

ADDRESS for 50th ANNIVERSARY of CORAL

Ian “Scrubber” Ahearn

In light of events of the past few days, a topic to which I will return, I am going to cover some of the events at Fire Support Patrol Base Coral during the first attack on 13 May 1968. The recollections are shared with members of 102 and HQ Battery and I would suggest that there are many others here present that have their own distinct memories.

50 years ago at about this time, I was standing on a track a partially destroyed rubber plantation in an area of Vietnam that subsequently became known as FSPB Coral. I was waiting for the guns of 102 Battery to arrive. I guess the veterans here to-day may have a memory of what they were doing at this time 50 years ago.

It was the calm before the storm.

I had arrived at 0730 AM with my RMC classmate, Rod Baldwin who is here today. We were the Gun Position Officers for 161 Battery and 102 Battery. We were part of the 12 Field Regiment Reconnaissance party but I had travelled with the Kiwis while another chopper carried the Second-in-Command's group. Things went swiftly downhill from then on.

The Kiwi guns arrived-3 hours early. We lost the Second-in-Command but then found him 1.5 kilometres away. A motley band of Gunners about a dozen strong then sat isolated for almost 6 hours awaiting the arrival of 102 Battery's guns.

Little did we know that we were being watched.

The guns began to arrive about 2 pm and the whole fly in was disrupted as the helicopters were removed to support the Americans who were heavily engaged further west. 1 RAR was flown in after 102 Battery and our little bulldozer was late in arriving while our defence stores were delayed until the next day. With almost last light came the mortars from 1 RAR Mortar platoon; Tony Jensen, another RMC classmate who is also here today, was the officer in charge of the mortar line and he and his mortars were placed to the north of the 102 Battery guns – they were in fact a seventh gun platform

As many of you know the day of the 12 May was a long exhausting day. Stan Carbin's CP Staff – he is here today -has captured its essence in his memoirs as he recalled the move from FSPB Harrison to Coral:

“On moving day we rose at dawn to prepare for the move. The situation was new to us as in the past we had always moved from Nui Dat and established a new Fire Support Base. On this occasion we were dismantling one FSB and moving to establish another FSB on the same day. We never had to dismantle one base and build another in the same day. It was going to be a challenge. We knew the day was going to be exhausting with no rest. Sandbags had to be slashed, sleeping holes filled in, the command post dismantled, the hole filled in and the materials stacked ready to be moved and the barbed wire rolled up to be used again. “

The disruption to the fly in meant that we lacked defence stores and so could not prepare the position with wire, trip flares and Claymore mines. We also had no infantry company protection, a normal practice for the defence of FSPBs. In the words of Tony Jensen the mortars and the guns were on the perimeter. In short we were not prepared for what we were about to receive.

At about 02:00 am Delta Company 1 RAR about 2,000 metres to the North of Coral opened fire on a group of NVA moving towards the FSPB. In a flash the NVA responded with a volley of Rocket Propelled Grenades and two infantry men were killed and eight wounded. The battery fired in support and at the end of the mission left three guns pointing north.

As Gunner Mick Grimes Foxtrot Gun (here today) recalled

“At about 02:40 all hell broke loose with rocket propelled grenades (RPG), impacting mortars, heavy and small arms (SA) fire falling into the FSPB. The bright tails of the RPGs, which seemed to be initiated almost in front of us, and the green tracer temporarily blinded me. When they stopped firing RPGs and my eyes adjusted slowly to the dark again, loud bugles and whistles were heard to our front as well as yelling and screaming. It was then that I saw a thick line of massed enemy across our front charging in a wave towards the MG pit. This line was about 70m away. “

The assault wave came from the north east and covered from the Mortar Line on the left to Delta Gun on the right.

Bombardier Larry Darcy CHARLIE Gun- also here

“I recall the first moments of the attack on FSPB CORAL. The enemy fire was so intense you could not hear for the noise of rockets, machine guns and grenades that came tearing through the gun position. Time froze, as it was the first time we had all been under this sort of fire. As the enemy were now so close, I could hear the enemy talking and seeing green tracer rounds incoming looking like fire flies. Some of the bravest and most unselfish acts of courage under enemy fire of other members of the Battery, that I encountered that night, never ceases to amaze me. “

Bombardier Ray Darragh Delta Gun (here as well) was on the machine gun in front of Delta gun. He engaged the enemy assault wave until his MG jammed and he wisely withdrew to Delta position where the enemy were first engaged with small arms and then with fire from the 105 mm over open sights:

“The first couple of Splintex we fired we set the fuse to 2 seconds, and saw that the round was activating behind and out the back of the front enemy line which proved to have devastating effect on the second line of enemy. So we set the fuse to muzzle burst. Each gun was supplied with 6 Splintex rounds, so the other guns that were behind No. 4 Gun couldn't fire over open sights. So the brave men from these guns crawled up to No. 4 Gun carrying Splintex and HE Rounds whilst under extreme, heavy enemy fire. Also some crew remaining at their guns carrying out fire missions in support of the infantry sections under attack.”

