

WAR IN VIETNAM - A SURVEYOR'S STORY

The Royal Australian Survey Corps at Nui Dat in its first
year

1966-67

PART 4 - VIETNAM - IT WAS

A personal reflection forty years later... Bob Skitch

PROLOGUE and DEDICATION

It has taken me forty years to decide to commit my Vietnam story to paper. Why so long you may well ask. My only response to that is that I was getting on with my life post Vietnam, my family, my work and my community involvements. And yet those twelve months in Vietnam have always sat in the back of my mind and I doubt whether a day has passed when I haven't reflected almost subconsciously on some incident great or small or person I came to know from that period of my life. My account is based upon several sources – my Commander's Diary that was discontinued in August 1966 by direction from higher authority; my monthly operational reports to my Directorate and to Headquarters Army Force Vietnam, my date pad desk diary (unfortunately pages missing from mid March to mid May 1967) and various letters and documents included as annexes to this account. Commander's Diaries and monthly operational reports (without annexes) can be accessed through Internet on the Australian War Memorial data base. Also I made reference to and extracted from my own Army Journal article Operational Mapping and Surveys, South Vietnam 1966 to 1967 published in 1968 and to the official history of the Royal Australian Survey Corps Australia's Military Mapmakers by Dr Chris Coulthard-Clark. Also I referred to other recent writings on the Vietnam conflict to confirm dates and some names.

Of course it would be a very dry account were it limited to simply extracts from those documented sources. My personal recollection of the people with whom I served in my own unit, the Detachment of the 1st Topographical Survey Troop and others with whom I had personal dealings on the Headquarters of the 1st Australian Task Force and a number of US headquarters and units remain as clear in my mind as they were on the day I departed Vietnam and form the 'glue' of my account. I clearly remember things that were said, comments made and the general ethos that prevailed within the Nui Dat base at that time. Lastly I remember also how I felt about many of the things that took place, my disappointments, frustrations and positive elations. In retrospect now I reflect on the remarkable effort of the sixteen soldiers with whom I served in the 1st Topographical Survey Troop who carried out their exacting role in incredibly trying and adverse conditions of climate and circumstance without complaint or criticism and achieved outstanding results.

Finally I reflect on the continuing encouragement given to me by my wife Wendy who with our one year old daughter endured the loneliness and frustrations of twelve months enforced separation living in a small army apartment in Sydney. Never at any time in our weekly, occasionally fortnightly, letter or voice tape communication transmitted through the hopelessly inept postal system did I hear a word of complaint or domestic concern yet knowing full well that there must have been many situations that may have warranted some off-loading on a distant husband.

I dedicate this account first to my wife Wendy and my eldest daughter Sarah Jane who didn't know a father until she was twenty one months old when a strange man invaded her life.

And secondly I dedicate this same account to the band of men who served with me in Vietnam; the men of the Detachment 1st Topographical Survey Troop and whose names appear in the pages of this account.

