

*Our guys were very good.
We were a very capable battery,
in fact we were an arrogant
bunch.
We were good.*

*Fire Support Patrol Base Coral
12 May to 6 June 1968, South Vietnam.*

Honours thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the award of the degree

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Mark Jamieson, Bachelor of Arts

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Synopsis

This thesis provides an account of the role played by seven veterans who fought in the Battle for Fire Support Patrol Base (FSPB) Coral, 12 May to 6 June 1968, in South Vietnam. The veterans interviewed are from 102 Field Battery Royal Australian Artillery and the First Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR) Mortar Platoon. The veterans' memories challenge the account given in *On the Offensive: The Australian Army in the Vietnam War 1967-1968*,¹ the Official History series devoted to the Vietnam War. They believe the Official History is incorrect when it comes to four main matters: the intelligence provided to the units flying in to FSPB Coral, the positioning of the artillery batteries, two Final Preventative Fire tasks, and the use of splintex and ricocheting artillery. They also argue that the Official History has overlooked their role in the battle itself, one that was important in the overall outcome of the initial attacks launched by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong.

¹ Ian McNeill and Ashley Ekins, *On the Offensive: The Australian Army in the Vietnam War 1967-1968*, (Crowns Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2003), pp. 347-381.

Declaration

'I certify that this thesis is entirely my own work except where I have given full documented references to the work of others, and that all the material contained in this thesis has not been submitted for formal assessment in any formal course and the word length is 18,346.'

Mark Jamieson

7 May 2014

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations:	iv
Abbreviations:	v
Acknowledgements:	vi
Introduction:	7
Chapter One: Methodology and Literature Review	10
Chapter Two: The Official History	23
Chapter Three: The Soldiers Respond	38
Chapter Four: Close Quarters Fighting	67
Conclusion:	87
Appendix:	92
Bibliography:	109

List of Illustrations

Figure 2.1: Area of Operations conducted by the First Australian Task Force.

Figure 2.2: Area of Operations Surfers.

Figure 2.3: Positioning of 102 Field Battery and 1RAR Mortars on 12 and 13 May.

Figure 2.4: Layout of FSPB Coral on 12 and 13 May.

Figure 3.1: Planned landing zone layout for FSPB Coral 12 May.

Figure 3.2: 1RAR Duty Officer's Log.

Figure 3.3: First Australian Task Force Duty Officer's Log.

Figure 3.4: 102 Field Battery Officer's at FSPB Coral.

Figure 3.5: Initial positioning of 102 Field Battery howitzers.

Figure 3.6: Final positioning of 102 Field Battery howitzers.

Figure 3.7: Splintex dart.

Figure 3.8: Position of 102 Field Battery, 1RAR Mortars and the 90mm Recoilless Rifles.

Figure 3.9: Spread of a splintex round when fired.

Figure 3.10: After Action Report.

Figure 3.11: Position of artillery and mortars.

Figure 4.1: Sergeant Humphry, Bravo Gun (No. 2) at FSPB Coral.

Figure 4.2: Bravo Gun (No. 2) on the morning of 13 May.

Figure 4.3: Bombardier Larry D'Arcy at FSPB Coral 13 May.

Figure 4.4: Bombardier Larry D'Arcy at FSPB Coral 13 May.

Figure 4.5: Sleeping area and gun position.

Figure 4.6: Members of Charlie Gun (No. 3) on 13 May.

Figure 4.7: 102 Field Battery Command Post gunners.

Figure 4.8: The last night in Vietnam.

Abbreviations

1RAR: First Battalion Royal Australian Regiment.

2RAR: Second Battalion Royal Australian Regiment.

3RAR: Third Battalion Royal Australian Regiment.

9RAR: Ninth Battalion Royal Australian Regiment.

AK47: Avtomat Kalashnikova (Kalashnikov Assault Rifle).

AO: Area of Operations.

ARVN: Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

Bombardier: An Artillery soldier equal to the rank of Corporal.

Bund: A substantial amount of dirt that is built into a protective wall around the artillery guns.

Coral: Fire Support Patrol Base Coral.

FSB: Fire Support Base (United States term).

FSPB: Fire Support Patrol Base (Australian term).

Gunner: An Artillery soldier equal to the rank of Private.

K Pad: Designated Landing Zone at Fire Support Patrol Base Coral.

MiD: Mention in Despatches.

MM: Military Medal.

NVA: North Vietnamese Army.

RPG: Rocket Propelled Grenade.

Shell scrape: A shallow hole used for temporary personal protection.

Spooky: The Douglas AC-47 Spooky (also nicknamed "Puff, the Magic Dragon") was the first in a series of gunships developed by the United States Air Force during the Vietnam War.

Tannoy: The loudspeaker communication system that connects the Command Post to the Artillery Guns.

US: United States.

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Introduction

This thesis reflects the author's interest in Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, and in particular the Battle for Fire Support Patrol Base (FSPB) Coral, which occurred between 12 May and 6 June 1968. As will be discussed in the body of the thesis, this was part of the largest operation undertaken by the Australian Task Force in Vietnam, Operation *Toan Thang*, yet it remains virtually unknown to most Australians. The interest in Coral itself was sparked by one former FSPB veteran and the concerns he had, not only about the way Coral is portrayed in the Official History, but also about the general lack of recognition that battle itself has received in the military histories of Vietnam over the last forty-five years. He was also concerned that the critical role played by 102 Field Battery and 1RAR Mortar Platoon in the events of 12 and 13 May 1968, which is the focus of this thesis, has been overlooked in the Official History.

Seven veterans from these units were interviewed for this thesis. The interviews reveal that the units were ill prepared, badly positioned and completely unaware of the strength of the enemy in the area surrounding Coral. With that, 102 Field Battery and the 1RAR Mortar Platoon bore the brunt of the initial attacks mounted by the NVA and the Viet Cong on 12 and 13 May.

Official Histories, of course, have always been subject to criticism by those who were there. Often these criticisms reflect a misunderstanding of the job of the Official Historians whose purpose is to provide an overview of events rather than a detailed description of the actions of each unit within the broader picture of battle. Yet, the Official Histories can, and do, get it wrong. The discipline of military history is ample evidence of that as scholars revisit and revise

the work of the Official Histories. For the more recent conflicts, they have also begun to include the voices of the men who were there rather than rely on archival sources alone. In Australian military historiography, this has been marked in histories of the Vietnam War.

This thesis, then, allows seven Coral veterans the chance to tell the story of FSPB Coral in their own words, to set the record straight as they see it. Their memories are still vivid and, like many veterans from past wars, they have reached an age where they feel it is necessary to have their views recorded for posterity.

Chapter One provides an outline of the methodology used to conduct the interviews, how the literature on the use of oral history informed the approach taken to the interviews, and a brief overview of the limited secondary literature that examines the Battle for FSPB Coral. As noted above, the men interviewed were often highly critical of the Official History's version of the events at the Battle for FSPB Coral, particularly those of 12 and 13 May. The veterans pointed to what they saw as factual errors, matters of omission and, above all, the fact that their experiences were not recorded in a history that relied primarily on written official records. Chapter Two, therefore, provides a summary of the Official History's version of Coral which is to be found in *On the Offensive: The Australian Army in the Vietnam War 1967-1968* by Ian McNeill and Ashley Ekins.¹ Chapter Three examines four key events in the battle from the men's perspectives: intelligence provided to the units, the positioning of the gun batteries, two Final Preventative Fire tasks, and the use of splintex and ricocheting artillery rounds. Chapter Four is the men's description of the close quarters fighting that occurred on 12 and 13 May. Both

¹ Ian McNeill and Ashley Ekins, *On the Offensive: The Australian Army in the Vietnam War 1967-1968*, (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2003), pp. 347-381.

provide the soldiers' perspectives of the battle, an element they find lacking in the Official History.

Before any unit was sent to Vietnam, they had to undertake jungle warfare training at the Jungle Training Centre at Canungra, Queensland. The course is designed to test the men under pressure, test their physical ability and prepare them for Vietnam. At Canungra, 102 Field Battery excelled in their training, emerging as a confident and capable battery, a group of men knitted into a family. As Ian Ahearn remarked, 'our guys were good. We were a very capable battery, in fact we were an arrogant bunch. We were good.'² But the situation the men found themselves in at Coral demanded far more than arrogance based on their success in training: it demanded that they translate training into practice.

² Ian Ahearn (interview conducted 11 February 2014), p. 10.

Chapter One: Methodology and Literature Review

This chapter describes the methodology and research methods undertaken for this thesis, a review of relevant literature and a brief discussion of the interviews used for this work. It concludes with how historians have tackled the importance of memory in the writing of history.

Methodology

The first stage of research was to identify men who had served with 102 Field Battery and 1RAR Mortar Platoon at FSPB Coral for interview. As noted in the Introduction, seven veterans were selected, viz: Captain Donald Tait, Lieutenant Ian Ahearn, Bombardier Laurence D'Arcy, Gunners' Thomas Carmody, Robert Costello and David Thomas from 102 Field Battery Royal Australian Artillery, and Lieutenant Anthony Jensen, Second-in-Command Mortar Platoon, (1RAR). The artillery guns are listed as Alpha (No. 1), Bravo (No. 2), Charlie (No. 3), Delta (No. 4), Echo (No. 5) and Foxtrot (No. 6).

The interviews' objective was to ascertain the men's recollections of their part in the Battle for FSPB Coral on 12 and 13 May 1968. These recollections were then set beside the version of events contained in Chapter 12 'Battle at Fire Support Base Coral, April-May 1968' in the Official History.¹ This method provides a different perspective of what happened, especially over the two days of 12 and 13 May. The interviews were conducted via telephone, in the interviewees' homes, at the Australian War Memorial, at the Castle Hill RSL Club and at the Novotel Hotel in Wollongong. All interviewees agreed to these interviews, they were relaxed with the process

¹ McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, pp. 347-381.

and felt it important to not only answer the questions asked, but to provide very personal memories that have stayed with them for over 45 years. Five Coral veterans were interviewed in person, two over the telephone. The questions were carefully constructed and the interview was conducted in an unobtrusive manner.

The approaches to, and the framing of the questions asked in the interview, followed the guidelines set down by Raymond Opdenakker² and Charles T. Morrissey.³ Opdenakker describes the face-to-face interview as being a synchronous communication in time and place. The advantage of this method includes notation of social cues such as body language, voice and intonation. This can provide the interviewer with extra material that can be used in later questions.⁴ Opdenakker also states that the time frame between the question asked and the answer received is more spontaneous and is often given without reflection on the part of the interviewee.⁵ The telephone interview is seen as a synchronous communication of time, asynchronous communication of place. The advantage is that an interview can be achieved regardless of distance, but the disadvantage is the inability to read the social cues evident in face-to-face interviews.⁶

Morrissey adds that the interviewer should allow the interviewee to determine the place of interview, should have a thorough understanding of the research area, be prepared to listen without interrupting, ask open ended questions, ask for examples and leave potentially difficult

² Raymond Opdenakker, 'Advantages and Disadvantages of Four Interview Techniques in Qualitative Research', *Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 7, no. 4 (September 2006), pp. 1-13.

³ Charles T. Morrissey, 'On oral history interviewing', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson's (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 107-113.

⁴ Opdenakker, 'Advantages and Disadvantages of Four Interview Techniques in Qualitative Research', p. 3.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

questions for later in the interview rather than at the beginning. In essence, the interviewer needs to create a sense of trust with the interviewee in an environment the latter finds comfortable.⁷

Potential interviewees were formally invited to participate in this research project. They were provided with an overview of the objectives of the research and advised that they could choose either to be involved in the research, or decline the invitation (Appendix 1). Those who confirmed that they wished to be interviewed were then sent the University's Participation Information Sheet and Consent Form (Appendices 2 and 3). Those I was unable to meet face-to-face were sent the forms with a stamped return addressed envelope.

The Participant Information Sheet provided information on the Researcher, Supervisor, Methods and Demands on Participant, Possible Risks, Inconveniences and Discomforts, Funding and Benefits of the Research, and Ethics Review and Complaints. All forms were duly returned with agreement to participate. Two of the tick boxes on the Consent Form offered the participants the option of a personal interview or providing a written response. The tick box offering the participants the option of using a pseudonym was crossed out by all the participants. They specifically requested that their proper names be used. This, they felt, was necessary to add authenticity to the thesis (Appendix 4).

The participants were also sent the questions that would be used in the interview (Appendix 5). They were informed that the questions were not 'set in stone', but were a guide to issues that would be raised and that they could answer the questions in full, in part or not at all. They were

⁷ Morrissey, 'On oral history interviewing', p. 274.

also advised that they could raise other issues related to the battle and suggest additional questions at their discretion.

Following the guidelines set out by Opendakker and Morrissey, the interviews began with general background questions (for example, how they came to be in the Army) which the veterans felt comfortable about answering and which provided context for the more specific questions that followed. All interviews were recorded on a digital audio recorder and were then transcribed. A copy of each recording was made to ensure that the original material was not lost or damaged during the transcription process.

The decision to record rather than take notes during the interview reflects Paul Thompson's methodological approach to oral history. Listening, according to Thompson, takes longer than reading, and if the recordings are transcribed, the task and process becomes longer. That said, however, the recorded interview is a more accurate record of the interview, as opposed to a meeting where the interviewer attempts to transcribe what has been said or summarises what has been said.⁸ The recorded interview captures the nuances of the voice, pauses and asides, along with the uncertainties of the interviewees' recollections. Thompson believes that these elements cannot be captured by taking notes during an interview, which are more a summary of *what* was said as opposed to *how* it was said.⁹ And how something was said is often as important as what was said.

⁸ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 98.

⁹ *ibid.*

Literature and Sources

The Battle for FSPB Coral took place between 12 May and 6 June 1968 during the second Tet Offensive (sometimes known as the May Offensive). Despite the scale of the operations involved and the attack on FSPB Coral, it has received little attention in the literature dedicated to combat operations during the Vietnam War. For most, the Battle of Long Tan is remembered as the significant military operation during the Vietnam War, leaving FSPB Coral forgotten. There is even confusion over the nomenclature of the base. The Official History, for example, when explaining events at Coral, use the term Fire Support Base (FSB)¹⁰ and this has subsequently been repeated through later works on Coral. The Royal Australian Artillery, however, operated a Fire Support Patrol Base (FSPB).

The term FSB is accredited to the American Army. For them, the FSB is distinguished by its use of fire power to dominate the surrounding area. At a tactical level, this was entirely different to the Australian units, who, since World War Two, controlled their assigned area through a combination of firepower and extensive patrolling.¹¹ Although this may seem a minor matter to outsiders, to the men interviewed for this thesis it is not. The term FSPB distinguishes the unit as an Australian unit with a different function to that of the American FSB.¹² This thesis, then, will use FSPB, the term which has also been acknowledged in the majority of primary source

¹⁰ McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, pp. 347-381.

¹¹ Ian Ahearn, 'South Vietnam: First Battle of Coral 12th – 13th May 1968 The Real Story', *Journal of the Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company*, no. 84 (2012), p. 6.

¹² *ibid.*

material relating to Australian forces in Vietnam, and, in particular, with reference to the Battle for FSPB Coral.¹³

This section of the chapter reviews the works most relevant to this research, a book by Lex McAulay, the chapter on Coral that appears in the Official History and articles by three veterans, Ian Ahearn, Neil Bradley and Tony Jensen. The literature pertaining to the use of memory in writing history is discussed in the next section, particularly the work of Paul Thompson, James Bennett, Alistair Thomson and Barbara Allen.

In 1988, Lex McAulay published *The Battle of Coral: Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral May 1968*.¹⁴ The book's release coincided with the twentieth anniversary of the battle. McAulay described it as being 'the biggest unit level battle involving Australian soldiers in the Vietnam War'.¹⁵ Between May and June 1968, a series of actions were fought by the First Australian Task Force in, and around, FSPB Coral and Balmoral. McAulay's book remains the only full-length study of the battle and effectively captures the professionalism, courage, compassion, humour and initiative displayed by the Australian soldiers when faced with a force that outnumbered them. It is an in-depth account detailing the build-up, the deployment, subsequent attacks at FSPB Coral and Balmoral to the eventual closure of the bases. Three veterans, however, believe that his account of the Regimental Reconnaissance Party that flew into FSPB Coral, and the positioning of both 161 Field Battery and 102 Field Battery at FSPB Coral, are incorrect. The book claims that the actions taken by Major Brian Murtagh's Regimental Reconnaissance Party

¹³ Australian War Memorial, Australian Army Commanders' Diaries (Vietnam), Infantry Units, 1 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, Narrative, Duty Officers Log, (1-31 May 1968), AWM95-7-1-78 Part 1, <http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/record/awm95/subclass.asp?levelID=1309> (accessed 10 April 2013).

¹⁴ Lex McAulay, *The Battle of Coral: Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral May 1968*, (Victoria: Century Hutchinson Australia Pty Ltd, 1988).

¹⁵ *ibid.*, inside cover.

indicated that they arrived approximately 1000 metres from the proposed landing zone and subsequently marched off to establish the correct position.¹⁶

The version of what happened at FSPB Coral that has been far more influential, however, appears in the Official History series devoted to the Vietnam War, *On the Offensive: The Australian Army in the Vietnam War 1967-1968*,¹⁷ written by Ian McNeill and Ashley Ekins. Although this work appeared fifteen years after McAulay's book, its influence is evident in books analysing the war that have been published since, including Paul Ham's *Vietnam: The Australian War*¹⁸ (published in 2007), Bruce Davies' *Vietnam: The Complete Story of the Australian War*¹⁹ (published 2012) and Peter Edwards' *Australia and the Vietnam War*²⁰ (published 2014). Chapter 12 in *On the Offensive* focuses on the military build-up and reasons for establishing a base for Australian units in the Bien Hoa/Long Binh area. It describes, in detail, the reconnaissance and military intelligence used, military units and the key players involved in the establishment of FSPB Coral. The chapter brings to the fore the role played by Murtagh, and the difficulties he faced as the FSPB defence commander.²¹ Yet, when it comes to the battle fought on 12 and 13 May, the focus of this thesis, the men interviewed for this thesis find the account fractured; one that has omissions, has some facts wrong and one that does not reflect their own experiences.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁷ McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, pp. 347-381.

¹⁸ Paul Ham, *Vietnam: The Australian War*, (Australia: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007), pp. 360-378.

¹⁹ Bruce Davies, *Vietnam: The Complete Story of the Australian War*, (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2012), pp. 377-384.

²⁰ Peter Edwards, *Australia and the Vietnam War*, (Sydney: New South Publishing, 2014), pp. 205-209.

²¹ McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 360.

Three veterans have voiced their criticism of the way the campaign has been portrayed. Tony Jensen in his, 'FSPB Coral',²² provides an analysis of the strategic and tactical aims of the North Vietnamese Army, the First Australian Task Force commander's concept of operations, the units involved and detail of the Battle for FSPB Coral pertaining to the 1RAR Mortar Platoon. Jensen wrote his article in 1973 to, as he put it, 'set the record straight', and how the events occurring at FSPB Coral directly impacted the Mortar Platoon of which he was the Second-in-Command. Jensen points out that the commander of the reconnaissance party, upon landing, believed that they were not in the correct location and moved approximately 1200 metres to the northeast to establish a new position. It was at this time the Chinooks (heavy lift helicopters) delivering the artillery of 161 Field Battery arrived and required an area. With the commander absent, the pilots were asked to delay the landing. This was not possible, however, and the 161 Field Battery Captain accepted the guns then and there at the original landing zone. Although the Official History would not be published until 30 years later, Jensen's account is at odds with the Official History's version.

Neil Bradley in his, 'Battles of Coral and Balmoral Part 2: Time Spent in Reconnaissance Is Rarely Wasted'²³ points to what he believes were failures on Major Brian Murtagh's part. Bradley is adamant that the 1500 metre distance between 102 Field Battery and 161 Field Battery (which would play a part in the battle) was a result of inaccurate map reading and an inability to comprehend the area needed for three artillery batteries to defend the base. He states that the

²² Captain A.H. Jensen, 'FSPB Coral', *Infantry*, vol. xix, no. 2 (May-June 1973), pp. 24-31.

²³ Neil Bradley, 'Battles of Coral and Balmoral Part 2: Time Spent in Reconnaissance is Rarely Wasted', *Ministry for Culture and Heritage* (30 January 2009), <http://www.vietnamwar.govt.nz/memory/battles-coral-and-balmoral-part-2> (accessed 25 February 2012).

confusion surrounding the layout of FSPB Coral was largely attributable to Murtagh, which is also at odds with the Official History.

In September 2012, an article titled 'South Vietnam: First Battle of Coral 12th–13th May 1968 The Real Story'²⁴ was published in the *Journal of the Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company*. The author, Ian Ahearn was the Gun Position Officer who served with 102 Field Battery, Royal Australian Artillery at FSPB Coral. He wrote the article in response to what he views as the inaccuracies and omissions, and an incomplete picture of what happened, in the Official History's account of the events of 12 and 13 May. His article takes exception to the Official History's version of the landing of the Regimental Reconnaissance Party, Murtagh's role, the omission of the decision to adopt two Final Preventative Fire tasks (which were pertinent to the battle) and the account of the use of splintex and ricocheting artillery during the battle. The veteran's criticisms are discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

Two other published sources used were *The Gunners*²⁵ by David Horner and Brian Murtagh's article, 'Coral Twenty Eight Year On: Some Recollections of a Gunner'.²⁶

The interviews with the veterans were the major primary source used in this thesis. Other sources used were the 1RAR Commanders' Diaries²⁷ as this infantry unit was supported by 102 Field Battery throughout their deployment in Vietnam. The Commanders' Diaries provide a descriptive account of movements and actions conducted by both 1RAR and 102 Field Battery.

²⁴ Ahearn, 'South Vietnam: First Battle of Coral', pp. 5-24.

²⁵ David Horner, *The Gunners: A History of Australian Artillery*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995), pp. 484-488.

²⁶ Brian Murtagh, 'Coral Twenty Eight Years On: Some recollections of a Gunner', *Duty First*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1996), p. 21.

²⁷ Australian War Memorial, Australian Army Commanders' Diaries (Vietnam), Infantry Units, 1 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, Narrative, Duty Officers Log Annexes, Maps, part 2 (1-31 May 1968), AWM95-7-1-78 Part 2, <http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/record/awm95/subclass.asp?levelID=1309> (accessed 10 April 2013).

