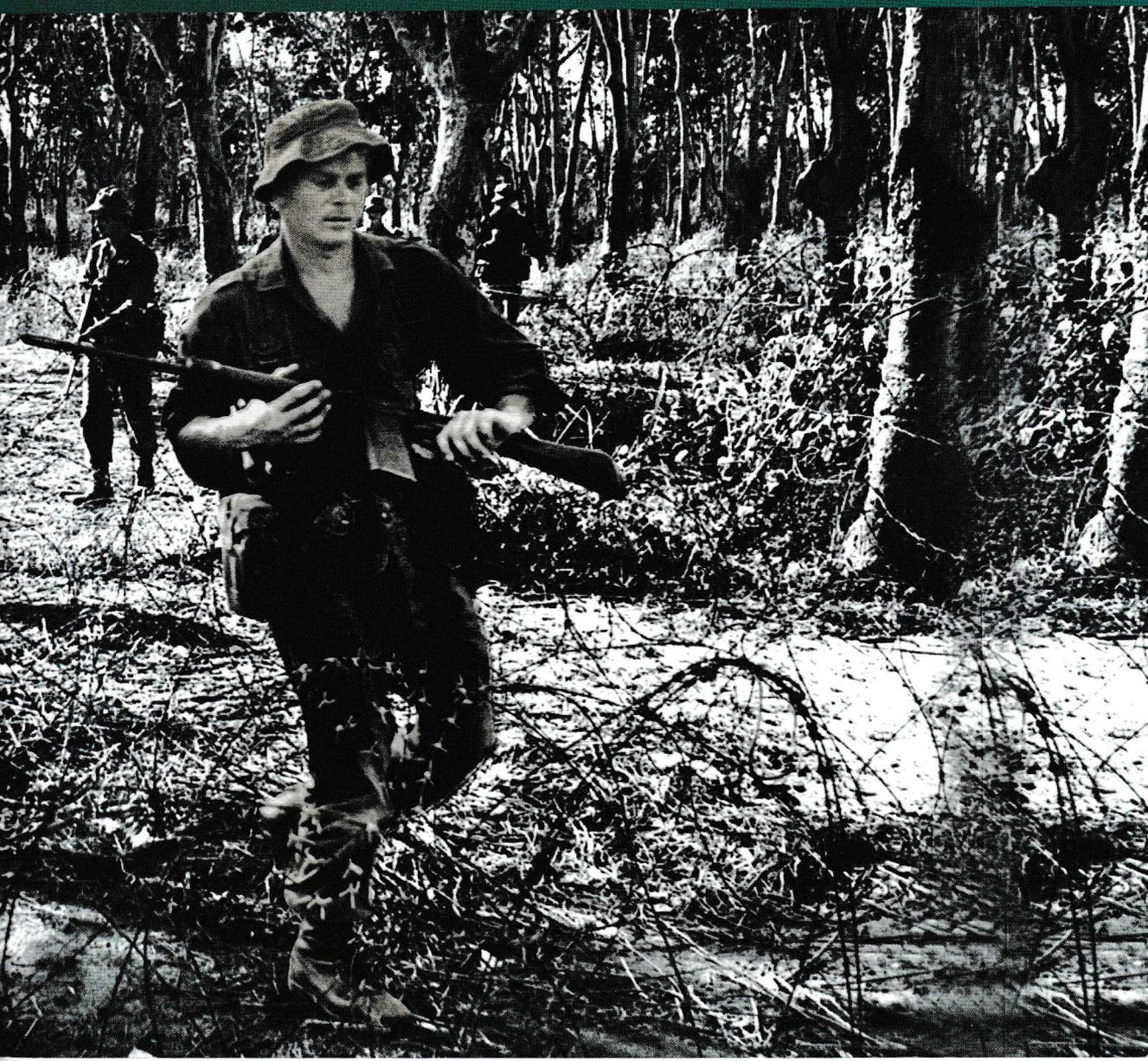


COMMEMORATION OF THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF
the **BATTLES** at **FIRE SUPPORT BASES**
CORAL and BALMORAL