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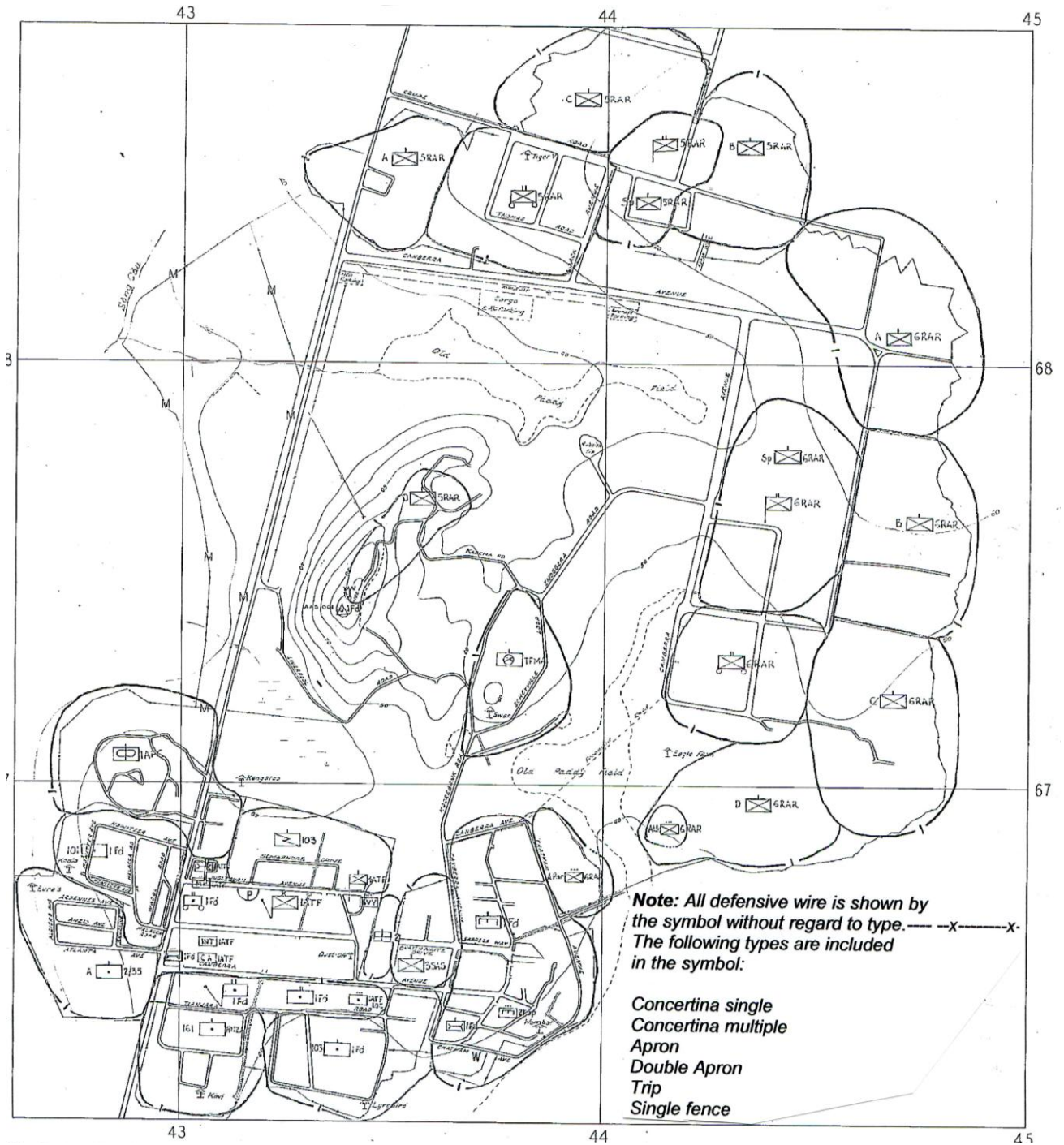
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MAP 1 – Frontispiece

Original scale
1:5,000

**1 ATF BASE AREA
NUI DAT**

EDITION 3



The Tactical Symbol version of the Cantonment Map
Simplified and reduced. Produced in about April 1967.
This copy from AWM data base.

Grid squares 1,000 metre

WAR IN VIETNAM – A Surveyor’s Story: The Royal Australian Survey Corps at Nui Dat
The First Year, 1966–67
PART 4 –VIETNAM – IT WAS – May 1967

MAY 1967

Arrival at Darwin

We arrived at Darwin mid evening and went through customs and quarantine with our soldier’s trunks and kit bags. Our boots were inspected (we had been warned previously that our boots needed to be spotlessly clean and they were), trunks and kitbags opened and rifled through. I thought my curios from Dalat might be confiscated but they weren’t; they simply had to be sprayed with something. We were fed from a buffet bar, ham and salad rolls and a cup of coffee. All in all, we were courteously treated by the customs and quarantine staff and then we waited, expecting to be loaded onto the mythical Ansett passenger jet. There were one or two on the tarmac and clearly one of them would be ours. We waited and waited. A few of the blokes broke ranks and wandered off to the bar for a beer or two. Thankfully perhaps the bar closed about 10 o’clock and they returned with the disappointing news that they had seen our trunks and bags being loaded back onto the C130. Well; perhaps our bags and trunks would be taken to Sydney on the C130 and we passengers would return by Ansett. At about midnight that thought was dispelled and we climbed aboard our C130, a different one this time. I often wondered why it was not made clear to us that our trip back to Sydney would be by C130 all the way. Where did this Ansett story come from? Who was playing ‘silly buggers’ with us and why? On reflection it had to be known how we were getting back. That was the way the chinks were organised quite some time in advance. As far as I could see we had the exact number of persons on the C130 – it was a full load with all our baggage. The time schedule was determined by the flight characteristics of the C130 – no other aircraft! Did it matter? We were going home. I think I slept fitfully on the final leg to Sydney, sitting in the red netting seats down either side of the aircraft.

