



CHAPTER 5 – SPECIALIST SIGNALS

PART 3 – 32 SMALL SHIP SQUADRON

Introduction

In 1959 the Australian Army purchased four Landing Ship Medium (LSM) from the US Navy in Japan. These vessels were veterans of the Pacific Campaigns in World War Two and the Korea War. They were 62 metres long, with a beam of 10.4 metres and could carry up to 306 tons, including four Centurion Tanks (4 x 52 tons) at a speed of 11-12 knots, with 14 knots max.

They served extensively in New Guinea and the South West Pacific and two of them served in Borneo during the confrontation with Indonesia in 1964. The unit, 32 Small Ship Squadron, was disbanded in early 1972 with the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) to be responsible for all seagoing activities of the Defence Force since.

32 Small Ship Squadron was a unit of the Royal Australian Engineers (RAE) and had five ships, each named after famous Australian generals, as follows:

AV1353 "Harry Chauvel" (Formerly USS LSM-319)

AV1354 "Brudenell White" (Formerly USS LSM-477)

AV1355 "Vernon Sturdee" (Formerly USS LSM-315)

AV1356 "Clive Steele" (Formerly USS LSM-547)

AS3051 "John Monash" (Formerly MV Marra - 1400 ton Cargo ship)

Australian Army held a LSM vessel on station in Vietnam during the Australian involvement in support of both Australian and US forces operating mainly between Saigon, Vung Tau and Cam Ranh Bay. They also visited the coastal ports of Nha Trang, Phan Rang, Qui Nhon and Da Nang plus the Mekong Delta ports of My Tho, Can Tho and Bin Thuy.

Each LSM carried a crew of 4 Officers and 47 other ranks, when on operations in Vietnam. While most of the manning was RAE, other Corps members were also part of each crew, including medical, signals and ordnance. In Vietnam, the ships were fitted with 40mm bofors gun and several machine guns for protection.

All LSM ships served in Vietnam with the "John Monash" undertaking the "Shuttle run" between Australia and Vietnam.





32 Small Ship Squadron Headquarter (HQ) never left Australia and was located in Sydney. Once the ships sailed from their Sydney Base, operational control was RAN via the Commander Australian Fleet (COMAUSTFLT). In Vietnam waters the tasking was HQ Australian Vietnam Force (AFV) via HQ 1st Australian Logistics Support Group (1ALSG).



Photo 5-3.1 - LSM Harry Chauvel unloads vehicles, OP Kenmore (1967).

Enemy Action

The only Australian LSM to sustain battle damage during the Vietnam War was the Clive Steele, attacked in the Mekong Delta in transit between Can Tho to Vung Tau on the 5 January 1969. The ship was hit by three B40 RPG rockets but lucky received no casualties. However the water distilling plant and the refrigeration system were damaged.

All the Australian LSMs came under sniper and sporadic fire from time to time.

Ship Conditions





The LSMs were built for short-term use landing supplies in the Pacific during World War II. As such the facilities for the crew were extremely basic. All accommodation spaces were below deck with poor ventilation with several sections of three tiered bunks in cramped and crowded conditions giving no room to roll over. Above the bunks were pipes lagged with asbestos, which would rain down on the sleeper during heavy seas, covering him in white dust. Toilet facilities were an open tray with a row of seats and no privacy.

The Forrard Mess was the eating, meeting and relaxing place in each LSM.

Dennis Wynne commented;

"Sometimes in inclement weather, anyone who had been up in the galley above the Forrard Mess run the risk of slipping on the ladder down to the mess deck and having a nasty fall. Needless to say the space immediately at the bottom of the ladder was always vacant in times of bad weather".

The flat-bottomed ships did not travel well in rough seas

When used during the Vietnam War, the LSMs were already old ships in need of constant maintenance. On the final trip of the *Clive Steele* in 1970 one of the bow doors fell off whilst on the way to Vietnam. The vessel had to return to Sydney for repairs before taking up station in Vietnam. One veteran remembers the skipper putting his hand on the side of the ship and it went straight through the signals shaft.

The ships would deliver a wide assortment of supplies, from tanks, drums of fuel, ammunition to beer. For many areas in Vietnam, the LSMs were the only means of transporting heavy equipment to the troops as the roads and bridges were not suitable. The cargo hull was open and exposed to the elements. There were frequent problems with the cargo shifting in heavy seas. On the initial deployment of the *Clive Steele* to Vietnam in Jan 1968, it had armoured bridge layers and other armoured type cargo lashed down in the well deck. Whilst transiting the South China Sea two days out of Vung Tau in Force 6 weather, some of the lashings broke at 2am in the morning.

