

RAAOC Soldiers Recognised 50 years on, Gallantry award for service during the Battles of Coral and Balmoral

WO2 D Rudder

1st Ordnance Field Park at FSB Coral – 1968

2018 sees the 50th Anniversary of the Battles of Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral and it is timely that recognition of the courageous service displayed by the members of the units involved.

The extraordinary gallantry displayed by members of the 1st Australia Task Force (Forward) and associated units deployed to Area of Operations Surfers during the Battle of Fire Support Base Coral and the Battle of Fire Support Base Balmoral is being recognised by the Unit Citation for Gallantry.

This was the first significant Corps specific event since WW2.

In April 1968, Forward Ordnance Field Park Group, was to operate as part of the Forward TFMA Group, and was scaled up during April. In late April the Forward Group deployed to the US 9th Division Base of Bear Cat on Route 15, to provide support during Operation TOAN THANG, Phase 1.

The 1st Australian Task Force deployed 1 RAR and 3 RAR during Operation TOAN THANG to an area twenty kilometres north of Bien Hoa to intercept and disrupt the approach of enemy forces towards Saigon. Several Fire Support Bases (FSBs) were established to provide defended firing points for artillery and mortars which would cover foot patrols by the battalions. Members of 1st Ordnance Field Park (1 OFP), were deployed to one of these FSBs was named "Coral", which was situated seven kilometres north of the town of Tan Uyen.

In May 1968 Australian troops established Fire Support Bases (FSB) Coral and Balmoral across the route used by the Viet Cong to depart, and approach Saigon and nearby Bien Hoa. The bases provided defensive positions for artillery, mortars and armoured vehicles which would, in turn, support infantry patrols of the area at a time when expectations of enemy attacks on Saigon were high.

The 1st and 3rd Battalions Royal Australian Regiment (1 and 3RAR), 102 Field Battery, Royal Australian Artillery, and 161 New Zealand Field Battery, which included RAAOC support elements of 1st Ordnance Field Park (1 OFP), deployed into FSB Coral on 12 May 1968. 1 and 3 RAR began preparing ambush positions but these were incomplete when a North Vietnamese Regiment attacked the base during the early hours of 13 May. The North Vietnamese, having penetrated the 1RAR Mortar Platoon and 102 Field Battery positions and briefly forcing the defenders to abandon one of their artillery pieces, were forced back after heavy fighting. With the aid of extensive air support, the attack was beaten off by 6.30am and the captured gun-pit was retaken. Nine Australians were killed and 28 wounded, while the attackers lost more than the 52 bodies they left behind.



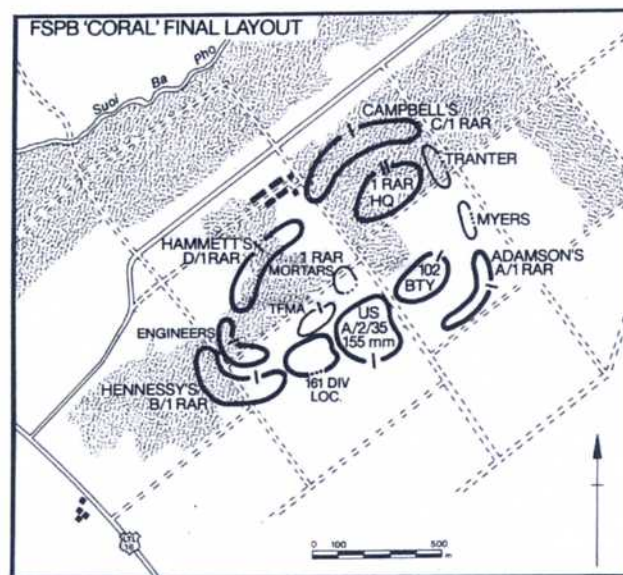
History

At 2.15am on 16 May, Coral again came under attack by an estimated three battalions of North Vietnamese infantry assaulted the base which was now defended by armoured personnel carriers of A Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment, a rifle company from 1 RAR and an American mobile howitzer battery. The attack was repelled after four hours of fighting, with the Australians suffering a further five killed and nineteen wounded to the previous attacks.



Further mortar and rocket attacks on Coral followed, on 22 May, and again on 26 and 28 May, but the base was not seriously threatened again. Having had the opportunity to establish a strong defensive perimeter, the Australians were able to launch their own attacks against the North Vietnamese. On 26 May, in a major contact, infantry and tanks destroyed part of a North Vietnamese bunker system that had been discovered in the vicinity. The Australians continued to launch aggressive patrols from Coral, engaging in combat against North Vietnamese forces and experiencing some fierce actions through until the end of May.