The home-coming

We arrived at Sydney’s Mascot airport somewhere about 7.00am, not at the main domestic terminal but somewhere at the back of the airport, the cargo terminal perhaps. It was a cold grey morning with a spit of rain. Our bags and trunks were offloaded onto a trolley where we could claim our own. An army bus stood waiting nearby. A movements warrant officer said ‘welcome home you blokes’ or words to that effect, and then told the National Servicemen they would be given travel vouchers to take them home and to report to the nearest Personnel Depot for discharge within a fortnight – the rest of us were to report to our units. The bus was to take those who wished to use it to the Eastern Command Personnel Depot, most took it I think. Wendy had always said that she would meet me at the airport and even after arriving at this god-forsaken end of Mascot I more or less assumed that she would. There were a couple of soldier’s families with cars waiting nearby keeping out of the wind next to one of the adjacent sheds. But no Wendy at that point. The bus left and I stayed on and after fifteen minutes or so Wendy and little Sarah arrived, having become bushed in the network of roads at the back of the airport. It was a strange feeling seeing them there with our Ford Falcon car. Little Sarah was a real little girl in a pretty vialla dress with a pattern of tiny flowers and blonde curly hair pulled back into pigtails. She had been a nine month old baby when I had left twelve months before. She certainly didn’t want to have anything to do with this strange smelling stranger that had just walked into her life. Wendy was the same, although it was to take a while to re-establish our normal married life.

Such was our welcome back to Australia!

Afterwards

I had an accumulation of about eight weeks leave from carry over credits from before departure for Vietnam. I had not taken R&R during my tour preferring not to be wandering aimlessly around a foreign city on my own taking a whole lot of meaningless photographs. The attractions sought by many soldiers taking R&R were not for my seeking and the constant line-up of soldiers at the RAP following their six days of absence was a matter of dismay. Nevertheless, I did not blame them –

venereal disease is yet another military hazard. Many front-line soldiers carried real doubts as to whether they would walk from the theatre.

Wendy and I had booked a two week holiday at one of Australia's then best known resorts, Hayman Island in the Whitsunday Group off the coast of central Queensland, commencing two weeks after my RTA. I was required to report to 'my unit' the day after arriving back and I did so at Randwick then to Victoria Barracks to visit Major Bob Hammett in his Deputy Assistant Director of Survey role. Bob Hammett greeted me with his usual "welcome back Bob – sit ye down". There were some formalities to attend to and I found that I was to visit my Directorate in Canberra for a debriefing and then to the Survey Regiment at Bendigo to advise on a few of the map products we had sent there from Vietnam for final cartography and reproduction. Wendy found it hard to accept that I had to be away for a further three or four days so soon after arriving back but I felt that the sooner I cleared those commitments the better and I could then get on with life after Vietnam.

I was well and truly welcomed in both locations – something of a hero perhaps, but not more so than the sixteen others that left Australia with me in May 1966. I hoped that they were accorded the same level of appreciation. In Canberra my Director Colonel Buckland confirmed that I would commence my civil secondment to the NSW Department of Lands for 18 months (negotiated back from the normal requirement of two years set by the Surveyor's Board) to become a Licensed Surveyor. I had completed all written Board examinations in a final burst of energy before leaving for Vietnam. Following that I would be posted to Singapore for two years with the British unit, 84 Survey Squadron, Royal Engineers. It would of course be an accompanied posting. Perhaps the warmest greeting I had was from Warrant Officer Class 1 Frank White. I had had some correspondence with Frank from Vietnam on the various computations we had to perform in establishing theatre grid – Frank had checked these. Being in the northern hemisphere I had wanted to be sure that all corrections were being correctly applied. Frank was an older person with World War 2 experience, not in survey, in infantry I think. He was the Corps' computational expert. In Bendigo at the Survey Regiment I was welcomed by the Commanding Officer Lieutenant Colonel John Nolan (who had been the Regiment's 2IC and acting CO at the time of my commissioning in 1961) and many of my old colleagues with whom I had served during non-commissioned years.