On the left flank Tony Jensen OIC of the Mortar line (here):

The first warning of the attack came from Corporal Hickey, a section second-in- command (later killed in action), who alerted the Platoon second-in-command as the mortar attack began, and stated he was one of the picquets and there were about 400 enemy 50 metres away and gibbering.

This information was immediately passed to 1 RAR CP on the Battalion command net, and on the internal defence net to FSPB defence CP.”

The mortar platoon was over run immediately Jensen called for fire from 161 Battery and the 3 RAR mortars located with them. Jensen shouted to his Platoon telling them of the incoming rounds warning them to stay in their pits. He advised both the local defence CP and HQ 1 RAR of his situation but the latter needed three reports before they understood what was happening at the Mortar Platoon. The men of the platoon took refuge in their shell scrapes; arriving last on the position at last light the men of the Mortar platoon had not had sufficient time to fully develop their individual weapon pits. From their shell scrapes, the men of the mortar platoon began to engage the NVA with their personal weapons.

Lance Bombardier Geoff Grimish BRAVO Gun (here):

“My recollections of the night were of Gunner Kevin Nichols, our gun tractor driver, suffering a severe head wound and loss of an eye from the ricochet from an RPG which hit No. 2 Gun in the very first stage of the attack. I placed him in my shell scrape and covered his wound with a shell dressing. The basic dressing was totally inadequate for his wounds and he was in a bad way and in shock. I thought he would be safer down the command post so I tied our sweat rags together, then to his wrists. I then looped the sweat rags over my neck got him on back and dragged him to the command post, hugging the ground all the way.”

Gunner Neil Ahern –not a known relation and here today-from ALPHA Gun

“ All hell had broken loose, there were rockets and mortars raining in on our position, I lay in my pit on my back, hands over my ears and mouth open. (As we had been told to do in the event of high explosive attack) – Suddenly there was a huge explosion, above & right next to me, I copped the full concussion of this and did not know if I had been hit, I remember having been sat upright by the force and had to feel my arms & legs to see if they were still there. A rocket had hit one of the star pickets over our ammo bay, sending shrapnel into my pit, the tarp covering the ammo had been set on fire and I feared there would be a massive explosion had the 105mm shells been set off.”

Gunner Peter Geelan recalled:

“Bombardier Peter Riley from the Q Store could see the guns were going to run out of ammunition. Each gun would carry 100/120 rounds of high explosive [HE]. Peter, who had put his age back to join the Australian Army, had served some years in the British Army. Peter Riley on his own initiative organised the Q store men to load ammunition on his land rover and trailer and proceeded to resupply the guns. Peter did this on numerous occasions during the morning. In my mind I can still see him and his vehicle bouncing around on the un even terrain. After the battle a mechanic was sent out to try and repair Peter’s Landrover the vehicle had been shot 36 times without hitting the driver.”

Lance Bombardier Andy Forsdike, HQ Battery was in trouble:

Down the track to the west of the Mortar Platoon Forsdike and his team were in all sorts of

trouble. "Enemy swirled around Forsdike's men; the young bombardier's M60 jammed. He wrestled with it. Two men fell to his rear: one dead one wounded." The savage fight around Forsdike's machine gun was to leave two Australians dead."

What I have hoped to show by gathering these recollections of Gunners that were there is the common theme that has emerged; individual as well as collective acts of gallantry and courage.

Gunner Bruno Kurkowski has summed it up perfectly when he wrote:

"I saw so many acts of bravery that night, but the feel within our detachment was we would not give up. This would mean the loss of mates and the guns."

The Battle of Coral and Balmoral went on for another hectic three weeks. Coral was attacked for a second time and then the enemy made two assaults on FSPB Balmoral. 1 RAR had 57 company sized contacts over the period 112 May to 6 June. Coral/Balmoral was the first all arms brigade operation since WW2.

After 50 years the efforts of all involved in the battle may be recognised by the award of a Unit Citation of Gallantry. I say may but it should be announced on Sunday. It has been a long time coming and it is sad that many of the Gunners that fought in the battle will not be with us to appreciate the moment.

To the veterans here today and those with us in spirit: Savour the moment, embrace the award, recognise the contribution of others but look around you and appreciate the mateship that has assembled us here half a century after a fight in which we gave our all and triumphed.

We proved what General Douglas MacArthur stated:

"In many situations that seemed desperate, the artillery has been a most vital factor."