

# SAS PATROL INSERTIONS BY 9SQN IN THE VIETNAM WAR

By  
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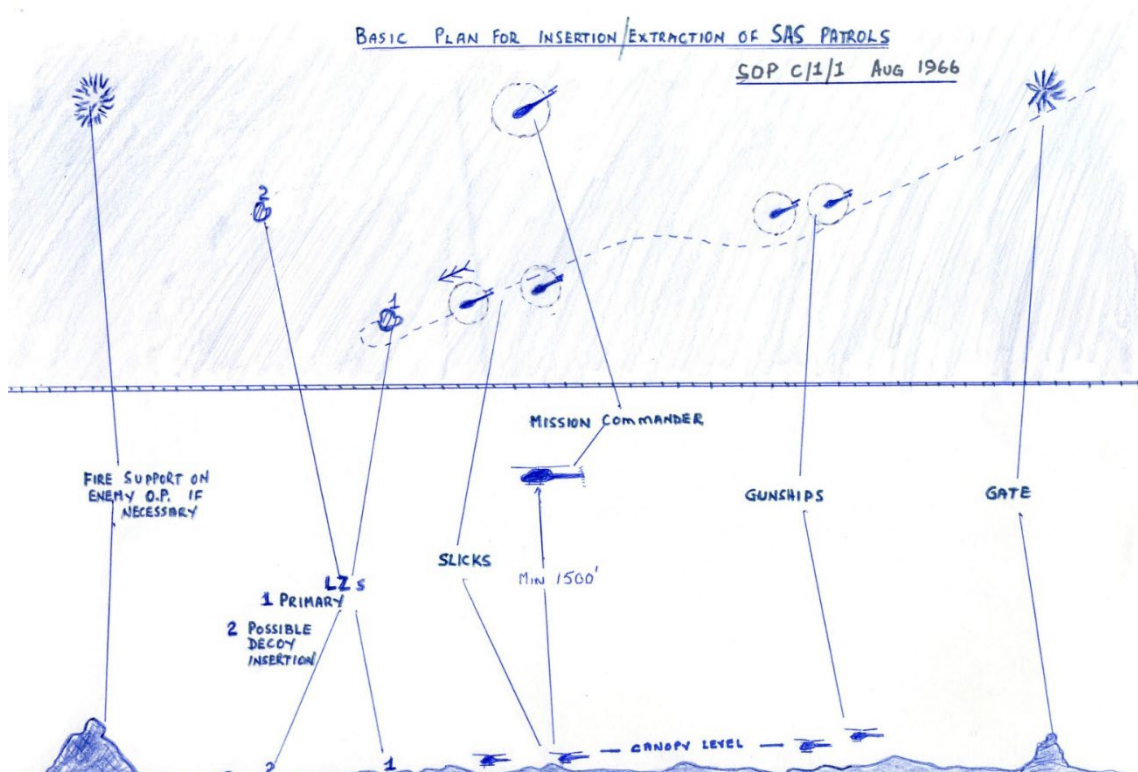
## Background

9SQN effectively began unit development in 1963 to conduct search and rescue functions at some RAAF bases with Bravo model Iroquois, helicopter operations being a relatively new role for the Australian Air Force. This necessitated finding resources to establish aircraft maintenance and training functions for both technical and aircrew needs.

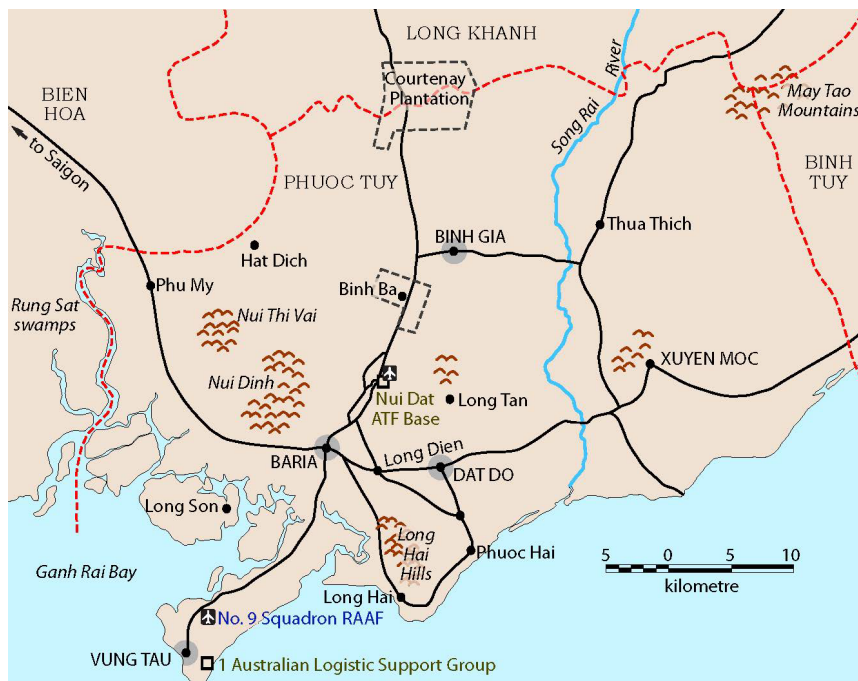
In 1964, the Australian Government thrust Army support upon the emergent RAAF helo component and prematurely committed an element to support counter-terrorist operations in Malaya. That small force was redirected to Vietnam War operations mid-1966.