I returned to Sydney and a week or so later Wendy and I left for Hayman Island and a very pleasant holiday. An old nursing friend of Wendy's who was nursing in Sydney generously took two weeks holiday and minded Sarah for that fortnight. I recall that during our trip to the island we had a two hour stop-over in Brisbane and my cousins Edna and John Mules came to the airport. I had last seen them when I was at Canungra with the Troop's Vietnam detachment doing our battle efficiency training. It was to be the last time I would see John; he died of a heart condition some months later. We flew into Proserpine by Ansett (the airline that owned Hayman Island) and I might have wondered if our aircraft was the mythical aircraft that was to have taken our chalk ex-Vietnam from Darwin to Sydney. A bus took the consignment of Hayman Island holiday makers to Airley Beach and then by boat across to Hayman. The resort, then known as Royal Hayman, was at that time an affordable holiday location. Accommodation was provided in separate lightly constructed cabins and the general restaurant and recreational facility was very comfortable and pleasant. It certainly wasn't in any sense grandiose. Certain rules of dress applied. In 1967 the sort of dress-down casualness of today was not then acceptable. These days Hayman Island is strictly up-market for the millionaire class. A programme of activity designed around the fortnight occurred but it wasn't compulsory; it wasn't a 'Billy Butlin' camp. One could participate to the extent that one wished. Wendy and I went fishing from a row boat, explored a few of the off-shore islets, did a cruise through the very beautiful Whitsundays, I went game fishing for a day but caught no marlin – or anything else, and we walked – right around the island on one day. I recall winning a rice eating competition with chopsticks; I was quite skilled with chopsticks! And then with the fortnight over we returned to Sydney.

Intrusive shadows from Vietnam

Vietnam could never be far from my mind. Somehow the experience, mundane though it was at times, lay like a soggy blanket on my mind. It intruded from my sub-conscious into dreams and into my conscious thinking constantly in a completely irrational way. My own Vietnam experience was not one that should have given rise to nightmares but it did, as if somehow that accumulation of experiences extrapolated into something horrific. Wendy recalls instances of my waking at night, shouting in my sleep, reliving an experience that never happened; being overwhelmed by an enemy against which I was powerless. But there was one real concern that started to plague me. Now, so many years later I wonder at it, even whether it was entirely real or part imagined.

It was on that boat trip from Airlie Beach to Hayman Island that a thought occurred to me that came close to wrecking my holiday. I believe that I succeeded in keeping it from Wendy, locking it away in a deeper recess of my mind, at least for the duration of our holiday. At first I found it hard to define exactly what it was; what was troubling me but gradually it started to fall into place like a jigsaw with a few missing pieces. But I didn't want to think about it. I wanted to enjoy the holiday experience and I resented anything related to the immediate past interfering with that. Neither did I want to cast a shadow on Wendy's enjoyment – she certainly didn't deserve that. But it remained a subconscious thought that would emerge into my conscious thinking in the stillness of the night and then drift away as sleep consumed me. I wouldn't say that it blighted our holiday and it was a long time after that I confided to Wendy. It wasn't until my return to Clovelly that I finally gave it my conscious attention.

The problem as I now reconstruct it after so many years related to the erroneous control point established south of Binh Ba at the Binh Ba Rubber Factory by the Artillery survey section, the station called 'PENN'. Our subsequent survey connection had shown PENN to be 60 metres in error. I believed that we had adopted the station as control for the Binh Ba 1:5,000 Special and the Binh Gia 1:10,000 special, the latter at that time being fair drawn for full colour reproduction by the Survey Regiment. But I wasn't entirely sure and for some illogical reason I could not clearly identify the problem. On returning to Sydney I phoned Survey Directorate and spoke to the Deputy Director of Survey, Lieutenant Colonel Bill Sprenger suggesting that production be held and 'A' Section in Vietnam be asked to further check the point out and determine whether it had been used in the aerial photography strip adjustments. I was envisaging situations where supporting artillery fire might be called in and the 60 metre error having a disastrous consequence. I am not clear whether A Section was asked to carry out the check; however, the map was produced with a warning that it should not be used for directing close support artillery fire. The problem never entirely left my mind. I saw it as a personal failing; something that had drifted out of my control in those last few weeks of my tour.