THE AUSTRALIAN VIETNAM FORCES NATIONAL MEMORIAL

ANZAC Parade, Canberra

13 May 2018

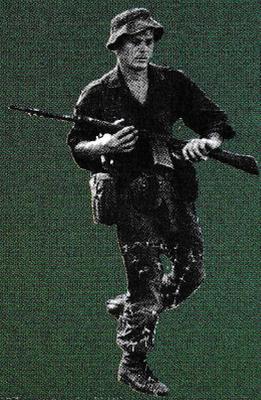




A member of the 1st Field Squadron, Royal Australian Engineers, remains on the alert beside a dugout at Fire Support Base Coral in Bien Hoa Province after two major attacks by the Viet Cong, May 1968. [AWM ERR/68/0511/VN; photographer: William Alexander Errington]

BATTLES AT FIRE SUPPORT BASES CORAL AND BALMORAL

In late January 1968 the communist Tet Offensive convinced many in the West that South Vietnam, the United States and their allies, including Australia, could no longer win the war in Vietnam. But Tet's impact on public opinion masked the fact that the communists had suffered a terrible military defeat. In the United States' attempts to seize the initiative against a weakened enemy, and in the communists' determination to build on Tet's propaganda success, lay the origins of Australia's longest and most costly battle in Vietnam – the Battles at Fire Support Bases (FSB) Coral and Balmoral.





A member of the 3rd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR), receives assistance after being wounded in the arm during an enemy attack on Fire Support Base Balmoral in north-west Bien Hoa Province, May 1968.
[AWM CRO/68/0556/VN; photographer: Richard William Crothers]

Two months after Tet, in April 1968, South Vietnam and the United States, supported by Australian, New Zealand and Thai troops, launched their largest operation of the war, Toan Thang (Complete Victory), a concerted attempt to sever communist infiltration routes into Saigon and destroy enemy forces in the staging areas of Bien Hoa province, just 45 kilometres from the South Vietnamese capital. At the same time the Communists prepared to follow Tet with Mini-Tet, a new offensive against Saigon that began on 5 May.

On 10 May the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR) moved into Bien Hoa to intercept enemy forces leaving Saigon after Mini-Tet. But along with the bedraggled survivors of the recent fighting, were thousands of communist troops en-route from North Vietnam to launch fresh attacks in the south.

The Australians were entering an area known as Area of Operations (AO) Surfers. Several senior officers knew that this part of Bien Hoa was becoming more dangerous, but most of those bound for Surfers were unaware that they were heading into the midst of large concentrations of enemy troops.

Within AO Surfers were several subsidiary AOs. Each was, or was soon to be, centred on a fire support base to provide infantry patrols with artillery, mortar and armoured support. The 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR) were responsible for one of these AOs, Bondi, and on 12 May the battalion began setting up FSB Coral. The day went badly for the Australians. First the landing zone was moved, then helicopters meant to airlift troops and equipment were diverted to support United States troops engaged in a fierce action nearby. 1RAR and its support units arrived late and in a piecemeal fashion over hours, all the while under North Vietnamese observation. Lieutenant Matthew Cleland, commanding a section of 102 Battery's guns recalled the 'stuff ups' and delays, and that his guns weren't as well dug in as they should have been. The North Vietnamese resolved to attack that night.

After dark under steady rain, while the Australians dug in, grabbed a meal and tried to organise their defences, North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops moved into position. There were a few fleeting contacts through the evening and just before 2.30am on 13 May, as D Company's 12 Platoon fired on three men, a member of 11 Platoon was killed by rocket propelled grenade (RPG) fire.

An hour later waves of NVA came at Coral as the base was hit with RPG and mortar fire. The Australian mortar platoon, 102 Battery and its machine gunners took the weight of the attack. A group of North Vietnamese, yelling and firing wildly, rose within a few metres of a machine gun pit, 'we did not even know they were there' remembered one gunner. One of





Soldiers of the 3rd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment, 'mop up' in a heavily wooded area after bitter fighting with North Vietnamese troops at Fire Support Base Balmoral in May 1968. [AWM CRO/68/0577/VN; photographer: Richard William Crothers]

102 Battery's guns was overrun. Another crew fired flesh-tearing splintex and high explosive rounds over open sights into the approaching mass. Fighting over the bodies of their own dead, the mortar men on the left flank called splintex fire onto their own position, pressing into the earth as a storm of metal darts tore through the enemy. Aircraft, helicopters and United States artillery poured fire onto the NVA and just before dawn the survivors retreated into the rubber and scrub outside Coral.