An account from Lance Corporal Allen James (Jack) Parr, 1RAR Mortar Platoon signaller was also used.²⁸

Memory and History

Well before the invention of writing, memory, based on a retelling of stories, events and experiences, was a means of preserving the past. As Nigel Hunt argues in *Memory, War and Trauma*,²⁹ written history emerged as a result of this retelling being captured in words on paper rather than words spoken, vividly exposed through the writings of early historians such as Herodotus,³⁰ who is often described as the father of history. This approach to history has emerged in modern historiography as oral history. Paul Thompson argues that oral history has been, and remains in many ways, a principle source of communicating past human experience. It offers insights into areas of history not always covered by the written records. This is why today we have a burgeoning community of professional and amateur historians whose sole purpose is to unveil those parts of history not recorded in the written record.³¹

Oral history is not an objectification of the past, but more an acceptance of events as seen through the eyes of the participants. It provides a voice for those who, more often than not, remain faceless, but who are no less important than the leaders whose lives are recorded in the written record.³² Recollections are critical when individuals encounter history: they can create an empathy that has a social expression. That may explain why the Australian War Memorial

²⁸ Australian War Memorial, Splintex Dart, Battle of Coral: Lance Corporal A J Parr, 1 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, <http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/REL35838>.

²⁹ Nigel C. Hunt, *Memory, War and Trauma*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 98.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Paul Thompson, 'The Voice of the Past', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 25.

³² Hunt, *Memory, War and Trauma*, pp. 108-109.

attracted over 900,500 visitors in 2013.³³ For many, the Australian War Memorial allows visitors to centre family histories within the metanarratives of Australians and war. This supports the rationale of this thesis. The works of Paul Thompson, Alistair Thomson, Barbara Allen and James Bennett on the importance of memory, and the role it plays in capturing lived history, and how to capture it, have shaped the theoretical approach used in this thesis.

Paul Thompson, in *The Voice of the Past*,³⁴ regards the process of memory as being dependant on several factors. First, there is the subject interest; the more significant or interest in the subject, the likelihood of it being remembered is increased. Memory becomes stimulated by revisiting the scene, meeting an old acquaintance or speaking about the past. Memory, Thompson asserts, is also dependent on the individual's willingness to remember. Memory is also co-dependent on the questions asked, and if these questions hold an interest for the interviewee.³⁵ What Thompson argues as relevant has been reflected in the interviews conducted with the Coral veterans. The men interviewed have an interest in the subject, the Battle for FSPB Coral, which has remained prominent in their memories.

The work of Alistair Thomson in *ANZAC Memories: Living with the Legend*³⁶ demonstrates that, over time, individual memories may fade or be reworked to suit a particular audience. This however, as Thomson points out, does not diminish the importance of the individual's memory. Its value lies in the intersection between the past as memory and contemporary issues. He found that remembering in the World War One diggers he interviewed was influenced by the

³³ Australian War Memorial, Annual report 2012-2013, <http://www.awm.gov.au/sites/default/files/AnnualReport2013.pdf> (accessed 12 February 2014).

³⁴ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1978).

³⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 103-104.

³⁶ Alistair Thomson, *ANZAC Memories: Living with the Legend*, (Australia: Monash University Publishing, 2013).

social and psychological experiences that come with age as well as the resurgence of interest in ANZAC that came in the 1980s, and that the memories of the men reflected different experiences, motivations and identities.³⁷

Barbara Allen's article, 'The Personal Point of View in Orally Communicated History',³⁸ reasons that oral history can be used to complement, and supplement, the written source by injecting the personal experience into written history. The sentiments of the people involved and the sharpness of the eyewitness account provides a different perspective that can counterbalance what is often regarded as the impersonal and the generalised in history.³⁹ The notion that the uniqueness of the individual's experience is just as important as any official historical account was borne out by the interviews with the Coral veterans.

In his 'Human Values in Oral History',⁴⁰ James Bennett establishes the relevance and value of the recorded interview. According to Bennett, the interview conveys the human value and the importance of the lived event. The key indicator in Bennett's article is the idea of *I remember*; this is the personal viewpoint, or the human value. If this viewpoint is removed from an account, then this in effect jettisons the personal or individual recollection.⁴¹ The *I remember*, is central to the research conducted for this thesis. Their individual memories, the *I remember*, belongs to them. This supports the thesis objective of capturing the soldier's memory.

³⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 81-119.

³⁸ Barbara Allen, 'The Personal Point of View in Orally Communicated History', *Western Folklore*, vol. 38, no. 2 (April 1975), pp. 110-118.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 117.

⁴⁰ James Bennett, 'Human Values in Oral History', *Oral History Review*, vol. 11 (1983), pp.1-15.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 6.

The work of Thompson, Thomson, Allen and Bennett was complimented with supportive literature from several other authors.⁴² The additional material provides further understanding of oral history, its connection to memory and how the individual experience provides an insight into an event.

⁴² Lindsay Dodd, 'Small fish, big pond: using a single oral narrative to reveal broader social change', in Joan Tumblety (ed), *Memory and History: Understanding memory as a source and subject*, (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 37; Barbara Allen & William Lynwood Montell, *From Memory to History: Using Oral Sources in Local Historical research*, (Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1981), p. 109; E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1963), pp. 11-12; E.H. Carr, *What is History*, (England: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 3; Paul Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 65; Emily Honig, 'Getting to the Source-Striking Lives: Oral History and the Politics of Memory', *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1997), p. 139; Joan Sangster, 'Telling our stories: feminist debates and the use of oral history' in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 88; Trevor Lummis, 'Structure and validity in oral evidence', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 273; Robert H. Lowie, 'Oral Tradition and History', *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 30, no. 116 (April-June 1917), p. 163; Kate Darian Smith and Paula Hamilton (eds), *Memory and History in Twentieth-Century Australia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.1; John Tosh, 'The Pursuit of History: Aims, methods and new directions in the study of modern history', 5th edition, (England: Pearson Education Limited, 2005), p. 313; Peter Edwards, 'Oral history and official history', p. 106; Allesandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, (London: Routledge, second edition 2006), p. 33.

Chapter Two: The Official History

As this thesis examines the men's memories of the Battle for FSPB Coral and their criticisms of the Official History, this chapter summaries its version of events to provide context for the veterans' four main criticisms to be discussed in Chapter Three: intelligence provided to all deploying units, the positioning of 161 Field Battery and 102 Field Battery, two Final Preventative Fire tasks, and the use of splintex and ricocheting artillery to defend FSPB Coral.

Brief Overview of Operation Toan Thang

The establishment of FSPB Coral began with Operation *Toan Thang* (Complete Victory), a combined allied military operation in the III Corp area beginning on 8 April 1968. American, South Vietnamese, Australian, New Zealand and Thai troops were involved. Totalling 70,000 service personnel, it was the biggest allied operation of the war to date.¹ FSPB Coral itself would become the largest base established by the Australian Task Force during the war.²

The initial purpose of *Toan Thang* was to clear 11 provinces of the NVA and the Viet Cong in the III Corp Tactical Zone, concentrating on the northern approach to Saigon. The operation consisted of three main elements. First, it was to interrupt and eliminate any remaining enemy forces of company size or larger involved in the Tet Offensive. Secondly, it was to halt any second wave offensive on Saigon and thirdly, to bolster the units of the Regional Force and Popular Force, known as 'Ruff-Puffs', in the III Corps area.³ The 'Ruff-Puffs' were a combination

¹ McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 347.

² *ibid.*, p. 356.

³ *ibid.*, p. 347.

of fulltime soldiers and volunteers supporting the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). They served as a militia organisation and their task was to secure strategic bridges and provide basic security in their areas.⁴

Task Force Progression

The key to understanding the organisational phase and build up to FSPB Coral begins with the units involved and the operational structure. Australian Major General A.L. MacDonald was approached by American Lieutenant General Weyand, Commander of II Field Force Vietnam, requesting the use of the Australian Task Force to block enemy infiltration routes into Saigon, the second objective of *Toan Thang*. The area that needed securing was the Bien Hoa/Long Binh complex, situated well north of the relatively secure province of Phuoc Tuy, the Australian Area of Operations (AO).⁵ The Task Force was to move from Nui Dat, the First Australian Task Force base, and progressively head north before finishing at AO Surfers (Figure 2.1). Surfers was broken into three separate AO's; Manly, Bondi (in which FSPB Coral was to be located) and Newport.⁶

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 41.

⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 349-350.

⁶ *ibid.*

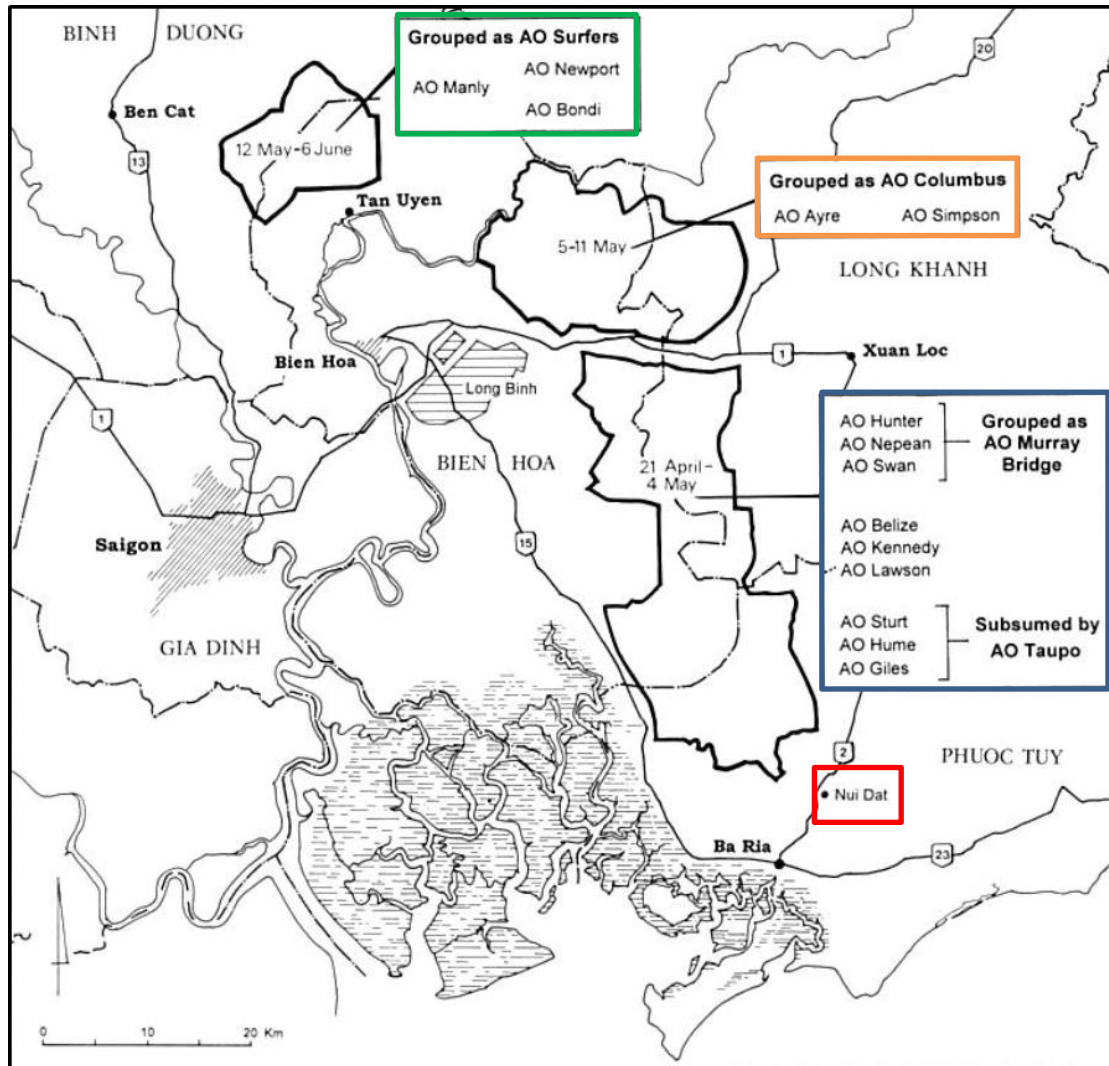


Figure 2.1: The progressive movement of AO's taken and occupied by the First Australian Task Force during operation Toan Thang, 21 April to 7 June 1968.⁷ Note: First Australian Task Force Base at Nui Dat is red, AO Giles is blue, AO Columbus is orange and AO Surfers is green.

The move was conducted as a battalion reconnaissance-in-force operation into the Nui Dinh, Nui Thi Vai and Hat Dich areas by Australia's Third Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR). On 21 April, the move into AO Giles (Figure 2.1) marked the beginning of the Task Force engagement in *Toan Thang*.⁸ With only minor contacts occurring during this phase, the Task

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 351.

⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 348-349.

Force proceeded north into the Bien Hoa province. From 23 to 25 April, they commenced a multi-battalion reconnaissance-in-force operation. This move redirected the operational approach from being search operations to a blocking role, concentrating on infiltration routes into the Bien Hoa/Long Binh and Saigon areas.⁹

On 5 May, Australian units comprising the First Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR) and the Second Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (2RAR) were airlifted into AO Columbus (Figure 2.1) relieving the United States Army's 199th Brigade, coinciding with the second communist offensive on Saigon. The Australian Task Force had now established a protective belt east of the Bien Hoa/Long Binh complex. In AO Ayre (Figure 2.1), 102 Field Battery moved to FSPB Harrison, providing direct artillery support for 1RAR. At AO Simpson, 108 Field Battery and the American 'A' Battery, 2/35th Artillery reoccupied FSPB Anderson, providing artillery support for 2RAR.

With expected enemy infiltration coming from the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) 274 Regiment, the Australians established a pattern of heavy patrolling and the laying of night ambushes to deal with the expected infiltration.¹⁰ Since 5 May, enemy contact had been minimal. With the NVA 274 Regiment unsighted by the Australians during this time, and the second offensive on Saigon faltering, the remaining enemy were considered weak, uncoordinated and to be generally in small disorganised groups.¹¹

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 349.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 353.

¹¹ *ibid.*

On 10 May, Lieutenant General Weyand held a Commanders' conference at II Field Force Vietnam Headquarters located at Long Binh. This was attended by Brigadier Hughes, First Australian Task Force commander. He was informed about moving the Task Force further north into an area known to the Americans as 'The Catcher's Mitt'. The area was in Bien Hoa, approximately 45 kilometres north of Saigon and 60 kilometres northwest of Nui Dat.¹² On 10 May, 3RAR flew into AO Simpson to relieve 2RAR; 3RAR sighted no enemies on 11 May. For the 21 days of operations, the Task Force had very little to show.¹³ However, a large scale withdrawal of enemy forces from around the Saigon area had begun. The Australians were now given the task with interdicting the escaping enemy.¹⁴

Intelligence

Intelligence reports are a vital part of the preparation of troops for deployment. It is expected to give an indication of the number of enemy and the potential threat the enemy may pose to the planned campaign. According to the Official History, there were two intelligence reports on the strength of the enemy in AO Surfers. The first report warned of a likely enemy presence of regimental strength somewhere within AO Surfers. It identified it as 7 NVA Division, which included the 141 and 165 NVA Regiments, and saw these forces as posing a threat to FSPB Coral.¹⁵ Figure 2.2 indicates the village of Binh My which was an important NVA staging area.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 354.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 353.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 354.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 356.

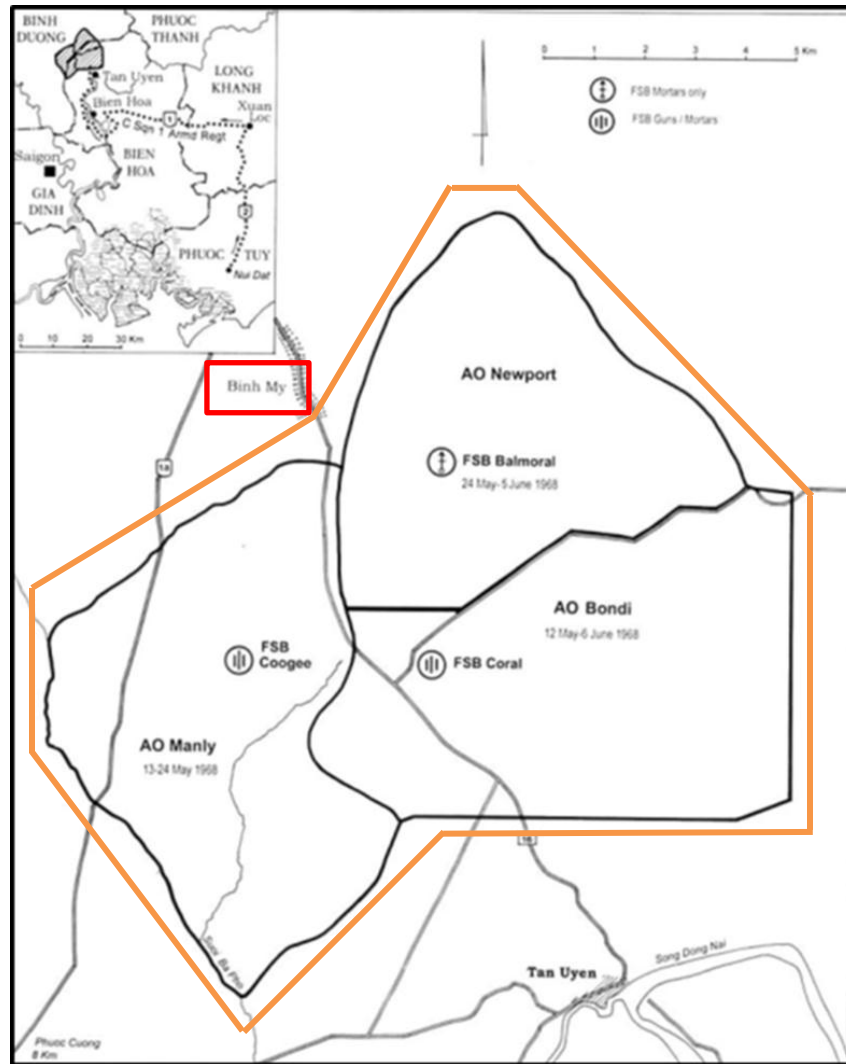


Figure 2.2: AO Surfers (orange) included subsidiary AO's Bondi (FSPB Coral) established 12 May. AO Manly established 13 May and AO Newport established 24 May.¹⁶ Note: The red rectangle indicates the village of Binh My. AO Newport did not exist in the original orders. It was created when FSPB Balmoral was initiated on 24 May.

By the time Weyand called his meeting, which as noted earlier, had been attended by Hughes, a second report had been prepared. It stated that the village of Binh My (Figure 2.2), located in AO Surfers, was accessible to enemy troops moving either north or south. The village was well known as an important staging and resupply area for the NVA and Viet Cong units.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 355.

Supplementary intelligence reports and captured documents noted the likelihood of enemy movements in and around AO Surfers. The enemy units included 141 NVA Regiment (strength 975), 165 NVA Regiment (strength 694), 274 VC Regiment (strength 720), 275 VC Regiment (unknown strength) and the Dong Nai Regiment (strength 800-900). The fact that it informed part of the planning for the operation is shown by the fact that it was included in the Task Force After Action Report.¹⁷ Although both reports also showed that the enemy forces outnumbered the Australian forces being deployed to the sector, only the first report suggested that this represented a threat to FSPB Coral.

Hughes, however, did not pass this information down to the next level in the chain of command, the unit command level. The Official History does not explain why this was the case, but when Lieutenant Colonel Bennett and other unit commanders met at the Task Force Commanders' 'orders group' meeting at the American base, Bearcat, on 10 May, there was no suggestion that there would be a large enemy presence in AO Surfers. Rather, the unit commanders assumed that operations would be as they had been over the last three weeks. Contact with the enemy had been limited to small groups of approximately 10 to 20 men, moving to a proposed rendezvous point, avoiding any confrontation.¹⁸ The decision at Bearcat, then, was to establish the base at Coral and infantry companies would move out of the base in the morning to commence their patrols, which had been standard operating procedure.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 356.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 363.

Reconnaissance and air move into FSPB Coral

On 10 May Lieutenant Colonels Phillip Bennett and Jim Shelton carried out an air reconnaissance of AO Surfers (Figure 2.2). The US Army pilot given the task of flying the Lieutenant Colonels refused to fly below 2000 feet (600 metres) for fear of being shot at and would permit only one fly over of the area. This caused concerns for Bennett and Shelton as a complete picture of the ground, including a rubber plantation to the northwest and landing zone, was never fully ascertained.¹⁹ With the commanders' air reconnaissance complete by 5.00pm, Brigadier Hughes initiated the move to AO Surfers for 12 May.²⁰

With the AO's established, 3RAR flew into FSPB Coral on 12 May to secure the landing zone, designated K Pad, followed by the remaining elements of 3RAR and 1RAR.²¹ 161 Field Battery Royal New Zealand Artillery was allocated to support 3RAR, whose task was to intercept enemy units withdrawing from the south and southwest in AO Manly. 102 Field Battery and 1RAR Mortar Platoon were allocated to support 1RAR who would clear route 16 from FSPB Coral to the village of Tan Uyen and provide blocking positions in AO Bondi.²²

The fly in to FSPB Coral, however, was delayed. There was a heavy contact occurring three kilometres from the site between the enemy and the American 1st Division in AO Surfers.²³ Shelton, who was in contact with Hughes, delayed the fly in of his men to AO Surfers. A second delay resulted when the American air controller, who accompanied Shelton, viewed the proposed landing zone and considered the vegetation problematic for the landing helicopters.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 354.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*, pp. 354-356.

²² *ibid.*, pp. 355-356.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 358.

This potential problem had been missed because of the altitude of the initial air reconnaissance. A new landing zone approximately 1000 metres southwest of the original site was nominated by the American air controller.²⁴ These delays subsequently pushed the allocated fly in times for all units back by a considerable amount.

With the Americans in contact with the enemy, the changed landing zone and modifications to the fly in plan, 1RAR companies had a long three to four hour wait at AO Columbus before flying into FSPB Coral.²⁵ 'A' Company 1RAR Commanding Officer Major Colin Adamson later wrote that 'the battalion was flown into FSPB Coral in dribs and drabs all day and then two hours before last light the Coys [companies] were sent of willy nilly N [North] , S [South], E [East] and W [West]'.²⁶ This resulted in units arriving late in the afternoon with insufficient time to properly establish the base before nightfall.

Battery Positioning

The first artillery guns to arrive were from 161 Field Battery, Royal New Zealand Artillery. They were ferried in by Chinook helicopters and placed 1000 metres away at an improvised landing zone to the southwest.²⁷ This was the landing zone designated by the American air controller, not the original landing zone proposed by Bennett and Shelton.²⁸ When landed, the 102 Field Battery guns were positioned 1500 metres away from 161 Field Battery.²⁹ This created a problem for Major Brian Murtagh, 12 Field Regiment in command of the artillery defence of the

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 359-360.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 360.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 359.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 354.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 360.

base: how could the defence of FSPB Coral be coordinated with the guns so far apart? The perimeter of FSPB Coral was now approximately two kilometres in diameter.³⁰ Murtagh later remarked that the distance between the 161 Field Battery and 102 Field Battery guns when FSPB Coral was attacked was actually a benefit as it allowed the guns of 161 Field Battery to fire in direct support of 102 Field Battery.³¹

Unknown to the Australians, the occupation of FSPB Coral had been carefully watched by the NVA, whose 7 NVA Division Headquarters was only nine kilometres to the east. Within the Headquarters vicinity, several units were housed, including 141 NVA Regiment operating to the east and 165 NVA Regiment operating to the north.³² To the NVA, the Australians moving into FSPB Coral was an intrusion into their area and they responded by mobilising one battalion of 141 NVA Regiment, and 275 and 269 Infiltration Groups.³³

A reconnaissance patrol from 275 Infiltration Group spied the 102 Field Battery guns, but not the 1RAR Mortar Platoon as they arrived well into the afternoon and were on the periphery of the 102 Field Battery guns. Under a dark sky and heavy rain storm, the NVA moved to within 250 metres of the FSPB Coral perimeter and were able to dig in to the earth undetected.³⁴

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*, pp. 363-364.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 364.