Our soldiers at risk

I have often reflected on the level of risk many of our Detachment members accepted in undertaking field survey work beyond the perimeter of the Nui Dat base and at times it has jarred my thinking. I ask myself 'was it all really necessary? How would I have felt had one of our number been shot – killed in action perhaps. It doesn't bear thinking about but of course one does. Dr Coulthard-Clark in his history of the Royal Australian Survey Corps makes light of the risks undertaken by the Detachment surveyors stating "*in the ordinary course of events it was rare that Survey Corps personnel were ever exposed to enemy fire beyond sharing with the rest of the task force the risks presented by occasional mortar or rocket attacks on the Nui Dat base*". I can only believe that in making the statement Coulthard-Clark failed to understand the nature of the duties undertaken by surveyors away from the confines of the base. In relation to the target survey undertaken in the Nui Thi Vais by Brian Firms and myself he states "*throughout this period the pair were never in any real danger*". That statement could only be made after 'the pair' emerged unscathed and would gain little support from either the infantry soldiers or engineers involved at the time. It is like saying that an infantry patrol that fails to contact the enemy was 'not at risk'.

Protection provided by an Australian infantry section led by a corporal was of the highest order. The task was undertaken with total commitment, the section leader more or less controlling the movement of the surveyors, sometimes clearing ahead of the surveyors. This was especially the

case in village based field checking work. Protection provided by sections or a group of ARVN and more especially by popular force units could amount to no protection at all. On many occasions the ARVN/popular force soldiers melted away and by afternoon could hardly be found. Generally Detachment soldiers found it near impossible to communicate with them. They would laze about listening to their incessant radios. Nevertheless, if nothing else they allowed the surveyors to get on with the job. The words of the section leader reported to me by Warrant Officer Dave Christie at about the time of the chain and theodolite traversing undertaken in the vicinity of Dat Do village in April 1967 – ‘how the hell do you expect us to protect you blokes standing like statues peering into those telescopes asking to be shot at’ – or words to that effect, have often echoed in my mind.

And then....

For most Vietnam veterans, whether they served as frontline fighting troops on endless patrolling, or logistic supporters at Vung Tau, or paper-pushers in Saigon, Vietnam remains something of a life-consuming experience. It is not hard to lapse into reflections on why we were there and on what it achieved. Even as early as my year, 1966/67 our commitment to Vietnam was losing public support, not just from the few very vocal fringe groups but from the public at large. Many veterans cling to the belief that our ten year involvement with the loss of 504 young Australian lives arrested the fall to communism of the adjacent countries of Cambodia and Thailand. It is arguable and perhaps it did. Laos of course was and remains communist. Australian casualties in Vietnam were relatively minor compared to those incurred by the United States and of course the Vietnamese themselves – on both sides – and it is true that Phuoc Tuy Province, following the Battle of Long Tan had become something of a back water. Of course it certainly can be argued that the Australian presence in Phuoc Tuy made it unprofitable for the NVA to attempt further incursions into the Province following Long Tan. Phuoc Tuy was left in the care of the provincial Vietcong unit D445. Our purpose in Vietnam was to simply give credible support to the American Alliance. The hidden directive was to keep out of harm's way. I think I knew that but accepted that that was good enough reason for us being there. It was a military adventure that served a political purpose – it demonstrated our commitment to the American Alliance. For what other purpose does a peace time army serve?

For both the nation and the individual serving soldiers the tragedy of Vietnam was the rejection suffered by the soldiers returning to Australia – rejection by the government that sent them there and the public. They were all but told to melt out of existence – get back to work and forget they had been there. If anyone complained they were considered wimps. National Servicemen, the Nashos, were told to report for discharge and then disappear. Those of us who were serving regular soldiers were luckier. Our units, the Army, accepted us back. Even if we were not in any sense heroes, we had done our duty. In due course we received our ‘returned from active service’ badges, reviving a tradition that went back to the First World War. Many refused to wear it. The traditional veteran's organisation, the Returned Sailors, Soldiers and Airmen's Imperial League of Australia, better known as the RSL only reluctantly accepted Vietnam veterans as full members. Many of the older Second World War hierarchy and members were of the opinion that Vietnam wasn't a ‘real war’. Vietnam service became something of a stigma worn by those who participated. Vietnam veterans tended to club together. Only together could they talk about their experiences. Even now many face the public with a sort of ‘in your face’ bravado, living in a time warp of the 1960s; many with broken marriages and disaffiliated children. Their only solace is in each other's company.

