THE COMPUTING VEHICLE TYPE VO 1.

At the 2011 Defence Surveyors' Association seminar 2011, Rod Siggs gave a talk mainly on the post-1950's mobile train from its inception to its phasing out of service after the Iraq War. This talk prompted some research into the earlier, World War Two mobile train vehicles based on the Leyland Retriever 3-ton chassis, those introduced later in the war on the Foden and Thornycroft 10-ton chassis and the early post-war Leyland Hippo 10-ton chassis. Work continues on this but it is hoped to publish an illustrated account shortly.
In the meantime it is thought that contributing a few illustrated notes on the computing vehicle based on the Bedford RL chassis might generate a few memories from some of the "fieldies" within the Association.

Descriptions and photographs of the mobile train have appeared from time to time in the Ranger and souvenir publications such as the 250th Anniversary booklets. Additionally, "Military Engineering Vol XIII – Reproduction" contains a section on the mobile train and first mentioin of the Computing Vehicle : -

"In addition to the above reproduction vehicles which are described in more detail in the following paragraphs, there are two ancilliary vehicles for technical personnel:
Topo Drawing Vehicle Type VT 1
Computing Vehicle Type VO 1
The first vehicle is equipped to carry 10 topo draughtsmen with drawing tables, a layout table for slotted template, and various items of photo-interpretation equipment: there are also facilities for scribing. At present the vehicle exists in prototype form only.
The second vehicle is a standard 3-ton GS vehicle especially adapted for the use of computers: it is also fitted with a radio transmitting and receiving equipment for general communications purposes as well as for reception of radio time signal information. Neither of these vehicles is described further in this book."

Any further information on the Topo Drawing Vehicle Type VT 1 would be appreciated. Doubtless there still exists a Complete Equipment Schedule and User Handbook for this vehicle, but the School Library, once a repository for this type of publication has clearly been the subject of archive vandalisation and little remains of the vast amount of material that once existed in file boxes on its shelving in the 1980's.

First acquaintance with the Computing Vehicle was on taking over, from Ken Harding, 2 Topo Troop of 84 Survey Squadron in Tenom, Sabah in 1966. The Troop was based in some ex-P.W.D. huts on the Keningau road just beyond the traditional Government Rest House.
The computing vehicle together with its single-axle 10KVA generator were parked alongside the huts, the vehicle being jacked-up, and it was used as the Troop Commander's office. This special-purpose box-bodied vehicle on a Bedford RL chassis was to be my daily place of work for the next year, all computing by the field survey techs and A-tradesmen being carried out in the PWD huts in which the troop was based.

The entrance was at the back via a metal ladder. Inside, on either side, were two worktops with drawer units for FACIT adding machines and swivel office chairs. All work tops were provided with angle-poise lamps.
The left side worktop was shorter than the right because the radio was on the rear, right wall. This was a C11/R210 Larkspur Range radio. At the front of the box was a full-width row of about four filing cabinets under a 2-3 drawer plan press and worktop.
Above the front plan press were the outlets of a row of two or three air-conditioning units and externally these projected over the drivers cab. On my arrival I found that these constantly leaked a trickle or stream of condensation into the vehicle but the simple expedient of re-levelling the vehicle on its supports resolved this. Actually, there was no computing done in the vehicle at all, except the monthly battle to resolve the Imprest and Lands & Surveys Accounts. Because of the air-conditioning, it was really quite a comfortable working environment despite the outside temperature.

The vehicle never took to the road at Tenom but at the end of 1966 it was decided that the Troop should move to Labuan and this of course entailed a Troop move. Tenom had no road link with the capital, Kota Kinabalu, then called Jesselton but known colloquially as Api Api due to its history of wooden houses catching fire. Tenom was located at the end of a narrow-gauge railway line which ran southwards from

Jesselton along the coast of the China Sea coast for some distance the landward side in those days being padi in which water buffalo or Kerbau browsed, backed by forest; before turning east along the banks of the River Padas gorge. After a six hour journey in a rail car one emerged from this gorge on the Tenom plain and turned north a few miles to reach Tenom. From Tenom a gravel road ran a further 30 miles north to Keningau the former Troop base before the move to Tenom.

The problem was that along this railway line there were several tunnels one or more of which would not allow the vehicle to pass through on a low-loader truck. The solution was to move the vehicle by rail as far as Papar and then drive it to Jesselton. Came the day of the move the Troop personnel les LCpl Holliday, moved by rail-car to Jesselton. L Cpl Holliday, for some very minor misdemeanour, had the unenviable job of accompanying the 3-ton cargo GS, Land Rover and assorted kit that went on the slow steam train. My Troop Sergeant, Alf Isherwood, and I travelled separately to Papar where we off-loaded the computing lorry from a low loader truck on to Papar Station platform and somehow from there on to the road.

From Jesselton, the computing vehicle, the 3-ton Bedford RL, and the troop land rover and trailer and Cpl Watson's car and all the troop stores were moved to Labuan by an RPL (Ramp Powered Lighter) where the troop was allocated two huts very near the old civil airport terminal. The vehicle could just be fitted between these huts and it resumed its static duty as troop office.

It was in Labuan that the radio came into its own. With some assistance from the R.A.F. a special aerial was rigged up which allowed communication to the hilltops on the mainland whose trig points were being occupied to re-observe to second order standard the traverses hurriedly observed to third order standards by the troop shortly after the Indonesian Confrontation began. The observing teams, as well as using their tellurometers for line of sight communications were equipped with A23HP sets.

It was there, in mid 1967, that I left it on RHE. What its ultimate fate was I know not. I assume it was at some time back-loaded to 84 Survey Squadron in Singapore.

The images illustrating this note are of a vehicle at Barton Stacey belonging either to 13 or 19 Squadrons. The author of this short note would welcome any further information or anecdotes from "fieldies" relating to the Computing Vehicle or from draughtsmen on the Topo Drawing Vehicle.