

104th Signal Squadron's 50th Birthday Address

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Twin Towns Services Club, Coolangatta – Tweed Heads

Sunday, 29 May 2016

Open with Funeral or Pirate Joke – Attribute to Nick Mazzarol

Good Morning and Welcome to all our 104 Sig Sqn family – what a great turn-out!

Can I also welcome other members of our Corps and I'd especially like to warmly welcome the wives and partners of our veterans, who grace us with their presence today.

We also have veterans of the 709th Sig Tp, veterans of 145 Sig Sqn, 110 Sig Sqn and veterans of 103 Sig Sqn – who blazed the Nui Dat trail for us – here today.

Whilst most of us are Vietnam Veterans, we are also privileged to have present Veterans of the Solomon Islands, East Timor, Iraq, Afghanistan and previous service with 104 Sig Sqn.

May I also take this opportunity to thank the organising Committee who have worked so hard to make this reunion possible: Denis Hare, John Bertini, Don Sutherland, and Peter Thorne.

It has been terrific to see so many old comrades in such pleasant surroundings. Especially good catch up with the backbone of our old 4th Battalion Crew:

Nick Mazzarol and Bob "Dustoff" Martin - two terrific blokes!

What a great place for a reunion! Why, just up the road a piece is the Army's holiday resort – everybody remember their happy 3 week battle efficiency holiday at Canungra? Where, if you didn't pass each of your holiday activities, your holiday began all over again? And they even gave us a day off in Surfers Paradise so we could have a few beers and an 'Uncle Merve' in the Surfers Paradise Hotel Beer Garden?

50 years ago, in November 1965 at Wacol, 104 Sig Sqn was raised for service in Vietnam.

And last November, Denis Hare, Mick Beetson, Mal Ferguson, Harry Martin, Ross Stickman and I attended 104 Signal Squadron's 50th Birthday Celebrations at Robertson Bks in Darwin. It was a particularly emotional occasion for me because I regard the 104th Signal Squadron as my spiritual home. And I'll bet I'm not the only one who does, either.

Mal Ferguson presented the last 104 Signal Squadron Flag to fly over our Squadron Headquarters at Nui Dat in 1971 – back to the Unit.

The lowering of this particular Flag for the final time, signified the end of the 104th Signal Squadron's time in Nui Dat and our role in the Vietnam War.

Three weeks after this flag was lowered, we were aboard an aircraft carrier steaming back to Australia.

It is an historic and iconic piece of 104 Signal Squadron history.

It was a magnificent gesture, Thank you Mal.

104 Sig Sqn deployed to South Vietnam in April of 1967 and replaced 103 Sig Sqn at Nui Dat. Our sole mission was to provide battlefield communications for the 1st ATF, and we did that in spades...for the next 5 Years and 8 Months...! I believe we are the longest serving, active service tactical signals unit, in the Australian Army - past and present.

Our Radio Operators could be found in Infantry Battalions, Engineer Squadrons, Recce Flights, Cavalry Squadrons, with 1ATF LO Teams scattered around Phouc Tuy Province, places such as: Xuyen Moc, Phu My, Dat Do, The Horseshoe, Long Dien, Sector Headquarters Baria, Hoa Long, Xa Bang ... and ... and ...

... **Duc Thanh springs to mind for some reason** ...!!

Our operators were based with US Army Units at places like Xuan Loc, FSB Mace, Hill 836, Bearcat with the Royal Thai Army Volunteer Force, ARVN Units and various 1ATF FSBs.

The Commander 1st Australian Task Force, who's radio Callsign was "HARDROCK", had his own dedicated 104 Sig Sqn Radio Operator who travelled everywhere with him. Only the best Radio Operator in the Squadron was chosen for this task.

The very last one in the Vietnam War -- Alan Brown -- is here, today.

By the way, the Commander 1st Brigade still uses the radio Callsign "HARDROCK"!

The 104th Signal Squadron was the sum of its parts. Our Radio and Keyboard Operators, Linemen, Technicians, Quartermaster Staff, Clerical and Administrative Staff, Draughtsmen, Drivers, Switchboard Operators, Catering Staff and Hygiene Dutymen, each played key roles in ensuring the squadron functioned smoothly and performed its role flawlessly.

104 Signal Squadron was a 24 hour a day, 7 day a week unit. In addition to normal duties, work parties continually improved upon our Unit Defences. Guards and Pickets were mounted daily. Additionally, we were responsible for patrolling the Task Force Tactical Area of Responsibility. Our Squadron provided regular Fighting and Reconnaissance Patrols as part of this program. On the 4th June 1970, one of our patrols 'bumped' a group of 20 Viet Cong east of Nui Dat in the vicinity of Nui Dat 2. As the contact escalated, the patrol employed Airstrikes and Artillery against the enemy. At least two of the members of that patrol, John Bell and Peter Robinson, are here today.

Nobody can say we 'remained safe behind the wire'.

Following our return from Vietnam, 104 Signal Squadron continued to support the Army's 1st Brigade -- the now renamed 1st Australian Task Force -- initially at Ingleburn, then across at Holsworthy - for the first few years in less than salubrious accommodation.

Then, in late 1996, 104 Signal Squadron moved to Darwin with the relocation of the 1st Brigade to Robertson Barracks out at Palmerston.

In 1998 the unit was renamed 'A' Squadron of the 1st Command Support Unit as part of an Army Restructuring Trial.

However, sanity finally prevailed and 104 Sig Sqn got its proper name back in 2001 and it is now part of the 1st Combat Signal Regiment.

104 Sig Sqn has since deployed to East Timor, the Solomon Islands and has completed multiple tours of Afghanistan, producing new generations of veterans.

We salute their continuing service.

Over 800 soldiers served in the Squadron during its time in South Vietnam. For the vast majority, life has never really been the same again.

Of those 800 plus soldiers, nearly 16% of you are here today – that's a mighty effort!

However, our service in Vietnam was not without cost. Sadly, three of our soldiers were lost there:

CPL Denis Donnelly was AK at Nui Dat on 09 Aug 1967;

SIG Alexander Young was KIA at FSPB Coral on 16 May 1968, and

SIG Denis Abraham was KIA near Blackhorse on 29 Sep 1968 when his helicopter was shot down.

Other members of our Corps gave their lives in Vietnam, they were:

WO2 Mick Gill who was serving in the AATTV;

SIG Barry Logan, 145 Sig Sqn;

SIG Sidney Moore, 110 Sig Sqn; and

SIG David Wallis, 110 Sig Sqn

Afghanistan has also claimed the lives of members of our wider Corps Family:

SIG Sean McCarthy of 152 Sig Sqn, SASR was KIA on 08 July 2008.

And SGT Blaine Flower Diddams, MG SASR, was KIA on 02 July 2012. Blaine was the Beloved Son of Colonel Peter Diddams, one of our own. Peter was Radio Troop Commander in 1968-69 and stood here before you at the 2011 Reunion.

Blaine was on his 7th Tour of Afghanistan and was within days, I stress days, of completing his tour and returning to Australia.

Blaine was posthumously awarded the Medal of Gallantry for his actions in Afghanistan.

To conclude, 50 years ago a Signal Unit was raised to go to war in The Republic of Vietnam. Who would have thought that 50 years later, we'd be gathering to remember our service, celebrate the life-long friendships we made during our time in the 104th Signal Squadron and to pay our respects to our Fallen Brothers in Arms.

Each of you here created history; each and every one of you is a part of our history.

You can be immensely proud of your contribution and your service to 104 Signal Squadron and to Australia.

I am honoured to have served with you!