

NUI BA DEN (THE BLACK VIRGIN MOUNTAIN) & KATUM 11May68

Early March 1968, 9SQN had just received 8 new Hotel model aircraft of 16 intended to replace smaller Bravo model Iroquois that had already been proven inadequate for US Army support roles before the Australian Army approached the Government directly to buy them in 1963.

9SQN unit personnel complement was being expanded from around 90 to 170 over about 6 months with a second tranche of 8 larger Hotel model aircraft expected in July 1968.

Expansion of the Squadron equipped with larger more capable aircraft enabled development of broader support roles with primary emphasis on tactical trooplifting for the infantry battalions especially (9SQN accepted primary responsibility for 1ATF trooping on 01Aug68).

Toward this goal, perhaps about 10 9SQN pilots began short exchange duties with US Army Assault Helicopter Companies to observe their operating practices. On 11Mar68, Day 1 of my one week exchange duty, I was flying with an all US Army crew with a Warrant Officer as aircraft captain.

The US Army 135th Assault Helicopter Company was an experimental military unit with half of the complement being Royal Australian Navy Officer pilots plus non-commissioned aircrew. I expected aircrew cooperation that we were accustomed to in the Australian military.

The US Army crew with whom I was flying was very non-communicative and I sensed they did not like flying with an Air Force Officer. After departing US Army Camp Blackhorse (about 30 kilometres north of Nui Dat) we headed WNW to an unspecified destination. Eventually, we landed at another US Army Camp that I presumed to be at Cu Chi.



Nui Ba Den in yellow rectangle close to Tay Ninh.

We uplifted 4 men and a number of small comms components. One member was very young and probably a new arrival from CONUS judging by his uniform and M16 weapon. He was tearful and obviously did not want to go wherever we were headed.

After heading northwards we began circling Nui Ba Den, a 3300 foot high mountain near Tay Ninh and about 35 kilometres from the Cambodian border.



Nui Ba Den, 'The Black Virgin Mountain'

I observed several military in beige uniforms and webbing intercepting ox carts near the base of the mountain and commented: *'Those guys down there look like NVA (North Vietnamese Army)'* but no response from the US Army Huey crewmembers.