The RAAF then operated 2 Iroquois helo units, 5SQN at Canberra in Australia and 9SQN at Vung Tau in Vietnam, both of these outfits still being somewhat embryonic.

In July 1966, when 9SQN received tasks to extract SAS patrols from enemy controlled territory back to their base at Nui Dat, SAS techniques and procedures were unknown to aircraft captains. Involvement in contested extraction of SAS patrols deemed it essential that some joint operating procedures be developed. Then Wing Commander Ray Scott, the initial CO 9SQN in Vietnam, devised a procedure for insertion of SAS patrols by Iroquois as depicted in his following sketch.



The relatively small Phuoc Tuy Province area of about 60 x 40 kilometres being the primary Area of Operations for 1ATF was replete with elevated features enabling observation of helo activities which was recognised in initial procedural development. But the enemy had limited radio communications so even if a SAS patrol insertion team was observed leaving Nui Dat, this info could not be relayed to a suspected landing zone in timely fashion.



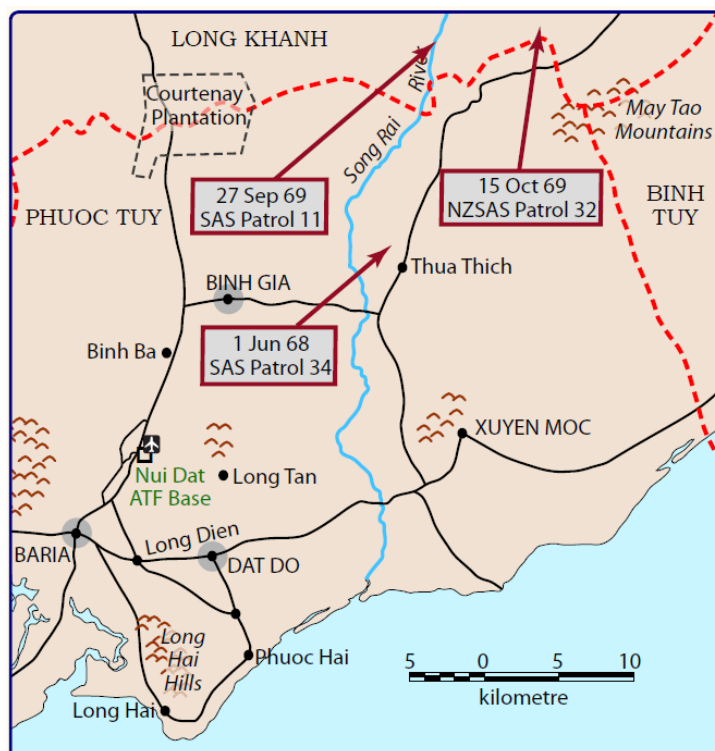
Eventually, a SAS Patrol Commander would do a visual recce of his desired insertion point via an Army Aviation 'Possum' and that would be followed by the 9SQN mission leader doing a separate reconnaissance by Iroquois. These dual recces were of course a direct signal to enemy in that area that a SAS insertion was imminent. **Neither of these recces was necessary as the detail on the 1:25,000 Pictomaps illustrated, which the SAS also used when patrolling, was very adequate for patrol insertion planning.**





In a 'War Whispers' You Tube interview, Charles Stewart of 2SAS mentioned that **on 11 out of 15 patrol insertions, they were engaged by enemy within 20 minutes of deplaning.**

This account of my personal experience on a SAS insertion:



**Action Events Locations**

'On 01Jun68, I was captain of Albatross 04B for insertion of 2SAS Patrol 34 in the eastern part of our area of operations, the Patrol Commander being 2LT Dave Procopis ('Zorba'). We were walking out to the aircraft following the pre-mission briefing when our crewman who had only recently arrived in country mentioned: *'My first time out on one of these jobs Sir; anything special that I need to know?'* I responded: *'If we encounter opposition Jan, try to stay calm and tell me what is happening and please do not shout on the intercom'*.





