

Vietnam, 1968

THE BATTLE OF FIRE SUPPORT BASES

CORAL/BALMORAL



FRONT COVER

Shirtless in the tropical heat, an Australian sits holding his weapon atop a deep dugout at Coral.  
(Australian War Memorial [AWM] ERR/68/0511/VN, photographer William Alexander Errington)

TITLE PAGE

The central and south-eastern areas of Fire Support Base (FSB) Coral, on the afternoon of 13 May 1968.  
(AWMP03022.008)

ISBN 978-1-877007-31-6

© Commonwealth of Australia 2008.

This work is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced by any process without prior written permission from the Commonwealth. Requests and inquiries concerning reproduction and rights should be addressed to the Commonwealth Copyright Administration, Attorney General's Department, Robert Garran Offices, National Circuit, Barton ACT 2600 or posted at [www.ag.gov.au/cca](http://www.ag.gov.au/cca)

Published by the Department of Veterans' Affairs, Canberra, 2008.

Researched and written by Ian Hodges

Text and photo editor Courtney Page-Allen, assisted by Emma Hinde

Commissioning editor Kerry Blackburn

Concept, design and layout Brian Knowler

Department of Veterans' Affairs

P01785 April 2008

Vietnam, 1968

# THE BATTLE OF FIRE SUPPORT BASES CORAL/BALMORAL





# Coral/Balmoral

The battle of fire support bases Coral and Balmoral, Vietnam, 1968

*Ammo was low no grenades the VC were all around us out of the 7 men around the M60, I had lost one dead and one wounded there was nothing I could do.<sup>1</sup>*

So wrote Bombardier Andrew Forsdike of his terrifying experience at Fire Support Base Coral on the night of 12–13 May 1968. There, in the clammy tropical darkness, the Australian force in Vietnam faced one of its toughest tests of the war. Having just that day established Coral right on a crucial North Vietnamese infiltration route to South Vietnam's capital, Saigon, and the big US bases at Bien Hoa and Long Binh, the Australians invited an assault, correctly suspecting that the North Vietnamese would not tolerate their presence in such a sensitive locale.

But the haphazard manner of the Australian arrival at the base and the unexpected ability of the North Vietnamese to mount an attack on the same night almost led to disaster. Coral's defenders survived and, along with the defenders of neighbouring Fire Support Base Balmoral, went on to fight a series of actions that together made up the most protracted and costly battle experienced by the Australians in Vietnam.

Australians had been operating from the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Task Force Base at Nui Dat, in the middle of Phuoc Tuy Province, since 1966. Mostly they had fought small scale patrol actions against the elusive Viet Cong, a North Vietnamese backed communist guerilla force that sought to overthrow the South Vietnamese Government. Facing heavy battlefield losses in a campaign of rural insurgency against South Vietnam's Army of the Republic of Vietnam and its allies, including the United States and Australia, the Viet Cong, under North Vietnamese instruction, turned to the country's urban areas, where they hoped successful assaults would trigger a general uprising against a corrupt and unpopular South Vietnamese government.

Timed to coincide with the Tet lunar New Year holiday in January 1968, the Tet Offensive shocked the anti-communist forces in Vietnam. The scale and audacity of the attacks made them headline news throughout the western world. People who had believed assurances that the war was being won watched in amazement as the media broadcast images of Viet Cong guerillas fighting American troops in the grounds of the United States Embassy in Saigon. Many wondered how the Americans could be winning if, after six years of fighting, the enemy was able to strike at the heart of Saigon and at the symbolic centre of United States power in South Vietnam.

The reality, however, was rather different. After Tet the Viet Cong were spent. They had suffered a major military defeat and grievous losses. Nowhere were they able to hold the ground they had captured and nowhere did they succeed in fomenting the rebellion that they hoped would destroy the South Vietnamese Government. Survivors fled Saigon north through Bien Hoa and back to the staging areas from which they had launched their attacks. The story was repeated throughout South Vietnam, but Tet's impact on Western public opinion was unmistakable. From military defeat the communist forces wrested a priceless propaganda victory. They followed it with action. Knowing that the American public was becoming sceptical about their country's purpose and prospects in South Vietnam, the North Vietnamese leadership decided that new attacks on Saigon and its surrounds would strengthen their bargaining position in the Paris peace talks, due to open on 13 May, and increase American disquiet about the war.