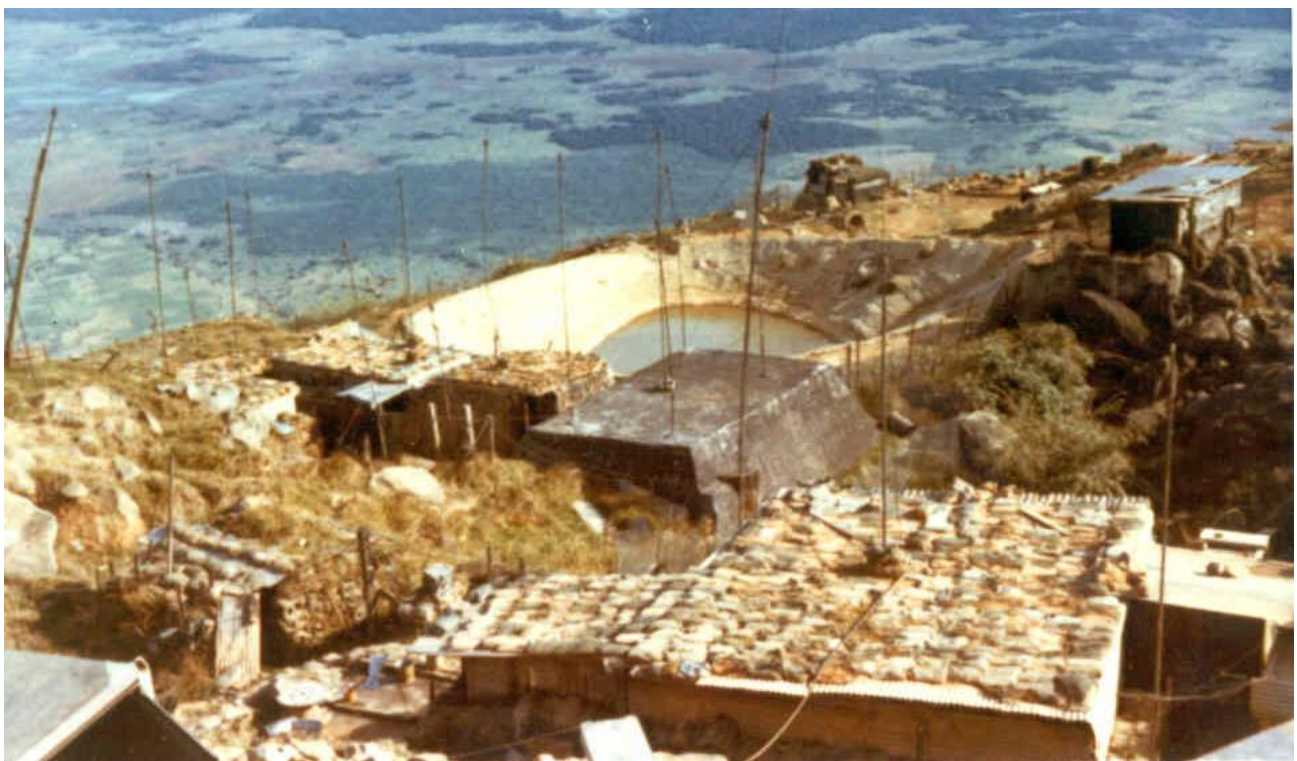


Traditional Vietnamese Ox Cart

We then made an approach to a helipad atop the mountain where highly classified communications facilities were located. A single strand of barbed wire surrounded an absolute shambles that covered about two thirds of a hectare. There were few hardened defensive facilities that I could see and a proliferation of antennas at the highest end of the camp.



US Army Communications Outpost on Nui Ba Den with Helo pad in foreground



Antennas atop Nui Ba Den

The 140 or so occupants of the facility were mostly communications personnel completely surrounded by opposition forces and totally reliant on air support for existence. Artillery fire support was available from nearby Tay Ninh plus USAF 'Spooky' Dakota fire support when weather allowed as the mountain was often enveloped in cloud.

I asked the Huey captain: '*Has this place ever been overrun?*' and he responded: '*A couple of probes.*' My query was prophetic as 2 nights later, on 13May68, the facility was assaulted with 24 Americans killed, 35 wounded and 2 taken POW.

See the legend of The Black Virgin Mountain and an account of the 13May68 night action here: <https://manchu.org/country/nui-ba-den/>

After landing on Nui Ba Den we arrived at Tay Ninh. We observed maybe 12 or so opposition soldiers sitting on a grassy clearing on a small hill about 1,000 metres distant. They had 2 large mortar tubes positioned for use. The local US Army people told us that an airstrike had been requested but would not be available for about 4 hours because USAF tactical air support was very busy.

Our Huey was temporarily parked near what may have been elevated school buildings beneath which was stacked artillery ammunition, a choice target for the nearby mortars.

We were then tasked to proceed to Katum, a tactical airfield under attack about 40 kilometres northwards almost on the Cambodian border. We uplifted women and children from near a small military compound and about 100 metres or so after lift-off, 2 large mortar rounds impacted our previous position.



Airfield at Katum

There were more to be evacuated and the US Advisor told us to call about 90 seconds out and he would meet us at the opposite end of the airfield. On our next approach we saw his 4WD truck tearing down the runway. After uplifting more women and children, mortar rounds impacted our landing point just after lift-off. The proficiency of the mortar crews was impressive.

Soon after return to Tay Ninh, 2 USAF F4 Phantoms turned up earlier than expected but the enemy that were earlier watching activity from the small hill about 1,000 metres distant had somehow become aware of the impending air attack and bugged out with their mortars.

As the F4s began their attacks on the small hill feature, smoke puffs appeared beneath one aircraft and somebody called '**Flak**'. We were near the lower end of the Ho Chi Minh trail along which there were more formidable anti-aircraft defences (14.5mm, 23mm, 37mm, 57mm weaponry) than the 12.7mm common throughout most of South Vietnam. See: <https://www.historynet.com/north-vietnams-light-anti-aircraft-artillery/>

The F4 Flight Leader coolly advised: *'We are delivering CBU (Cluster Bomb Units) and it is probably just the bomblets banging into one another and exploding on their way down.'*

After the airstrike we headed back to base at Camp Blackhorse. I was dismayed at the inadequacy of defences at the vital US comms facility on Nui Ba Den but impressed by the comparative proficiency of opposition forces.



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