Dennis Wynne remembered a couple of the seaman, Sapper Richardson and others went out onto the wet and slippery deck to re-lash the vehicles. A tremendous feat of bravery and skill was displayed by the crew members involved, as any damage by the unsecured vehicles could have been disastrous to the vessel and its crew.

The trips would vary in length. A trip from Vung Tau to Saigon would take a few hours whereas Vung Tau to the Mekong Delta would take 14 hours. All the time they were up river or in the Delta, the crew were at action stations.





Duties were varied among the small crew. Some, such as engineers, worked in shifts of four hours on eight hours off. However the maintenance requirements were high and it was not unusual that engineers and others to worked very long days. Other crew were day workers who worked a normal day and they would help with other jobs as needed. However with a small crew duties were flexible and would change whether at sea or in port. While in port or in heavy seas all crew were needed, often for extended periods.

Food was obtained from a variety of sources, generally from American or Australian suppliers. Fresh local food was also obtained from the Vietnamese, especially when away from Vung Tau.

The LSMs had a Kleinschmidt water distillation unit that would distil about 100 gallons of potable water per day. However when the unit was running it would cause the temperature in the engine room to increase to extremely uncomfortable levels, so was only used on longer trips out to sea. When in harbour fresh water was pumped on board normally from Australian or American organisations but sometimes it was obtained from local Vietnamese and then the crew would add buckets of chlorine to the supply.

RASigs Involvement



Photo 5-3.2 – Sgt Alva Knight (RASigs) using an AN/PRC-25 Radio Set to communicate with Army units from the AV Clive Steele in Vietnamese waters (1966).





Normally two or three Royal Australian Corp of Signals (RASigs) personnel were part of each ship's crew maintaining a radio watch 24 hours/7 days a week. Communication staff were responsible for transmitting and receiving by AM voice, messages/telex normally in morse code and delivering to designated personnel on the ship. Also receiving and displaying weather reports on the Ship's Notice Board. The Radio Operators were some of the most experienced in RASigs. Many also served with other RASigs units in Vietnam.

Communication equipment used on the Ships was standard RAN, so on the job training was required to learn its operation. Lots of on the job training was required including some technical tasks, as technical assistance was not available on the ship for most of the communication equipment.

110 Sig Sqn provided technical assistance with tactical radio equipment installation and repairs when the ships were at Vung Tau.

The Ship maintained communications with HQ 32 Small Ship Squadron at Woolwich Dock in Sydney. RASigs members built a Base Station which was manned by the signalmen not at sea, under the watchful eye of the senior RASigs member, WO2 Nolan Astill.

Ship Communications

Once at sea the ship operated on the RAN communication system using morse code at a speed of 18wpm or better and the ships Navy callsigns were as follows:

AV1353 " Harry Chauvel"	VKFX
AV1354 "Brudenell White"	VKFY
AV1355 "Vernon Sturdee"	VKFD
AV1356 "Clive Steele"	VKFQ
AS3051 "John Monash"	VKPB

All ships in Australian Defence Force (ADF) were under COMAUSTFLT and all communications to and from each ship were through the RAN, United States Navy (USN) and Commonwealth Navy's ship/shore communication stations.

Key communications stations used during the Vietnam War period were:





HMAS Harman, Canberra (RAN)
HMAS Coonawarra, Darwin (RAN)
Kranji W/T, Singapore (RN)
Portishead Radio, England (RN)
Vancouver Radio, Canada (RCN)
Wellington Radio, New Zealand (RNZN)
North West Cape, Western Australia (USN)
Yokuska, Japan (USN)

Interesting most ship/shore stations operated duplex continuous wave (CW) however; the USN stations operated simplex CW only.

Offline COMSEC equipment TSEC/KL-7 (Adonis) was used in the first ship deployments but was replaced with the BID/60 (Singlet) to encrypt and decrypt classified messages.

When in Vietnam waters the vessels were also fixed with Tactical HF and VHF equipment's so they could communicate on the different radio nets used by military units and port facilities.