Men of 131 Divisional Locating Battery await transport to Coral on 12 May 1968. Their experience was typical of many that day as they waited until late in the afternoon to be flown in. Less than twelve hours later the base was attacked by a strong North Vietnamese force. (AWM P01766.002)

# Operation *Toan Thang*

*We thought we were going to an area where ... you had to go looking for the enemy.* <sup>2</sup>

While the communists sought to exploit the propaganda victory that Tet had become, the South Vietnamese and their allies were anxious to follow up their military success. On 8 April 1968 they launched their largest operation of the war so far, *Toan Thang* (Complete Victory). Ultimately involving some 70,000 troops, including those from the US, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand, the offensive was a concerted attempt to sever Viet Cong infiltration routes into Saigon and destroy their forces in the area.

On 21 April the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR) initiated Australia's participation in *Toan Thang* with operations in the Nui Thi Vai Hills to the west of the Task Force base at Nui Dat. But two days of patrolling yielded few results, the enemy was scarcely in evidence and the Australians shifted their efforts to the north, closer to the North Vietnamese infiltration routes.

Shortly before dawn on 5 May the communists launched their new offensive, known as Mini-Tet, against Saigon. Later that day the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR and 2RAR) deployed to Area of Operations (AO) Columbus, which straddled the border between Phuoc Tuy and Bien Hoa Provinces. They were closer to where the fighting was heaviest, but still they remained on the periphery. Five days passed, there were several fleeting contacts and a small number of Viet Cong were killed while Australian casualties were avoided. By contrast, the fighting in Saigon had cost thousands of military and civilian lives before the communist offensive was defeated. For the Australians at least it was a relatively quiet time. But things were about to change.

On 10 May 3RAR replaced 2RAR and the Australians were ordered to move further into Bien Hoa province, to AO Surfers, an area almost directly north of Saigon, 45 kilometres distant. With orders similar to those already issued during *Toan Thang*, the Australians were to intercept enemy forces withdrawing from Saigon, expected to be made up mainly of small parties seeking to avoid detection until they could regroup.

The enemy in the vicinity was, however, made up of more than just groups of bedraggled survivors from the recent fighting. Every month thousands of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops were making their way down the Ho





Chi Minh trail—in reality a series of trails—running from North to South Vietnam, some through the border regions of neighbouring Laos and Cambodia. Many of these routes emerged within 150 kilometres of Saigon and the area around Bien Hoa was used as a staging post for communist attacks on the city and its surrounds. In May 1968 reinforcements were arriving in preparation for fresh assaults on the southern capital.

American patrols in the area noticed the build-up and reported the presence of strong North Vietnamese units, some moving towards the area for which the Australians were bound. There were other signs too. Having received orders to deploy their troops to AO Surfers the commanders of 1RAR and 3RAR, Lieutenant Colonels Phillip Bennett and Jim Shelton, flew a reconnaissance mission over the area. Their American pilot was wary. He only flew one pass and fear of ground-fire kept him above 600 metres: 'I'm not going any lower', he told them, 'we'll get shot down'.<sup>3</sup> Clearly this was not an area that the Americans considered safe. Bennett and Shelton viewed the pilot's reticence with some foreboding. Worse, neither man was able to get more than a general idea of the terrain in which they would be operating.

# The move to Coral

*We didn't expect anything to happen based on previous experiences.<sup>4</sup>*

AO Surfers was, in fact, in the midst of large concentrations of North Vietnamese. The area was divided into three subsidiary AOs, Bondi, Manly and Newport. Each AO was, or would soon be, centred around a Fire Support Base, like Coral, from which artillery, mortar and armoured support could be provided to infantry patrols in the area. Bondi was the responsibility of 1RAR and the site of what would become Fire Support Base Coral. 3RAR was initially sent to Manly but was supported by its Direct Support artillery battery from Coral. No base existed in the remaining AO, Newport, until later in May when Balmoral was established.

An Australian helicopter pilot remembered people expecting more action in Bien Hoa than there had been in Phuoc Tuy, which, he said, was 'a pretty benign area compared with what the Yanks had put up with'.<sup>5</sup> Not everyone was concerned about the possibility of tougher fighting. Corporal Lorne Clarke, a medic in 1RAR's C Company, remembered hearing rumours that they were headed for an area with '10 million Viet Cong', but he 'took a pretty relaxed attitude to it',<sup>6</sup> while an officer told Company Sergeant Major Wally Thompson that Surfers promised 'easy pickings'.<sup>7</sup> 3RAR had already operated in the area and found nothing to suggest a large enemy presence. On 12 May they were the first troops into Coral.