Two Final Preventative Fire Tasks

Before last light there was a concerted effort to tie in various sub units and coordinate defences around FSPB Coral, but as night fell this was still incomplete.³⁵ 102 Field Battery and the 1RAR Mortar Platoon machine gunners established their machine guns in front of their respective positions, but were unable to test fire or coordinate arcs of fire. The men at FSPB Coral then settled in for the night with picquets established as rain began to fall.³⁶

With the rain easing at midnight, sporadic skirmishes occurred with enemy reconnaissance parties. Just past midnight, now 13 May, an enemy probe contacted the 1RAR Mortar position and was engaged by machine gun fire. Return fire from outside the perimeter saw green tracer rounds heading into the Australian position. This alerted the gunners, who initially thought it was the Mortars firing through them, but soon realised that the green tracers were North Vietnamese.³⁷ This was the initial enemy probe of the FSPB Coral defences. Then at 2.25am, 12 Platoon, Delta Company, 1RAR initiated an ambush on three enemy soldiers in their area. The contact killed one enemy before they retreated and fired rocket propelled grenades (RPG's) into the trees above the Australians. This resulted in serious injuries requiring a 'Dustoff' helicopter to remove the dead and wounded Australians.³⁸

According to the Official History, prior to the ground attack on FSPB Coral, all six artillery guns were pointing to the east. A fire mission to the north was called and the rounds were delivered

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 363.

³⁶ *Ibid.*.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 364. Note: Tracer ammunition (tracers) are bullets that are built with a small pyrotechnic charge in their base. Ignited by the burning powder, the pyrotechnic composition burns brightly, making the projectile visible to the naked eye. This enables the shooter to follow the trajectory and make corrections. Tracers are generally loaded as the fifth round in a rifle magazine or machine gun belt. Often referred to as a four to one tracer.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 365. Note: Throughout the Vietnam War, all evacuation helicopters assumed the callsign 'Dustoff'.

by 102 Field Battery in support of the infantry. The Official History does not explain the reasons for the fire mission, simply that it occurred. With the fire mission concluded the gunners remained at their posts. 'Luck' is mentioned as a prevailing factor with the artillery guns from 102 Field Battery being laid in the direction of the attacking enemy.³⁹ Figure 2.3 shows the direction of the six artillery guns after the fire mission to the north.

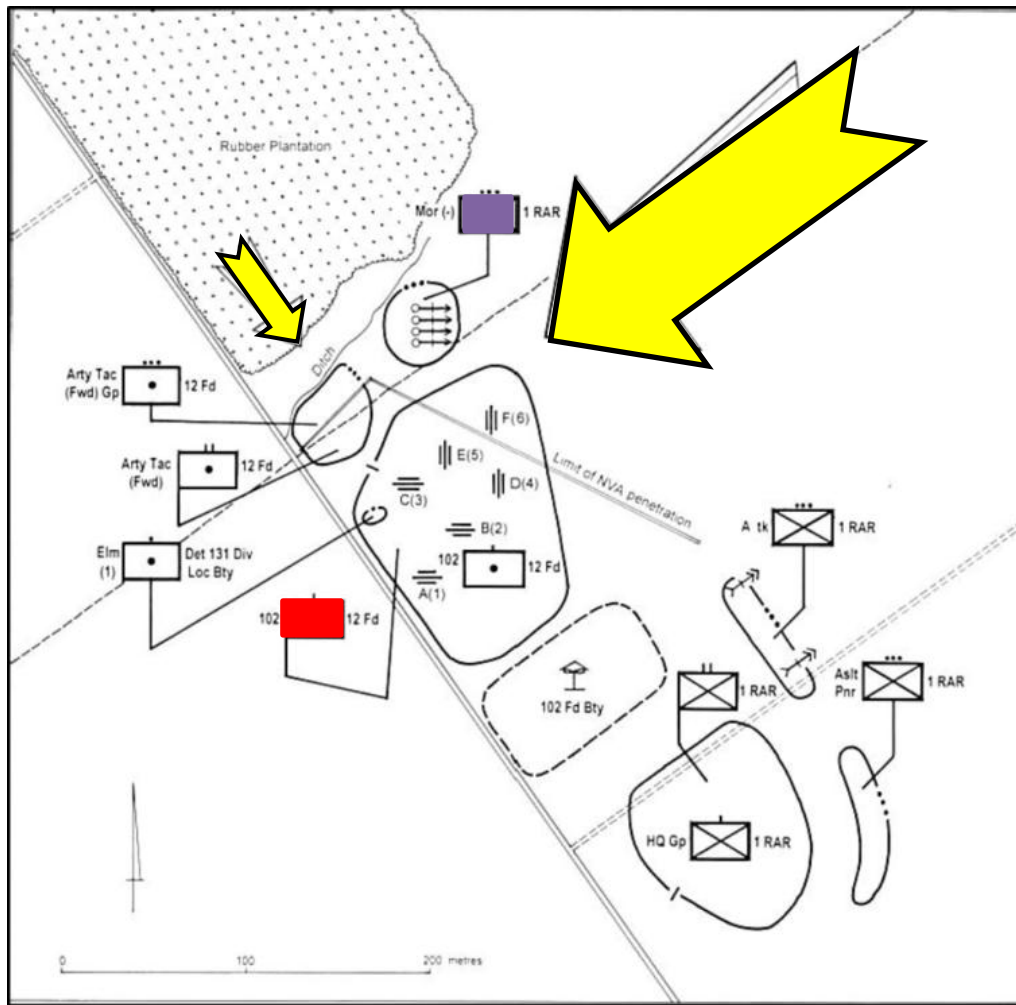


Figure 2.3: Yellow arrows indicate direction of enemy attack on 12/13 May 1968. Red indicates the direction of the six 102 Field Battery guns, purple indicates 1RAR Mortar position.⁴⁰

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 367.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 366.

Splintex and Ricocheting Artillery

At 3.30am, with mortars and rockets falling on FSPB Coral, the enemy launched their major attack. 1RAR Mortars were being completely overrun in the assault and Lieutenant Jensen faced the possibility of complete annihilation.⁴¹ Two of his mortar men had already been killed as a result of trying to evade the enemy by leaving their pits. Jensen's only option was to call the 90mm Recoilless Rifles onto his mortar position.⁴² After being called to fire by Jensen, Lieutenant Les Tranter, commanding the Anti-tank Platoon and the 90mm Recoilless Rifles, fired across the front of the mortars using splintex and high explosive ammunition to relieve some of the pressure caused by the attacking enemy. Jensen called for his platoon to 'stay down' as splintex darts swept across his platoon.⁴³ This act would ultimately save the lives of many of his men. During the attack, the enemy had captured a mortar tube and used it against the Australians. The rounds, however, landed away from the base, causing no harm. The enemy also attempted to remove a mortar tube in one piece. Jensen called for splintex again which penetrated the mortar tube and pinned an enemy combatant against the weapon.⁴⁴

Due to no serious threat to the artillery guns during previous operations, an allocation of six splintex rounds per gun had been issued. The guns fired the splintex rounds over open sights and once they expended their splintex rounds they fired high explosive rounds.⁴⁵ The gunners then employed a technique not taught at the School of Artillery. They depressed the gun barrel towards the ground, setting the fuses to delay, and firing. The round ricocheted off the ground

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 368.

⁴³ *ibid.*, pp. 367-368.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

40 to 50 metres in front of the gun, creating in an air burst above the enemy.⁴⁶ Figure 2.4 shows the positioning of 102 Field Battery, 1RAR Mortar Platoon and the Anti-tank Platoon. The positioning of all three will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapters.

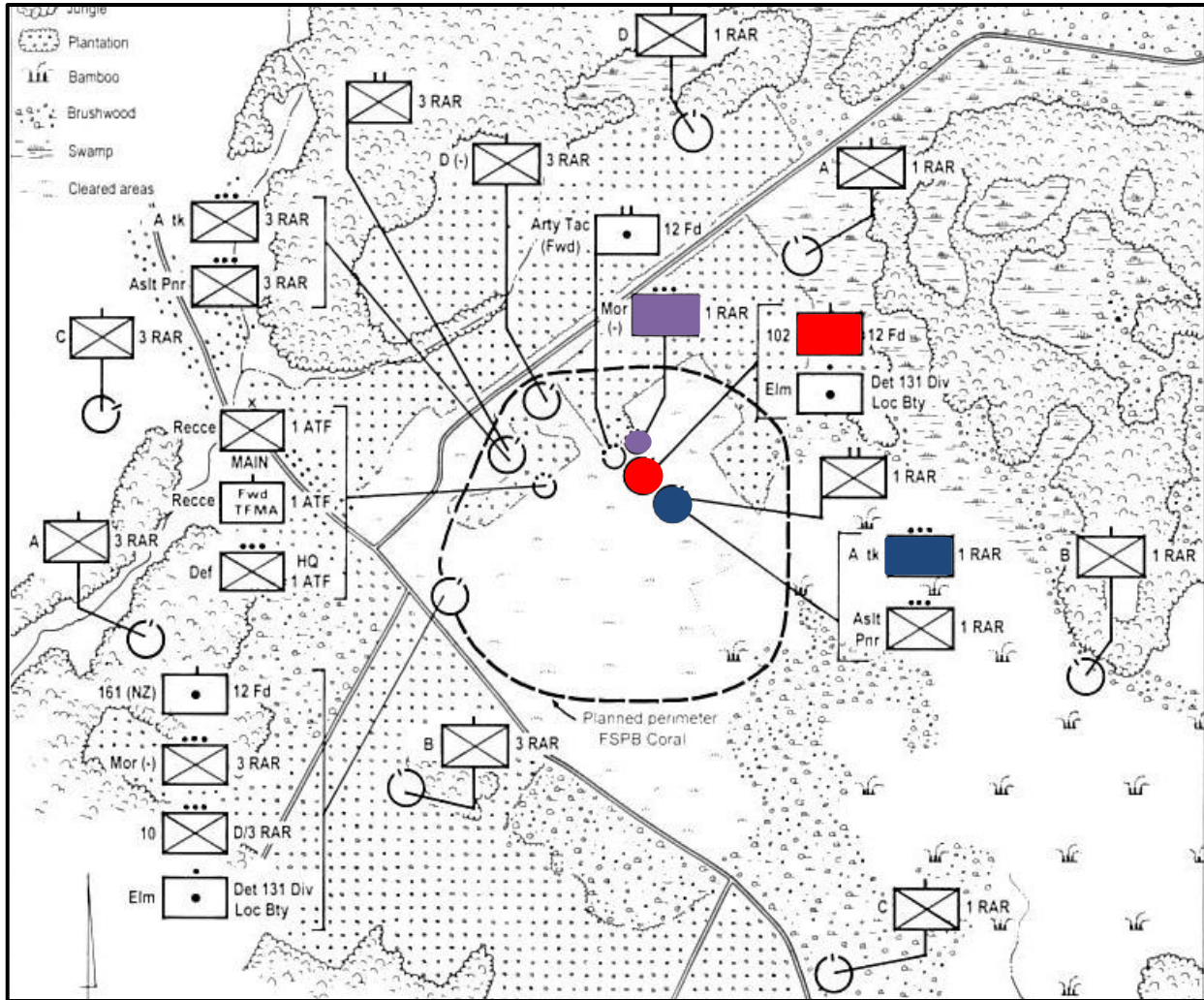


Figure 2.4: Layout of FSPB Coral on the night of 12/13 May 1968.⁴⁷ Note: This shows the position of 102 Field Battery (red), located between 1RAR anti-tank Platoon (blue) and 1RAR Mortar Platoon (purple).

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 368-369.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 362.

Closing out the first attack

Air support was called to assist FSPB Coral, and a hailstorm of cannon fire was delivered by a 'Spooky', a US AC-47 aircraft equipped with multiple miniguns that circled the perimeter. Armed helicopters engaged the enemy along with ground attack fighter jets.⁴⁸ At 5.45am with light approaching, the enemy began to withdraw back into the rubber plantation, removing as many of their dead as possible. As a result of the contact, the Task Force suffered nine killed in action and 28 wounded in action. The heaviest loss was on the 1RAR Mortar Platoon with five killed and eight wounded from a total of 18 men. A total of 52 enemy dead were recovered from the battle field.⁴⁹

A number of Officers were critical of the operation. Among them was Major Colin Adamson, commanding 'A' Company, 1RAR, who said:

The TRUE story of the first attack on 'Coral' will NEVER be told, to many bastards' heads would roll. For sheer incompetence I've never seen worse.⁵⁰

The veterans interviewed agreed with his assessment, particularly when it came to their role between 12 and 13 May 1968.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 369.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 370.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 371.

Chapter Three: The Soldiers Respond

The intelligence summary, the positioning of both 161 Field Battery and 102 Field Battery, the purpose of two Final Preventative Fire tasks, and the use of splintex and ricocheting artillery as mentioned in Chapter Two will be discussed in this chapter. As will become clear, there are substantial differences between the soldiers' memories of these events and the Official History's version.

Intelligence

The Official History states that through intelligence reports, captured documents and prisoners questioned, contact with enemy regiments had occurred in AO Surfers. It states that the Task Force was to interdict enemy withdrawing from the south and southwest. The Commanders' conference referred to the presence of 7 NVA Division (to which 141 and 165 Regiments belonged) to be somewhere within AO Surfers. The intelligence reports went on to state that 'this was not considered a significant threat to FSPB Coral'. The Operational Orders noted that the enemy units expecting to pass through AO Surfers would contain a substantial enemy main force and local force units. They would be deployed tactically, be well-coordinated, and possess high morale. The Operational Orders also listed additional local force elements operating in and around AO Surfers. In total, enemy numbers were estimated at over 4000 in the area.¹

¹ Australian War Memorial, AWM95 Australian Army commanders' Diaries [Vietnam] Infantry Units 7/1/78 Part 2, 1 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, Narrative, Duty Officer's log, Annexes, Maps part 2, Operational Orders Annex A to 1ATF Frag No.5 to OPO No. 19/68 (10 May 68). <http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/AWM95/7/1/> (accessed 10 January 2014).

The veterans interviewed state that the intelligence reports and Operational Orders were not passed down to them. They are critical of the fact that the Official History does not make a point of addressing the failures of command evident in the fact that the intelligence provided to Hughes at the Commanders' conference at Long Binh was not communicated to the Task Force Commanders' 'orders group' at Bearcat who, in turn, were not able to provide their next in command with the required intelligence. Instead, as Don Tait remembers, the men were expecting an entirely different scenario:

First of all I need to dwell on the intelligence. There is no doubt, absolutely no doubt that we were told from an intelligence point of view that we were going in against a rifle battalion that had been reinforced and we expected to operate against groups of up to 10.²

Ian Ahearn is just as emphatic:

This information was not passed on to us, the intelligence provided to all deployed components only indicated enemy withdrawing from Saigon, not reinforcing Saigon.³ It seems strange, but I never saw the actual orders until about 10 years after the event.⁴

As is Tony Jensen:

The enemy that we went in to fight were stragglers coming out of Saigon after the second Tet Offensive and we were told that we were there to pick them up. We were there to interdict their lines of movement and so on. There was no indication any way, shape or form of what we were up against, but subsequently years later we have seen the Op O [Operational Orders], and that indicated that there were fresh reinforcements coming down and all those other sorts of things, yet we knew nothing. The CO [Commanding Officer] declares to this day that he knew nothing about that at all.⁵

² Don Tait, (interview conducted, 11 April 2013), p. 1.

³ Ahearn, p. 2.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵ Tony Jensen (interview conducted, 17 February 2013), p. 3.

In essence, the men went into AO Surfers expecting minimal contact with the enemy and, as yet, have been offered no explanation for the blunder evident in the chain of command.

Battery Positioning

Fly in plan

To understand the substance of the veterans' view of events at Coral, it is necessary here to outline the general procedures that govern the establishment and defence of an FSPB. An FSPB may contain elements of infantry, artillery, armour, engineers, signals and logistics units. This was the case for FSPB Coral and the command and control arrangements should be clearly stated in the operational orders. It begins with the insertion of an infantry company into the area chosen for the FSPB. Its task is to secure the landing zone, making it safe for units following. In the case of artillery, the Regimental Reconnaissance Party flies in next and is responsible for allocating the areas within the regimental fire position or FSPB, and the allocation of positions to each of the batteries (in this case, 161 Field Battery, 102 Field Battery and the American 'A' Battery 2nd/35th which was to arrive the following day).⁶

The Regimental Second-in-Command (in this case Major Murtagh) indicates the general areas for each of the arriving batteries and the Battery Gun Position Officers (in this case Lieutenant Ian Ahearn for 102 Field Battery) lay out their gun positions siting the individual gun platforms, the command post and where appropriate the battery helicopter landing zone. The infantry may land and transit through the FSPB or may use separate landing zones depending on their

⁶ Ahearn, p. 2.

role and tasks. The artillery guns arrive after the gun positions have been identified and are received by the batteries within the regimental gun position or FSPB. The nominated FSPB Local Defence Commander (in this case Murtagh) is responsible for the plan to defend the FSPB.

The Official History states that the air landing at FSPB Coral was delayed due to enemy contact in the area.⁷ It states that 161 Field Battery was landed at an improvised landing zone, and with 102 Field Battery located 1500 metres away from 161 Field Battery, left Murtagh with a difficult task of how to defend the base.⁸ It also states that Murtagh was not at K Pad to meet the following parties but offers no explanation for his absence.

The veterans interviewed disagree with the Official History. For them, Murtagh was completely inept and misunderstood his role as the FSPB defence commander. He was absent at the K Pad, which caused confusion for the arriving reconnaissance parties and Murtagh positioned 102 Field Battery further north than it should have been to effectively defend the base from any potential attack.

Regimental Reconnaissance Party

3RAR was to secure K Pad before the arrival of the Regimental and Battery Reconnaissance Parties, the artillery batteries and supporting elements.⁹ Although the Official History stated that this was to happen, what actually happened was something very different as 3RAR were not sighted at K Pad when the Battery Reconnaissance Parties flew in to establish the gun positions at FSPB Coral.

⁷ McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 358.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 360.

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 354-356.

12 Field Regiment was deploying two gun batteries to FSPB Coral by air, 102 Field Battery and 161 Field Battery, with the American 2nd/35th arriving the following day. This made three batteries in total, occupying (according to artillery doctrine) an expected area of approximately 400 to 500 metres square.¹⁰ The position of 102 Field Battery was to be determined by Murtagh.¹¹ Upon arriving at K Pad, Murtagh disappeared into the bush. His absence created a problem as no artillery gun area was designated; this was his primary role.¹² The fly in procedure to FSPB Coral was followed according to the plan, what was not followed was the implementation of the FSPB plan.

Battery Reconnaissance Parties

12 Field Regiment, 102 Field Battery and 161 Field Battery Reconnaissance Parties flew into FSPB Coral to establish the Regimental artillery gun positions.¹³ The Battery Reconnaissance Party was provided with the only grid reference, XT925284, K Pad (Figure 3.1). This was supposed to have been secured by 3RAR and was the grid reference the Battery Reconnaissance Parties flew into.¹⁴ Figure 3.1 shows the planned layout and positioning of the batteries at FSPB Coral.

¹⁰ Ahearn, p. 2.

¹¹ Ian Ahearn, 'South Vietnam: First Battle of Coral', p. 10.

¹² Ahearn, p. 2.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁴ Ahearn, 'South Vietnam: First Battle of Coral', p. 8.

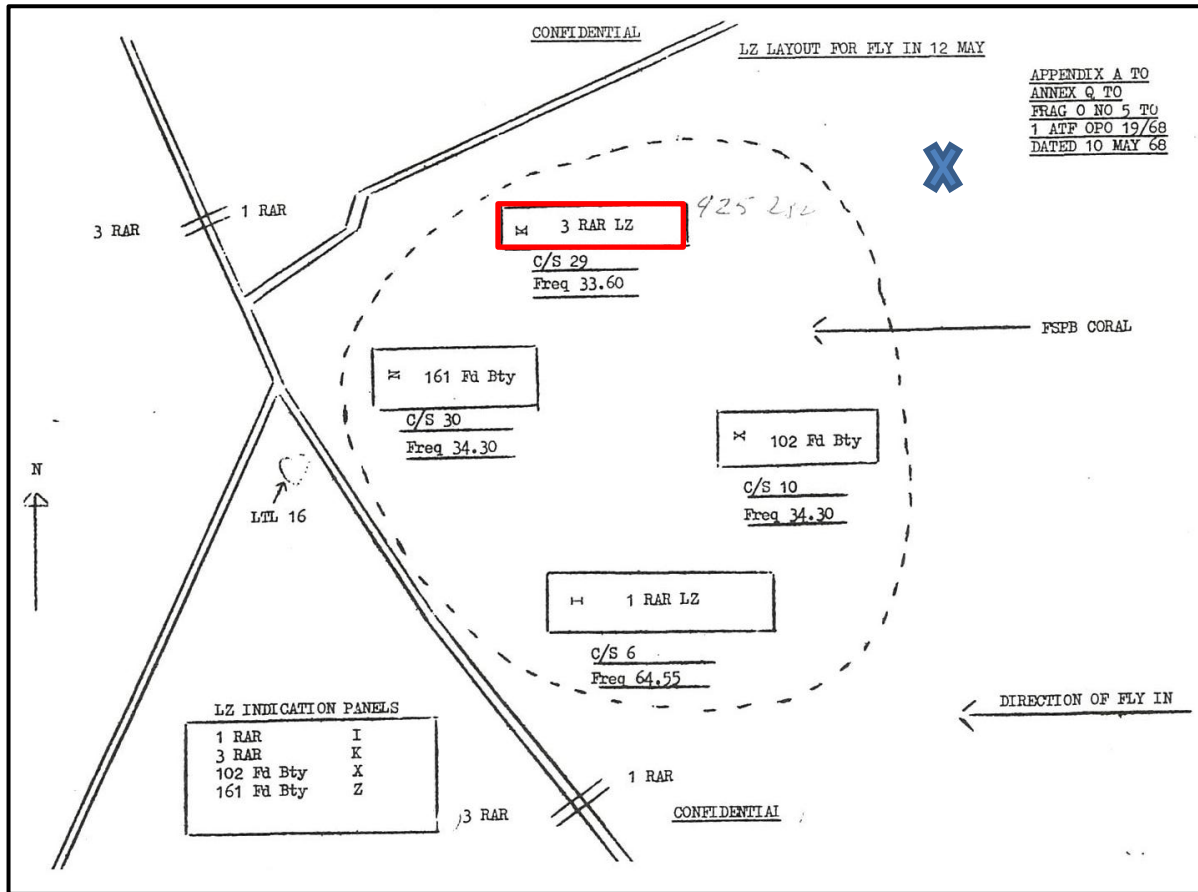


Figure 3.1: Planned landing zone layout for the fly in to FSPB Coral 12 May. Indicating the designated positions for 3RAR, 1RAR, 102 Field Battery and 161 Field Battery.¹⁵ Note: Red rectangle indicates 3RAR landing zone, designated K Pad. This is also the landing zone that 102 Field Battery Reconnaissance Party landed at. The blue X marks the position 102 Field Battery eventually established. This was approximately 1500 metres from K Pad.