By this time the North Vietnamese had turned their attention to FSB Balmoral which had been established by 3RAR some 4.5 kilometres north of Coral on 24-25 May. Tanks from Nui Dat helped Australian infantry defeat a two-battalion-strong North Vietnamese attack just hours after their arrival at the base on 25 May. A second attack followed on 28 May, but a combination of infantry, armour, aircraft, artillery and mortars repelled the North Vietnamese assault.



May 1968 – FSB Coral showing layout & location of the TFMA Forward Group

Tony Flanagan recalls that he was at Coral for a week. During that time they were mortared twice. On 22 May some accommodation and stores tents copped it, and on the night of 26 May the Control Office got hit and one side was blown out. During these attacks Lt Monty Brown's Armalite rifle was damaged and Stan Stefanowicz had a very close call when a mortar landed near his trench. Fortunately no member of the Forward TFMA Group was injured during this attack.

During Phase 2 of Operation TOAN THANG which commenced on 12 June and a Forward Group of 1 Corporal Clerk and 3 Private Storeman were deployed with the TFMA Forward Group and stationed at Long Binh. There was a changeover of personnel after two weeks. The Forward Detachment at Long Binh returned to the unit after the completion of Operation TOAN THANG on 17 July 1968.

In 2017, the government directed the Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal to inquire into unit recognition for the Battles of Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral. The Tribunal released the report of the Inquiry into Unit Recognition for Service at the Battles of Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral on 3 April 2018. The report made five recommendations, which were supported by Defence and the Minister for Defence Personnel. The recommendations were subsequently accepted by Governor General Sir Peter Cosgrove AK MC (Retd).

Twenty six Australians were killed during the fighting at Coral/Balmoral. Estimates suggest that more than 300 North Vietnamese were killed in these actions, but exact figures cannot be obtained.

The Nominal Roll – 1st Ordnance Field Park personnel who were deployed to FSB Coral during OP TOAN THANG- May/ June 1968:

Beattie, James Duncan 15837 WO2 Deceased;
 Blatch, Douglas Bruce 2787227 CPL;
 Boldiston, Stanley William 35563 S/SGT Deceased;
 Brown, John Lamont 217011 2LT;
 Coughlin, Noel Thomas Edward 53364 CPL Deceased;
 Cross, Colin Douglas 5714842 CPL;
 Flanagan, Anthony Michael 61659 SGT;
 Hall, Stanley Richard 15185 SGT Deceased;
 Holten, Ronald James 215925 SGT Deceased;
 Meppom, Ronald Spencer 2786399 CPL,
 Moroney, Timothy John 217055 PTE;
 Patzel, Graham Bernard 4719148 PTE;
 Place, Edward Leonard 61715 CPL;
 Redman, John William 2786975 L/CPL;
 Stefanowicz, Stanislaw 4718670 PTE;
 Whitaker, Alan Clive 1200715 CPL; and
 Wilkinson, Leslie William 2786128 PTE.

In 1996 just prior to the 30th Anniversary of the Battles of Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral a group of veterans of 1 OFP travelled back to Vietnam to revisit the sights of the war they are now recognised for, and in 2013 on the 45th Anniversary they again travelled as a group to see the modern OFP at the 1 CSSB Open Day at Robertson Barracks in Darwin.

History

Veterans of eligible units for the Unit Citation for Gallantry are encouraged to apply directly to the Department of Defence, through the Defence Medals Online Application form available at: www.defence.gov.au/medals.

Eligible units are:

- 1st Australian Task Force (Forward)
- 1st Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment
- 3rd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment
- A Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment
- C Squadron, 1st Armoured Regiment
- 12th Field Regiment, Royal Regiment of Australian Artillery
- 1st Field Squadron, Royal Australian Engineers.

Members of the below units who flew missions in direct support of the battles, or who were deployed to the Fire Support Bases, are also entitled to wear the Citation insignia:

- No 9 Squadron RAAF
- 161 Reconnaissance Flight

Family members of deceased veterans are also encouraged to apply for the insignia.

REFERENCES

- Australian Government Department of Defence. (2018, August 30). History. Retrieved from www.defence.gov.au/History: <http://defence.gov.au/History/>
- Hartigan, B. (2018, May 13). Gallantry award for service during the Battles of Coral and Balmoral. Retrieved from CONTACT Magazine: <http://www.contactairlandandsea.com/2018/05/13/unit-citation-for-gallantry-for-coral-balmoral-battles/>
- Nash, R. (2006). Ordnance at the sharp end: Ordnance Field Park Nui Dat South Vietnam 1966-72: Historical accounts and experiences from the men who served with the OFP. Ferny Grove, QLD: Robert Nash.