

# Royal Australian Corps of Signals

## Battles of Coral and Balmoral

### (Operation TOAN THANG)

The Battles of Coral/Balmoral began on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1968 and lasted until 6<sup>th</sup> June 1968. The Battle was the largest and most sustained engagement of the Vietnam War involving Australian troops and was the first Australian all arms brigade sized operation since WW2. 25 Australians were KIA.

104 Signal Squadron had one KIA and three WIA. Detachments from 547 Signal Troop, 110 Signal Squadron and the 53<sup>rd</sup> Signal Battalion (US Army) were also involved. Signals deployment tactics changed because of the Battle resulting in Armoured Command Vehicles (ACV) to deploy equipment and signal personnel for signal sector defense, on all future deployments involving Signals in Vietnam.

The following is a Signals overview of the battles:

On 12<sup>th</sup> May 1968 major elements of 1 ATF were airlifted into an area north of Saigon eventually to be known as Fire Support Patrol Base (FSPB) Coral. This was to intercept the movement of 7 NVA Division to Saigon and cut off its withdrawal. The advance party of HQ 1 ATF included Major Norm Munro, OC 104 Signal Squadron and 5 other ranks from the squadron. This TF HQ advance party had to establish a task force headquarters area.

The party was landed some 1500 metres from the proposed headquarters location and so the small signals element had to manpack its equipment which was to operate initially as a substation on the task force command net. This was no mean task as the equipment included an RT-524 radio (the receiver/transmitter of the vehicular borne AN/VRC-12 series VHF equipment), 150 amp hour batteries, 300 watt charger, RC-292 antenna, AN/GRA-39 remote control unit and an AN/PRC-25 radio. It was an effort to prove well worthwhile. Early on the morning of 13<sup>th</sup> May 1968 the base came under attack from enemy mortar, rocket and small arms fire, causing signals casualties to men and equipment (including the RC-292 antenna). Temporary repairs enabled the radio station to remain operational and it was the means by which Spooky (DC3 aircraft equipped with illumination and six miniguns) and helicopter gunships (Light Fire Teams) were called in to support the units under attack. The FSPB Coral being partly over-run by the enemy during this action. Signaller Gamble was WIA during the fighting.

The main body of 1 ATF arrived later on 13<sup>th</sup> May 1968 bringing the strength of the signals group to 51 including two 3 man detachments from 110 Signal Squadron and the 7 man detachment from the 53<sup>rd</sup> Signal Battalion (US Army). Also a three man detachment from 547 Signal Troop arrived by air in this period.

Signals began digging in, including bulldozing 2 metre deep holes for the signal centre and VHF radio bunker. Next day an unexpected rain storm flooded the radio bunker swamping most of the radio equipment, but after draining the water out all operated satisfactorily. The signal centre was also flooded but not so badly.

At 0240 hours on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1968 an NVA regimental attack was launched against FSPB Coral. It started with 50 minutes of mortar and rocket barrage which included the signals area and was followed up by ground attacks, one enemy party coming within 50 metres of the signals perimeter which was directly protecting the task force command post. The enemy finally broke contact at 0645 hours. Signaller Alex Young was KIA during this action and two other Signalmen (John Koosache and Ian Crosthwaite) were WIA.

Additional 104 Signal Squadron soldiers were at this stage deployed to the FSPB to assist with the defense and communications. Subsequently FSPB Coral had new bunkers constructed, radio relay vehicles lowered and bunkered plus strong defenses developed. Three more mortar/rocket attacks were experienced but damage was limited to soft equipment and exposed cables.

Operation TOAN THANG tested the task force signal squadron under most contingencies likely to arise in the theatre. Whilst maintaining all communications facilities at Nui Dat base, it undertook a deployment from Nui Dat to one field base (Bearcat) and from there to another base (Coral) in an enemy controlled area. It required the provision of the full range of communications facilities available to the squadron, and it involved maintenance of communications whilst under enemy fire. It is a credit to those concerned that at no time was there a loss of command communications. This saved many Australian lives.

### **110 Signal Squadron**

110 Signal Squadron had two detachments in support of the communication effort at FSPB Coral. One Radio Relay (RR) and the other Secure Radio Teleprinter (RATT). The RR bearer housed shelter equipment was an AN/MRC-69 Radio Terminal Set under the command of Cpl Mal Stevens. The shelter took a number of hits and the enemy used the "pancake" antenna to direct rockets and mortar into the Signals and HQ area.

