

DON VI 600

The Republic of Vietnam (RVN) national cryptologic organization was named Don Vi 600. This was an Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) unit located at Tan Son Nhut, Air Force Base, Saigon, RVN. Don Vi 600's mission was to be the focal point for all cryptographic materials and equipment in the RVN. The U.S. support element was originally the U.S. Army Field Army Issuing Office-Vietnam (FAIO-V), also located at Tan Son Nhut. It was later moved to Long Binh Post, near Binh Thuy, North of Saigon approximately 30 miles and renamed, Theater COMSEC Logistic Support Center-Vietnam (TCLSC-V). TCLSC-V's mission was COMSEC support to U.S. forces and Don Vi 600. TCLSC-V was an element of the 160th Signal Group, 1st Signal Brigade, U.S. Army Vietnam (USARV), all of which were located at Long Binh Post.

Collocated with Don Vi 600 was a detachment of U.S. personnel to provide COMSEC assistance. This detachment consisted of a Commanding Officer in the grade of Chief Warrant Officer (CWO), normally in the grade of CW2 or CW3 that had a COMSEC maintenance background in off-line encryption devices, PYTHON one time tape devices, KL-7, HL1 and HL1B, ADONIS rotor encryption device and tape readers, HW-10 and HW-19 on-line encrypters, and could speak French. The Detachment Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge (NCOIC) was normally a Sergeant First Class (SFC) (E-7) with two Specialist Five (SP5) Repair Parts Specialists, two SP5 COMSEC Material Specialists and 13 SP4/SP5 crypto repairmen. It should be noted that all the crypto repairmen had to be sent to special schools for the equipment they were to repair as the U.S. Government had declared all obsolete and it was no longer in use by U.S. forces.

Don Vi 600 was composed of a Major as commanding officer, one Captain as Executive Officer, one 1st Lieutenant, Operations Officer and three Warrant Offices to handle the hardware maintenance Communications Security (COMSEC) account and one to handle the COMSEC handling and shipping. There were approximately 40 enlisted, mostly Non Commissioned Officer to perform the maintenance, COMSEC accounting, receiving, inventorying, storage and distribution of materials. Being assigned to the unit was very prestigious and denoted a high level of trust for the ARVN personnel.

The cryptographic equipment used by the RVN forces was considered obsolete by U.S. standards as it was either offline equipment or used one time tape systems. While obsolete, the cryptographic algorithms were as secure as they had ever been when used by U.S. forces. The cryptographic materials used were:

a. Software:

- ADONIS (KL-7) Key list
- PALUS Keysquares (used to encrypt the rotor alignment for KL-7s)
- PYTHON One Time tapes
- One time encryption pads
- Voice Authentication Lists
- Operations Codes
- Key list for NESTOR (KY-8 voice encryption devices, first fielded in 1971)

b. Hardware

KL-7s complete with rotor baskets and rotors

HL-1 and HL-1B tape readers used with KL-7 to decrypt messages.

B-1 Tables, used with PYTHON One Time Tapes

HL-10 on line transmitters (developed for the USAF)

HW-19 on line receivers (developed for the USAF)

KYB-6 NESTOR Voice Encrypters.

Cryptomaterials would be sent from the National Security Agency (NSA) to the FAIO-V and later TCLSC-V for storage and delivery to Don Vi 600. RVN forces would be permitted to have 90 days of cryptographic material on hand. Don Vi 600 would have copies of that 90 days plus another 90 days in case of compromise. FAIO-V would have an additional 120 days of material in storage. This permitted a total of 300 days of cryptographic materials on hand in the even of lost or a unit being overrun and the cryptomaterial compromised. This would preclude NSA having to make an emergency run of cryptomaterial and shipment to the RVN. Repair parts for the crypto equipment was handled in the same way. Normal U.S. Army COMSEC Accounting and Repair Parts Supply procedures were taught to and followed by Don Vi 600

Each month a "pull" of 30 days crypto materials for each RVN unit would be made, checked, packed and shipped. A corresponding receipt of material would be made from FAIP-V to ensure the 180-day supply of crypto keylists; operations codes and ciphers were on hand. Hardware and other equipment was sent and received on a daily basis. The same shipping and receiving section provided the incoming and outgoing activities, the only difference was the equipment was sent to the maintenance area after it had been received.

Major Traun Ly was the commanding officer for the entire life of Don Vi 600. He ruled with an iron fist and would accept no excuses for failure, e.g., miscounting a 10,000 copy count code. He would instantly have enlisted personnel sent to infantry units if they made errors. He spoke fluent French, as did most of his senior NCOs. That was the reason the U.S. detachment commander was expected to speak French, even though Major Ly spoke fluent English, it helped when the Major "could not understand" directions in English.

In 1971 the KYB 6, NESTOR secure voice equipment was issued on a limited basis to selected RVN Forces. This was a major leap in COMSEC support by U.S. forces. The NESTOR family had only been in use by the U.S. forces for some four years. In 1974 the OIC of the RVN support at Theater COMSEC Logistic Support Center -Pacific (USATCLSC-PAC), Fort Kamahamaha, Hawaii was directed to start encouraging DON Vi 600 to start removing excess cryptoequipments to Hawaii as the tide of war did not look good. The U.S. Congress was not forthcoming with the aid that had been promised by President Nixon if the RVN would agree to withdrawal of U.S. land and Air Forces. After a period of time this started to be accomplished. The same was done with NESTOR equipments. Finally a directive was sent from the U.S. Embassy and Military

Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) for the removal of all NESTOR and as much of the keying material, operations codes and other COMSEC items as quickly as possible. That any resupply would come from Hawaii. Don Vi 600 did the best it could. In aerial photographs taken of Tan Son Nhut Air Base two days after the fall of the RVN, the pallets of equipment and software were identified that had been prepared for shipment to Lexington Bluegrass Army Depot (LBAD), Kentucky.

The CWO attached to the MACV staff charged with supporting Don Vi 600 was able to get Major Ly and most of his personnel and their families out of Vietnam before the city fell. Major Ly was in Thailand for most of one year before a group of concerned persons who had been a part of supporting Don Vi 600 received immigrant status for him and his family. Major Ly currently lives in Augusta, Georgia.

This is just a brief overview of what Don Vi 600s mission, organization and functions were. There is much more to the story on the U.S. and RVN sides.

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