**The Phu Lam, Vietnam U.S. Army Communications Base**  
  
By

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army

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In America's "Made for Television" war in Vietnam, the combat support troops were seldom featured on the evening news. Yet, they played a vital role in that conflict. The several thousand men who served their country at the U.S. Army's communications base at Phu Lam, on the western outskirts of Saigon, were among those support troops, with the mission of providing reliable, secure, strategic communications to the U.S. forces in Vietnam. The men at Phu Lam accomplished that mission. But they also helped to transform the Army's long-haul communications systems from high-frequency (H.F.) radio and paper tape teletype relays to state-of-the-art technology, including tropospheric scatter radio, automatic digital message switching, secure voice telephone systems and satellite communications terminals.



THE BUILD-UP YEARS: 1951 - 1966  
It wasn't until the early 1950s that the United States took a serious interest in Southeast Asia, having been preoccupied with the Cold War in Europe. Consequently, the U.S. established a small communications station in Saigon in 1951 to monitor the developing events in Vietnam.

That station, located in the Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) headquarters, consisted of a single-channel, H.F. radio link to Clark Air Base in the Philippines and served the U.S. embassy and a handful of military advisers. It eventually evolved into the large communications complex at Phu Lam. With the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and the emergence of the Domino Theory, the U.S. mission in Saigon and the Army's STARCOM communications station there became increasingly more important.

In 1956, the radio transmitter was moved to the old French transmitter site while the receiver station was relocated to Ba Queo, near Tan Son Nhut Airport. In the late 1950s it became more likely that the involvement of the United States in Vietnam would escalate, particularly after the first two American advisers were killed in 1959, and plans were made to upgrade the in-country and out-of-country communications systems. In 1962, the Wetwash wide-band communications system was approved for the western Pacific. It included an undersea cable from the Philippines to Nha Trang and a tropospheric scatter radio shot from there to Phu Lam.

Tropospheric scatter radio used radio signals bounced off the troposphere and had just emerged from the R & D laboratory. Phu Lam was also selected as the new location of the H.F. radio transmitters, the Saigon Overseas Switchboard and a paper tape major relay that would process virtually all military messages into and out of Vietnam. The latter plans were implemented in November 1961 when the relocated transmitters went on the air. Shortly thereafter, work on the Nha Trang - Phu Lam tropospheric scatter link, part of the Back-porch system, was started. By the middle of 1962, 130 men were stationed at Phu Lam and were responsible for operating H.F. radio circuits to Bang Pla, Thailand; San Miguel, Philippines; and Ft. Buckner, Okinawa.

By early 1963, Phu Lam was connected to the outside world via 44 teletype and 9 voice circuits. The installation of a 50-line torn-tape relay and the Saigon Overseas Switchboard was underway in the new operations building in the middle of what had been a rice paddy on the highway linking Saigon with the Mekong Delta. By the end of that year, the move of the communications center from the MAAG compound to Phu Lam was underway. At the same time, work on the undersea cable from the Philippines to Nha Trang was started to provide more badly needed high-quality channels and to lessen the dependence on H.F. radio.

In January 1964, the STARCOM Facility at Phu Lam became known to Army communicators around the world when the tape relay and the telephone switchboard were cut over to traffic. During a typical month in the first half of the year, the station handled 185,000 messages. In August 1964, the Gulf of Tonkin Incident ushered in a new era of military communications. Due to the sudden increase in demand for communications circuits between Saigon and Washington and poor H.F. radio propagation conditions at the time, the first satellite terminal to be used in a war zone was airlifted to Saigon on one-day's notice and was assigned to the Phu Lam facility.

The terminal, still in the experimental stage, had been touring military bases in the U.S. to convince skeptical military and congressional leaders of the technical feasibility of satellite communications. After the U.S. Army Strategic Communications Command (USASTRATCOM) was assigned the mission of long-haul communications, Phu Lam was reorganized as the USASTRATCOM Facility, Vietnam in November 1964, reporting to USASTRATCOM - Pacific in Hawaii. Its authorized strength then exceeded 300 men.

By early 1965, the U.S. involvement in Vietnam was still confined to advisers, with the American troop strength at approximately 20,000. However, because of the deteriorating military situation, it appeared liked that this number would increase dramatically. Consequently, as soon as the Wetwash System was completed, the state-of-the-art, long-haul Integrated Wideband Communications System (IWCS) was approved in 1965. It would interconnect the major cities of South Vietnam. That approval came none too soon since the first U.S. Marines landed at Da Nang in March of that year.