That morning Jim Shelton flew another reconnaissance mission over Surfers. If what he had seen on his last flight was disturbing, Shelton's next look was alarming. Before reaching the area where Coral was to be established, he flew over a bloody fight between the United States 1<sup>st</sup> Division and troops from the North Vietnamese Army's (NVA) 141 Regiment. Then the landing zone he had seen from 600 metres proved unsuitable and another site, more than a kilometre to the south-west, was chosen. The American soldiers waiting to secure the area for 3RAR had to move to the new location.

Shortly afterwards 161 Battery, Royal New Zealand Artillery, arrived at the landing zone by Chinook. When the Australian artillery arrived they were sent 1500 metres to the north-east. Helicopters meant to be bringing in the remaining Australians were, meanwhile, diverted to support the nearby Americans in their fight against the NVA. Time was getting away. 1RAR arrived hours late and in a piecemeal fashion throughout the rest of the day. Only two hours of daylight remained by the time the last of the battalion was on the ground. Having been ordered to interdict and block the enemy from the south and south-west, they were quickly dispatched in companies to ambush positions.



Almost two decades after the battle, Matthew Cleland, a lieutenant commanding a section of 102 Battery's guns, recalled the 'stuff ups' and delays that held them up that day, and he remembered that his guns weren't as well dug in as they should have been.<sup>8</sup> 'We weren't prepared for anything' recalled Colin Adamson, a major commanding A Company.<sup>9</sup>

The poorly defended guns at Coral were a tempting target, and the North Vietnamese who had watched the landings throughout the day decided to attack that night. A steady rain started falling after sunset, masking the sound of an NVA battalion and two infiltration groups moving into position, while the Australians dug in, grabbed a meal and organised whatever defences they could.

Australian artillerymen with 102 Field Battery's No. 6 gun after the dramatic events of the previous night when the gun was overrun and won back after vicious close-quarter fighting. Matthew Cleland is standing on the right; the other men in the photograph were members of the No. 6 gun crew. (AWM P01769.009, photographer Greg Ayson)

NEXT PAGE: In a testament to the ferocity of the fight around 102 Battery's position, at least seven North Vietnamese soldiers lie dead in front of the No. 6 gun on the morning of 13 May 1968. Shortly afterwards the bodies were collected and buried in a mass grave. (AWM P01769.013, photographer A King)

On the morning of 13 May 1968 an Australian searches the body of a North Vietnamese soldier killed in the fighting just a few hours before. Behind them, a bulldozer already carrying at least one corpse waits to be loaded with others. (AWM P01766.001, photographer J Dellaca)

Two Australians drag away the body of a North Vietnamese soldier on 13 May 1968, while another looks on. (AWM P01769.016, photographer A King)





# Fire Support Base Coral 12–13 May 1968

*I think we were all very grateful to be alive.<sup>10</sup>*

When the rain stopped, towards midnight, the North Vietnamese were within a few hundred metres of Coral's perimeter. During the preceding hours there had been sporadic contacts and a few NVA killed. Just before 2.30 am on 13 May, 12 Platoon, D Company, 1RAR, fired on three figures who had entered their ambush position. Almost immediately 11 Platoon was hit by Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG) rounds that killed one man and wounded eleven others. An hour later Coral came under RPG and mortar attack. Then chaos.

Waves of NVA came at the Australian positions. The mortar platoon, 102 Battery and its machine gunners in pits in front of the guns took the weight of the attack. One section of machine gunners was taken completely by surprise when a group of North Vietnamese, yelling and firing wildly, rose within a few metres of their pit: 'we did not even know they were there' remembered one gunner.<sup>11</sup> When the North Vietnamese threatened to overwhelm 102 Battery the gunners fought with grenades and small arms against an onslaught unlike anything Australian artillerymen had so far experienced in Vietnam.