Flying into FSPB Coral, Ahearn who was the Gun Position Officer for 102 Field Battery and part of the Battery Reconnaissance Party is adamant that his battery's flight into FSPB Coral had not been delayed by enemy fire as stated in the Official History. Ahearn was witness to airstrikes occurring about one kilometre to the west of K Pad and recalls that a 'god almighty' fight was going on, the Americans; 'had eyes like organ stops'. Yet the Australians were not informed

¹⁵ Australian War Memorial, Australian Army Commanders' Diaries (Vietnam), Infantry Units, 1 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, Narrative, Duty Officers Log Annexes, Maps, part 2 (1-31 May 1968), AWM95-7-1-78 Part 2, <http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/record/awm95/subclass.asp?levelID=1309> (accessed 10 April 2013). Note: 102 Field Battery position (blue X) provided by Ian Ahearn.

about this prior to the helicopter insertion at FSPB Coral and it did not delay the battery insertion.¹⁶ According to Ahearn,

The airstrikes did not delay the insertion of the 12 Field Regiment, 102 Field Battery, 161 Field Battery and 1RAR Reconnaissance Parties. They arrived on time at the landing zone designated in the orders. No indication was given to the reconnaissance parties that the fly in had been changed.¹⁷

Upon arriving at K Pad, Ahearn did not see Bravo Company 3RAR who were supposed to have secured K Pad, any Australian infantry or Major Murtagh.¹⁸ The Americans securing the area reported to the arriving reconnaissance parties that a group of Australians had moved out of the area into what the Americans called 'Tiger Country'.¹⁹ This group of Australians contained Major Brian Murtagh who was the FSPB defence commander. His absence created the problem for 161 Field Battery and 102 Field Battery as now there was no area allocated for the two gun batteries.

Arrival of 161 Field Battery

The Official History states that 161 Field Battery landed 1000 metres to the southwest of K Pad.²⁰ This is incorrect as the Duty Officers' logs clearly indicates the grid reference where 161 Field Battery landed. 161 Field Battery was positioned 100 to 200 metres from K Pad (See Figures 3.2 and 3.3), and not 1000 metres from K Pad as stated in the Official History. The Duty

¹⁶ Ahearn, p. 1.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*, McAulay, *The Battle of Coral*, p. 34.

²⁰ McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, pp. 359-360.

Officers logs match more closely with the veterans' version of events and they question why the Official History has neglected this evidence drawn from a primary source.




Figure 3.2: 1RAR Duty Officers Log indicating 161 Field Battery at K Pad, XT926284.²¹ Note: This log shows a discrepancy of 100 metres from their landing zone.



Figure 3.3: Headquarters, 1 Australian Task Force Duty Officer's Log indicating 161 Field Battery at K Pad, XT927284.²² Note: This log shows a discrepancy of 200 metres from their designated landing zone.

The confusion for 161 Field Battery and 102 Field Battery resulted as no area was allocated for the artillery guns and Murtagh was absent from the area.²³ The area that 161 Field Battery Reconnaissance Party landed at was understood as being the grid reference for the FSPB. The ground was relatively flat and cleared. With the positioning of 161 Field Battery at the correct location, the remaining elements of the arriving Task Force were to be built around the 161 Field Battery location.²⁴ When the artillery guns of 161 Field Battery arrived overhead by Chinook helicopters, approximately two hours before they were expected, the 161 Field Battery Reconnaissance Party accepted the guns and set them into position.²⁵ The planning, detail and execution of the First Australian Task Force at FSPB Coral can only be described as lacking.

²¹ Australian War Memorial, Australian Army Commanders' Diaries (Vietnam), Infantry Units, 1 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, Narrative, Duty Officers Log Annexes, Maps, part 2 (1-31 May 1968), AWM95-7-1-78 Part 2, <http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/record/awm95/subclass.asp?levelID=1309> (accessed 10 April 2013).

²² Australian War Memorial, Australian Army Commanders' Diaries (Vietnam), Headquarters units, Headquarters, 1 Australian Task Force, Duty Officer's Log (cont), (1-31 May 1968), <http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/records/awm95/1/4/> (accessed 16 October 2013).

²³ Neil Bradley, 'Battles of Coral and Balmoral Part 2: Time Spent in Reconnaissance Is Rarely Wasted' *Ministry for Culture and Heritage*, (30 January 2009), <http://www.vietnamwar.govt.nz/memory/battles-coral-and-balmoral-part-2/> (accessed 30 April 2013).

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Ahearn, p. 2.

According to Neil Bradley, written orders were never seen; the only orders were through word of mouth.²⁶

Position of 102 Field Battery

The Official History accurately states that 102 Field Battery was located 1500 metres away from 161 Field Battery, leaving Murtagh with a difficult task when it came to defending the base.²⁷

What the Official History has failed to understand or has failed to correctly acknowledge is Murtagh's role in this. It was Murtagh who chose to have 102 Field Battery 1500 metres away from 161 Field Battery, for reasons he never explained. It was his decision that put the lives of approximately 100 men in jeopardy when 102 Field Battery and the 1RAR Mortar Platoon were attacked on 13 May 1968.

At K Pad, Ahearn needed to locate Murtagh to be able to establish the gun lay out for 102 Field Battery. Ahearn eventually established radio contact with Murtagh who advised Ahearn that 'he was up the track'. Ahearn requested Murtagh to throw a smoke grenade to indicate his position, which he did. Ahearn and the 102 Field Battery Reconnaissance Party then headed in Murtagh's direction.²⁸ At Murtagh's location, Ahearn took a compass bearing of the last known position, counted the paces, took the theodolite and with the Section Commander and a Battery Surveyor conducted a resection from an old French establishment and rubber plantation. This method established their exact position which was 1500 metres away from K Pad and 161 Field Battery. They then bought the coordinates back in under the rubber trees,

²⁶ Bradley, 'Battles of Coral and Balmoral Part 2 (accessed 30 April 2013).

²⁷ McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 360.

²⁸ Ahearn, p. 2.

and it was here they discovered about 200 freshly dug NVA round weapon pits. An AK47 (Kalashnikov Assault Rifle) bullet and a Ho Chi Minh lolly were also discovered. This was relayed to Murtagh who told the party 'not to worry about it'.²⁹ Ahearn remarks, 'this didn't fill us with much joy'.³⁰ Confirmation was received that 161 Field Battery was 1500 metres away from 102 Field Battery's position.³¹ At this, Ahearn recalls he commented to Murtagh:

That's a hell of a long way away for when we [102 Field Battery] get on the ground', to which he [Murtagh] replied 'there is a lot of people to fit in here'.³²

At around 2.00pm, the six 102 Field Battery guns arrived by Chinook helicopters at the new location designated by Murtagh. The artillery gunners set their howitzers in their allocated zones and began preparing their gun stores.³³ Ahearn is certain that Murtagh did not know where he was and did not know that 161 Field Battery was 1500 metres away.³⁴

Ahearn recalls,

I'm at a complete loss as to why Bravo Company 3RAR could not find the landing zone as we flew straight into it and I'm at a complete loss as to why the 2iC [sic] of the Regiment [Murtagh] was so far out.³⁵

Gunner David Thomas (Tomo) believes that Murtagh had made an error with the positioning of 102 Field Battery. Although not involved with the planning, the artillery gunners had been at other FSPB's before heading to FSPB Coral. The gunners understood their role as artillery, along

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 3.

with what was considered adequate protection for a FSPB, being barbwire, claymore mines, trip flares and infantry close by for protection.³⁶ Thomas recalls:

Some big mistakes were made at Coral and why Murtagh had 102 Field Battery so far out of position only he will know. He was supposed to be in control of the base defences.³⁷

102 Field Battery was the support unit for 1RAR, so when Bravo Company 1RAR flew into FSPB Coral, they did not fly into K Pad, but flew into 102 Field Battery's new location. Ahearn was asked by three or four Forward Observers where they were.³⁸ Captain Don Tait was the Forward Observer for 1RAR and recalls:

When we touched down at Coral, I had no idea where we were [sic]. I knew it was not the grid reference that we were supposed to be at, and the first thing I did, obviously as a gunner is that I went around and spoke to Scrubber [Ahearn] and said 'where the hell are we' and he said 'we are here' and I said 'are you sure of that'. I walked up to the main route and confirmed the track junction and yes we were where Scrubber [Ahearn] said, so that turned out to be right. When I overflowed the thing my view was that we should have been further south, but anyway we turned up where we were.³⁹

Clearly the position Murtagh had set for 102 Field Battery was further north of K Pad than Tait had been expecting. With the infantry establishing that they were at 102 Field Battery's location, they then moved out 2000-3000 metres to establish their night harbour position.⁴⁰

Figure 3.4 shows the 102 Field Battery Officers involved at FSPB Coral.

³⁶ David 'Tomo' Thomas, (interview conducted 5 March 2013), p. 2.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Tait, p. 2. Note: Huey is the unofficial term used to describe the Bell UH-1 Iroquois helicopter.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Ahearn, p. 2.



Figure 3.4: 102 Field Battery Officers, left to right are Captain Don Tait, Second Lieutenant Bob Lowry, Second Lieutenant Matt Cleland, Lieutenant Ian ‘Scrubber’ Ahearn, and Captain Dave Brook. Note: Captain Don Tait replaced Captain Dave Brooks as Battery Captain (BK).⁴¹

1RAR Mortar Platoon was to fly into FSPB Coral at 12.00pm, but arrived at 5.00pm, around one hour short of last light. The late arrival of the 1RAR Mortar Platoon severely reduced the amount of time they had to prepare their weapons pits and establish their defensive fire positions before last light.⁴² Lieutenant Tony Jensen was met by Captain Hugh McInally and was taken to the Mortar position. McInally apologised that the 1RAR Mortars were situated on the perimeter of the 102 Field Battery gun position and told Jensen ‘it will get sorted tomorrow’⁴³ before McInally returned to the Battalion Headquarters. The 1RAR Mortars were positioned 50

⁴¹ Robert ‘Cossie’ Costello, personal collection.

⁴² Jensen, p. 1.

⁴³ *ibid.*

to 70 metres out, slightly in front of and located between No. 5 and No. 6 guns.⁴⁴ Jensen approached Murtagh and asked where everybody was and what was going on.

Murtagh informed me that 3RAR was about somewhere providing protection and waved his arms in the general direction of the rubber plantation. I asked about manning machine guns and was told by Murtagh it was not necessary. I stated that my men were only just in country,⁴⁵ and we should man a machine gun sentry, yet Murtagh was not interested.⁴⁶

Jensen recalls:

I went and found Scrubber [Ahearn], who was the GPO [Gun Position Officer] of 102 [Field Battery] and we sighted the machine guns to look after our defences.⁴⁷

Ahearn adds:

Two Lieutenants basically coordinated the machine guns that went out which was not our job.⁴⁸

With 102 Field Battery and 1RAR Mortars being further north than planned, the discovery of enemy weapons pits, and Murtagh's dismissive attitude of the situation regarding defences, added responsibility was placed upon Ahearn and Jensen. The two Lieutenants now had to establish defensive fire positions for the machine guns. Siting a track running nearby, Jensen elected to position his machine gun there and then Ahearn would establish his two machine guns across the front of his artillery position. Ahearn had access to two M60 machine guns which were located 50 to 70 metres out in front of the artillery guns; the 1RAR Mortar machine gun was in front of the mortars. The track they elected to use gave them a firing position back

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 1-2. Note: In country means that the soldiers had only recently arrived in Vietnam.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴⁸ Ahearn, p. 4.

down to 12 Field Regiment Command Post which was to the southwest. The 12 Field Regiment Command Post machine gun was placed in position and the four machine guns were now in supportive firing positions. The organisation of base defence was the responsibility of Murtagh who failed to conduct more than one of his roles as the FSPB defence commander.

Murtagh eventually arrived back at 161 Field Battery's position sometime after the artillery arrived. Murtagh had a large map, folded concertina style and was flipping it about. As far as the men at 161 Field Battery's location were concerned, Murtagh was completely lost and well out of his depth. It was pointed out to Murtagh where 161 Field Battery was located and the position he chose for 102 Field Battery. According to Bradley, 'He (Murtagh) had the desperate look an Opossum gets when caught in the headlights',⁴⁹ meaning that Murtagh looked bewildered about what was now occurring at the FSPB.

Two Final Preventative Fire Tasks

The Official history states that, at 6.09pm, 3RAR viewed multiple enemies moving across their front. Shortly after, 1RAR engaged 10 enemy soldiers. As a result of the enemy contacts, 102 Field Battery was called to provide a fire mission.⁵⁰ An omission in the Official History is the conversation between Battery Commander Major Gavin Andrews and Lieutenant Ian Ahearn that centred on two Final Preventative Fire tasks. The result had a significant impact on the battle that was to occur at FSPB Coral.

⁴⁹ Bradley, 'Battles of Coral and Balmoral Part 2 (accessed 30 April 2013).

⁵⁰ McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 364.

In the early hours on 13 May, 102 Field Battery was called to provide supporting artillery for the infantry. The six artillery guns that were originally pointing east (Figure 3.5) were manoeuvred by their gun crews and pointed north. The guns then delivered their 105mm projectiles with deadly accuracy. The fire mission lasted 20 minutes before the six artillery guns were advised that the mission had ended.⁵¹

With all six artillery guns now pointing north, Andrews asked Ahearn if the gun battery could handle two Final Preventative Fire tasks.⁵² A Final Preventative Fire task is one battery (six guns), loaded with information on a target, normally selected as the most probable area of enemy activity. The artillery gunners only need to pull the lanyard to fire the gun and the projectile will land where assigned. Andrews wanted one section (three guns) laid north and one section returned to its original eastern bearing. Ahearn selected guns (No. 4, 5 and 6) to stay pointing north and the other three (No. 1, 2 and 3) to be laid on the original east bearing (Figure 3.6).⁵³

Ahearn provides his reasoning for selecting the guns:

Now a bit of serendipity went on here for no reason at all as I picked the three guns to the north as they were already bunded,⁵⁴ before we had to stop work as last light was approaching and we had to stand to.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Ahearn, 'South Vietnam: First Battle of Coral', p. 13.

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ Ahearn, p. 4.

⁵⁴ *ibid.* Note: The term bunded means that a substantial amount of dirt is built into a protective wall around the artillery guns.

⁵⁵ *ibid.* Note: Stand to is called an hour before dawn and an hour before dusk. It is used to keep the soldiers alert in case of an attack.

Ahearn's decision in selecting the three banded guns to stay pointing north ultimately assisted in saving the gun position. The attacking enemy now faced the barrels of three 105mm howitzers with devastating results (see Figures 3.5 and 3.6). The Official History claims that the fact that the guns were pointing north was a matter of luck. Yet the decision had been made by Ahearn to position them thus, even if, as he noted, it was serendipitous. It also raises the question of why was this omitted by the Official History.



Figure 3.5: The six 102 Field Battery M2A2 105mm howitzer guns (yellow), 1RAR Mortar Platoon (blue circles), machine gun positions (yellow circles), 12 Field Regiment Command Post and 102 Field Battery Command Post (red triangles).⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Ahearn, 'South Vietnam: First Battle of Coral', p. 17.

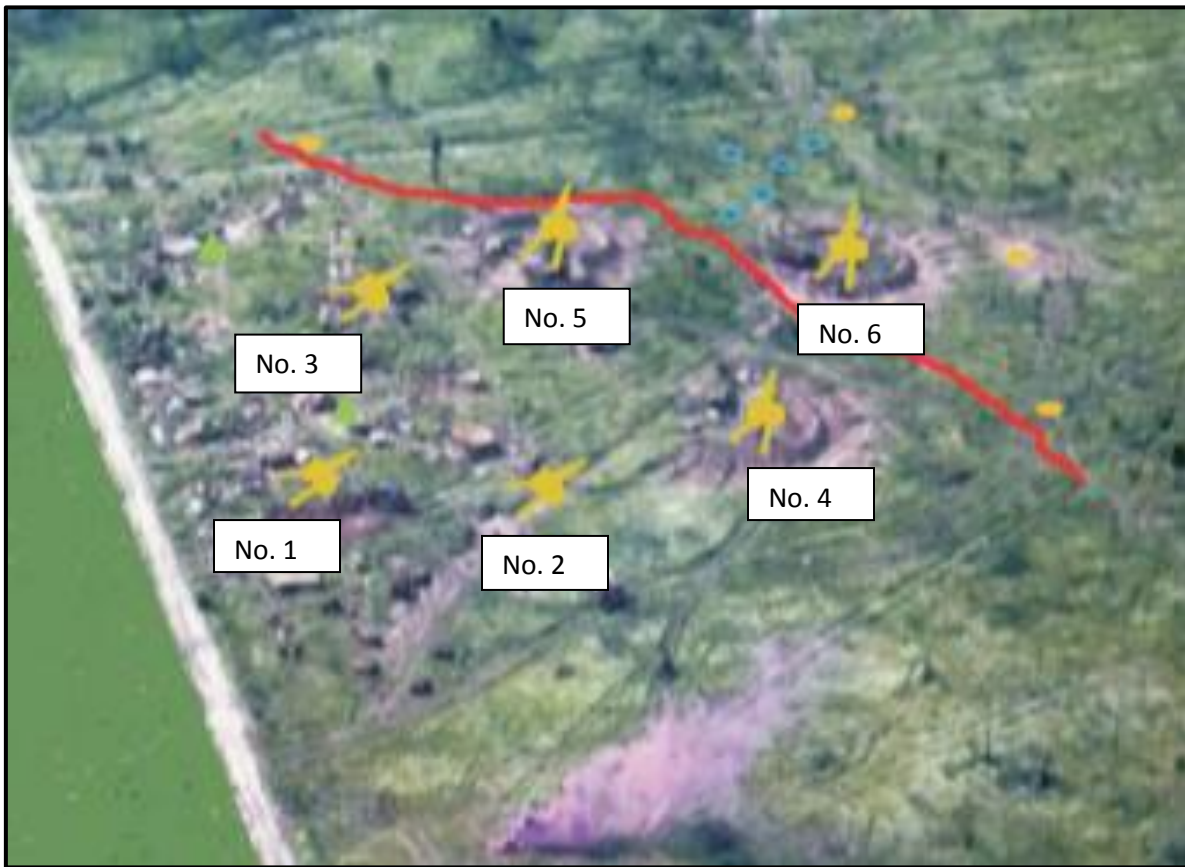


Figure 3.6: Positioning of No. 1, 2 and 3 guns after they returned to the original eastern direction.⁵⁷
Note: Red line indicates enemy penetration.

Splintex and Ricocheting Artillery

The Official History states that Jensen, in desperation, called for direct fire from the Anti-tank Platoon's 90mm Recoilless Rifles. Splintex was fired across the front of the mortar position, providing some relief for the 1RAR Mortars.⁵⁸ Later in the battle, 102 Field Battery used a technique not taught at the School of Artillery. By lowering the gun barrels towards the ground and setting the fuse to delay, the rounds, when fired, ricocheted creating an airburst over the

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, pp. 367-368.

enemy, proving to be very effective.⁵⁹ The veterans interviewed reject both actions as being an inaccurate account of what happened.

Splintex

Clarification of what a splintex round contains, and the damage it can inflict, is needed here. A splintex round consists of approximately 8000 one-half gram flechettes (darts) as shown in Figure 3.7. When fired, the flechettes spread from the point of burst in a widening cone along the projectile's previous trajectory prior to bursting.⁶⁰ The flechettes are small light weight steel projectiles and upon impacting a human body they bend into a hook formation and lose their rigidity. The tail fin will break off causing an additional wound.⁶¹



Figure 3.7: A splintex dart recovered by Jack Parr after the Battle of FSPB Coral.⁶² The size of the dart is approximately one inch in length.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 368-369.

⁶⁰ Larry D'Arcy, (interview conducted 28 February 2013), p. 3.

⁶¹ (Federation of American Scientists), <http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/land/m546.htm> (accessed 25 March 2014).

⁶² Australian War Memorial, Splintex Dart, Battle of Coral: Lance Corporal A J Parr, 1 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, <http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/REL35838> (accessed 30 November 2013).

As a result of their late arrival, 1RAR Mortars had been positioned on the periphery of the 102 Field Battery gun position, and subsequently were hit by the enemy during the initial ground assault on 12 May. At around 2.30am, the mortar position was under fire from small arms and RPG's. The section commander on the M60 machine gun came to the Command Post and said 'there are about 400 Nogs [sic] about 50 metres away gibbering and coming in fast'.⁶³

Tony Jensen remembers:

I was woken in my sleeping bay. My Sig [sic] and I, as we left, about half way across to the Command Post and an RPG took out our sleeping bay, so we were just ahead of that. We got over to the Command Post, cut down the tent over the Command Post as there was no need having a tent over the top anymore.⁶⁴

Jensen and his men were being overrun. 3RAR Mortars and 161 Field Battery was called to fire on Jensen's position as the enemy was swarming through them. The Operations Officer, Kim Patterson, asked Jensen three times for the fire order to be repeated. Each time Jensen did just that. Finally, Jensen held his radio hand piece up so Patterson could hear the contact, hoping this would convince Patterson of the severity of the situation.⁶⁵

With four mortars, 75 rounds of ammunition and unable to evacuate wounded diggers, Jensen made the decision to stay in position. They also had nowhere to withdraw to as 102 Field Battery were also in a heavy contact with the enemy. Jensen's only option was to call in a fire mission.⁶⁶

⁶³ Jensen, p. 2.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

Jensen recalls:

We had to hold our ground and do what we could and the only way we could do that was to call in a fire mission on our position which is what I organised.⁶⁷

After some discussion between the Mortar Command Post and the Battalion Headquarters, the Commanding Officer (Bennett), agreed to have splintex fired over the mortar position.⁶⁸ With Murtagh in effect absent throughout the battle, Bennett, although not in command of FSPB Coral (along with his Battery Commander and Headquarters staff) authorised Jensen to have 102 Field Battery fire across their position.⁶⁹

As Jensen recalls:

I told the men to stay in their pits, engage the enemy, but do not get above ground level as anything above ground was considered enemy. I repeated to Command that we have a contact, we are overrun and we need fire over our position, it is the only way to clear them.⁷⁰

Since dawn, Ahearn had been trying to contact Jensen to ascertain if he and his men were indeed alive. He eventually managed to get him to answer by voice. This created another problem as each time Ahearn, positioned near No. 5 gun, called Jensen, who was positioned between No. 5 and No. 6 guns, both were met with a volley of enemy machine gun fire.⁷¹

Bombardier D'Arcy, at this stage of the battle, was firing the M60 machine gun near No. 5 gun.