So, off we went at about 50 to 100 feet above the treetops at around 80 knots accompanied by supporting US Army gunships with our mission leader directing progress from altitude about 2 kilometres astern. Bright sunlight on the raw beauty of the jungle had a soporific effect and we eventually made a gentle straight in approach toward the tree line of a large clearing perhaps 100 metres across.

We were almost stationary and touching down when my peripheral vision detected movement and smoke puffs about abeam on our right. 4 enemy dressed in black had popped up from behind fallen timber in the middle of the clearing and were engaging us from about 40 to 50 metres.

Several things then happened within 3 or 4 seconds. There was a shout on the intercom, the starboard door-gun began firing and I called '*Enemy on the pad right 3 o'clock*' on the radio. A SAS trooper dragged Zorba back in off the left-hand skid and the other SAS guys dived to the right-hand side of the cabin and began engaging the opposition with their considerable firepower, ordnance from our supporting US Army gunships began impacting alongside us in the centre of the clearing and the Huey wanted to roll over with much of the weight now on one side. We somehow managed to stay upright and got airborne again with the SAS patrol still on board while our supporting gunships did their bit.

After we had departed the scene of action, a somewhat apologetic voice said: '*Sorry I shouted on the intercom and didn't tell you what was happening Sir but I thought it best to start firing. You did well Jan; you did well.*'

The enemy collectively fired up to 100 rounds from 4 automatic weapons at a virtually stationary Iroquois side on at very close range yet amazingly, there were no holes in our SAS friends, aircrew or the aircraft as we discovered after landing. But the opposition were not so lucky; at least 3 lay prone and motionless as we departed the clearing. Good teamwork got us out of a perilous situation, but the event demonstrated that it takes a cool head to hit an aircraft, particularly when the occupants are retaliating and adrenalin is pumping.



**The primary lesson was the enemy were expecting us so our insertion procedures were flawed.** Pre-insertion recces were not envisaged when procedures were first created and apparently evolved later.

Prior to about mid-1968, 9SQN Standard Operating Procedures were concise just covering standardization of essential aspects. **Up to that time, some Pilot Officers were accorded mission leader status and in my view they excelled.** As the Vietnam War rolled on, it became more or less a career stepping-stone for the ambitious and mission leader functions were assumed by unit executives and senior ranking pilots.

The insertion procedures established mid-1966 had become like The Ten Commandments. At some stage, I briefed a slight variation in gunship positioning. One of the favoured senior Flight Lieutenant pilots complained to the CO and I was directed to adhere to SOPs.

According to a unit executive, CO 9SQN in 1968/69 considered me his foremost mission leader (211 insertions/extractions overall), but I was never invited to participate in any SAS/9SQN discussions regarding standard operating procedures, if they ever eventuated!

After 16 Hotel models had been introduced and the Squadron had grown to full strength, SOPs were expanded to cover new roles. They were further broadened in 1969 after introduction of the Bushranger gunship capability, **ultimately evolving to 125 ridiculously detailed pages covering all roles.**

I had dialogue with Ray Scott over many years and visited him at his home just 2 weeks before he died on 10Nov16. When I mentioned to him how absurdly ponderous 9SQN SOPs became, he responded: **'Arse covering!'** Here are some of his words from previous written communication referring to 17 pages of 9SQN SAS related SOPs:

*'To me these SOPs are badly written, verbose, disjointed...Radio discipline appears to be ignored...They appear to ignore the intelligence and capabilities of the enemy...In my view they are unacceptable and I would be ashamed to pass them on to anyone, particularly the Army.'*  
– R.A. Scott, 22Mar14.

**While concise SOPs are necessary to standardize unit operating practices, flexibility is essential for success in military operations. I was a disciple of the Douglas Bader dictum:**

***'Rules are made for the obedience of fools and the guidance of wise men.'***

### **Low Level Operations**

Ray Scott and myself disagreed on some aspects of low level operations. These considerations were pertinent:

- Vulnerability of helos to groundfire was much lower than generally assumed (See HELICOPTER BATTLEFIELD SURVIVABILITY feature).
- The aiming solution for shooting at a moving helicopter is 4 dimensional including time and continually changes regarding crossing speed, apparent range and gravity drop.
- Transit speed for Bravo model Iroquois was generally kept at about 80 knots to enable station keeping with supporting US Army Bravo and Charlie model gunships.
- Transit speed for Hotel models was also ideally kept at about 80 knots (41 metres per second) to enable physical functionality of door-gunners at rear crew stations due to slipstream effects.
- Transit at 50 to 100 feet above jungle canopy was desirable to enable flaring to kill forward speed following power loss before crashing into trees and also to avoid large dead trees in low visibility.