Fire poured into the artillery and mortar positions. In the No. 4 and No. 5 gun pits the desperate defenders called for ammunition as they exhausted their stocks, while another gun, No. 6, was overrun. Some North Vietnamese fell to the Australian fire but the rest kept coming. No. 4 gun's crew fired flesh-tearing splintex and high explosive rounds over open sights into the approaching mass. No. 2 gun was hit, destroying its tyres and wounding one of the crew. Then the ammunition bunker for No. 1 gun went up.

Out on the left flank the mortar men were engaged in a deadly struggle. Fighting over the bodies of their own dead, and with the survivors facing annihilation, Tony Jensen, the commanding lieutenant, called splintex fire onto the mortar positions. The Australians buried their faces in the earth as a storm of metal darts tore through the NVA, stopping their attack and leaving shattered corpses around the Australian pits. Around the artillery, fighting continued. The Australians took back No. 6 gun, while No. 4 gun kept firing high explosive over open sights into the oncoming NVA. Other guns in the battery raised their sights and began firing in support of the infantry, still in their ambush positions well outside the base. Australian artillerymen hadn't fought such a close action in defence of their guns since the Second World War.







Four members of a 102 Field Battery gun crew under their tarpaulin at Coral. The holes in the tarpaulin were made by North Vietnamese bullets during attacks on the base. (AWM P01635.011)

Sergeant Richard Creek of 102 Field Battery inspects the damage inflicted on the Battery's Command Post by North Vietnamese mortars during the attack in the early hours of 13 May 1968. (AWM P01769.020, photographer Greg Ayson)

A member of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division Supply and Transport Workshop examines bullet and shrapnel damage to a truck windscreen in the aftermath of a North Vietnamese attack on Coral. (AWM ERR/68/0513/VN, photographer William Alexander Errington)

OPPOSITE PAGE: Two Australian privates, weapons in hand, dive for their half-completed pit during an alert at Coral. (AWM HAL/68/0530/VN, photographer Colin Thomas Halmarick)

Bombardier Larry Davenport of the 12<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Regiment mans a machine gun at Fire Support Base Coral in May 1968. (AWM ERR/68/0520/VN, photographer William Alexander Errington)



Above the fight 'Spooky', a C-47 aircraft equipped with flares and miniguns, threw light onto the battlefield and fired thousands of rounds into the NVA outside the Australian perimeter. Helicopters, fighter aircraft and United States artillery also fired at the North Vietnamese, who began to waver under the powerful defensive fire. The fight ended just before dawn when the NVA broke contact and retreated into the rubber and scrub beyond Coral's perimeter.

At first light helicopters took away the wounded, the nine Australians who had died and the remnants of the mortar platoon, pale and shocked after their ordeal. Their pits, said Adamson, were 'just swimming in blood'.<sup>12</sup> Alan Parr saw 'a mass of bodies and parts of bodies' in front of the mortar position.<sup>13</sup> Sandals and bits of equipment were scattered over the battlefield, blood lay in pools on the ground, and drag marks where the NVA had removed their dead disappeared into the scrub. Barry Brown from 1RAR walked into Coral that morning: 'I recall vividly ... the absolute catastrophe that obviously happened the previous night' he said, remembering a front end loader digging a mass grave. It was the only time in Vietnam that he saw that many dead being buried together.<sup>14</sup> There were fifty-two bodies, but no one knew how many North Vietnamese soldiers had died that night.

The delays in establishing Coral throughout 12 May meant the defences were hastily prepared and unfinished when the NVA attacked. The outcome could have been disastrous for the Australians. They hadn't expected an attack against the base on the first night, and were unaware that the North Vietnamese had the capability to respond so ferociously to the Australian incursion. And they had been lucky. The North Vietnamese had attacked straight into the three guns that had been used to support 1RAR's D Company when they had fired on NVA at 2.30 that morning. The enemy didn't seem to know about the mortars either, and they could not carry their attack through the massive defensive fire that swept over them. At least one officer, writing to a friend just weeks later, expressed his anger at what might have happened: 'the TRUE story of the first attack at "Coral" will never be told—too many bastards heads would roll. For sheer incompetence I've never seen worse'.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout the next day the base was strengthened and organised. A forward headquarters arrived, along with reinforcements, including Cavalry and the 155 mm Self Propelled guns of A Battery 2/35th US Artillery. Outside Coral, 3RAR set up Fire Support Base Coogee in AO Manly, four kilometres to the west. Platoons patrolled into the surrounding countryside out to three or four kilometres, sometimes clashing with NVA. On 14 May there were nine contacts in which a further three Australians and twelve North Vietnamese were killed. During one, Private Richard Norden of 1RAR made three dashes through heavy enemy fire to rescue his wounded section commander and drive the enemy from the body of the Australian scout. He was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