By that time, Phu Lam had moved into another new technological era for military communications by activating a data relay. It used IBM punched cards instead of paper tape, and data communications eventually obsoleted the paper tape relay. Construction of a Non-Automatic Data Relay Center was started in August 1965. By the end of 1965, as the American troop strength stood at 180,000, the demand for communications continued to increase steadily. The number of men assigned to Phu Lam then exceeded 350, and new traffic records were set monthly. At the same time, 23 barracks to house 200 men on base were completed.

The harsh reality of war was brought home to the men of Phu Lam in June 1965 when three men from the Switchboard Section were among 42 people who were killed in a terrorist attack at the My Canh floating restaurant on the Saigon waterfront. They were the first of five Phu-Lamers who made the ultimate sacrifice for the cause of freedom. The Viet Cong threw a grenade into the restaurant and then exploded a Claymore mine as the patrons ran in panic off the ship.

The build-up of American forces continued in 1966, accompanied by the expansion of facilities at Phu Lam. The IWCS section, which was operated by a detachment of the Long Lines Battalion - South, headquartered at Vung Tau, was upgraded by replacing trailers with permanent buildings. That change was consistent with the strategy of the base becoming a key component of a modern civilian and military communications network in Vietnam after the cessation of hostilities.

In April, Phu Lam became part the reorganization to consolidate communications units in Vietnam when the 1st Signal Brigade (USASTRATCOM) was activated. Shortly thereafter, Regional Communications Group became the immediate higher headquarters of Phu Lam. The last major expansion of the base took place in November when ground was broken for the multi-million-dollar Automatic Data Message Switching Center Building that would tie Phu Lam into Automatic Digital Network (AUTODIN).



THE PLATEAU YEARS: 1967 - 1969 1967 was marked by continued growth at Phu Lam, but the pace began to level off as the U.S. military strength reached the 486,000 mark by the end of the year. In January, over 1,000,000 messages were processed over 55 teletype circuits, and the number of men assigned to the base approached 800. Additional satellite circuits were activated to augment those on the undersea cable and to provide an alternate means of communications back to the States.

Reflecting the steady growth of the unit, the USASTRATCOM Facility, Phu Lam was re-designated as the Phu Lam Signal Battalion (USASTRATCOM) in July, as the facility had by then become the busiest non-automatic tape relay station in the world. Toward the end of the year, the teletype message volume reached 1,250,000 per month.

1968 was a pivotal year, not only for the United States but also for Phu Lam. When the enemy launched the Tet Offensive in late January, message volume increased dramatically due to enemy attacks throughout the country. The word "Incoming" took on a personal meaning for the men at Phu Lam when mortars hit the base in February for the first time. Although damage was light and operations were quickly restored, several dozens injuries resulted. Because of an elaborate defense system of guard towers, bunkers, Claymore mines, and a well-trained defense force, the enemy apparently decided that a ground attack would have been futile. However, Phu Lam lost two of its comrades from the Long Lines Battalion - South detachment when their jeep was ambushed on the first day of the Offensive near the Phu Tho Racetrack, in an attempt to deliver a message to Regional Communications Group.

In March, the AUTODIN Automatic Message Switching Center became operational, and it became the first such center to operate in a war zone, virtually within sight of enemy patrols. It marked the beginning of the end of paper tape and IBM punched cards for record communications. Although having enough trained men to operate this highly sophisticated system and obtaining spare parts were serious problems at first, they were gradually overcome. Military commanders now had available to them the highest quality, most reliable, fastest and most secure communications system in history. 1968 also marked the end of the expansion of troop facilities at Phu Lam. Two-story barracks to house 700 men were completed, a library was started, and a chapel was built.

In the spring of 1969, as the American troop strength reached its peak of 543,000, Phu Lam also reached its development plateau. With the implementation of President Nixon's Vietnamization policy and the first withdrawal of combat troops in July 1969, Phu Lam was also on the road to oblivion. The decline was interrupted when the Da Nang communications center was damaged in a mortar attack, with many circuits being rerouted through Phu Lam, and when the Nha Trang communications center was assigned to Phu Lam prior to its phase-out. Consequently, the number of men assigned to Phu Lam remained in the 800 to 1,000 range longer than expected.