Nine Australians had been killed, more were wounded but the NVA had suffered heavier casualties. A front end loader dug a mass grave for the 52 bodies lying in front of the Australian positions, while drag marks told of other NVA dead and wounded having been taken from the battlefield.

The next day Coral was strengthened and organised. A forward headquarters arrived along with reinforcements including Cavalry and the 155mm Self Propelled guns of A Battery 2/35th US Artillery. Infantry platoons patrolled into the surrounding countryside, sometimes clashing with NVA. On 14 May there were nine contacts. Three Australians and twelve North Vietnamese were killed.

Coral came under attack again early on the morning of 16 May but after four hours fighting the North Vietnamese were driven back by overwhelming fire from aircraft, helicopters, mortars and artillery. Five Australians lost their lives while 34 NVA dead were counted in front of the Australian positions.

On 23 May Coral's defences were strengthened further with the arrival of two troops of Centurion tanks. The following day 3RAR set up FSB Balmoral about four and a half kilometres from Coral. On 25 May as one of the tank troops and their infantry moved from Coral to Balmoral they came under heavy fire from an NVA bunker complex. Early the next morning Balmoral was hit with a barrage of mortar, RPG, machine gun and small arms fire. The NVA, seeking to prevent supporting fire from Coral's artillery and mortars, also hit that base with mortars and RPGs. At Balmoral the fighting lasted little more than an hour before the NVA were forced to withdraw. Six men were found dead in front of the Australian lines, the characteristic drag marks told of many others having been killed. 3RAR lost two men and had fourteen wounded.

A few hours later tanks and infantry from Coral were sent against the bunkers discovered the previous day. As they approached the objective an airstrike went in while the Centurion's Cannister rounds destroyed the foliage exposing the enemy and enabling the tanks to fire directly into the bunkers. They rolled over NVA positions, crushing bunkers beneath their tracks, driving right up to the entrances of others and blasting the soldiers



inside. Infantry, with small arms, grenades and flamethrowers followed up while artillery and mortar fire pounded the enemy positions.

The fighting went on for almost four hours but this was a major complex and the risk of becoming trapped in its midst was too great. At 3:30 with rain falling and light failing the Australians broke contact. Without a single man hit, morale was high. The infantry, wary that morning of working with the Centurions, couldn't have been happier.

On 28 May the NVA sent another attack against Balmoral. At 2.30 in the morning signal flares lit the sky and mortar fire fell among the defenders. One tank crewman remembered 'shooting at soldiers on the wire with my commanders' 30 Cal. machine gun.' His fire joined the mass of weaponry arrayed against the NVA; small arms, tanks, mortars, machine guns, aircraft, helicopters, the artillery from Coral and American artillery from Bien Hoa. In return a storm of mortar, RPG and machine gun fire swept over the Australians, but much of it went high.

As daylight approached, the surviving NVA fled under cover of mortar fire but most were shot down on the open grassland in front of the Australian positions. Seven surrendered and were taken prisoner. Outside the wire were 42 NVA dead, some just 16 or 17 years old.

This was the last major attack on Coral or Balmoral but infantry patrols continued. On 30 May 1 RAR's C Company took fire from concealed bunkers and pinned down. The enemy was so close that artillery fire from Coral on their position wounded two Australians. Two tanks were sent in and destroyed eight bunkers, but the Australians had no idea how many more there were. In danger of being encircled, they disengaged under the cover of fire from two American gunships. One Australian had been killed and seven wounded.

More patrols were sent out from Coral and Balmoral over the following days, but the contacts became fewer and less intense. The NVA conceded that this route to Saigon was no longer open to them and began to move out of the area.

The end of Coral and Balmoral coincided with the conclusion of Toan Thang. Hundreds of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong had been killed in the fighting at Surfers, some 276 according to the official figures, with the caveat that a further 69 may have also perished. Twenty six Australians died and almost 100 were wounded.

Brigadier Ron Hughes, the Australian Task Force Commander, described the combat at Coral and Balmoral as 'some of the heaviest fighting that the Task Force ever undertook.' For their role in Toan Thang the Royal Australian Regiment, the 1st Armoured Regiment and the 3rd Cavalry Regiment were awarded the battle honour 'Coral-Balmoral'.