A patrol from 1RAR makes its way through the wire on Coral's perimeter as they search for signs of the enemy after one of the attacks on the base. Behind them are the rubber trees through which the North Vietnamese attacked early on the morning of 13 May. (AWM THU/68/0596/VN, photographer Kevin Denham Thurgar)

Australians with their tracker dogs at Coral in May 1965. The dogs, mostly black Labradors, were trained to follow the scent of human blood, waste and food, and were used by patrolling Australians to locate enemy troops. (AWM P01765.003)





## The second battle for Coral

*In the end it was like a shooting gallery.*<sup>16</sup>

By 15 May Coral had become a strong defensive position. The patrols of previous days continued, and at night the Australians awaited further attacks. The next one came at 2.30 on the morning of 16 May. Following the pattern of the first assault, the NVA fired tracer and signal flares to guide the attacking troops in and preceded the attack with a barrage of mortar and RPG fire, this time directed mainly at the artillery positions and headquarters areas.

Major Adamson felt like they were coming straight at him—two battalions of NVA who killed two of his men in the first five minutes. The battle raged around A and B Companies' positions and then also around C Company. Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) brought ammunition to the beleaguered infantry. Once again the fire support from the base's artillery and mortars, United States heavy artillery and helicopters flying overhead stopped the NVA attacks. Alan Vickers thought the air power available to the Australians was remarkable: 'these great big spookies dropping flares and we actually had fighter aircraft coming in in the light of ... these flareships coming in very close to the positions'. It was, he remembered, 'just fantastic really'.<sup>17</sup> The NVA fought with enormous courage but only a few managed to get inside the wire. It was, said Adamson, 'a torrid four hours ... quite frightening'.<sup>18</sup>



A 102 Field Battery gun fires from Coral; spent cases lie in front of the gun while an artilleryman waits to load another shell. (AWM P01770.015, photographer K Foster)

While patrolling the perimeter of the base after a North Vietnamese attack, a member of 1RAR steps over the body of a North Vietnamese soldier killed during an attack on Coral earlier that morning. (AWM ERR/68/0504/VN, photographer William Alexander Errington)

By 6.30 am the battle was over. The NVA rearguard kept up the fight while the main force withdrew, again dragging their dead with them. Five Australians had been killed, and two battalions of North Vietnamese had been repulsed, leaving thirty four of their men dead in front of the Australian positions. The drag marks leading away from Coral's perimeter told the defenders that many more NVA had been killed. At daybreak infantry patrols swept the area out to 1000 metres looking for fleeing enemy. Lorne Clarke saw how much fire was poured into the advancing NVA: 'we were dropping mortars on them, we were getting them from the gunships', he recalled, 'but you'd go out next morning and find a few bodies'. It was an eerie feeling, he said, and 'very disheartening'. Disheartening as it may have been for the Australians, we can only wonder at how the Vietnamese felt after the failure of two major attacks at the cost of what, to the Australians, seemed to be hundreds of casualties.

Coral was a major hindrance to North Vietnamese attempts to reach Saigon and they were prepared to accept heavy losses to remove the obstacle. In response, the acting Australian commander at Coral, Colonel Donald Dunstan, decided that the defence should be further strengthened with Centurion tanks. They duly rolled into the base early on the afternoon of 23 May. Alan Vickers saw the crews' 'great smiles'. 'They were', he said, 'absolutely thrilled to get there' after the risky journey from Nui Dat.<sup>19</sup> 1 Troop from C Squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Regiment went to work with 1RAR at Coral, 2 Troop with 3RAR at the newly established fire support base Balmoral, some 4.5 kilometres to the north, also in the midst of strong North Vietnamese forces.

