

A COMMUNICATIONS GUY'S INVOLVEMENT AND A PERSPECTIVE OF THE VIETNAM WAR 1967-1976

3 DIFFERENT WARS LOOKING TOWARD VIETNAM AND WHAT I THOUGHT AT THE TIME

I was drafted into the U.S. Army in June of 1966, after Basic at Ft. Polk, La. and AIT at Ft. Gordon, I spent 5 months with the 385th Signal Company at Ft. Campbell, Ky. In May of 1967 I was assigned to the 105th Signal Services Detachment in Bangkok, Thailand. Listed below is what I did and what I thought about the Vietnam War as I went through my different assignments in Southeast Asia.

1967/68 Working on the 2nd floor of the Capital Hotel on Phahon Yothin Road, I was providing communications support for Deputy Chief Joint United States Military Advisory Group Thailand (DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI) along with about 30 other Department of Defense (DOD) units in the Bangkok Area, which also included SEATO Headquarters and the SEATO Lab and some Air Force units such as AFOSI. But our main customer when it came to communications support was DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI. DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI was a big misnomer, as this unit had nothing at all to do with Thailand. After the 1962 Geneva Accords on Laos, which stated that all foreign military troops would leave Laos, the Military Assistance and Advisory Group Laos (MAAG Laos) moved from Vientiane to the Capital Hotel in Bangkok. MAAG Laos then changed their name to Deputy Chief JUSMAGTHAI as this change of names made it sound like MAAG Laos was part of the real JUSMAGTHAI located across town on Satorn Road. With this name change, MAAG Laos could continue to operate from Bangkok and perform its mission it had earlier when its location was in Vientiane, that of assisting and advising the Lao Military and no one would be the wiser. It was like the Army Security Agency (ASA) which was located right around the corner at Seri Court, calling itself Radio Research while monitoring Red Chinese, North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao communications. Being stationed in Bangkok and my job of providing communications support to a host of DOD units that were not directly involved in the Vietnam War, I gave Vietnam little thought. All the units we supported, had their missions in Thailand, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI being the exception, its mission was Laos. I knew that DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI was sending troops, equipment, munitions up country and into Laos as a result of their message traffic coming and going through us, but as a young PFC and Sp4, that did not interest me, both Laos and Vietnam could have been half way around the world instead of next door for all the attention I paid to them. The sites of Bangkok were on my mind, more honestly, the bars, the girls, the beer and having a good time after work. I always did my best to ensure that any unit that needed communications support got it, but it was the night life I paid attention to. All I knew of the Vietnam War was what I read in the Bangkok Post and the SECRET War in Laos was not much different. In fact, the war in Laos got good coverage in the Bangkok Post; so much so, none of us knew it was a SECRET war. There was a Thai Army Maintenance shop on the 2nd Floor of

the Capital Hotel and I did develop a very close relationship with the 2 repairman that worked on our teletypes. With their help, I started to learn Thai and when our time off from work coincided, we spent a lot of time together. They would treat me to a bottle of Mekong, (Thai Whiskey) at their club at their Saphon Kwai Army Base and I would treat them when we would bar hop. If we got a weekend off, the 3 of us would go out to Bang Poo, the Thai Army Recreation Pier on the Gulf of Siam, I would like to say our friendship was alive and well today, but that is not the case. We parted ways when my unit, the 105th Signal Detachment pulled out of the Capital Hotel and their maintenance shop closed. But the Thai these two comrades taught me would come in handy on more than one occasion, of all places, Laos and Vietnam.

