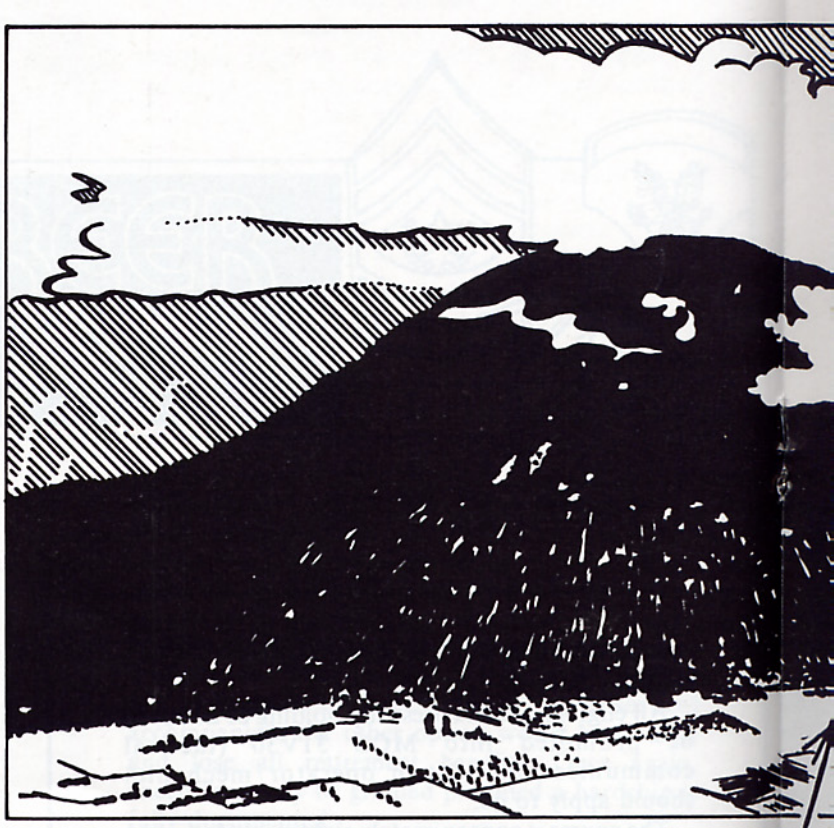
Record Traffic From The Past

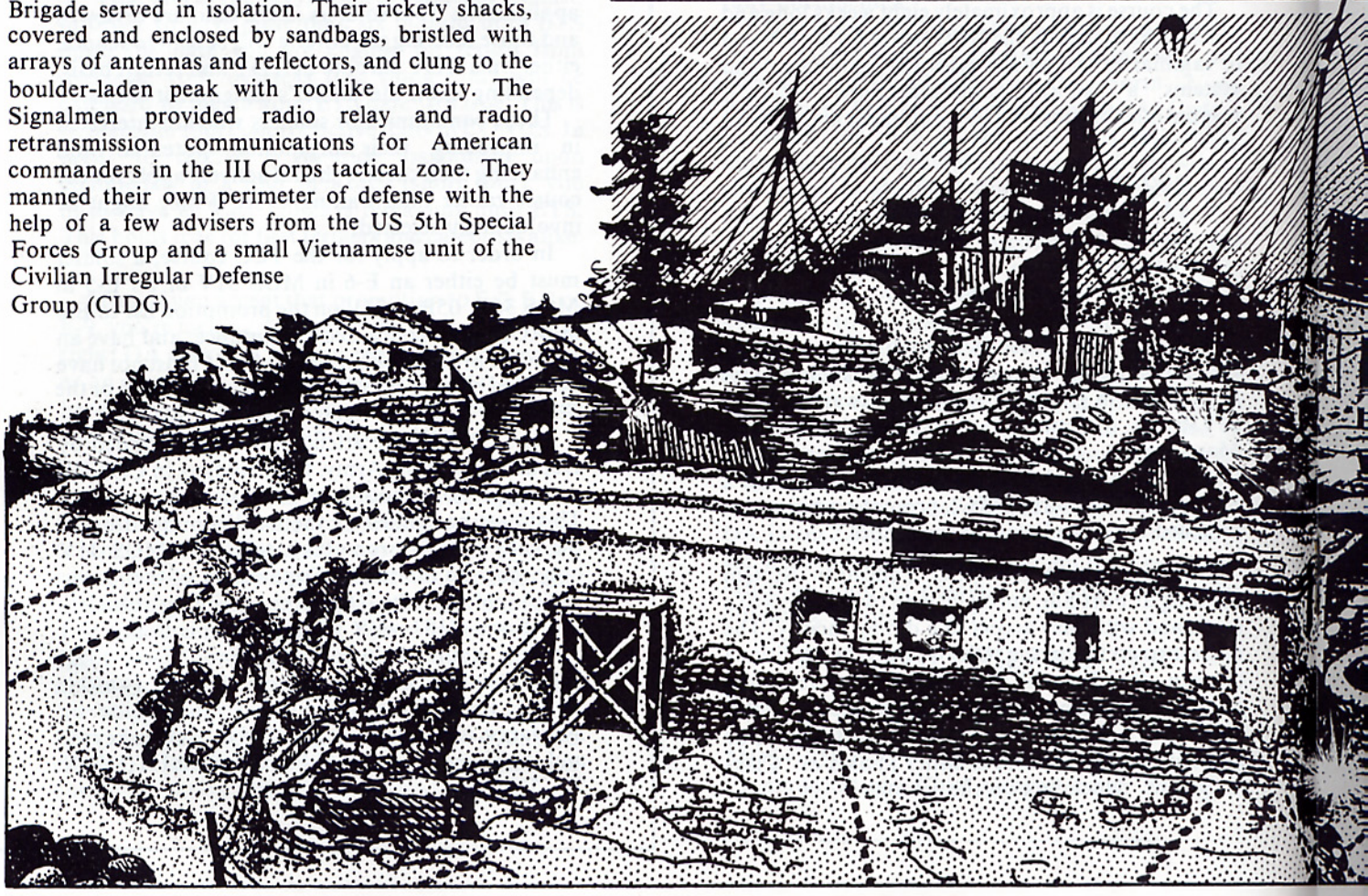
by Sam Barnes

Mist shrouded Nui Ba Den, or more aptly "Black Virgin Mountain" as the natives called it, which towered 3,203 feet above the rice paddies of Tay Ninh Province in South Vietnam. Whenever its omnipresent halo of humidity permitted, Nui Ba Den offered a commanding view of the surrounding countryside. The Saigon River could be seen meandering lazily off in two directions. Dozens of villages and military basecamps and towns, too, could be seen in every direction. Even the enemy sanctuary of Cambodia could be seen in the distance. It fanned itself around the mountain in a menacing semi-circle, from north to west to south.

Nui Ba Den's prominence offered more than just a commanding view. It provided unobstructed observation and communications sites for both friendly and enemy forces.

On top of Nui Ba Den, a number of Signalmen from the 125th Signal Battalion, 25th Infantry Division, and about 15 more from the 1st Signal Brigade served in isolation. Their rickety shacks, covered and enclosed by sandbags, bristled with arrays of antennas and reflectors, and clung to the boulder-laden peak with rootlike tenacity. The Signalmen provided radio relay and radio retransmission communications for American commanders in the III Corps tactical zone. They manned their own perimeter of defense with the help of a few advisers from the US 5th Special Forces Group and a small Vietnamese unit of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG).

