at a much higher altitude, the occasions when a small unit or long-range patrol was without communications were virtually nonexistent.



U21-A on radio relay alert at Da Nang circa 1971

From 1969 to 1972, the 2nd Signal Group Aviation (later renamed the 1st Signal Brigade Aviation) Detachment operated these radio relay aircraft out of Long Thanh North AAF, near Long Binh Vietnam. They were frequently sent TDY to Da Nang, Phu Bai, Pleiku, and Nha Trang for radio relay missions. They also flew radio relay directly from Long Thanh North. Usually a two aircraft team and three crews would be sent to for 24 hour radio relay support. A typical mission was 15-30 min enroute to the target area and up to 5 hours on station before returning to refuel. Flying circles at 10,000 feet at night did get tedious, and many times available helicopter pilots were recruited to fly co-pilot on radio relay missions.

The following explains what radio relay was really like from the perspective of a radio operator. The following is an excerpt from Rick Holt's "Adventures in Vietnam, 1971":



Rick Holt (Radio Operator) in front of Radio Relay rack in U-21A

"The story of my Vietnam service is not written in blood or violence. I saw very little of that part of the war. The story of my Vietnam service is written in sweat, boredom and stress. I was assigned to the Second Signal Group Aviation Detachment in Long Thanh North. My job title was radio relay operator.

My primary job was to fly in a light aircraft (U-21) and facilitate radio transmissions between ground troops in the field and their headquarters. Ideally this was just a matter of tuning a couple of radios and listening for endless hours as we circled the combat zone below. But on many occasions the equipment malfunctioned and I manually relayed messages between the two parties.

My training did not prepare me exactly for the job I was asked to do. I had never flown in an aircraft before my trip to Vietnam. I was never trained on the radio equipment I had to operate. I took one flight as on-the-job-training and I was on my own. Our crew consisted of pilot, co-pilot and radio operator. We used encrypted transmissions which complicated things a bit.

Our missions were almost always at night. We would support ground troops as they moved out of range of their headquarters radios. If their mission lasted any length of time a ground relay would eventually be set up and we would be released. But usually we supported brief ground missions that went temporarily out of their radio range.

Over the course of the year I flew to most parts of South Vietnam north of the Mekong River. Although we were based out of Long Thanh North, I probably spent more time away from there than living there. We would go TDY (on temporary duty) to an air base near our mission area.

I spent a considerable amount of time in Da Nang Air Base flying missions near the DMZ and over Laos. In this area we often supported Vietnamese troops. We also flew a little out of Hue. One of my favorite assignments was a mission we flew out of Pleiku. We had flush toilets!

A typical mission started with a call from the pilot in the middle of the night. While the crew chief got the plane ready we were briefed and given our encryption information. We keyed this into a special device which we carried with us. One of the first things I would do when boarding the plane was to use this device to set the codes on the radios. Basically I plugged it in and gave it a push and pulled it back out.

Once we were airborne the pilot would let me know when we were in our target area. At that point I would begin attempting to communicate with the parties involved. It was unpredictable whether this would be an easy process or long and drawn out. Believe it or not, many times the guys on the ground had no idea who I was or what I was going to do to help them.

If all went well I would eventually have communications set up with the two parties on separate frequencies. I would simply throw a switch and if the equipment worked right the two parties could then talk directly with one another. It was great when it worked. Trouble is it often didn't work.

It is scary now thinking back that people's lives depended on what I was doing and whether the equipment worked. If there was equipment trouble I would have to sit there and manually relay transmissions. This was a lot less boring than a perfect mission, but also very stressful. I recall one instance where none of the radios worked properly and we ended up using the aircraft's flight radio to manually relay messages until we could get another plane airborne to take our place.

We flew quite often at night. It was rather eerie. Pitch black except for a few lights in the aircraft. You could often see flashes and explosions on the ground from the action below. B-52 flights were particularly impressive. Our planes were not armed, but in certain areas we were supported by aircraft that were. We usually flew at about 10,000 feet, which often put us right in the clouds. If danger lurked we would intentionally hide in the clouds.

I often thought about the danger. Our aircraft had no parachutes. We usually carried an M-16 and some ammunition or a 45 caliber pistol. Since my jungle training consisted of a brief time in a mock village in basic training I doubt I would have survived a crash even if I lived through it. I was basically unprepared for this whole experience.

Truthfully I had little idea at the time or even now whether I was in any particular danger during most of my missions. The pilots were usually pretty cryptic about where we were and what was really going on. But like anything else, you can read a person by their actions. There were many times I could sense their apprehension.

On the ground back at the airbases it was a different story. The sound of 122 mm rockets exploding nearby was pretty clear evidence of the danger involved. I lost count of the rocket attacks I shivered through in Da Nang. The rockets would be picked up on radar and sirens would sound warning that there was incoming. Oh boy, thanks for the warning.

There was usually very little time to do anything but roll under a bunk or sprint to a shelter. I was always scared to death when that happened. Since we were TDY personnel in Da Nang we always got the second best in accommodations. Essentially our accommodations were Quonset tents that held about twenty guys."

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Phone and/or Email Interviews with Author

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1st Signal Brigade

Depriest, Zandy D
Everhart, Thomas G
Kreider, Larry C
Zarkos, Timothy L
Leeds, William R
Pohlmann, William E
Holt, Rick

2nd Signal Group

Andrus, Allen A
Bartlett, Drew
Bodkin, William B
Brandt, John R
Dorville, Ronald E
Giebner, Robert M
Milavic, Jack A
Yensen, David A
Turgeon, A J
Strye, James
Rudt, Danny J
Hoeteker, Anthony

12th Signal Group / 37th and 41st Signal Battalion

Martin, Joe
Nielsen, Robert D
Cheek, Larry D

21st Signal Group

Baggot, David L
McKenna, John F
McPherson, Thomas E
Rodewald, Bruce R
Smith, Timothy C
Thompson, Mitchell S
Wix, Michael F
Comrey, Bill

54th Signal Battalion

Dorr, Robert A
Marshall, Henry
Smith, Perry
Walpole, Jon S
McGehee, Arthur J