1968/69 After a weeks course at the Embassy honing my skills in Off Line Encryption, I moved on over to the Joint United States Military Advisory Group Thailand/United States Military Assistance Command Thailand Telecommunications Center, (JUSMAGTHAI/USMACTHAI TCC) on Satorn Road, the real one for Thailand. Here, with all the reports circulating from Vietnam, I started paying more attention to that War. I also learned that in Northern Thailand of the Communist Insurgency that existed there. I was little older and got promoted to Sergeant; I started to take notice of things that earlier, I had paid no attention to. We sent advisors to different Thai Military Units and supplied equipment and training to help them fight the Thai Communist or CT's as they were known. The CT's caused us quite a stir when some of their sappers got into both UDORN and UBON Royal Thai AFB'S and blew up a couple of U.S. Air Forces planes that were stationed there. Most historians overlook this aspect when dealing with the Vietnam War, although official estimates of the CT's never put there numbers above 20,000 and Intelligence Reports (IR's) put the hard core number closer to 5,000, they were a threat that had to be taken serious. We received reports from the field and monitored the CT's very closely. These guys were a threat locally to our forces in Thailand and although never confirmed, I always wondered if some Pathet Lao, (Laotian Communist) or NVA or VC were not slipping across the Mekong River and leading these guys in their attempt to harass the U.S. Forces and overthrow the Thai Government. I wonder about this today. By late 1969, the Thai Army and the Thai Border Police pretty much had the CT Insurgency under control and all was looking up from Northern and Eastern Thailand. From all the reports we were receiving from Vietnam, after TET, Vietnam started to look positive also. It was during this time, I first started to notice the difference in the reports we were receiving, OPSUM's and SITREP's from MACV, USARV, 7th Air Force, along with a ton and half of other reports from various units in and out of Vietnam and what I was reading in the newspapers. The reports were stating that the Viet Cong (VC) had pretty much ceased to be an effective fighting force, the Regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had suffered huge casualties, but what I was reading was the defeat, the VC and NVA had put on the Allied Forces during TET in Vietnam. But having noticed the difference between official reports and the newspapers, I did not give it any further thought. But having a hand, a small one from 2 countries away, I did start feeling a satisfaction of helping win the Vietnam War. Being able to provide secure communications to whom ever needed it, either over secured or non secured communications links, also brought a sense of accomplishment. In 1969, as the men landed on the moon, I felt good

about our situation in Southeast Asia, the CT's were on the run in Northern Thailand and had become a nuisance instead of a threat, in Vietnam, most reports were positive and it looked like progress was being made. Things seemed to be going the U.S.'s way and I was thinking that Victory can not be far ahead.

1969/70 It was time for me to leave Thailand, so I volunteered and went back to the Capital, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI with duty station Project 404 was my new unit. I was headed to Laos. I went to work in the communications center, Attaché Building, USAID compound, Vientiane, Laos. This was a civilian clothing assignment, we were not here officially. I had received briefings back at the Capital Hotel in Bangkok about keeping the fact I was in the military and in Laos a closely held and guarded secret. I was not in Laos for more than a couple of days, when some fellow Project 404er's took me down to the Tropicana Bar, when a Brit asked me right off if I were Army or Air Force. My jaw dropped, after my fellow 404er's picked themselves up off the floor from laughing so hard, they told me to go ahead and tell him. I did, I guess what a secret was across the Mekong River in Thailand, was an open secret in Vientiane. Here we received SITREP's from the different Military Regions (MR's) which were put together for a weekly OPSUM. Automatic Digital Network (AUTODIN), along with teletype and Radio Teletype communications were provided, this and the normal FM and AM radio communications. Here, Vietnam was off the radar screen, although we did have a direct dedicated circuit to MACV and to UDORN. Vietnam was something I read about in the Stars and Strips, which we rarely got unless someone made a run down to UDORN. The operations up on the Plain of Jars (PDJ) was where we paid most attention, mainly because every so often one of our Radio Teletype (RATT) people would be headed that way and we would be talking to them in our Radio Room. That was where our war was taking place. It was between General Van Pao (VP) and his Hmong against the Pathet Lao (PL) and the NVA. The Royal Laotian Army also mounted operations through out Laos, but they were of so poor quality, it was expected they would fail at whatever they attempted. The watching and bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail was mainly run out of Savanakheth and Pakse, MR's III and IV. We received their reports and passed them on, all the while, our eyes were on the PDJ. The siege of Skyline Ridge in 1970 was a great worry, some of us went up there during the day, but were flown back to Vientiane at night. A couple of Intel friends of mine told me the NVA could have had Skyline if they were willing to pay the price, but for some reason after a couple of weeks, the NVA just up and left. They had captured Sam Thong and nothing much was left of it, but Long Thien and Skyline remained secure. My buddy told me it was the NVA's pay back for VP capturing the PDJ in his previous offensive. About this time, President Nixon came on the radio, we had AFTN (Armed Forces Thailand Network) piped in and said we have no GI's in Laos. I looked over at my fellow shift workers and burst out laughing. Guess we do not exist is what I said. Then Lon Nol overthrew Sihanouk in Cambodia, this caught everyone in Vientiane by surprise, it was a very hectic couple of days trying to get reports on the goings on in Cambodia, the Attaché's were coming and going and asking if we had any further news every 5 minutes it seemed. But it felt good to have someone on our side in Cambodia; my thoughts were, now maybe, just maybe something can be done about the Ho Chi Minh Trail. As my tour in Laos was coming to an end, I felt good, VP had