Photo 5-3.3 – LR Sgt Norm Harris and Cpl Dennis Wynne in the Radio Shack AV1356 Clive Steele in Vietnam 1968. Note: Radio Set AN/GRC-106 (Bottom Left) purchased from US Army for carton of VB Beer (1968).





On arrival in Vietnam vessels remained under COMAUSTFLT but Vietnam tasking was passed to local Army Command. Which was HQ AFV but day to day tasking was through HQ 1st ALSG in Vung Tau. The *Clive Steele* in 1968 was taken into the USN Landing Ship Tank (LST) Squadron, as a flotilla member, for the period of its stay in Vietnam.

Once in Vietnam the vessels remained on the ship/shore system and the following systems:

1. Communications guard on the Military Sea Transportation Service (MSTS) Command and Control Net which all military vessels took station on. This Net was on 8MHz and Dennis Wynne remembers an interesting incident on the *Clive Steele*;

"The Clive Steele had departed Vung Tau for the Delta and beached at Can Tho. The operators on the Clive Steele were preparing for the nightly CW schedule to HMAS Harman, when a very distinctly sounding Aussie voice called the USS LST 825 Hickman County, which was on transit to Da Nang. Operators monitoring the net on the Clive Steele listened whilst the "voice" sounded the USS Hickman County operator, who incidentally knew the operators on the Clive Steele very well and both vessels had been side by side in Vung Tau just 8 hours previous. A couple of judicious questions to the "voice" very quickly caused him to disappear. So we had Imitative Communications Deception (ICD) in Vietnam to deal with. A few other attempts at ICD were made over the tour of duty of the Clive Steele on the MSTS Net and all handled well until no further incidents were attempted."

2. On departure from the Vietnam Home Port (Vung Tau) the ship maintained a twice daily HF Voice schedule back to 110 Sqn Sqn, Vung Tau. This circuit was for the passage of traffic from HQ 1st ALSG to the ship. After some teething problems the links went well.
3. Maintain a "Guard" on the Defence VHF Net of each area that the ship passed or visited.





C O N F I D E N T I A L

1 ATF SOI ITEM NR 41 - 2 Pg 1 of 1
RADIO CALLSIGNS AND FREQUENCIES

LSM CLIVE STEELE HF NET (CW)

Freq: Main 2770 Alt 3288

Callsigns	LSM CLIVE STEELE	QV7A
	HQ AFV	K473
	HQ 1ALSG	3MU3

Schedules Hourly on half hour when
LSM NOT in dock.

The use of KAC-PI Operations codes or
other voice codes on this link is forbidden.
KAC-QK Numeral/Authentication codes may be
used for challenge and reply authenticat-
ion ONLY

1 ATF SOI ITEM NR 41 - 2 Pg 1 of 1

C O N F I D E N T I A L

Document 5-3.D1 - 1st Australian Task Force Signal Operating Instructions (SOI)
for contacting the LSM Clive Steele by HF (February 1967).



Photo 5-3.4 – LSM Sigs Desk with morse key, smokes and part message decode.





Summary

Signal members who served with the 32 Small Ship Squadron all became experienced ship Radio Operators that adapted to ships life, working both with the RAN and Army units in Vietnamese waters, without much support from RASigs. Many would go on to serve in other RASigs roles in the Vietnam War but would always see their service with 32 Small Ship Squadron, as a highlight in their war service.

Sadly members of the LSMs crews including the RASigs personal were exposed to poor environmental living conditions including, water, ventilation, heat, diesel fumes, cigarette smoke, asbestos, Agent Orange and other chemicals. This has resulted in the crews in later life having poor mortality (death) and morbidity (illness) rates. RASigs manning of RAE ships in Vietnamese waters is attached.

Notes:

1. Some crew members show a break in service because their vessel sailed outside the designated war zone, usually to Malaya or Singapore.
2. Some vessels remained in the designated war zone while replacement crews were flown in.
3. List of RASigs members may have missing details and names. If you have any corrections or additional information please contact the author by email pronto@au104.org.