The Secure RATT was commanded by Cpl Trevor Chell and used the Radio Set AN/GRC-106 as its HF bearer.

It was at the time of the action at FSPB Coral that 110 Signal Squadron was also most extended. It was operating in 9 locations, including several detachments in support of communications to the fire support patrol base, in which 23 men were involved. During this period the availability of the radio relay trunk bearer system to HQ 1 ATF (Main) averaged 97.5%. Again, a highly creditable performance, but this forward communications task of 110 Signal Squadron represented only a small part of all the facilities it had to continue to provide at the same time.

### **547 Signal Troop**

Also operating from FSPB Coral was a detachment from 547 Signal Troop that did valuable Signals Intelligence (Sigint). It is worth noting that on the advice of 547 Signal Troop, Comd 1 ATF changed his initial insertion point for the Coral operation. The first planned insertion point was considered dangerously close to an NVA regiment, in fact probably on top of it!

The Troop deployed a three man detachment under the command of Sgt Jim Brill (RASigs) by air into Coral on 13<sup>th</sup> May 1968. Jim's detachment members were Sgt Fred Hawkes (RASigs) and Cpl Tom Williams (Aust Int Corps). Jim and Fred were highly skilled Morse code radio operators and radio traffic analysts and Tom was a Vietnamese linguist and cryptographer. Their limited equipment consisted of two VHF and two HF receivers with power supplies. On arrival at the Fire Support Patrol Base they set up within 104 Signal Squadron's defence position alongside Headquarters 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Task Force (Tactical) and commenced radio intercept operations, initially above ground, but everything was moved underground immediately after the first ground attack against them. Between being mortared, rocketed and defending the headquarters, the detachment intercepted many High Frequency enemy radio networks and recorded them, but the main prize sought, which was enemy VHF voice radio communications using low level codes or ciphers, eluded them for they were few and far between. The fruits of their labour were returned to Nui Dat for detailed analysis, being carried by the Troop OC, Maj Peter Murray, and 2IC, Capt Steve Zagon, who took it in turns to fly between Nui Dat and Coral. They also carried into Coral signals intelligence obtained from other sources for the Task Force commander.

After six days Jim's detachment was exhausted and a fresh team replaced them under the command for Sgt Ken Trewartha (RASigs). Ken's detachment members were Cpl John Hunter (Aust Int Corps) and L/Cpl Snowy Turner (RASigs). The new detachment continued to dig and intercept enemy radio communications around the clock, always hoping for the main prize, but to no avail on this occasion.

The battle of Coral showed that for future deployments the Troop had to be better equipped to carry out its task away from the specialist set room at Nui Dat. Five months later the Troop was issued with its own Armored Command Vehicle (call sign 85D).

#### **Footnotes:**

104 Signal Squadron had radio detachments with 1RAR and 3RAR at FSPB's Coral, Coogee and Balmoral. Also radio operators were with 1 Field Squadron at Coral and 161 (Indep) Recce Flt at Phu Loi. Members of 104 Signal Squadron went forward to Balmoral with HQ 1 ATF. Other members of 104 Signal Squadron provided a VHF retrans station from Bearcat; and a radio operator provided communications to 1 ATF while the Australian tanks traveled to FSPB Coral from Nui Dat on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1968.

104 Sig Sqn was also issued its own Armored Command Vehicle (call sign 85C) as a result of the lessons for the battle and all future deployments had the COMCEN and Switchboard (Ebony Forward) equipments mounted in the vehicle.

A special Signals web site that includes many photos from Coral and Balmoral is at <http://coral-balmoral.au104.org>. This site also has details on the May 2008 commemorations activities in Canberra. All the photos will over time be included on the 104 Signal Squadron Web Site at <http://www.au104.org>

**Denis Hare, B.E.M**  
March 2008

**Note:**

*Much of the information contained in this document was taken from the original 104 Signal Squadron after action report. In addition, the details on 547 Signal Troop were provided by Peter Murray, the Troop OC at the time. Thanks Peter.*

**About the Author:**

*Denis Hare was with 104 Signal Squadron in South Vietnam in 1968 and served over 22 years with the Royal Australian Corps of Signals. He is the Web Master of the 104 Signal Squadron Web Site "[www.au104.org](http://www.au104.org)" and the Author of the CD 'Pronto in South Vietnam 1962-1972'. Denis is now retired, which allows him to do more research on Signals in the Vietnam War and assist Signals Veterans with this research*