launched another offensive to take back the PDJ, Lon Nol was now in charge in Cambodia, Combat troops were being withdrawn from Vietnam and Vietnamization was taking place, the reports we were getting from all 3 countries were for the most part, positive, it was a great feeling. But Laos is an isolated place, I had no idea of what was going on in the States, if I did, maybe I would not of felt so good about our situation in Southeast Asia.

1971-1973 I volunteered for Vietnam, I was assigned to the 1st Signal Brigade, Long Binh, RVN. First with the Area Communications Company (ACC LBN (P-TD)) and when it was deactivated, Command Communications Company (CCC LBN). Now I was there, I was involved directly and for the first time since I arrived in Southeast Asia, Vietnam became important to me. It was no longer just a story in a newspaper or a place on some report. The draw down had started and most combat troops were out of country when I arrived. The 1st Signal was responsible for providing communications for all the remaining Army Units and a host of other ones which included some Allied Forces. It was very important to bring the ARVN's up to strength and make sure they had all the equipment they needed as Vietnamization continued. As two important events happen while I was at Long Binh, the Eastertide offensive and Kent State, I began to wonder if Congress and the American People actually wanted us to win here or were they rooting for the enemy. Worse yet, it looked as though they were helping the North Vietnamese by doing everything in their power to hinder us and abetting the North. Our thoughts on Kent State could be seen with the T-shirts we had made up, stating National Guard 4, Kent State 0. Most of us thought the Kent State Students got exactly what they deserved. In the Eastertide offensive, the NVA did not get close to Long Binh, although, others were worried about the offensive and maybe a sapper attack, I did not give it much thought, except to watch the reports, more concerned with how well the ARVN units were performing. Most ARVN units performed pretty well and with American Air Support forced the NVA back to where they were prior to the Eastertide offensive with a couple of exceptions. The good news, much like the VC after TET, the NVA now had to regroup and re supply to become an effective fighting force. It would take them a year or two before they could think of something like this again. In Vietnam, unlike Laos and Thailand, I did not have a chance to associate with the local military and civilian populace that I had been able to in those countries. I missed that. Although, I did give support to the Royal Thai Army Expeditionary Force (RTAEF) in Bearcat on a couple of occasions, which was like old times, that was the closest I came to forming an association with either the Allies or the Local troops. When Long Binh was turned over to the Republic of Vietnam's Army (ARVN) in late 1972, an ARVN tank platoon took over our barracks; it was on down to Saigon with USASTRATCOM-SEA, working in MACV TCC and providing communications support for what ever MACV needed. At the end of 1972, things looked promising in Vietnam, Vietnamization seems to be working and I thought we were in good shape. Laos was now off my radar screen, but that was OK, I assumed if South Vietnam could hold out, Laos would too. Cambodia, next door was in trouble, but that was not USARV's (U.S. Army Vietnam) or the 1st Signal's problem and I seen very little about Cambodia in the official reports. As our troop strength came under 20,000, I was not at all troubled or worried, the Eastertide offensive had proven that the ARVN, with American Air Support could hold their