This was to keep the advancing enemy from outflanking the artillery gun position. D'Arcy

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ Robert Lowry, *The Last Knight: A biography of General Sir Phillip Bennett AC, KBE, DSO*, (Newport: Big Sky Publishing, 2011), p. 95.

⁷⁰ Jensen, p. 2.

⁷¹ Ahearn, p. 6.

remembers Ahearn calling to Jensen, 'little brother, little brother' and being met with enemy fire.⁷²

Ahearn returned to the Command Post to hear Jensen on the Battalion radio asking for splintex to fire across his position. Jensen, bluntly stated, 'if you don't do it then we are all dead'.⁷³

Ahearn recalls:

Jensen was trying to convince his CO [Commanding Officer] that they were in real deep shit [sic] and the CO sort of said are you sure? Christ I don't know what he thought was going on because I was told later that it looked like Luna Park with all the RPG's and machine gun fire coming in.⁷⁴

To comply with Jensen's call, Ahearn returned to No. 5 gun and informed the gunners to aim the gun across the mortar position.⁷⁵

Ahearn continues:

I yelled out to Tony [Jensen], asked if he was ready, he yelled at his guys to stay down and he said let it rip. We fired five rounds of splintex across the top of the mortar section and all enemy activity ceased. The mortars were only 50 metres off the guns and all activity just stopped and we thought, Holy Christ I wonder if we had just killed them.⁷⁶

Jensen adds;

Scrubber [Ahearn] yelled out to me that they were going to fire splintex, so I said right and told the platoon what was going on and basically get underground as splintex was coming in. I gave two warnings and the third time I said right fire and Scrubber fired and everything went sort of quiet.⁷⁷

⁷² D'Arcy, p. 3.

⁷³ Ahearn, p. 6.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, pp.6-7.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷⁷ Jensen, p. 3.

Lance Corporal Alan James (Jack) Parr was Jensen's signaller and looked after two radio sets. One was connected to the Battalion command network, the other used for commanding mortar fire missions. With FSPB Coral overrun, Parr called in direct fire support from 3RAR Mortars, a Light Fire Team of two helicopter gunships and a 'Spooky' gunship. Mortar rounds from 3RAR landed within 1RAR Mortar position as did the enemy mortars and RPG's. Parr deliberately called fire onto his very own position in an attempt to kill the enemy and save his mates. One metre way in the other fighting pit, Jensen called in direct fire from 102 Field Battery.⁷⁸

As Jack Parr recalls:

The guns fired HE [High Explosive] and splintex rounds making an awesome sound coming through one's own position. These [splintex darts] were lodged everywhere in equipment and weapons...millions were fired into and across our positions in an attempt to clear the enemy.⁷⁹

Other evidence corroborates the men's version of the event, showing that, despite the Official History's claim, it was not the Anti-tank Platoon's 90mm Recoilless Rifles that fired splintex across the front of the 1RAR Mortar Platoon.⁸⁰ Figure 3.8 indicates the positioning of all three units involved, and clearly shows that the 1RAR Mortar Platoon was partially protected by the 102 Field Battery guns. Figure 3.9 shows the spread of splintex when fired. If the 90mm Recoilless Rifles *did* fire across the front of the Mortars, then 102 Field Battery would have been hit with splintex. This would have resulted in serious injury or death to the gunners.

⁷⁸ Australian War Memorial, Splintex Dart, Battle of Coral: Lance Corporal A J Parr, 1 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, <http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/REL35838> (accessed 15 February 2014).

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, pp. 367-368.

Additionally, the Battalion Headquarters, Assault Pioneers and the Anti-tank Platoon 90mm Recoilless Rifles were 300 to 400 metres away from the mortars.⁸¹ This placed the 90mm Recoilless Rifles at the limit of their effective splintex range,⁸² and the 90mm Recoilless Rifles had only eight rounds of splintex available for two weapons with permission to engage 'opportunity targets' during the attack.⁸³

⁸¹ Jensen, p. 2.

⁸² Ahearn, 'South Vietnam: First Battle of Coral', p. 18.

⁸³ McAulay, *The Battle of Coral*, p. 80.

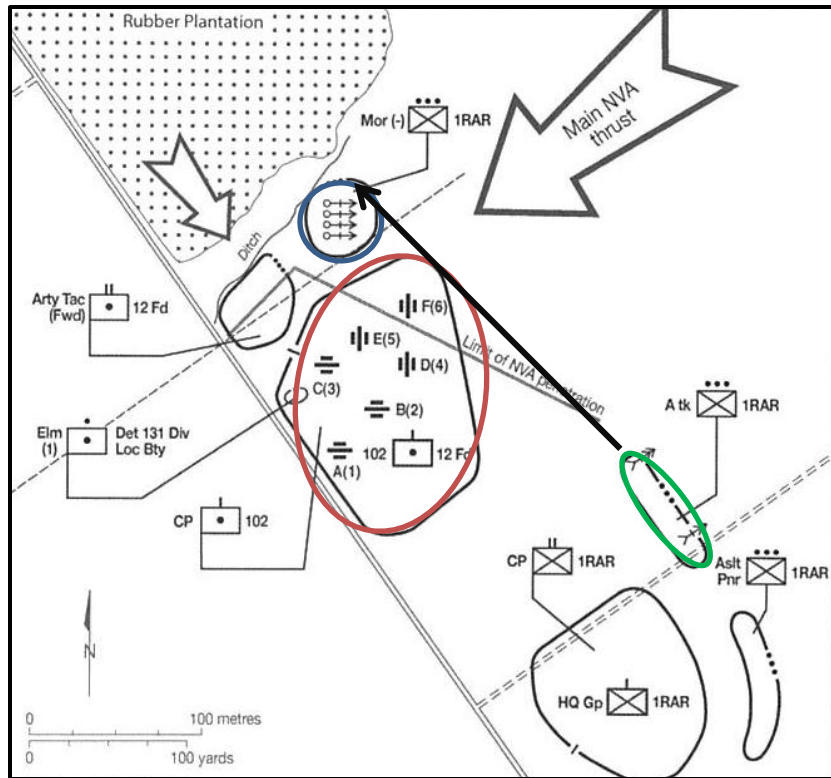


Figure 3.8: The positioning of 1RAR Mortars (blue), 102 Field Battery (red) and the 90mm Recoilless Rifles (green) on the night of 12-13 May 1968.⁸⁴ Note: The black line indicates the firing direction of the splintex round as mentioned in the Official History.

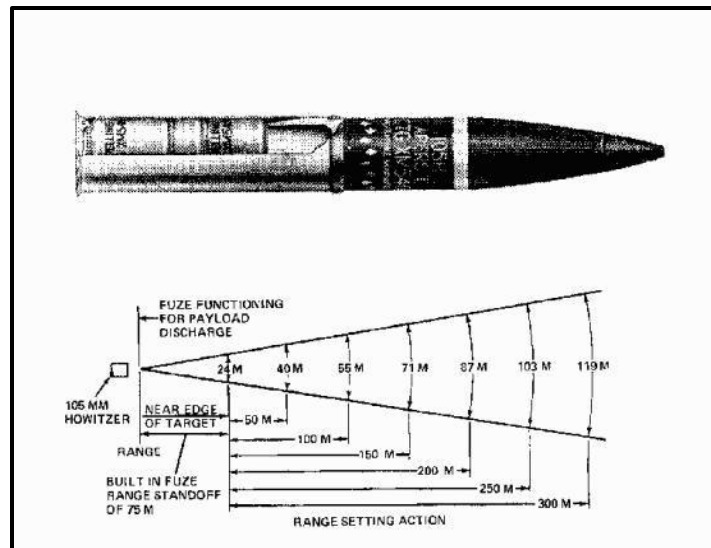


Figure 3.9: shows the distance and spread of splintex when fired.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Lowry, *The Last Knight*, p. 94.

⁸⁵ (Federation of American Scientists), (accessed 20 March 2014).

The strongest evidence, however, that corroborates the veterans' version of the use of splintex is in the After Action Report, a source readily available to the Official Historians. It clearly states that the gunners from 102 Field Battery engaged the enemy with splintex rounds by firing over the 1RAR Mortar Platoon's position. It also recorded the time, which matches the recollections of the men (see Figure 3.10).⁸⁶

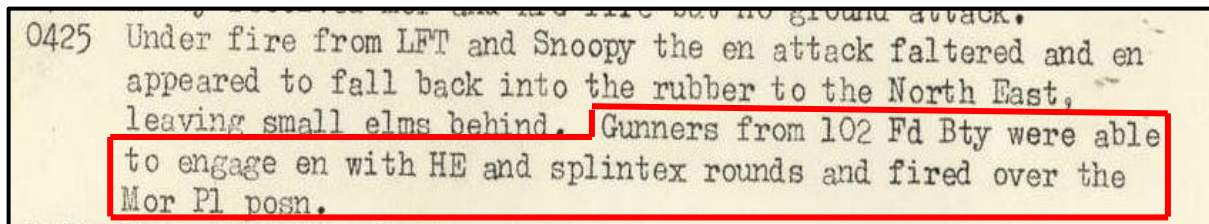
A photograph of a typed document snippet, likely an After Action Report. The text is typed on a light-colored background. The first line is "0425 Under fire from LFT and Snoopy the en attack faltered and en". The second line is "appeared to fall back into the rubber to the North East,". The third line is "leaving small elms behind." The fourth line is "Gunners from 102 Fd Bty were able". The fifth line is "to engage en with HE and splintex rounds and fired over the". The sixth line is "Mor Pl posn." A red rectangular box highlights the text from "Gunners from 102 Fd Bty were able" to "Mor Pl posn.".

Figure 3.10: The After Action Report clearly indicates that, Gunners from 102 Field Battery were able to engage en (enemy) with HE (High Explosive) and splintex rounds and fired over the Mor Pl posn (Mortar Platoon position). The time indicated in the top left corner is 0425 hours (4.25am).

Both McAulay and Horner had accurately described the use of splintex during the attack. McAulay wrote that Ahearn had moved to No. 5 gun to contact Jensen and had arranged for five rounds of splintex to fire over the mortar position.⁸⁷ Horner wrote that the men in the 1RAR Mortar position were overrun and ordered to remain below ground, as 102 Field Battery fired splintex over the mortar position.⁸⁸ The research reveals most certainly that it was 102 Field Battery, not the 90mm Recoilless Rifles that fired splintex over the 1RAR Mortar position.

⁸⁶ Australian War Memorial, Australian Army Commanders' Diaries (Vietnam), Infantry Units, 1 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, Narrative, Annexes (1-30 June 1968), AWM95-7-1-79, <http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/records/awm95/7/1> (accessed 11 November 2013), p.48.

⁸⁷ McAulay, *The Battle of Coral*, p. 92.

⁸⁸ David Horner, *The Gunners: A History of Australian Artillery*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995), p. 487.

Ricocheting Artillery

The Official History states that after expending the allocation of splintex rounds, the artillery employed a technique of setting the fuse of the high explosive artillery round to delay. They then aimed the artillery gun towards the ground and fired. The result was a round that ricocheted off the ground approximately 40 to 50 metres in front of the artillery gun and then exploded in the air above the heads of the enemy.⁸⁹ The theory of ricocheting artillery rounds came from Major Brian Murtagh who wrote, in his article 'Coral Twenty Years On',

By using direct action fuses set to delay and depressing the gun to fire the shell at the ground some forty-fifty metres (I think) in front of the gun. The round ricocheted and then exploded as an airburst but very close to the ground.⁹⁰

The Official History ignored the qualification evident in the use of 'I think'. According to the men who were there, Murtagh did not appear on the gun position throughout the attack and had no firsthand knowledge of what was actually happening.⁹¹ The gunners interviewed,⁹² described this action as 'pure fantasy'. To understand why this technique is seen as being unbelievable by the gunners, it is necessary to focus on the early contact and the gunners firing over open gun sights.

During the battle, Gun Sergeant John Stephens, No. 4 gun, was running out of small arms ammunition. He requested a resupply and asked permission to fire splintex over open sights.⁹³

Hearing this request, Ahearn and Second Lieutenant Lowry consulted the technical manual, but

⁸⁹ McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, pp. 368-369.

⁹⁰ Brian Murtagh, 'Coral Twenty Eight Years On: Some Recollections of a Gunner', *Duty First*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1996), p. 21.

⁹¹ Ahearn, p.8.

⁹² *ibid*, D'Arcy, p. 2, Thomas, p. 2.

⁹³ Ahearn, 'South Vietnam: First Battle of Coral', p. 15.

could not work out the fuse setting. They set the initial fuse for 0.05 seconds. Ahearn then ordered the men to fire and watched the round disappear, apparently failing to detonate. They then ordered direct muzzle action, no fuse setting.⁹⁴ Clearly, with Ahearn and Lowry having to consult the technical manual to fire splintex, it indicates that the gunners had not been trained in the use of firing splintex, let alone attempting to ricochet an artillery round off the ground under an intense ground attack.

Ahearn clearly makes his point:

There was a thing written saying that the guns were firing down towards the ground so that the round bounced up, this is absolute bloody crap, absolute crap [sic]. They weren't worried about what they were firing at and they weren't setting bloody fuses on HE [High Explosive] rounds. The HE rounds, they were firing parallel to the ground and some went into the ground, but some people have said that the fuses were on delay and that's a load of crap because it was dark, they [the gunners] couldn't bloody well see, they were taking rounds out and firing, that's why they put up an illumine [illumination round], they also fired one unplugged/unfused round.⁹⁵

Bombardier D'Arcy had served previously in Malaya with 'A' Battery Royal Australian Artillery and was well versed in what could and could not be achieved with artillery. He points out that:

We had that much going on; guys were fighting on gun bunds, running ammo [sic] to other guns. It was dark, the noise was incredible, Scrubber [Ahearn] was everywhere leading by example. I can tell you that this stuff about bouncing artillery rounds didn't happen. We still had guns doing fire missions; we had guns out of action. It wasn't possible, never saw it then and never heard of it ever happening. We were more concerned about staying alive.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Ahearn, p. 5.

⁹⁵ Ahearn, p. 6.

⁹⁶ D'Arcy, p. 2.

Figure 3.11 provides an overview of the gun positions. This throws considerable doubt on the idea of ricocheting rounds, as described in the Official History. Artillery guns No. 1, 2, 3 and 4 would have been unable to ricochet rounds as they would have fired directly into guns 5, 6 and the mortars. No. 6 gun was out of action as it was overrun early in the contact, this left only No. 5 gun and the only rounds fired by this gun in the open sights mode was splintex.

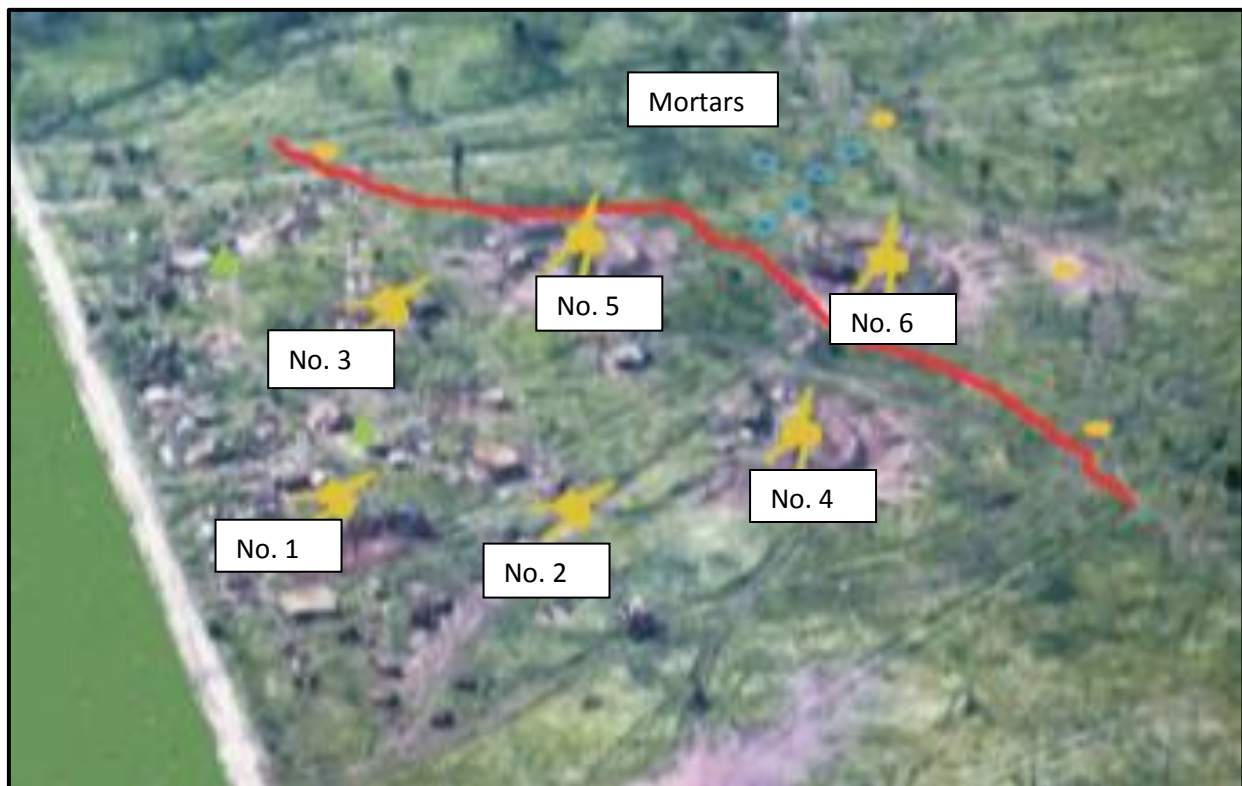


Figure 3.11 shows that ricocheting rounds as indicated in the Official History was an impossibility given the positioning of the artillery guns and 1RAR Mortars. The 102 Field Battery gun positions and numbers (yellow), Mortar position (blue).⁹⁷

The battle that took place on 12 and 13 May resulted in five killed and eight wounded from the 1RAR Mortar Platoon,⁹⁸ two killed and three wounded from 12 Field Regiment Headquarters

⁹⁷ Ahearn, 'South Vietnam: First Battle of Coral', p. 17.

⁹⁸ Jensen, p. 6.

and three wounded from 102 Field Battery.⁹⁹ Testament to the gunner's ability to operate in the theatre of war is evident as the battery was called to fire and carried out three fire missions supporting the infantry during the attack. Of the guns, No. 4 fired 84 rounds over open sights, and five rounds over open sights were fired from No. 5 gun.¹⁰⁰

The following chapter examines the role of the men in 102 Field Battery and the 1RAR Mortar Platoon, an area that receives little attention in the Official History.

⁹⁹ Horner, *The Gunners*, p. 488.

¹⁰⁰ 12 Field Regiment (Vietnam) Association, History, 102 (Coral) Fd Bty, http://12fieldregiment.com.au/history_102fdbty.htm (assessed 27 March 2014).

Chapter Four: Close Quarters Fighting

Despite the fact that the enemy launched an effective surprise attack on FSPB Coral, and failed to over-run it, and that the fighting over 12 and 13 May was intense, the men from 102 Field Battery feel that the Official History obscures, or overlooks, their role and actions during those eventful days at FSPB Coral. This has disappointed the Coral veterans interviewed for this thesis. They question just how 'official' the Official History is. This chapter provides the soldiers' voice and offers an insight into what the gunners and mortarmen remember about FSPB Coral.

With the 102 Field Battery guns arriving at Ahearn's position, he immediately informed the gunners that something was amiss, but was unsure as to what it was. He therefore directed the soldiers to dig to stage one weapons pits. This is a defensive fighting position whose purpose is to shield the soldiers from incoming fire. The normal procedure, however, was to dig shell scrapes which are shallow in depth and used for temporary personal protection.¹ This made Ahearn very unpopular as he remembers.

Some will say that they only had shell scrapes, and they might well have, but we as Officers had to go around and kick ass to make sure that people were digging. I think that shows in the results as you don't get a number of RPG's and things in without having excessive casualties.²

On 12 May, no defence stores had been delivered to FSPB Coral. With no barbwire, claymore mines or trip flares set up, the area lacked adequate protection. When the attack came, Ahearn

¹ Ahearn, p. 3.

² *ibid.*

was lying in his weapon pit. There was no sound, but he was awoken by a green glow over his hootchie (personal tent), a result of enemy tracer coming into FSPB Coral.³

Literally there was no sound; I didn't hear anything until it came in like a 'whomp', it was the sound of RPG's, mortars and machine guns.⁴

At this early stage of the battle, No. 6 gun was out of action as it had been overrun by the enemy. Gun Sergeant Max Franklin, however, had had the presence of mind to remove the No. 6 gun firing pin before withdrawing. This is a difficult task that requires a series of moves, and made all the more difficult by being under attack and with wounded men under his command. Sergeants Franklin's actions made the 105mm Howitzer inoperable in enemy hands.

Ahearn quickly made his way to the Command Post to find out what was happening.⁵ At this stage, No. 4 gun opened fire with small arms (rifles) and shortly after, the Gun Sergeant John Stephens reported to the Command Post that they had expended small arms ammunition and requested an ammunition resupply. The Gun Sergeant also reported that there was a considerable amount of activity happening at No. 4 gun and requested permission to fire the 105mm howitzer over open sights.⁶

The enemy were well equipped and were now within grenade throwing distance. Their grenades started landing among the Australian positions. Some of the unexploded ordinance was picked up the next day revealing Chicom 'potato masher' style grenades.⁷ As a result of the

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷ *ibid.* Note: The Type 67 Chicom grenade is modelled on the WW2 German model 24 Stielhandgranate (handgrenade) and widely used by communist forces during the Vietnam War.

close quarters' fighting, 102 Field Battery had suffered casualties. Supporting fire was called for and was delivered by 161 Field Battery, 3RAR Mortars and an American Battery located in and around Bien Hoa. The Battery Commander also arranged for Cobra gunships and a 'Spooky' gunship to assist in the fight and they began to pound the perimeter of FSPB Coral.⁸

When asked if an awareness of time becomes noticeable during battle as so much is happening, Ahearn replies.