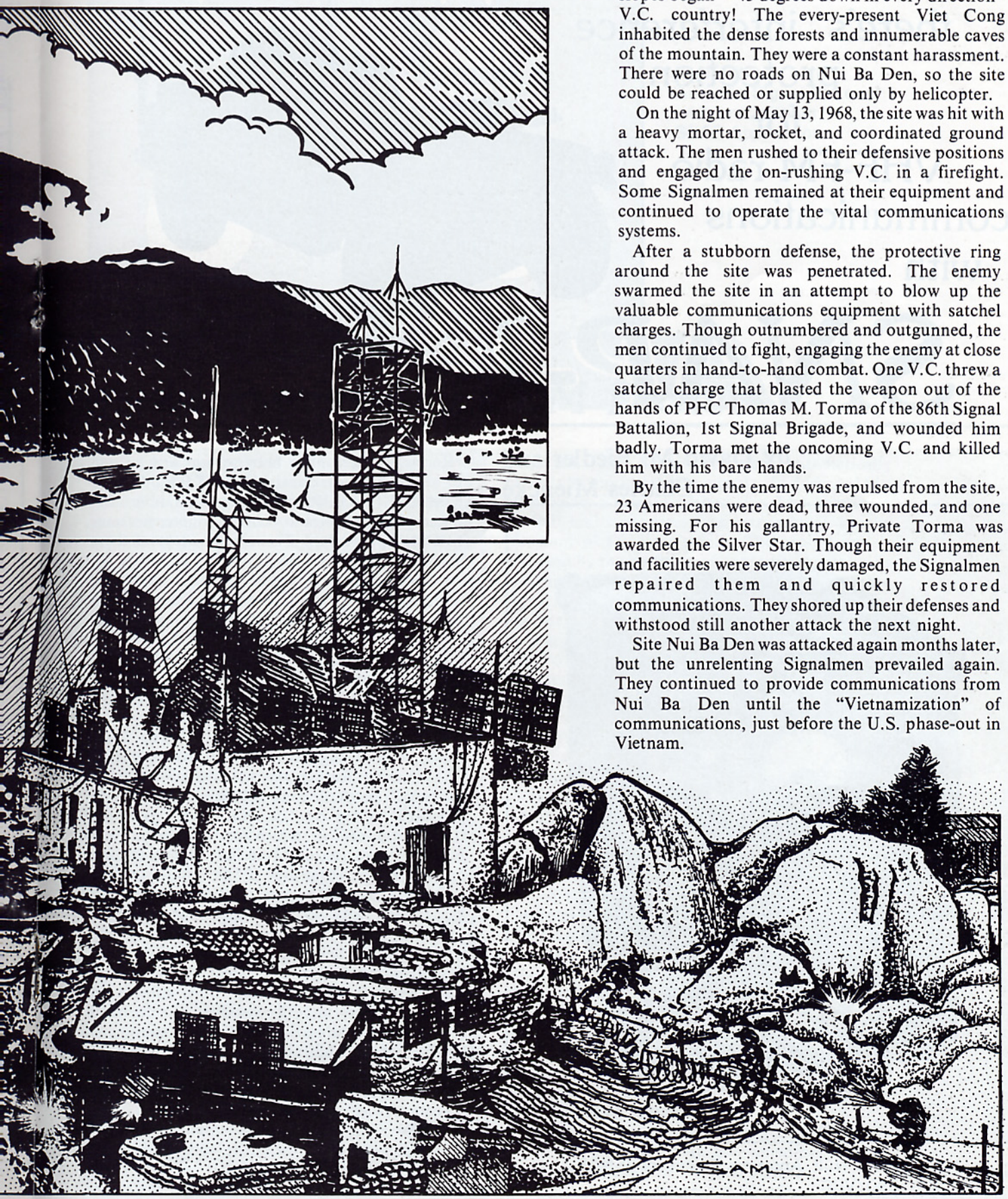




Outside the American perimeter, heavily forested slopes began - 45 degrees down in every direction - V.C. country! The every-present Viet Cong inhabited the dense forests and innumerable caves of the mountain. They were a constant harassment. There were no roads on Nui Ba Den, so the site could be reached or supplied only by helicopter.

On the night of May 13, 1968, the site was hit with a heavy mortar, rocket, and coordinated ground attack. The men rushed to their defensive positions and engaged the on-rushing V.C. in a firefight. Some Signalmen remained at their equipment and continued to operate the vital communications systems.

After a stubborn defense, the protective ring around the site was penetrated. The enemy swarmed the site in an attempt to blow up the valuable communications equipment with satchel charges. Though outnumbered and outgunned, the men continued to fight, engaging the enemy at close quarters in hand-to-hand combat. One V.C. threw a satchel charge that blasted the weapon out of the hands of PFC Thomas M. Torma of the 86th Signal Battalion, 1st Signal Brigade, and wounded him badly. Torma met the oncoming V.C. and killed him with his bare hands.

By the time the enemy was repulsed from the site, 23 Americans were dead, three wounded, and one missing. For his gallantry, Private Torma was awarded the Silver Star. Though their equipment and facilities were severely damaged, the Signalmen repaired them and quickly restored communications. They shored up their defenses and withstood still another attack the next night.

Site Nui Ba Den was attacked again months later, but the unrelenting Signalmen prevailed again. They continued to provide communications from Nui Ba Den until the "Vietnamization" of communications, just before the U.S. phase-out in Vietnam.