own and give more than they got, all seemed well. When the Paris Peace Pack was signed in 1973, I was very leery. I wondered if all we had accomplished in Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia would hold. The one thing that really troubled me was where was the residual force? Korea had it 50,000 after its armistice, Germany had it residue force after WWII and now around 500,000 were stationed in Europe to meet the communist threat, where was ours? In March when I left Vietnam to go back to Thailand, it looked like the war was won, but for even a little Sergeant, things did not seem right. Cambodia was not going good next door and Laos seemed stalemated, which was normal for Laos. I began to worry about things, no residue force troubled me greatly, leaving the NVA in the South was not right, we did retain our Air Power in Thailand, so maybe things would work out. Being a Sergeant, E-5, who was I to worry; there were those of higher rank and Government official who surly knew what they were doing. But it was time to leave, Thailand beacons and that was home to me.

1973-1976 Back in Thailand, I was originally suppose to work the Automatic Secure Voice Network (AUTOSEVOCOM), but ended up in the JUSMAGTHAI Telecommunications Center in their compound on Saturn Road. Again I was receiving all sorts or reports from Cambodia and Vietnam, which were bad going to worse. Laos kind of fell off the screen as far as reporting to JUSMAG is concerned, but that was all right, the Bangkok Post kept me informed there, while official reports from Cambodia and Vietnam did the same here at the JUSMAGTHAI TCC. I October of 1973, came the overthrow of Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn, a General in the Thai Army, took place amid demonstrations of Thai students. Even student unrest had come to Thailand. With all the student unrest at this time, we began wearing civilian cloths to work. With Thanom's ouster, the people of Thailand were able to elect their first civilian government in decades. As 1973 turned to 1974, worries about Cambodia came to the fore front, but for some reason while we could still bomb in Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge (KR) tried to overrun Phnom Penh and got the hell bombed out of them. That ended that threat for the time being. But the number of incidents in Vietnam continued to climb, all was not good. Congress had become our greatest enemy in our efforts to keep these countries in Indochina free, even more than the NVA itself. As 74 turned to 75, hopes were diminishing, Phnom Penh had become isolated, even barge shipments up the Mekong River had come to a stop, the NVA started their final offensive. April was a very bad month for freedom loving Indochinese and Allies of the U.S., first Phnom Penh and then Saigon fell. As Eagle Pull, the evacuation of Phnom Penh started, the J-6 of JUSMAGTHAI put together a communications team to help, and I volunteered. We never left the JUSMAGTHAI Compound. Just like the Air Force Planes at 5 Royal Thai Air Forces Bases were put on alert, also went no where. Where was the U.S.? I kept asking myself, what troops and planes we had left in Thailand were ready to go, but no go came from Washington D.C. How could this happen? Why had not we done something? Anything? The whys keep coming. Wasn't our mission to protect and defend the Vietnamese and Cambodian's? Resentment towards Congress and the anti-war movement turned to discuss and hate. I lost trust in the U.S. along with quite a few Allies. Late 1975, Laos also went communist and the Mayaguez affair happens. The Mayaguez affair was a hastily put together operation that the right hand did not know what the left was doing. A comedy of errors on the U.S. part, that cost us