You're totally not aware of time at all which is one of those things; it doesn't seem to neither drag nor go fast. It is just that things are happening and there is a whole heap of information coming in which you're processing and therefore time, it becomes irrelevant. It doesn't strike you one way or the other.⁹

Ahearn sent small parties out to get grenades as the gunners were not allowed to carry them, a direct result of an Officer being fragged (killed) at Nui Dat two years before. RPG's were still coming in to FSPB Coral and No. 2 gun received heavy damage. Both tyres were blown out and the gun trail had large holes in it from either a RPG or an exploding mortar round. No. 1 gun received a hit to its ammunition bay. Fortunately, the rounds did not explode, but the cordite did, and a huge fire blazed away in the middle of the gun position.¹⁰ Figures 4.1 and 4.2 show the damage caused to No. 2 gun during the battle.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 6.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 6.



Figure 4.1: Sergeant Leonard Humphry (Skeeter) Bravo, No. 2 gun pointing to a hole in one of his gun trails.¹¹



Figure 4.2: No. 2 gun on the morning of 13 May after the first attack.¹²

¹¹ Robert 'Cossie' Costello, personal collection.

¹² *ibid.*

Lieutenant Jensen was in charge of the mortar baseplate and four mortar tubes. There were six tubes in a section, four were at FSPB Coral and two were kept at Nui Dat for base defence. At FSPB Coral, Jensen sighted the mortar tubes and told the section commanders to dig in and get organised before he and Signaler Parr started digging the command post and sleeping bay.¹³ The mortars had approximately 75 mortar rounds each and were supported by two machine guns. By last light the mortar pits and the command post had been prepared, the latter with a lightweight tent over the top to keep light to a minimum. This provided Jensen and party the ability to illuminate plotting boards without being visible from the outside.¹⁴

At midnight, NVA soldiers engaged the 1RAR Mortar machine guns. The machine gunners fired back. There were moans and groans from the enemy and then they fell silent. The mortars remained alert for another half an hour and at 12.30am they returned to their positions. At around 2.30am, the enemy came through the mortar position 'in no time flat'.¹⁵ Everything was happening very fast, enemy and small arms fire was all through the mortars, as Jensen recalls.

There were 18 men in the Mortar Platoon and we were like a pimple on the side of the gunners and when they (NVA) came through, we basically surprised them and that created a bit of a problem as they didn't expect us to be there. On top of that, we held our ground and fought hard.¹⁶

Bombardier Larry D'Arcy of 102 Field Battery No. 3 gun, had not been concerned where the next FSPB was to be located. As a Bombardier, his role began when the guns and men landed on the ground. When the artillery guns landed at FSPB Coral, the individual gun crews set up

¹³ Jensen, p. 1.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 3.

their guns for action. This required the men to manoeuvre the guns into the correct position, lay the gun on the sites, set the elevation and sort the ammunition. From landing on the ground to having the guns ready for action took around 10 minutes. As noted earlier, no defensive barbed wire was out on the perimeter, and no claymore mines set as they had not arrived, and did not, in fact, arrive until the next day. Initially, all six guns were without dirt bunding to protect them until the bulldozer arrived and banded three of the guns, numbers four, five and six.¹⁷

At approximately 2.25am, 102 Field Battery was called on to provide supporting artillery fire for Delta Company 1RAR and all six guns were involved. At the completion of the fire mission, D'Arcy was busy reorganising the gun ammunition bay for his gun when small arms fire started. D'Arcy assumed it was 1RAR firing their weapons. This had happened previously at FSPB Harrison when the men in an Australian Armoured Personnel Carrier had fired their guns without notifying the gun battery in the vicinity.¹⁸

D'Arcy comments,

When the first few rounds came into Coral I wasn't really alarmed, just thought it was another balls up [sic]. As soon as I heard the 'crump' of the mortars being fired and the RPG's coming into our position, I soon realised it was no mistake.¹⁹

With the sound of incoming mortars, RPGs and small arms fire, D'Arcy made a quick return to his weapons pit to find out what was happening. It was at this point that D'Arcy was ordered to get his M60, move onto the gun bund of No. 5 gun, and start firing. He was told in no uncertain

¹⁷ D'Arcy, p. 2.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

terms to 'give everything a spray' as the advancing NVA were attempting to flank the Australians.²⁰ He still remembers the incredible noise and the intensity of the battle.

The sky was pitch black and the incoming tracer rounds were very clear to see. The noise of the enemy mortars being fired was probably one of the worst feelings. Once you heard the primer go, indicating the mortar had been dropped into the tube, you just waited to hear it coming and hoped it did not land near you or your mates.²¹

The heavy rain and boggy ground had masked the sounds of the approaching NVA. They had moved to within grenade throwing distance and started throwing them at the Australians. A grenade landed a few feet from D'Arcy's position, rolled away and then exploded. The dirt spoil from his shell scrape protected him, but the shrapnel from the exploding grenade damaged the M60 link belt ammunition causing the machine gun to jam.²²

Unable to clear the stoppage, D'Arcy called to Gunner Costello (Cossie) to pass his rifle. Without hesitation, Costello passed his rifle, and D'Arcy emptied the magazines into the enemy area. Now, having two guns not working, the M60 jammed and the rifle out of bullets, D'Arcy decided on clearing the M60 as it fired the most bullets. D'Arcy vividly remembers that throughout all this, Lieutenant Ahearn and Second Lieutenant Lowry were issuing battle orders to the men while they moved from one position to the next, and this instilled a lot of confidence in the soldiers.²³ Figures 4.3 and 4.4 show Bombardier Larry D'Arcy from No. 3 gun on the morning of 13 May. Figure 4.3 provides what is often described as the '1000 yard stare'.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*, pp. 3-4.



Figure 4.3: Bombardier D'Arcy on the morning of 13 May showing the strain of combat. Behind is the M60 that suffered the stoppage. In his left hand is the damaged link ammunition. At right are those damaged rounds caused by exploding grenade fragments.²⁴

²⁴ D'Arcy, personal collection.

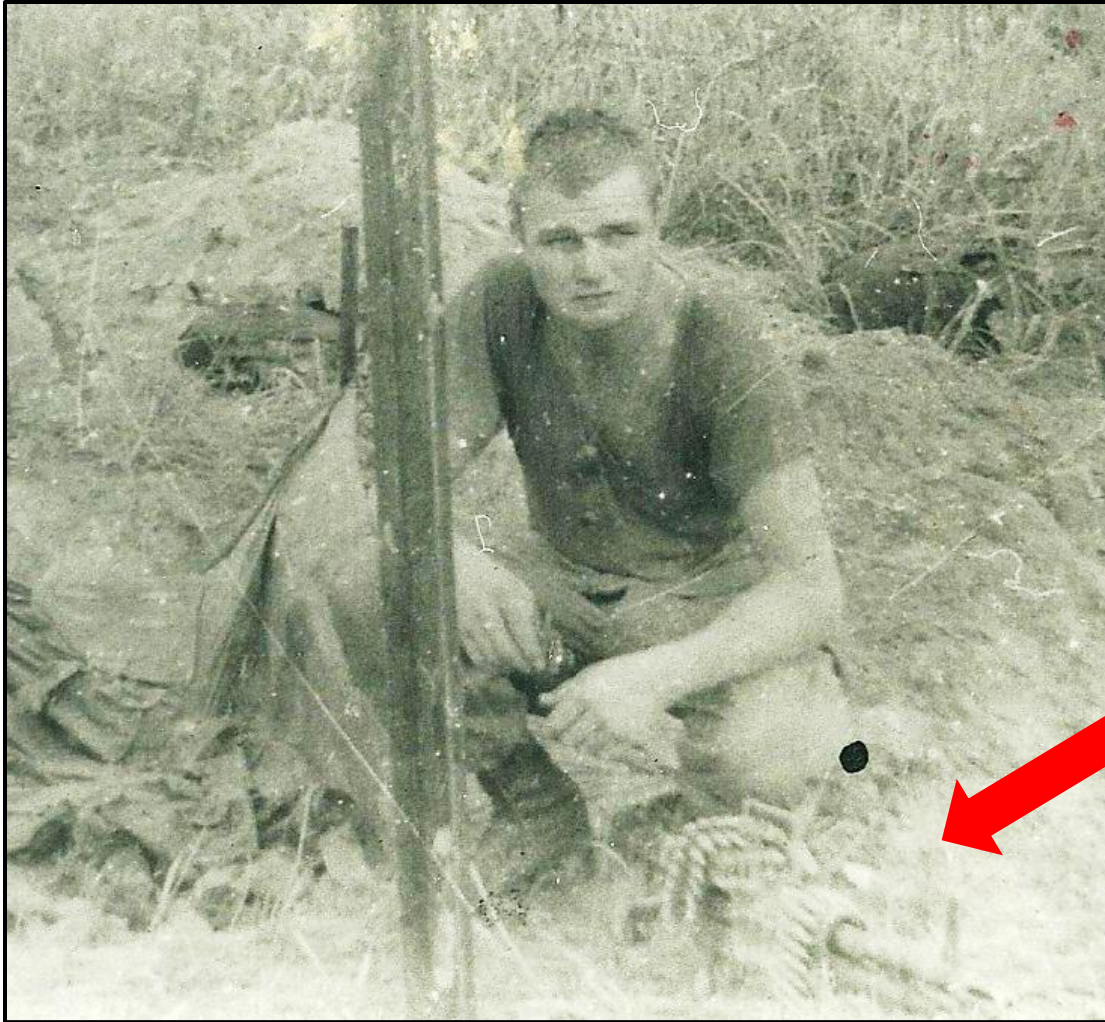


Figure 4.4: Bombardier D'Arcy in front of his shell scrape. The dirt spoil (red arrow) which saved his life, is where the grenade landed before rolling away and exploding.²⁵

With the dynamics of the battle constantly changing, D'Arcy and Gunner David Thomas (Tomo) were ordered to take extra artillery forward to the other guns. Both men leopard crawled with the rounds cradled in their arms to No. 4 gun as bullets, rockets and mortars continued to zap,

²⁵ *ibid.*

crack and explode around them. They later laughed and remarked that 'if we needed to, we would have carried another round in our teeth'.²⁶

Upon landing in Vietnam, Gunner Tom Carmody of 102 Field Battery No. 3 gun was amazed with the amount of military activity. The amount of planes flying everywhere was hard to fathom. Carmody, like the other gunners did not know what was planned for FSPB Coral; the gunners were not privy to such information. When on the ground they got to work setting up the guns, putting out aiming markers and digging weapons pits.²⁷ Carmody was standing to, awaiting fire orders as the infantry reported a contact when the enemy attacked.

I recall a green glow in front of me and thought that the fireflies were bright tonight and next minute, whoosh whoosh a series of RPG's flew overhead, then the mortars started coming in. All hell broke loose. I thought this couldn't be happening to me.²⁸

The gunners had never been under this type of fire before and basic survival instincts kicked in as Carmody recalls.

102 Field Battery had never been under fire like that before. It's instinctive, you know what to do and you follow orders.²⁹

During the NVA attack, the artillery guns still operated in their primary role which is to provide effective artillery support, Carmody continues.

We still had to do our job, we had fire orders and we fired on targets that were available to us. Our tannoy,³⁰ it was knocked out so we had no direct means of communication. We continued on doing what we were supposed to be doing.³¹

²⁶ D'Arcy, p. 2.

²⁷ Tom Carmody, (interview conducted 7 June 2012), pp. 1-2.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.* Note: Tannoy is the loudspeaker system that formed the final part of the communications between the central command and the artillery guns.

³¹ *ibid.*

A fire mission was called which No. 3 gun conducted with a limited crew, and then the gunners ran ammunition up to No. 4 gun. Carmody was sent to the helipad to break open an ammunition crate. Approaching the helipad, fellow gunner Ross Prowse, in the light of the flares, was attempting to open the ammunition crate with an axe. As Tom emerged out of the dark, Prowse whipped around and was about to put the axe through Carmody's head: 'I swore at him and said "don't do that", words to that effect'.³²

Gunner David Thomas (Tomo) of 102 Field Battery No. 3 gun recalls that it was sometime through the night when all the whiz bangs started. Gunner Thomas was under his hootchie when the bombardment came. 'I thought it was just a few rounds, I didn't think it was going to turn out like it did'.

Thomas recalls that a fire mission was called to support 3RAR as they were in a contact with the enemy. No. 3 gun executed the fire mission with only three men available on the gun: Gun Sergeant Elgar (Algie), Gunner Costello (Cossie) and himself. Bombardier D'Arcy was firing the M60 on one of the gun bunds and Gunner Carmody was in another area. The fire mission went on while rockets and bullets were going through the gun position; this was all in the dark of night.³³

It was at this moment of the interview that Gunner Thomas recalls a poignant moment that has remained with him since it occurred on 13 May 1968.

I will never forget carrying splintex over to No 4 gun, Stevos gun and I tripped and fell down and had a poncho wrapped around my ankles. You know, I looked down and there

³² *ibid*, pp. 3-4.

³³ Thomas, p. 1.

was Bluey Sawtell, he was dead, he had been shot in the head and was under the poncho near our gun bay. I covered him back up and kept going.³⁴

The following day, Murtagh came over to the No.3 gun position and started relaying pointless information. Thomas responded to Murtagh, 'it's your fault we are in this mess'. Someone grabbed Thomas; he told them to 'piss off' and turned around to see Bombardier D'Arcy laughing. In only six to eight weeks into the tour Murtagh had become 'a bit of a laughing stock'.³⁵ Figure 4.5 shows the morning after the first attack and the rough conditions the soldiers operated in.



Figure 4.5: The sleeping areas and spent artillery shell casings bearing witness to the heavy and sustained fight that the Australians were involved in. Note: Bottom right of photograph (circled) is the gun trail of a 105mm M2A2 Howitzer from 102 Field Battery. This indicates just how close the sleeping areas were to the gun position.³⁶

³⁴ *ibid*, p. 3. Note: Gunner Sawtell was killed instantly when the attacking NVA fired point blank into his pit.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁶ D'Arcy, personal collection.

Gunner Robert Costello (Cossie) of 102 Field Battery No. 3 gun had been waiting with the other gunners at FSPB Harrison since daybreak to be flown into FSPB Coral. Landing at FSPB Coral late in the afternoon, the gunners established the gun positions, but were unable to prepare defences due to inadequate stores being delivered. Weapons pits were not completed and at this stage Costello had only half prepared his weapons pit by the time 'Stand To' was called.³⁷

Very early in the morning all hell broke loose as rockets were going above the heads of the gunners about six to eight feet and mortars were exploding around them. The gunners were well commanded by the Officers and Non Commissioned Officers. The gunners' training kicked in and ammunition resupplies, defensive fire and fire missions were carried out accordingly. The artillery guns were firing over the protective dirt bund at the enemy running across their front. Unlike Ahearn, Costello remembers that the night flew by, faster than normal.³⁸

The interview with Costello reveals more than just his memory of the battle. Costello reflected on the importance of mateship and the camaraderie that is built with the men he served alongside.

I may be biased in my thoughts here, but our group, not only as a unit, but you could call Charlie Gun (No. 3), the immediate family if you like. I'm very biased towards Charlie gun as I have always thought that our mateship and comradeship is something that could never be broken. In my eyes, it's a true relation to what mateship really is. I'm sure every gunner feels the same way about their guns.³⁹

³⁷ Robert 'Cossie' Costello (interview conducted 7 June 2013), pp. 1-2.

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ *ibid*

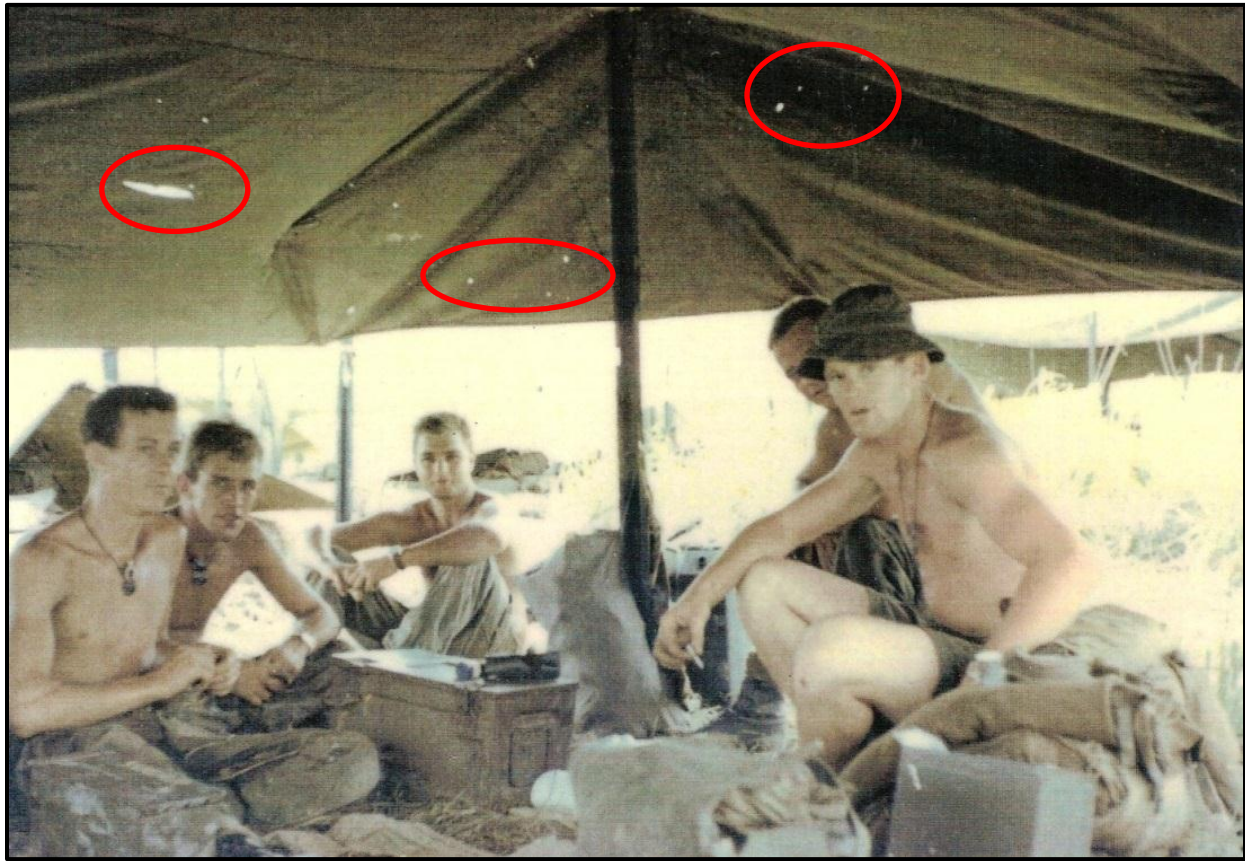


Figure 4.6: Left to right, No. 3 (Charlie Gun), ‘Pommy’ Fisher, Costello, D’Arcy, Thomas (obscured) and ‘Stoney’ Bourke sitting under there shelter on 13 May after a tough night of fighting. Note: The holes in the tent (circled) are from exploding shrapnel, rockets and bullets.⁴⁰

As morning approached, incoming rounds were still falling around FSPB Coral, and the NVA were still firing sporadically at the Australian positions. Ahearn had now returned to the Command Post and instructed Second Lieutenant Lowry to take a clearing patrol and head out through No. 6 gun. At the same time Ahearn would take the medical officer and others and

⁴⁰ D’Arcy, personal collection.

head through the 1RAR Mortar Platoon. This was to do two things: clear the area of any enemy and to check the situation of 1RAR Mortars.⁴¹

Ahearn recalls.

The first one we came across was a wounded NVA and I distinctly remember that he had been hit with a burst on F1 9mm (sub machine gun ammunition) and you could see the rounds in his chest as it was just getting light. It was 1944 ammunition so it had only just gone in, he wasn't feeling great, but he wasn't anywhere near dead [sic]. He was the first we came across.⁴²

Ordered to take a clearing patrol out through the gun position, Bombardier D'Arcy gathered Bombardier Burns (Burnsie), Gunner Floyd and a few others before cautiously moving out to begin a clearing search. The gunners had not moved far from the gun position when Gunner Ayson (No. 6 gun) opened fire and shot an NVA in the grass. On instinct, the men went to ground. D'Arcy was now looking at an NVA soldier and the end of his AK47 and pulled the trigger of his M60; the sound was a resonating thud as his M60 jammed.⁴³

All I remember was Ayson firing; I hit the ground as trained to do and seeing the barrel of an enemy gun I pulled the trigger and nothing happened. I was yelling at Burnsie to bloody shoot him, just bloody shoot him [sic]. I did this more than once. Burnsie assured me that he was already dead and I can get up and stop shouting.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ahearn, p. 7.

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ D'Arcy, p. 3.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

As a result of that first night's contact, the Australians suffered nine soldiers killed in action and 28 wounded. The biggest loss was with 1RAR Mortar Platoon. With 18 men flying into FSPB Coral, they suffered five men killed in action and eight wounded. Of the men in 1RAR Mortar Platoon who were in the battle, only Lieutenant Jensen and signaler Private Parr remained at FSPB Coral. All the other men were injured or suffered from battle shock and were returned to Nui Dat. The enemy dead numbered 52 on the battlefield around FSPB Coral.⁴⁵



Figure 4.7: Left to right, 102 Field Battery Command Post gunners Trevor Bryant, Ian Ryan, Peter Storey, Mal Chambers and Stan Carbines in front of No. 6 gun in the morning after the first attack.⁴⁶

After the first attack on FSPB Coral, Lieutenant Colonel Bennett was directed by Brigadier Hughes to strengthen the defensive position and redeployed the companies of 1RAR into the area of FSPB Coral. The Task Force Forward Headquarters arrived from Bearcat on 13 May along

⁴⁵ McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 370.

⁴⁶ 12 Field Regiment (Vietnam) Association, *Photo Gallery & Video and Slide Show* (2007), <http://hampo.smugmug.com/12-Field-Regiment-Photo/Coral> (accessed 08 October 2013).

with an American Battery of 155mm self-propelled guns. Australian armour arrived with 'A' Squadron, 3 Cavalry Regiment along with other elements to assist in strengthening FSPB Coral. 161 Field Battery was redeployed to AO Coogee.⁴⁷

The attack on 12 and 13 May demonstrated the attacking capabilities of the enemy. The idea now was to strengthen the defences at FSPB Coral, providing the enemy with some big targets. This, it was assumed, would draw the enemy out and this time they would be met with a stronger and well-prepared fighting force. FSPB Coral would be heavily defended at night and aggressive daytime patrols would ensure that the fight was taken to the enemy. Major John Keldie, commanding the Armoured Personnel Carriers now became the local defence Commander. He was to co-ordinate the defence of FSPB Coral, a role previously held so inadequately by Murtagh.⁴⁸

The artillery gunners busied themselves with digging deeper weapons pits, clearing, repairing and cleaning their guns and making sure that they were ready to provide artillery support when needed. The second attack on FSPB Coral occurred on 16 May at approximately 2.30am. Once again the enemy hit under the cover of darkness, launching a sustained barrage of rockets, mortars and small arms on FSPB Coral.⁴⁹

D'Arcy, commenting on his weapons pit, he states,

By now my pit was that deep that I had to stand on my helmet to see over the top of it. I was making sure that I was well below ground level.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, pp. 372-374.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 374.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 375.