By November, the AUTODIN System was processing almost all messages, and the paper tape major relay was shut down, marking an end of another era in U.S. Army strategic communications. However, part of the relay was reactivated in 1970 as a minor relay to serve units in the Mekong Delta until they were withdrawn.



THE DECLINING YEARS: 1970 - 1972 As the withdrawal of U.S. forces continued in 1970, the Phu Lam Signal Battalion (USASTRATCOM) was re-designated as the USASTRATCOM Signal Support Agency, Phu Lam. With the downsizing of 1st Signal Brigade, plans were made to shift responsibility for operating the strategic communications network to U.S. civilian contractors. Some complexes were to be phased out completely and others turned over to the Army of South Vietnam (ARVN), subject to the availability of trained men. The AUTODIN terminals, one at Phu Lam and one at Nha Trang, were to be retained under U.S. control, and these were later dismantled and shipped out of the country.

By mid-1970, the reliability of the undersea cable to the Philippines, along with another cable that connected the major cities along the coast of South Vietnam and Thailand, had been proven to the point that the H.F. radio terminal at Phu Lam was phased out. By the end of that year, U.S. troop strength in Vietnam was down to 335,000. At Phu Lam it was clear also that everyone would be going home, the only questions being "when?" and what the eventual outcome of the continuing fighting and the Paris peace talks would be. The men of Phu Lam's Automatic Secure Voice Communications (AUTOSEVOCOM) Company, also designated as the 532nd Signal Company, played an important role in those talks since they operated the secure communications systems that linked officials in Saigon with the negotiators in Paris. By 1971, Phu Lam's mission consisted of operating the AUTODIN Switching Center, the AUTOSEVOCOM System, the satellite terminal, the Overseas Switchboard and the IWCS systems. The latter were then the responsibility of a detachment of the 369th Signal Battalion, which had been the Long Lines Battalion - South.

In 1972, Phu Lam also became part of the Vietnamization policy. The Signal Support Agency, Phu Lam was reorganized one last time in March as the 60th Signal Battalion, and it was assigned to the 160th Signal Group, since Regional Communications Group had been disbanded. As the withdrawal of U.S. troops accelerated, Phu Lam's strength declined steadily until in June the Battalion was deactivated, with most men transferred to Korea. A small contingent, the Phu Lam Roll-up Force, was left behind to re-terminate the few remaining AUTODIN circuits to Clark Air Base and ship anything of value out of the country.

The Phu Lam Roll-up Force completed that mission in September. Because few men were left behind to defend a very large installation, the lack of security became their overriding concern. This security crisis was alleviated when a platoon of Nung mercenaries was "hired" for the last few weeks to help guard the base. When the facility was unceremoniously turned over to the ARVN Signal Corps, without even a change-of-flags ceremony, it had been reduced to virtually empty buildings. The air-conditioning units had even been dismantled and shipped out. Shortly thereafter, in November 1972, the 1st Signal Brigade transferred its colors to Korea.

The ARVN troops who took over the base in the fall of 1972 reestablished some communications systems at Phu Lam. The nature of those systems is still one of the unanswered questions about the history of Phu Lam. Two and a half years later, on the morning of April 30, 1975, Phu Lam was invaded by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese, who encountered no resistance. Later that day, the South Vietnamese government surrendered unconditionally. Based on reports of Phu-Lamers who visited Vietnam recently, the base is still used for military communications, with the barracks and tropospheric antennas still standing as an ironic reminder of the U.S. Army Signal Corps communicators who called Phu Lam home for more than ten years.

The names and insignias of the units at Phu Lam engraved on the entrance sign on Highway 4 changed several times over the years due to numerous reorganizations. However, the basic mission of the base remained unchanged: To provide reliable, high-quality strategic communications to U.S. Armed Forces in Vietnam and to live up to the U.S. Army Signal Corps motto to "Get the Message Through." The name by which the men who fulfilled that mission were known also remained unchanged. That name, which was also inscribed on that sign at the front gate, reflected the dedication and commitment of those men. The sign proudly read "THE PROFESSIONALS."

This history is based on the author's book "The Professionals: History of the Phu Lam, Vietnam U.S. Army Communications Base." The author may be contacted at rokus@comcast.net. The web site of "The Professionals" is http://www.xlibris.com/theprofessionals.html more information about Phu Lam is available at the web site http://phulam.com.