References

1. Introduction based on "Small Ships, Heavy Boats and the Perils of the Long Tau Shipping Channel" by Peter Bayliss – Deceased.
2. Voyage and Crew List Project and technical advice and assistance WO1 Les McFadzen [Rtd], RAE.
3. Advice and assistance from WO1 Dennis Wynne [Rtd], RASIGS. 32 Small Ship Squadron RAE Association Web Site <http://www.32smallshipsqn.org.au/>.
4. Royal Australian Navy Communication Branch Association Web Site <http://www.rancba.org.au/>.
5. DVA Perception of Service, Appendix C (Detailing perceptions and recollections of Vietnam service of Navy and Army Small Ship personnel). Used for ship conditions section and summary.
http://www.dva.gov.au/aboutDVA/publications/health_research/vietnam_vets/vvcis/Documents/cancer_incidence_study_chap_2.pdf
6. AWM95-6-3-8 110 Sig Sqn monthly report detailing assisting with installation and repairs.





Attachment to Chapter 5, Part 3

RASIGS MANNING SHIPS IN VIETNAMESE WATERS

(This RASIGS manning is not in Pronto in South Vietnam, Attachment B as 32 Small Ship Sqn was a RAE unit)

AV1355 Vernon Sturdee (The Sturdy Virgin)



Photo 5-3.5 - The Sturdy Virgin.

11 April – 25 June 1966

Sgt George Flint (11 Apr 66 – 25 Jun 66)

Sgt William Dolph Moll (11 Apr 66 – 25 Jun 66)

23 January - 14 December 1967

Sgt Bruce Bridgman (AKA Levy) (23 Jan 67 – 9 Jun 67)

Cpl Laurence Johnston (23 Jan 67 – 8 Jun 67)

Sig Ian Hutchinson (23 Jan 67 – 8 Jun 67)

6 June – 22 November 1967

Sgt George Flint (6 Jun 67 – 22 Nov 67)

Cpl Andrew Cutten (6 Jun 67 – 14 Dec 67)

Sig Michael Maher (6 Jun 67 – 14 Dec 67)





AV1356 Clive Steele (The Stainless)



Photo 5-3.6 – The Stainless.

26 June 66 – 16 March 1967

Sgt Alva Knight (26 Jun 66 – 21 Mar 67)

Sgt Kilworth Leslie Robinson (26 Jun 66 – 23 Nov 66)

29 January 1968 - 27 April 1969

Sgt Norman Harris (29 Jan 68 – 21 Mar 68 and 16 Apr 68 – 2 Jul 68)

Sgt Gordon Drochmann (2 Jul 68 – 7 Jan 69)

Sgt William Moll (7 Jan 69 – 27 Apr 69)

Sgt Raymond Whellum (21 Jan 69 – 27 Apr 69)

Cpl Dennis Wynne (29 Jan 68 – 2 Jul 68 and 14 Jan 69 – 27 Apr 69)

Cpl Wayne Rush (29 Jan 68 – 6 Aug 68)

Cpl Charles Younger (15 Jul 68 – 21 Jan 69)

Cpl Andrew Cutten (6 Aug 68 – 17 Jan 69)

21 July 1969 - 2 March 1970

Sgt Norman Harris (21 Jul 69 – 28 Jan 70)

Sgt Raymond Whellum (21 Jul 69 – 27 Aug 69)

Sgt Terence Hinchcliffe (28 Jan 70 – 2 Mar 70)

Cpl Dennis Wynne (27 Jan 70 – 2 Mar 70)

Cpl Wayne Rush (21 Jul 69 – 27 Aug 69)

Cpl Andrew Cutten (20 Aug 69 – 28 Jan 70)

Sig Gary Weeks (20 Aug 69 – 19 Dec 69)

Sig Trevor Ross (17 Dec 69 – 18 Feb 70)

11 July - 3 September 1970

WO2 Nolan Astill (11 Jul 70 – 3 Sept 70)

Sgt Norman Harris (11 Jul 70 – 3 Sept 70)

Sgt Raymond Whellum (11 Jul 70 – 3 Sept 70)

Cpl Robert Dawson (11 Jul 70 – 3 Sept 70)





23 February - 22 March 1971

Sgt Terence Hinchcliffe (2 Mar 71 – 12 Mar 71)

Cpl Brian Gum (23 Feb 71 – 22 Mar 71)

Cpl Robert Dawson (2 Mar 71 – 12 Mar 71)

Cpl Robert Wicks (2 Mar 71 – 12 Mar 71)





AV1353 Harry Chauvel (The Shovel)



Photo 5-3.7 – The Shovel.