⁵⁰ D'Arcy, p. 3.

The struggle around FSPB Coral went on until 6 June 1968 and involved a large number of clashes with NVA and heavy rocketing and mortaring of Coral. For the first time since World War Two, Australian tanks participated in actions supporting the infantry and they in turn were supported by the artillery.⁵¹

Operation Toan Thang came to its conclusion in early June. The First Australian Task Force was instructed by the II Field Force Vietnam Commander that operations in the 'Catchers Mitt' area were terminated. On 6 June FSPB Coral was abandoned and remaining units returned to Nui Dat via air or road.⁵² By the time the Australians withdrew, over 270 NVA had been killed, 20 captured and an untold number wounded. The Australians suffered 25 killed and 109 wounded.⁵³

Lieutenant Ian Ahearn from 102 Field Battery wrote 13 citations for actions at FSPB Coral. Of those 13 written, two gunners were decorated for their part in the battle: Sergeant Leslie John Stephens received the Military Medal (MM) and Sergeant Lindsay Arthur (Algie) Elgar was Mention in Despatches (MiD).⁵⁴ (See Appendices 6 and 7).

Events that occurred over 45 years ago still resonate in the minds of the veterans as the interviews showed and recognition of their action in the battle of FSPB Coral are still being sought. Yet, the veterans wonder how, or even if, the Battle for FSPB Coral will be remembered.

⁵¹ McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 379.

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 395.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 396.

⁵⁴ 12 Field Regiment (Vietnam) Association, Awards, (7 August 2012), <http://12fieldregiment.com/awards.htm> (accessed 05 April 2014).

Tom Carmody on Coral:

I don't know how history will show us. We were involved in the Sudan, Korea is almost forgotten war, and some Australians were involved in the Boxer Rebellion. History is history and people write about it, but they don't always have much insight or the right knowledge because we will be long dead and buried and all the first-hand knowledge will go with us and all we leave behind is what has been written about us or what we have put down ourselves for posterity.⁵⁵

Tony Jensen adds:

Militarily it was one of those things that had to be done; basically it was what it was. I guess the sad thing is that it doesn't get the recognition it should have got and really doesn't still today and if there is anything I would change, that would be it because there were five diggers killed and another eight wounded from my section who did it in vain.⁵⁶

Figure 4.8 shows four gunners from 102 Field Battery celebrating their last night in Vietnam after 12 arduous months. Just 36 hours prior to this photo being taken, 102 Field Battery were supporting the Ninth Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (9RAR) near Xuyen Moc. They came under friendly fire from a unit of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam operating within the vicinity. Luckily for the battery, no one was injured. The following morning the men boarded the QANTAS 'Freedom Bird' and headed home to Australia.

⁵⁵ Carmody, p. 4.

⁵⁶ Jensen, p. 6.



Figure 4.8: Left to right, Bombardier John Harms, Gunner David Thomas, Bombardier Ian Warren and Bombardier Larry D'Arcy.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ D'Arcy, personal collection.

Conclusion

E.P. Thompson argued that, although the artisan's trade may seem irrelevant, it is in fact very pertinent when attempting to understand their overall role in history.¹ The artisan in this thesis is the soldier; his trade is that of an artillery gunner, mortarman and an Officer within his unit. This thesis then had two main aims. First, it opened an avenue for seven Coral veterans to provide an account of their battle experiences as witnessed by them. This method questioned four key points in the Official History's account; the lack of intelligence provided to the men going into Coral, the positioning of 161 Field Battery and 102 Field Battery, two Final Preventative Fire tasks, and the use of splintex and ricocheting artillery. The second aim, to position the combat element missing in the Official History, was provided in detail in Chapter Four.

Throughout Chapters Three and Four of this thesis, the soldiers' voice has been prominent. The work of Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*,² Barbara Allen, *The Personal Point of View in Orally Communicated History*,³ and James Bennett, *Human Values in Oral History*⁴ has been reflected through the veterans' narratives.

While qualitative research makes up the majority of an oral history project, it is open to debate and criticism by reason for what has been called its 'worm's eye view'. Yet, as Lindsay Dodd argues, what must not be lost is that the worm is integral to the ecosystem, just as the

¹ E.P.Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1963), pp. 11-12.

² Paul Thompson, 'The Voice of the Past', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds).

³ Barbara Allen & William Lynwood Montell, *From Memory to History: Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research*, (Nashville, The American Association for State and Local History, 1981).

⁴ James Bennett, 'Human Values on Oral History', *Oral History Review*, vol 11 (1983), pp. 1-15.

individual account is integral to an official history.⁵ The tendency to obscure the soldiers' role at FSPB Coral, or completely eliminate the combat element, has in effect removed the soldiers' efforts from the battle. The soldiers' memory and personal view point is as valid as the Official History as it comes from their own experience, offering insights and discoveries into a forgotten battle.

For Paul Thompson, memory can be used to transform the very purpose of history. Memory enables the transformation of the content and delivers a new perspective on an historical event,⁶ in this instance, the Battle for FSPB Coral. Through the veterans' words, the event becomes the central theme, with the focus on them, and it is their history we now vicariously live through.⁷

For Barbara Allen, the personal records and observations of individuals are pertinent to history as they have been directly involved in the event. The memories of the individuals affirm the importance of a personal view point as a means of distinguishing the ordinary in historical context.⁸ This has been demonstrated in Chapters Three and Four where, although, the veterans interviewed fought alongside each other, they have different memories of the battle, reflecting their place in it, and what is important to them.

History is also an experience, a way of understanding events through the lived experiences of the individual or individuals. Those involved are the original experiencers; it is they that have

⁵Lindsay Dodd, 'Small fish, big pond: using a single oral history narrative to reveal broader social change', in Joan Tumblety (ed), *Memory and History: Understanding memory as source and subject*, (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 39.

⁶ Thompson, 'The Voice of the Past', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), p. 26.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Barbara Allen, 'The Personal Point of View in Orally Communicated History', *Western Folklore*, vol. 38, no. 2 (April 1975), p. 112.

made history.⁹ Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton state that memory is an undeniable source that links us to a specific place. It is the act of remembering what is personal and often private to the individuals that is important.¹⁰ John Tosh adds that individual voices may become lost in collective memory; this is evident with the Official History and the Battle for FSPB Coral. The individual voice is no longer recognised, it has become a communal commodity. Personal testimony, when kept as an individual entity and not engulfed in the collective, remains centred on the individual experience. This is often recounted with an emotional power and intensity that provides the interviewer with vivid details of the event.¹¹

A striking omission within the Official History is the conveying of what James Bennett calls 'the human value', this is the person's own words, what they consider valuable to them.¹² Chapter Four of this thesis reflects Bennett's argument. When the human value is presented in one's own words it creates an image of the person. This does two things. First, it provides the reader with a tangible entity that they can identify with (compared to the informal and impersonal prose provided in an Official History). Secondly, the human value is able to convey a clearer message of an event, in this case the veterans' view of the battle.¹³ Bennett also affirms that two memories are never the same; each memory is uniquely inherent to the individual.¹⁴ This has been affirmed throughout Chapters Three and Four of this thesis when events described by the veterans interviewed contained feelings and memories of the battle.

⁹ Paul Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1997), p.65.

¹⁰ Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton, 'Introduction', in Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (ed), *Memory and History in Twentieth- Century Australia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 1.

¹¹ John Tosh, 'The Pursuit of History: Aims, methods and new directions in the study of modern history', 5th ed, (England: Pearson Education Limited: 2005), p. 313.

¹² Bennett, 'Human Values on Oral History', p. 3.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 4.

In 2008, a civic reception was held in Canberra by 12 Field Regiment (Vietnam) Association to commemorate the 40th Anniversary of the Battle for FSPB Coral. The ceremony also included the awarding of an Honour title to 102 Field Battery. This made them the only unit in the Australian Army to receive such an award. 102 Field Battery is now recognised as 102 'CORAL' Battery (Appendix 8).¹⁵ In 2012 a submission to the Defence Honours and Awards Appeal Tribunal¹⁶ seeking a Unit Citation for Gallantry was put forward by Colonel Ian Ahearn (Retired). Ahearn was the Gun Position Officer for 102 Field Battery and fought in this battle. The Battle for FSPB Coral was also brought to the attention of Mr Ross Vasta MP, Member for Bonner, Queensland (Appendices 9 and 10),¹⁷ by one former Coral veteran, Sergeant John Harms (Retired) who served with 102 Field Battery and was in the battle. In his speech to the parliament on the matter, Vasta highlighted the actions of 102 Field Battery at FSPB Coral and sought recognition of this action. Appendix 11 provides a look at the veterans interviewed for this thesis.

To date, 102 'CORAL' Battery has not received the Unit Citation for Gallantry and, although they still seek recognition, the men interviewed for this thesis feel that this may never be achieved.

Robert Costello sums it up this way:

My perspective on it is that I know what we achieved I know what we done [sic] and there is no chance on God's earth that we will ever gain any more recognition than what we have got now. It seems as though the artillery were never there and it was us who

¹⁵ Australian Artillery Association, '102nd (CORAL) Field Battery', <http://australianartilleryassociation.com> (accessed 18 August 2012).

¹⁶ Australian Government Defence Honours and Awards Tribunal (2012), <http://defence-honours-tribunal.gov.au/submission153> (accessed 11 April 2014).

¹⁷ Parliament of Australia, *Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, Federation Chamber, Constituency Statements: Royal Australian Artillery Speech* (2012), http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Hansard (accessed 02 December 2013).

took the brunt of the attack. We do get aggrieved in the fact that the gunners are always forgotten about.¹⁸

David Thomas adds:

I would just like some recognition like what has being given to Long Tan to tell you the truth and I would like the true story to get out there as opposed to what has been said and written about. The truth just has not been spoken about and I would just like the truth to get out there. Nothing is ever said about 102 Field Battery and I think the reason that it is not said is because we should not have been there. I would just like our side told, but I don't think that will ever happen.¹⁹

¹⁸ Costello, p. 3.

¹⁹ Thomas, p. 3.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Invitation to participate.



Dear (Insert Name),

I am undertaking an Honours thesis in History (15,000 to 18,000 words) at the University of Wollongong, covering the Battle for Fire Support Patrol Base (FSPB) Coral in South Vietnam 1968 under the supervision of Associate Professor John McQuilton. This thesis seeks to add the perspective of the men who were part of that battle to the official version by recording their experiences and examining the place of memory in the writing of history. As part of the research required for this thesis, and following the procedures set down by the University for conducting interviews, I would like to formally invite you to participate in this project.

Participation involves answering a series of questions. These can be done through an audio taped interview that will last approximately two hours or by written response to the questions. The questions will briefly cover how you ended up in the Military, your role at FSPB Coral, how you view the battle in retrospect and comparisons with Balmoral and Long Tan. The questions are attached.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and at your choosing you may answer all or in part of the questions. You will have the opportunity to partial or complete withdraw from the thesis at any stage. All material provided by you, the interviewee, will be kept confidential and a pseudonym will be used in place of your actual name. All material provided by the interviewee will be kept in a secured safe within the supervisors office and accessible only to myself (Mark Jamieson).

When the thesis has been completed, all interview recordings and any notes taken will be returned to the interviewee.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, or my supervisor, at the email addresses listed below.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "M. Jamieson".

Mark Jamieson (maj076@uowmail.edu.au)

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "John McQuilton".

John McQuilton (jmquilt@uow.edu.au)

Faculty of Arts
University of Wollongong NSW 2522 Australia
Telephone +61 2 4221 5328 Facsimile +61 2 4221 5341
fac_arts@uow.edu.au www.uow.edu.au/arts CRICOS PROVIDER No. 00102E

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet.



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET FOR: **(Insert Name)**

TITLE: *The Battle for Fire Support Patrol Base (FSPB) Coral and its consequences.*

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

This is an invitation to participate in a *History Honours Thesis* conducted by *Mark Jamieson* an Honours student at the University of Wollongong. The purpose and research of the thesis will focus on the men from 102 Field Battery, Royal Australian Artillery and the roles that they played at FSPB Coral. The purpose of the thesis is for the men to tell their side of the story to illuminate the official historical view which was written without the view of the men who were there. The men that I interview will be able to provide a soldiers perspective and the benefits cover the ongoing historical importance for all Vietnam Veterans as they are able to become the voice of this thesis. The growing need to preserve the past through oral history is equally important as it challenges the official written accounts and without the veteran's memories, part of our history will be lost. This thesis will also contribute to a better understanding of what happened at FSPB Coral. The current historiography of Vietnam is similar to that of the Great War some thirty years ago where only one battle was remembered, Gallipoli. Its equivalent in Vietnam is Long Tan. Yet, the military history of Vietnam is more than the battle at Long Tan.'

RESEARCHER: Mark Jamieson
Faculty of Arts, Building 19
Email: maj076@uowmail.edu.au

SUPERVISOR: Associate Professor John McQuilton
Faculty of Arts, Building 19
Email: jmcquilt@uow.edu.au

METHOD AND DEMANDS ON PARTICIPANTS:

If you choose to be included, you will be asked to participate in either an interview of approximately two hours that will be audio taped or by a written response to the questions.

Typical questions in the interview include:

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself, name, age, how you ended up in the military.
2. You were at the Battle of Coral: what do you remember about that? What role did you play?
3. It has been said that the Army made mistakes at Coral. Did they? And do you think those mistakes could be repeated?
4. Balmoral often crops up in any discussion about Coral. What can you tell me about the two?
5. Long Tan is often seen as *the* battle in histories about our involvement in Vietnam. What do you think about that?
6. Did the contact at FSPB Coral change you in anyway militarily and personally?

Faculty of Arts
University of Wollongong NSW 2522 Australia
Telephone +61 2 4221 5328 Facsimile +61 2 4221 5341
fac_arts@uow.edu.au www.uow.edu.au/arts CRICOS PROVIDER No. 00102E

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet (continued).

7. How do you see Coral now in retrospect?

8. (Battery Captains and Lieutenants) Did Coral affect the way officers organised when preparing future FSBPs?

POSSIBLE RISKS, INCONVENIENCES AND DISCOMFORTS:

I am aware that the interview and or questions may elicit uncomfortable past memories and if a problem does arise I have provided information from the Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs website <http://www.dva.gov.au> and include: What services does the Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service (VVCS) provide, Veterans Line Information, Who can use the Veterans Line and the Veterans Families Counselling Service information The information comes from the Department of Veteran Affairs http://www.dva.gov.au/health_and_wellbeing/mental_health/Pages/index.aspx. The Vietnam Veterans and Families Counselling Service can be reached 24 hours a day across Australia for crisis support and counselling. Phone: 1800 011 046. I will also provide other services including Lifeline: <http://www.lifeline.org.au/> contactable on 13 11 14 and Beyondblue: <http://www.beyondblue.org.au/> contactable on 1300 224 636.

The Battle for FSPB Coral was a unit size battle that included the Royal Australian Artillery (12th Field Regiment, 600 men). Using pseudonyms for the participants will ensure their confidentiality for two reasons: I am interviewing ten men from the 130 in the unit; the men are not being asked to describe their individual behavior during the battle, but rather their general role in, and memories of, it. Any information solicited during the interviews that could identify a participant will not be used in the thesis. Your involvement in the study is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation from the study at any time and withdraw any data that you have provided to that point. Refusal to participate in the study will not affect your relationship with the University of Wollongong.

FUNDING AND BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH:

There is no funding for this thesis and throughout the duration of the thesis all confidential material will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet in the office of Supervisor John McQuilton and accessible only to me (Mark Jamieson). Confidentiality is assured and participant's names will be replaced with a pseudonym so you will not be identified in any part of the research. At the completion of my thesis all material, audio or otherwise will be returned to the participant.

ETHICS REVIEW AND COMPLAINTS:

This study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Science, Humanities and Behavioural Science) of the University of Wollongong. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the way this research has been conducted, you can contact the UOW Ethics Officer on (02) 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

Thank you for your interest in this study.

Kind Regards

Mark Jamieson

Appendix 3: Consent Form.



CONSENT FORM FOR:

RESEARCH TITLE: The Battle for Fire Support Patrol Base (FSPB) Coral and its consequences.

RESEARCHER/S: Mark Jamieson (student)

I have been given information about *The Battle for FSPB Coral and its consequences* and discussed the research project with Mark Jamieson who is conducting this research as part of a History Honours Degree supervised by Associate Professor John McQuilton in the department of Arts at the University of Wollongong.

I have been advised of the potential risks and burdens associated with this research, which include talking about and re-living my experiences in Vietnam and have had an opportunity to ask Mark Jamieson any questions I may have about the research and my participation.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time. My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my treatment in any way or future relationship with the University of Wollongong.

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact Mark Jamieson (email: maj076@uowmail.edu.au) and/or John McQuilton (email: jmcquilt@uow.edu.au) or if I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, Office of Research, University of Wollongong on 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to (please tick):

- Being interviewed/voice recorded*
- Writing responses to questions*
- Having a pseudonym being used in place of real name*
- Providing my viewpoint on questions provided*

I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for a History Honours Thesis and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Signed Date

...../...../.....

Name (please print)

.....

Faculty of Arts
University of Wollongong NSW 2522 Australia
Telephone +61 2 4221 5328 **Facsimile** +61 2 4221 5341
fac_arts@uow.edu.au www.uow.edu.au/arts CRICOS PROVIDER No. 00102E

Appendix 4: Consent Form Reply indicating that the participant agrees to use his name.



CONSENT FORM FOR: Tony Jensen

RESEARCH TITLE: The Battle for Fire Support Patrol Base (FSPB) Coral and its consequences.

RESEARCHER/S: Mark Jamieson (student)

I have been given information about *The Battle for FSPB Coral and its consequences* and discussed the research project with Mark Jamieson who is conducting this research as part of a History Honours Degree supervised by Associate Professor John McQuilton in the department of Arts at the University of Wollongong.

I have been advised of the potential risks and burdens associated with this research, which include talking about and re-living my experiences in Vietnam and have had an opportunity to ask Mark Jamieson any questions I may have about the research and my participation.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time. My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my treatment in any way or future relationship with the University of Wollongong.

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact Mark Jamieson (email: maj076@uowmail.edu.au) and/or John McQuilton (email: jmcquilt@uow.edu.au) or if I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, Office of Research, University of Wollongong on 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to (please tick):

- Being interviewed/voice recorded
- Writing responses to questions
- Having a pseudonym being used in place of real name *Happy to use my name*
- Providing my viewpoint on questions provided

I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for a History Honours Thesis and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Signed Date

[Signature] 27/2/13

Name (please print)

A. H. JENSEN

Faculty of Arts
University of Wollongong NSW 2522 Australia
Telephone +61 2 4221 5328 Facsimile +61 2 4221 5341
fac_arts@uow.edu.au www.uow.edu.au/arts CRICOS PROVIDER No. 00102E

Appendix 5: Thesis Questions.



Thesis Questions

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself, name, age, how you ended up in the military?
2. You were at the Battle of FSPB Coral: what do you remember about that? What role did you play?
3. Did the Army make errors at FSPB Coral in regards to fly in and LZ preparation? If so why is the official history recorded differently and do you think those mistakes could or were repeated?
4. Balmoral often crops up in any discussion about Coral. What can you tell me about the two?
5. Long Tan is often seen as *the battle* in histories about our involvement in Vietnam and the date has become Vietnam Veterans Day. What do you think about that?
6. Did the contact at Coral change you in anyway militarily and personally?
7. How do you see Coral now in retrospect?
8. (Battery Captains and Lieutenants) Did Coral affect the way officers organised when preparing for future FSPBs?

Faculty of Arts

University of Wollongong NSW 2522 Australia

Telephone +61 2 4221 5328 Facsimile +61 2 4221 5341

fac_arts@uow.edu.au www.uow.edu.au/arts CRICOS PROVIDER No. 00102E

Appendix 6: Leslie John Stephens, Military Medal (MM) Citation.

Army Number:	215284
Substantive Rank:	Bombardier
Temporary Rank:	Sergeant
Christian Name:	Leslie John
Surname:	STEPHENS
Honour or Award:	MM

Sergeant Leslie Stephens enlisted in the Australian Regular Army on 6 June 1963, and since 18 June 1966, has served with 12th Field Regiment, Royal Australian Artillery. He arrived in South Vietnam on 5 March 1968.

On the morning of 13 May 1968, during Operation Toan Thang at Fire Support Base Coral, an enemy main force unit of Battalion strength attacked positions held by 102nd Field Battery and Regimental Headquarters 12th Field Regiment. Covered by heavy small arms and rocket fire, the enemy, during the battle, mounted a strong frontal assault against the guns of 102nd Field Battery. Sergeant Stephens exhorted his gun detachment to manhandle his gun into a position where it could engage the enemy over open sights. For more than two hours the enemy attempted to reach the gun position. Sergeant Stephens and his gun detachment fired eighty four rounds direct fire at the enemy, who were at times within five metres of his gun. During this time the gun was repeatedly hit by small arms fire and the basic structure of the gun was holed by a rocket.

Sergeant Stephens' calmness and exemplary leadership under fire contributed greatly to the successful defence of the position, and reflects great credit on himself, his Regiment and the Australian Army.

Appendix 7: Lindsay Arthur Elgar (Algie), Mention in Despatches (MiD) Citation.