That is the legacy of Vietnam. For me it could be said that my military career after Vietnam prospered. I received no particular credit or award for my service in Vietnam; being the first Survey Corps officer to take a survey and mapping unit into a theatre of war since the close of World War Two. Not long before leaving the theatre Major Kayler-Thomson (improperly) told me that my name had been put forward for an imperial award and I assumed that that might be the time-honoured MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire). It never happened and I assume it somehow fell outside the quota or got scotched at a higher level. Who knows and who cares? Nevertheless I felt some disappointment when the subsequent listings of service awards failed to include my name. So certain was Kayler-Thomson that the award would have followed that a few years later in Singapore on our first meeting he asked me why I was not wearing the pink ribbon. Well – it was

nice to at least think that my service in Vietnam was appreciated by someone at that personal level.

I completed my civil secondment with the New South Wales Lands Department and became a Licensed Surveyor then enjoyed my two year accompanied posting to the British Army in Singapore. This was followed by twelve months at the Australian Staff College at Queenscliff, Victoria then three years at the School of Military Survey as Senior Instructor at Bonegilla on the Murray River where Wendy and I made some wonderful friends; then as Officer Commanding the 1st Field Survey Squadron in Brisbane and finally the Army Survey Regiment in Bendigo, Victoria as Commanding Officer. In 1981 I retired from the Army after twenty six years of service which today remains central to my life. There is nothing more to say.

INDEX OF ANNEXES & MAPS

I have included this selection of letters, operation orders and instructions, routine orders, diagrams and maps to provide a number of sentinels on which the foregoing narrative hangs and also to establish an element of authenticity to the account. They are taken from my own collection of memorabilia and since the copy I hold in most instances is a second or third carbon copy of the original typescript or a somewhat faint 'Gestetner' stencil copy that was after 40 years quite hard to read and re-copy I have digitally scanned each sheet for optical character recognition and re-established each document as close as possible to the original in layout and type-style – 'Courier' on the old typewriter. Some documents were hand lettered and these I have totally converted to typescript.

- A. DET 1ST TOPOGRAPHICAL SURVEY TROOP OPERATION ORDER 1/66
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 - B. NUI DAT CONNEXION SUMMARY (DIAGRAM) (undated circa JUN 66)
 - B.1. SUMMARY OF CLOSURES JUN 66
 - B.2. SUMMARY OF OBSERVATIONS JUN 66
 - C. REQUEST FOR STEREOTOPES DEMI OFFICIAL LETTER 14 JUN 66
 - D. SILK SCREEN REPRODUCTION FACILITY FOR 1ATF 30 JUN 66
 - E. MAPPING AND MAP DISTRIBUTION 3 JUL 66
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 - I. OPERATION ORDER 2/66 – OPERATION TRISIDER 21 NOV 66
 - J. LETTER TO Director Military Survey – MAPS FOR OPERATIONAL HISTORY OF 1ST ATF IN
VIETNAM 7 JAN 67
 - J.1. NUI DAT WITH 1ST ATF IN VIETNAM – 1966 SCHEDULE OF MAPS AND DIAGRAMS 7 JAN 67
 - K. OP INSTR 1/67 - OP TRISIDER - PHASE 5 – APR 67
 - L. REPORT ON PRELIMINARY FIELD TESTING OF AIRBORNE SURVEY SYSTEM (ARTY CONCEPT) AT
NUI DAT - SOUTH VIETNAM MAY 67
 - M. STANDING OPERATING PROCEDURE (PROV) (Undated circa MAY 67)
 - N. A SEA VOYAGE TO SOUTH VIETNAM ON THE GOOD SHIP *HMAS SYDNEY* – Stan Campbell
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