A member of the 1st Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR), checks the perimeter wire at Fire Support Base Coral after two attacks by a large force of Viet Cong, May 1968. [AWM ERR/68/0512/VN; photographer: William Alexander Errington]



Men of the 1st Armoured Regiment, Royal Australian Armoured Corps, on the move with their Centurion tanks from Nui Dat to Fire Support Base Coral in Bien Hoa Province, watch as a Sioux helicopter prepares to land, May 1968. [AWM ERR/68/0548/VN; photographer: William Alexander Errington]



ORDER OF SERVICE

Members of the 1st Australian Task Force jump into a half completed weapon pit at Fire Support Base Coral after an enemy alert during Operation Toan Thang, May 1968.
[AWM HAL/68/0530/VN; photographer: Colin Thomas Halmarick]



ARRIVAL OF OFFICIAL GUESTS

Greeted by

Major General Mark Kelly AO DSC
Repatriation Commissioner
Department of Veterans' Affairs

COMMEMORATION

INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME

MASTER OF CEREMONIES

Major General Mark Kelly AO DSC
Repatriation Commissioner
Department of Veterans' Affairs

CATAFALQUE PARTY MOUNTS

CALL TO REMEMBRANCE

Lieutenant General Angus J Campbell AO DSC
Chief of Army



COMMEMORATIVE ADDRESS

The Honourable Darren Chester MP
Deputy Leader of the House
Minister for Veterans' Affairs
Minister for Defence Personnel and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister
for the Centenary of ANZAC

HYMN

O VALIANT HEARTS

O Valiant Hearts, who to your glory came
Through dust of conflict and through battle-flame,
Tranquil you lie, your knightly virtue proved,
Your memory hallowed in the Land you loved.

Proudly you gathered, rank on rank to war,
As who had heard God's message from afar;
All you had hoped for, all you had, you gave
To save Mankind - yourselves you scorned to save.

Splendid you passed, the great surrender made,
Into the light that nevermore shall fade;
Deep your contentment in that blest abode,
Who wait the last clear trumpet-call of God.

READING

Mr Gary Cooper

Brother of 4411171 Private Alan John Cooper, 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment
Killed in Action on 26 May 1968



Members of the 102 Field Battery, Royal Australian Artillery, at Fire Support Base Coral, May 1968. [AWM P01635.011; photographer: Peter Geelen]



PRAYER OF COMMEMORATION AND LORD'S PRAYER

Father John Tinkler

OFFICIAL WREATH LAYING

As the wreath laying is conducted a piper will play *Flowers of the Forest*

ODE OF REMEMBRANCE

Warrant Officer Don Spinks OAM
Regimental Sergeant Major of the Australian Army

LAST POST

ONE MINUTE OF SILENCE

ROUSE



Members of the 1st Armoured Regiment watch as a helicopter lands at Fire Support Base Balmoral to deliver jerry cans of water and evacuate casualties after an attack on the base, May 1968. [AWM CRO/68/0563/VN; photographer: Richard William Crothers]



Vietnam 1968. Sergeant Dave "Zeke" Brooks 2 Troop A Sqn 3 Cav Regt RAAC, commanding his M113A1 APC, moving out on patrol from behind the wire.



NATIONAL ANTHEM OF AUSTRALIA

The National Anthem will be performed by the band of the Royal Military College, Duntroon

Australians all let us rejoice,
For we are young and free;
We've golden soil and wealth for toil;
Our home is girt by sea;
Our land abounds in nature's gifts
Of beauty rich and rare;
In history's page, let every stage
Advance Australia Fair.

In joyful strains then let us sing
Advance Australia Fair.

FINAL BLESSING

Father John Tinkler

CATAFALQUE PARTY DISMOUNTS

PUBLIC WREATH LAYING

Members of the public are invited to lay wreaths

OFFICIAL GUESTS DEPART

CONCLUSION OF SERVICE





Australian Government
Department of Veterans' Affairs

Men of the 1st Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR), patrol the perimeter of Fire Support Base Coral for signs of the enemy following several attacks on the base, June 1968.
[AWM THU/68/0596/VN; photographer: Kevin Denham Thurgar]