Army Number:	1410746
Substantive Rank:	Bombardier
Temporary Rank:	Sergeant
Christian Name:	Lindsay Arthur
Surname:	ELGAR
Honour or Award:	MID

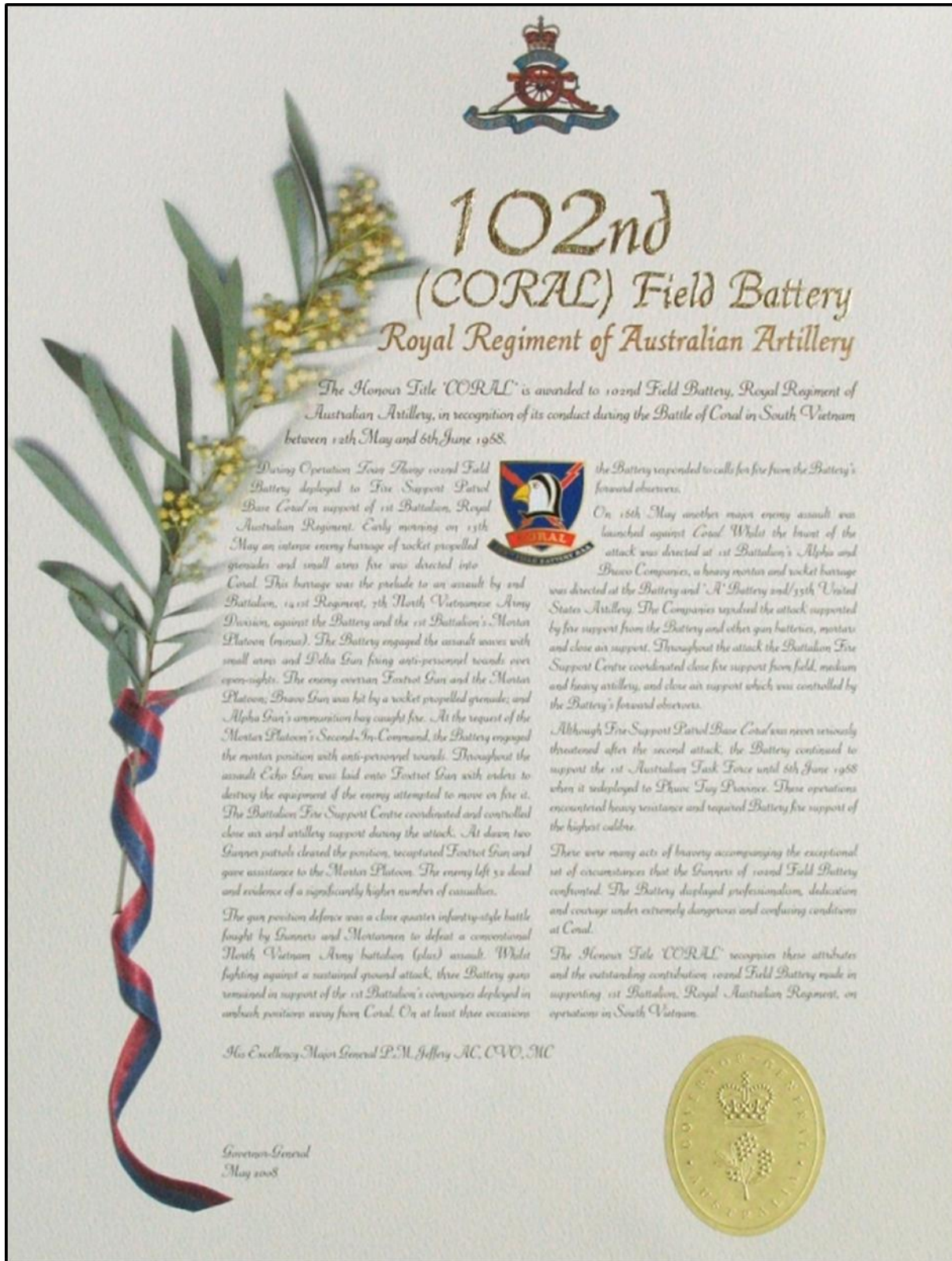
Sergeant Lindsay Elgar enlisted in the Australian Regular Army Supplement on 16 April 1962 and since 18 April 1966 has served with 12th Field Regiment, Royal Australian Artillery. He arrived in South Vietnam on 5 March 1968.

On the morning of 13 May 1968 during Operation Toan Thang at Fire Support Base Coral, Sergeant Elgar and his gun detachment occupied a position on the left flank of 102nd Field Battery. During a strong enemy attack on that position Sergeant Elgar found that his detachment, although protected, was not in the best position to engage the enemy. Continually exposing himself to heavy small arms and rocket fire Sergeant Elgar moved his detachment into better fire positions and directed the successful defence of a flank of the gun position. He later led a small party to clear enemy from a nearby mortar position, which was under heavy attack. His party killed or forced back most of the enemy enabling a further party to reoccupy this position.

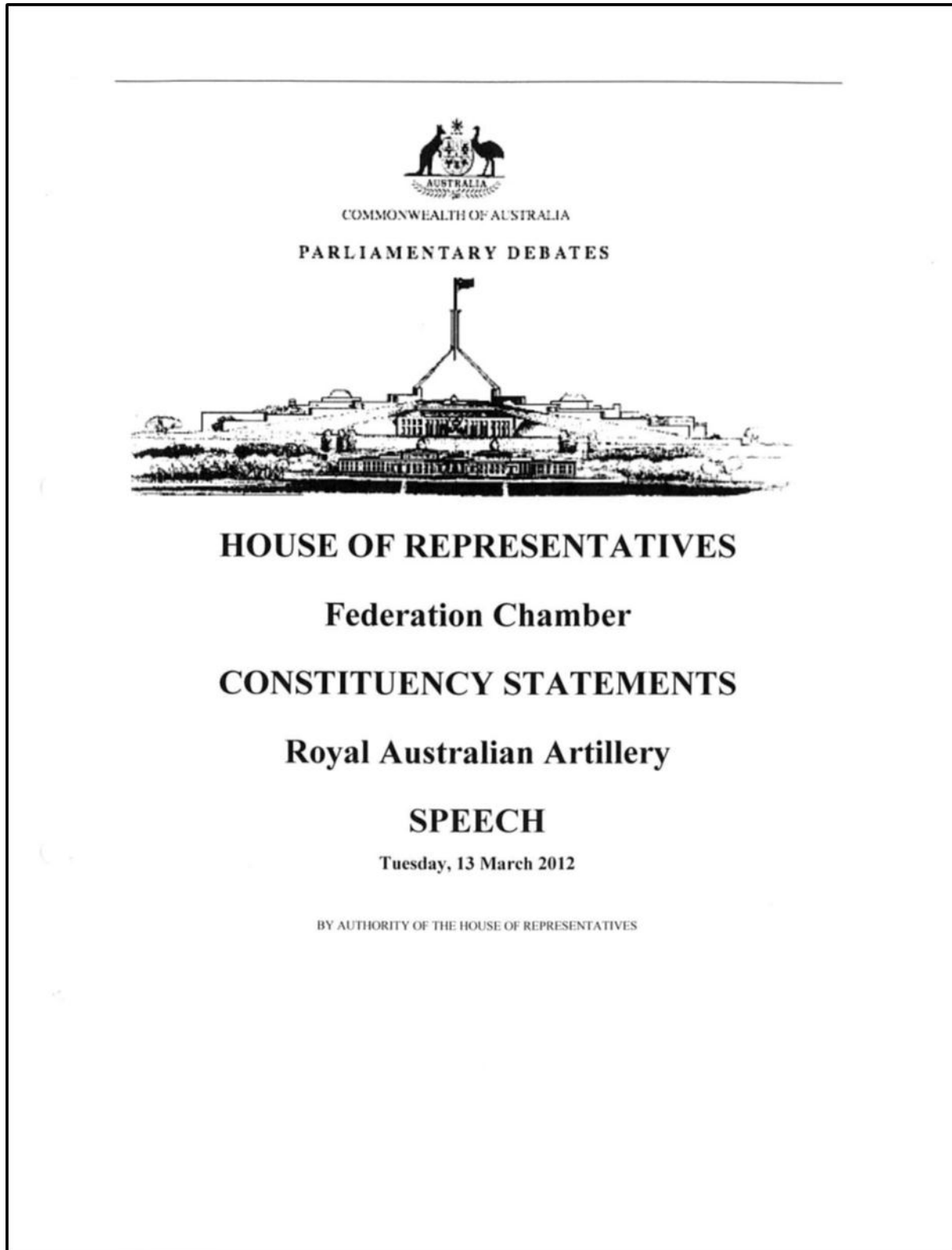
On the morning of 16 May 1968 a further enemy attack on the fire support base area was preceded by intense mortar and rocket fire directed against the gun position. Enemy mortar fire destroyed the means of communication between Sergeant Elgar's gun and the gun position command post. Completely disregarding his own safety Sergeant Elgar moved over ground exposed to fire in order to obtain information which enabled his gun to take part in an important fire mission.

In both battles Sergeant Elgar's bravery and devotion to duty were a source of inspiration to other members of his sub unit, and reflect great credit on himself, his Regiment and the Australian Army.

Appendix 8: Honour Title Scroll awarded to 102 Field Battery.



Appendix 9: Front page of the speech by Mr Ross Vasta MP.



Appendix 10: Mr Ross Vasta, MP for Bonner delivering a letter from a Bonner constituent, Mr Jurgen (John) Harms who served with 102 Field Battery at FSPB Coral.

Tuesday, 13 March 2012

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2740

SPEECH

Date Tuesday, 13 March 2012

Source House

Page 2740

Proof No

Questioner

Responder

Speaker Vasta, Ross, MP

Question No.

Mr VASTA (Bonner) (18:07): It is with pleasure that I rise tonight to acknowledge the bravery of the 102nd Field Battery, Royal Regiment of Australian Artillery for its collective gallantry and heroic actions that took place on the night of 12 to 13 May 1968 in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. The 102nd's exemplary conduct on that evening against a numerically superior enemy has yet to be formally recognised by the Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal, and tonight I would like to formally raise this matter. I have been made aware that a submission for an award of a Unit Citation for Gallantry for the 102nd is currently before the tribunal. I would strongly encourage the tribunal to formally recognise the collective tenacity and bravery of the Australians who held their ground under intense enemy pressure on the first night of fierce fighting at Fire Support Base Coral in South Vietnam.

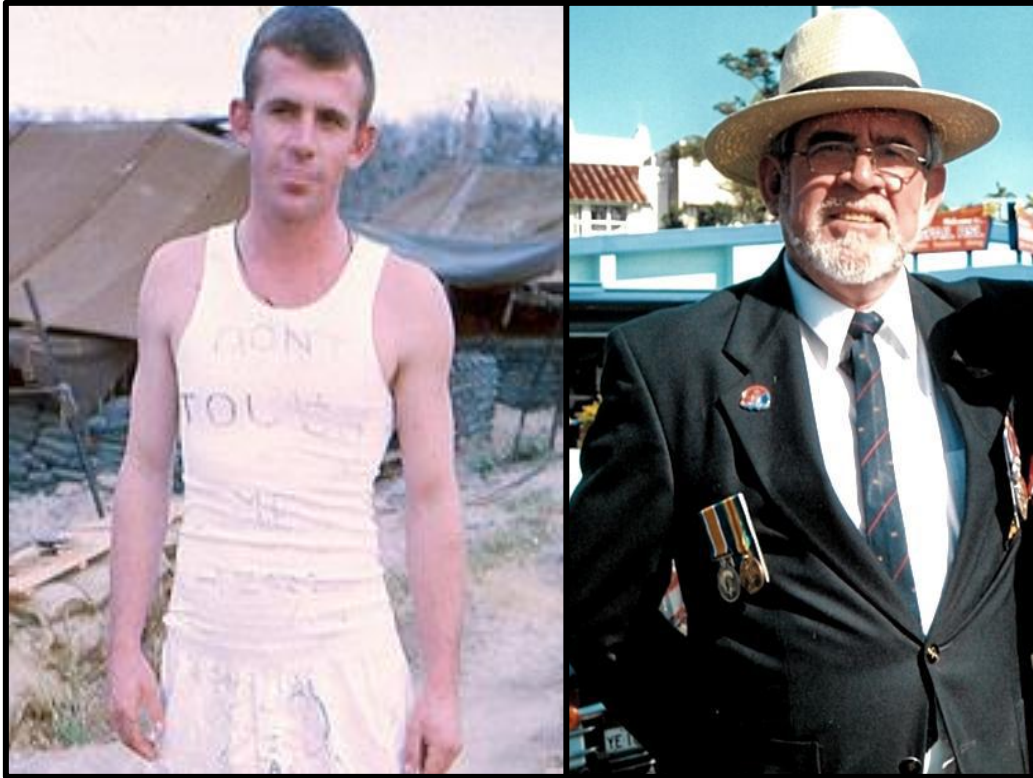
The members of the 102nd were under strength and unprepared for the fierce attack that evening and were faced with a 1,000-strong North Vietnamese Army unit who were fresh and well equipped and whose objective that night was to secure the six guns of the 102nd. The North Vietnamese Army succeeded in securing only one of the six Australian guns that evening due to the bold and heroic actions of the battery. The members of the battery were engaged in close hand-to-hand combat with the enemy whilst performing their main purpose, which was to provide support to the Australian infantry, all the while under sustained mass infantry attack. To summarise for you today, as many as 220 Australians would have been captured and lives subsequently lost,; six Australian guns would have been lost, mortar and other vital equipment and supplies would have been lost, and the regiment headquarters would have been overrun—truly unthinkable outcomes. Without the 102nd's brave actions it really could have become a reality of the Vietnam War. The 102nd's courageous actions were brought to my attention by my Bonner constituent Mr Jurgen Harms of Wynnum, who served in the Vietnam War and was part of the 102nd FB. I thank him for his ongoing efforts in achieving appropriate recognition for this battle. In conclusion, I would like to formally place my full support behind the 102nd Field Battery, Royal Regiment of Australian Artillery in their submission to be awarded the Unit Citation for Gallantry.

Appendix 11: FSPB Coral veterans interviewed.



Ian 'Scrubber' Ahearn

Ian is a Graduate of the Royal Military College, Army Command and Staff College and the Joint Services Staff College, serving 35 years in the Australian Army. He saw active service in South Vietnam with 12 Field Regiment 102 Field Battery Royal Australian Artillery 1968 to 1969, and service overseas with 28 ANZUK Field Regiment in Singapore. He was the Commandant 1st Recruit Training Battalion in 1988/89 and the Army HQ as Director Information Plans and Policy-Army before retiring in 1997.



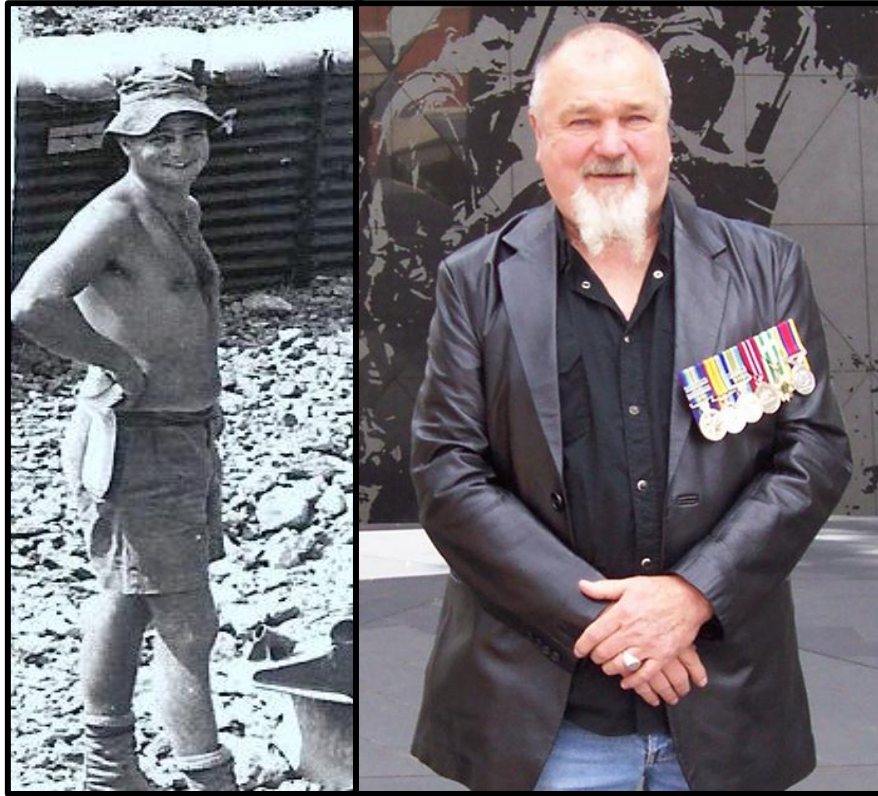
Thomas 'Tom' Carmody

Tom was part of the 9th National Service intake and served in the Army from 13 February 1967 to 13 February 1969, posted to the Royal Australian Artillery. Tom saw active service in Vietnam with 12 Field Regiment 102 Field Battery Royal Australian Artillery 1968 to 1969. Receiving an honourable discharge, Tom returned to work in the State Governments Attorney General Department before moving to the Federal Government working in the court system, retiring in 1998.



Robert 'Cossie' Costello

Robert was part of the 8th National Service intake and served in the Army from 19 April 1967 to March 1969, posted to the Royal Australian Artillery. Robert saw active service in Vietnam with 12 Field Regiment 102 Field Battery 1968 to 1969. Receiving an honourable discharge, Robert forged a career in the transport and oil industry before retiring. Today, Robert is involved with 102 'CORAL' Battery and 12 Field Regiment (Vietnam) Associations.



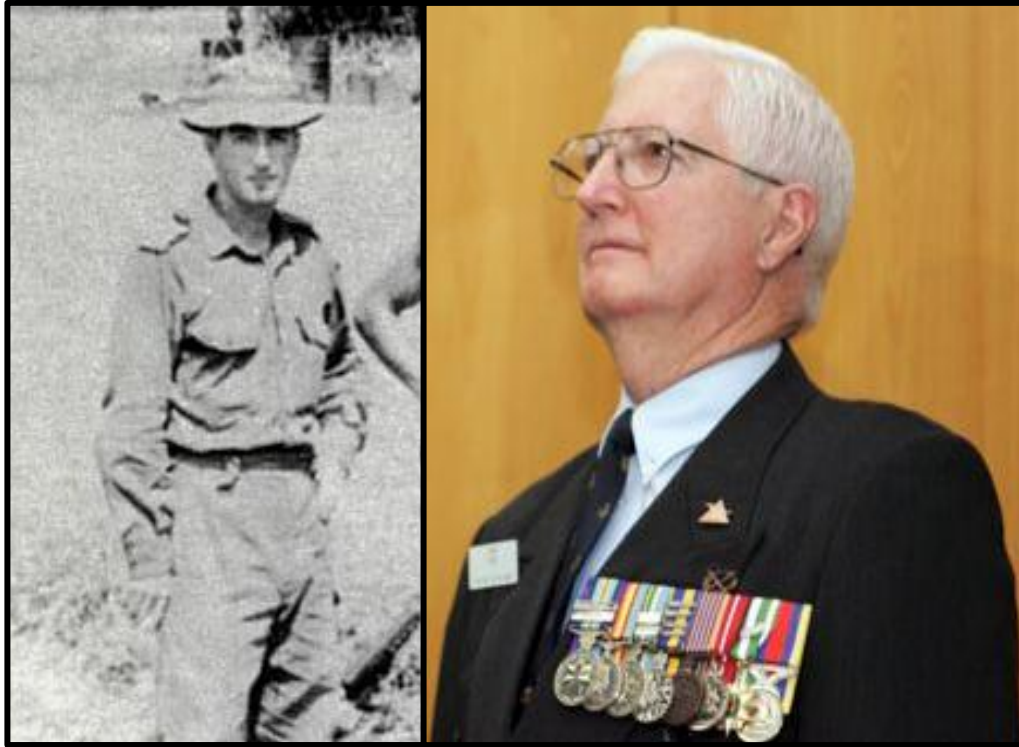
Laurence 'Larry' D'Arcy

Larry served in the Citizen Military Forces (CMF) 20 June 1962 to 12 February 1964 before embarking on a fulltime career in the Regular Army 18 February 1964 to 17 February 1973 with the Royal Australian Artillery. Larry saw active service in Malaya with 'A' Battery, 1965 to 1967 and two tours of Vietnam. First with 102 Field Battery 1968 to 1969, before returning with 'A' Battery 1971. Larry served as an instructor with 123 Training Battery in 1972. Receiving an honourable discharge in 1973, Larry worked in the transport industry driving interstate and coal trucks before retiring. Today, Larry is an active member of the Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club.



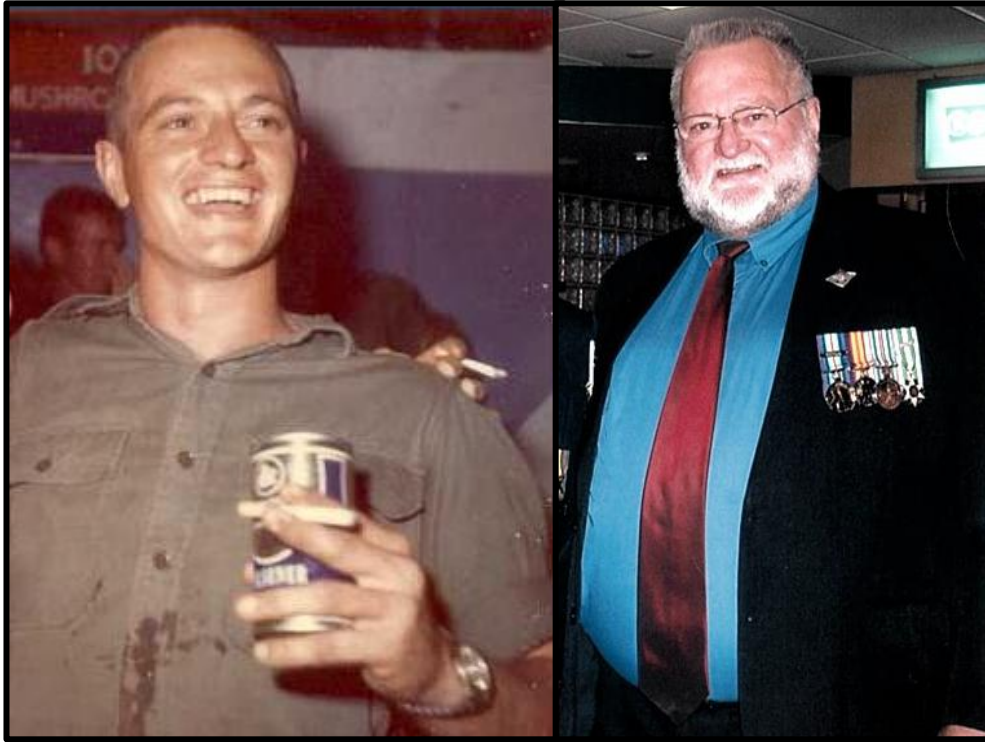
Anthony 'Tony' Jensen

Tony is a Graduate of the Royal Military College, Army Command and Staff College, serving 27 years in the Australian Army. He saw active service in South Vietnam with 1RAR Mortar Platoon and service overseas with 1RAR in 28 ANZUK Brigade in Malaysia and Singapore. Amongst other postings, Tony was an instructor at RMC Duntroon where he taught tactics and ran exercises for cadets. He retired in 1990.



Donald 'Don' Tait

Don began his army career as a private in the Australian Army. He graduated as an Officer from Portsea and served for 21 years. Don saw active service in Malaya with 'A' Battery Royal Australian Artillery and Vietnam 1968 to 1969 with 102 Field Battery Royal Australian Artillery. Don held command from Troop to Brigade level before receiving an honourable discharge. Today, Don is on the Board of Directors at the Castle Hill RSL.



David 'Tomo' Thomas

David was part of the 8th National Service intake and served in the Army from 19 April 1967 to 18 March 1969, posted to the Royal Australian Artillery. David saw active service in Vietnam with 12 Field Regiment 102 Field Battery 1968 to 1969. Receiving an honourable discharge, David returned to running a successful bricklaying company before retiring.

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Australian War Memorial, Australian Army Commanders' Diaries (Vietnam), Infantry Units, 1 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, Narrative, Duty Officers Log Annexes, Maps, part 2 (1-31 May 1968), AWM95-7-1-78 Part 2, <http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/record/awm95/subclass.asp?levelID=1309> (accessed 10 April 2013).

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