over 20 American Military deaths. The crew of the Mayaguez were released, but not because we launch a rescue operation, it was more in spite of it. Then in early 1976, another hammer fell, the Prime Minister Pujong asked us to leave. I do not blame the Thai's, we were there to protect them along with Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, we did nothing for the latter three, what would make the Thai's think we would change directions and protect them. Better we, the U.S., be gone as a bad irritant than stay for what? Now the aftermath, 2-3 million Cambodians killed by Pol Pot. Millions of South Vietnamese put into re-education camps and ex-government officials and employees were killed and millions escaped by boat. Total number killed by the North Vietnamese, estimated to be at least a million or most likely more. Laos was not so bad, but the King and Queen and the Royal Family, killed, re education camps introduced, the Hmong singled out for destruction and former members of the Government of Vientiane killed if they had not escaped to Thailand prior to the Communist take over. All and all, that war could of lasted another 50 years and the death toll figures would not even come close to what actually happened. So much for the commitment and promises of the U.S.! I left Thailand in July of 1976, on to become a Drill Sergeant at Ft. Leonard Wood, 1980 to Germany with the 11th ACR in Fulda, 1983 to Ft. Gordon, Georgia. I retired from active duty in 1986. I then went immediately to work for the U.S. Army as a Civilian and continue to do so to this date.

Looking back 30 years later, are my feelings the same? No, I hate nobody, distrust still exists to a certain extent, but it is a healthful distrust. I was even thankful to the NVA for their intervention in Cambodia to stop the killing fields. I firmly believe to this day, that if we had kept a residue force, 5-10,000 would have been enough and kept our Air Power ready, South Vietnam would be a free country today, but I am sure our Air Power would have had to be used again and again, every 4 or 5 years. I do not think the North would ever have given up their idea of conquering the South. Cambodia was doomed, Laos, I am not sure of. The Hmong were becoming a spent entity and it was only with the help of Thai SGU and artillery units that they were able to hold their strong holds on the PDJ. The Royal Lao Army was not a match for the NVA or even the PL. Would the Thai's support the Royal Lao Government indefinitely, would the U.S. be willing to go to the well with Air Power every few years, no I do not think so. I would like to think if we gave Vietnamization 4 or 5 more years, they, the South Vietnamese could have held their own without any U.S. help, but that was not to be. Without Watergate would the outcome have been different? Most likely not, Nixon and Kissinger rushed into the Paris Peace Accords, more from pressure from Congress than the American People. I like to think Nixon huge victory over McGovern in 1972, really showed where most Americans stood, but that could also be wishful thinking. Perhaps if we just listen to McArthur and Eisenhower, do not get involved in another ground war in Asia, Korea was enough. The fact that our intervention in Indochina, kept Thailand free from the communist, is a small victory, but 30 years later, that is enough.

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I discovered my memory can be mistaken at times, especially when the episode at Kent State happened. I wrote the following:

"As two important events happen while I was at Long Binh, the Eastertide offensive and Kent State, I began to wonder if Congress and the American People actually wanted us to win here or were they rooting for the enemy. Worse yet, it looked as though they were helping the North Vietnamese by doing everything in their power to hinder us and abetting the North. Our thoughts on Kent State could be seen with the T-shirts we had made up, stating National Guard 4, Kent State 0. Most of us thought the Kent Staters got exactly what they deserved."

As I found out, the shooting at Kent State happened in 1970, not 1971. In 1970 I was in Vientiane, Laos and not Vietnam. I can remember Sp/4 Peterson and myself having the T-Shirts made on Long Binh not more than a month or two after my arrival. I remember seeing one with "Fly the friendly skies of Vietnam" on the front and on the back, a picture of a B-52 dropping its eggs. We decided to have our NG 4, KS 0 shirts made. Why I remember Kent State happening in 1971 instead of 1970, could be nothing more than faulty memory with dates or it might be the first time I heard of Kent State was when I arrived in Vietnam. Laos is a very isolated country, no TV stations in the entire country, Lao radio only and at the time, no English newspapers, only Lao even in Vientiane. We had to get Stars and Stripes from Udorn across the Mekong in Thailand when one of our people flew down there to get caught up on the news. In the early part of 1970, our focus in Laos was up on the PDJ where things were not going exactly as planned. Regardless of exactly when Kent State happened, we had the T-Shirts made up in 1971, on Long Binh to express exactly how we felt at the time and that is how I remembered it happening. To be honest, if I had not been told that Kent State happened in 1970, I would of went to my grave believing it was 1971.