23 October 1967 - 21 March 1968

Sgt William Moll (23 Oct 67 – 13 Mar 68)

Sgt John Myers (23 Oct 67 – 21 Mar 68)

Cpl Thomas Williams (23 Oct 67 – 21 Mar 68)

21 May - 6 June 1970

Sgt George Flint (27 Apr 70 – 21 Jun 70)

Sgt Terence Hinchcliffe (21 May 70 – 6 Jun 70)

Cpl Charles Younger (15 May 70 – 6 Jun 70)

Sig Barry Butt (21 May 70 – 6 Jun 70)

11 November - 15 December 1970

Sgt Terence Hinchcliffe (11 Nov 70 – 15 Dec 70)





AV1354 Brudenell White (The Broody Hen)



Photo 5-3.8 – The Broody Hen.

22 September- 24 October 1970

Sgt Raymond Whellum (22 Sept 70 – 24 Oct 70)

Sig John Wilson (22 Sept 70 – 24 Oct 70)





AS3051 John Monash (Jolly John)



Photo 5-3.9 – Jolly John.

5 May - 14 May 1966

Sgt Alva Knight (26 Jun 66 – 23 Nov 66)

9 Aug – 26 Aug 1966

Sgt Alva Knight (19 Aug 66 – 26 Aug 66)

3 December 1967 - 31 January 1968

Sgt Gordon Drochmann (3 Dec 67 – 31 Jan 68)

Sgt Alva Knight (3 Dec 66 – 9 Jan 67)

Cpl Hugh McClintock (3 Dec 67 – 31 Jan 68)

17 February - 31 March 1968

Sgt Alva Knight (17 Jan 67 – 16 Mar 67)

Cpl Andrew Cutten (17 Feb 68 – 31 Mar 68)

Cpl Hugh McClintock (17 Feb 68 – 31 Mar 68)

6 December - 10 Jan 1969

Sgt Noman Harris (6 Dec 68 – 10 Jan 69)

Cpl Wayne Rush (6 Dec 68 – 10 Jan 69)

Cpl Robin Weirman (6 Dec 68 – 10 Jan 69)

20 February - 15 March 1969

Sgt Noman Harris (10 Feb 69 – 15 Mar 69)

Cpl Wayne Rush (10 Feb 69 – 15 Mar 69)

Cpl Robin Weirman (10 Feb 69 – 15 Mar 69)

25 October - 7 December 1969

Sgt Raymond Whellum (25 Oct 69 - 7 Dec 69)

Sgt John Dey (25 Oct 69 – 7 Dec 69)

Sig Malcolm Adams (25 Oct 69 – 7 Dec 69)





27 July - 14 August 1971)

Sgt Terence Hinchcliffe (30 Jul 71 – 4 Aug 71)
Cpl Robert Wicks (30 Jul 71 – 4 Aug 71)
L/Cpl Christopher McPhail (27 Jul 71 – 14 Aug 71)
Sig David Whellum (24 Jun 71 – 23 Aug 71)

32 Small Ship Squadron disbanded 30th September 1971. Crew and vessel movements from that time under the command of 1 Terminal Group.

5 Oct – 20 Oct 1971

L/Cpl Christopher McPhail (5 Oct 71 – 20 Oct 71)

2 Aug – 13 Aug 1972 (Saigon) (*)

WO2 Ian Pickering (1 Aug 72 – 14 Aug 72)
Cpl Wayne Rush (1 Aug 72 – 14 Aug 72)
Sig Malcolm Adams (1 Aug 72 – 14 Aug 72)
Sig Michael Priest (1 Aug 72 – 14 Aug 72)

31 Aug – 8 Sep 1972 (Da Nang) (*)

Sgt Robert Couper (29 Aug 72 – 10 Sept 72)
Cpl Wayne Rush (29 Aug 72 – 10 Sept 72)
Sig Michael Priest (29 Aug 72 – 10 Sept 72)

5 Apr – 13 Jul 1973

Sgt Robert Couper (5 Apr – 13 Jul 73)
Sig Malcolm Adams (5 Apr – 13 Jul 73)
Sig David Edwin Winch (5 Apr – 13 Jul 73)

8 Aug – 3 Oct 1973

Cpl Thomas James Williams (8 Aug – 3 Oct 73)
Sig Malcolm Adams (8 Aug – 3 Oct 73)
Sig David Edwin Winch (8 Aug – 3 Oct 73)

** Names for voyages in 1972 corrected by Geoffrey Vincent (RAE) in Apr 2025
(Version 4-1)*