The USAF dropped about 96,000 tons of defoliant chemicals on Phuoc Tuy Province and many big dead or dying trees penetrated above the jungle canopy. These were often difficult to see in low visibility conditions.



A 9SQN aircraft impacted such a tree when trying to fly right on the jungle canopy. The branches of the tree broke a leg of a SAS trooper sitting on the edge of the cabin floor.



*CPL John Delgado whose leg was broken when a 9SQN Iroquois collided with a dead tree at low level*

**So-called 'Nap of the Earth' flying is unnecessarily risky and of no significant benefit in avoiding groundfire in my opinion.**

Not everybody is comfortable when flying, even some elite SAS troopers. Ideally, they should be calm but highly alert during an approach for insertion, viewing surrounds for signs of enemy activity and especially orientation when landing. Similarly for helicopter crew with door-gunners prepared for immediate response to any enemy action. **This was best achieved by minimal manoeuvring during a gentle approach to the LZ. The team was then better placed to retaliate if engaged and bug out.**

### ***A Low-Level Insertion***

I was mission leader for planned insertion of a 3SAS patrol but the weather turned bad with a low cloud base maybe around 150 to 200 feet. I informed the Patrol Commander that we would have to cancel the mission which drew smiles from his men who were not enthusiastic. We advised ATOLL our tasking agency in the 1ATF Command Post (CP) accordingly.

Soon after, the landline telephone in our Alert Hut near Kangaroo Pad rang and the Brigadier Task Force Commander wanted to speak with me. I explained to him that the weather prevented us from doing a normal insertion and he responded: *'I don't care how you do it but the Patrol has to be deployed.'* I replied: *'Okay, we will try.'*

We had other tasks lined up so then a 10 minute exercise in mental arithmetic and placing chinagraph pencil marks on a Pictomap with timings to run to the destination insertion point. There were 2 egg-shaped adjacent clearings separated by a narrow strip of vegetation and the desired LZ would be the first one from our approach direction.

I decided we would embark the Patrol in the lead aircraft with the other 4 aircraft in the 5-ship team tagging along behind us at low level. We had selected a gate feature to commence a timed run of maybe 4 minutes or about 10 kilometres below the low cloud base to the desired clearing. At the end of timing, I gently turned right maybe about 60 degrees into a clearing and landed where I thought the Patrol Commander desired.

He looked at me quizzically and I nodded but then saw something indicating it was not the preferred LZ. *'Bugger, wrong bloody pad!'*, but the patrol had already disappeared into the vegetation. **We had turned about 4 seconds too late for the correct LZ.**

When back at Nui Dat, we informed the CP where the patrol had been inserted and they were advised on a due radio sched. A week or so later, I bumped one of the patrol members and apologised profusely for putting them in the wrong LZ. He responded: *'Don't worry about it, we knew where we were and had to move a few hundred metres to get to our start point but that was okay.'*

**I did not inform 9SQN hierarchy of this non-standard happening and explanation was not sought. On reflection, I figured we could suitably modify our insertion procedures so all aircraft in the team operated at low level to enhance SAS operational security. Most unit pilots would have revelled in the challenge of low-level visual navigation.**

### ***Epilogue***

Over 2,000 days, about 5.5 years of Vietnam War operations, Australian and New Zealand SAS patrols were inserted by 9SQN Iroquois on around 1,130 occasions. Near 110 (10 percent) of these patrols were extracted in contested situations, some of them resulting from ambushes initiated by the patrols. Favourable outcomes of some perilous situations resulted from good teamwork but in my view, there was also much luck involved.

No SAS patrol members or 9SQN aircraft were lost through direct enemy action during insertions/extractions, apparently persuading executives of both units that SOPs were sound. **In effect, they became dogma and change to insertion methodologies was seemingly not considered despite repeated contested situations.**

This snippet from Page 356 of 'Phantoms of the Jungle' by David Horner:

*'After almost 5 years of SAS operations, the VC had become familiar with SAS insertion techniques. Some days before an insertion there would be a reconnaissance of the proposed area of operations by a light plane or reconnaissance helicopter. Then perhaps the day before the insertion or on the day itself there might be a further reconnaissance of the area, particularly of the proposed LZ, by the patrol commander. Finally, on the day of the insertion two or three gunships and two lift helicopters would swoop into the area. And there were only a limited number of suitable LZs in any area of operations. Not surprisingly, SAS patrols continued to be contacted soon after insertion.'*

**It is hard to argue against success, but unnecessary pre-insertion recces alerted the enemy to prospective SAS patrol incursions. Operational security could have also been enhanced by all Iroquois involved in the insertion team operating at low level.**

**We could have done it better.**



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