OPPOSITE PAGE: With their artillery piece in the background, gunners occupy defensive positions at Coral. Steel helmets have replaced the 'bush hat' more commonly associated with the Australians in Vietnam because of the danger posed by enemy RPG and mortar fire. (AWM ERR/68/0515/VN, photographer William Alexander Errington)

An Australian soldier, Private John Iwankiw, at Coral, May 1968. Having experienced two heavy attacks on the base, Iwankiw has surrounded himself with belts of ammunition for the M60 machine gun that he is holding. (AWM ERR/68/0519/VN, photographer William Alexander Errington)



An Australian soldier kneels among discarded North Vietnamese equipment after one of the attacks on Coral. In his hands are shovels used by North Vietnamese soldiers, some of whom might have tried to dig scrapes under the barrage of defensive fire. (AWM ERR/68/0507/VN, photographer William Alexander Errington)

Two Australians examine a hole made by a piece of shrapnel in a drinking mug during one of the attacks on Coral. (AWM ERR/68/0508/VN, photographer William Alexander Errington)

Australian and South Vietnamese soldiers speak with a seated North Vietnamese prisoner at Coral. He was captured during an attack on the base in May 1968, one of fourteen prisoners taken by the Australians during the fighting at Coral and Balmoral. (AWM ERR/68/0522/VN, photographer William Alexander Errington)







Shirtless in the tropical heat, an Australian sits holding his weapon atop a deep dugout at Coral. (AWM ERR/68/0511/VN, photographer William Alexander Errington)



Bombardier Keith Hyliffe, 131<sup>st</sup> Divisional Locating Battery, checks radar equipment used to pinpoint enemy mortars being used in attacks on Coral. (AWM THU/68/0612/VN, photographer Kevin Denham Thurgar)

A soldier checks a strand of perimeter wire at Coral in the aftermath of large North Vietnamese attacks on the base. (AWM ERR/68/0512/VN, photographer William Alexander Errington)

As the words 'Fire Support Base' imply, artillery was central to operations at Coral and Balmoral. Although the guns played a defensive role during North Vietnamese attacks on both bases, their main purpose was to protect infantry patrolling outside the wire. In an indication of the volume of fire provided by the guns, these shells constitute a resupply for 102 Field Battery at Coral. (AWM P01768.007, photographer Ian Ahearn)

Members of a Centurion tank crew watch a Sioux helicopter landing nearby. (AWM ERR/68/0548/VN, photographer William Alexander Errington)



A Centurion tank from the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Regiment passes through a Vietnamese village on the long and hazardous journey from Nui Dat to Coral, 22 May 1968. (AWM ERR/68/0543/VN, photographer William Alexander Errington)

Gunners from 102 Field Battery, Royal Australian Artillery, stand outside their shelters at Coral and watch the Centurion tanks move into defensive positions after their arrival from Nui Dat on 23 May 1968. (AWM P01635.004)

Having driven from the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Task Force Base at Nui Dat, a journey of some 120 kilometres through hostile territory and across ten bailey bridges, none of which were rated to carry the weight of a 54-ton tank, relieved Centurion crews of C Squadron, 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Regiment, arrive at Fire Support Base Coral on the afternoon of 23 May 1968. (AWM P01768.010, photographer Ian Ahearn)

OPPOSITE PAGE: A Centurion tank from the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Regiment stops near a group of Vietnamese children on the way from Nui Dat to Coral. (AWM ERR/68/0545/VN, photographer William Alexander Errington)





Two soldiers sit under the shelter that housed 102 Battery's stores at Coral. Around them are varieties of tinned food, water supplies—there being no fresh water point on the base—and nearly empty cartons of eggs. (AWM P01765.001)

Radio relay antenna of 110 Signal Squadron Detachment at FSB Coral. (Photographer John MacDonald, Radio Relay Detachment.)

A typical shelter at Coral: the sandbagged cover over the roof offers protection from the weather and, more importantly, from enemy fire. Few, if any, such shelters existed on the first night at Coral, but after the fierce North Vietnamese assault, men were quick to prepare safer pits. (AWM P01768.008, photographer Ian Ahearn)

OPPOSITE PAGE: Alan Vickers leaves the heavily protected command post at Coral. The level of fortification surrounding the post is indicative of the ferocity of North Vietnamese attacks and bombardments against the base. (AWM HAL/68/0528/VN, photographer Colin Thomas Halmarick)

One Australian private congratulates another on his selection for Officer Cadet School at Portsea in Victoria, May 1968. The man in the pit, Private Willis Taylor, learned of his appointment to Portsea while serving at Coral. (AWM HAL/68/0527/VN, photographer Colin Thomas Halmarick)



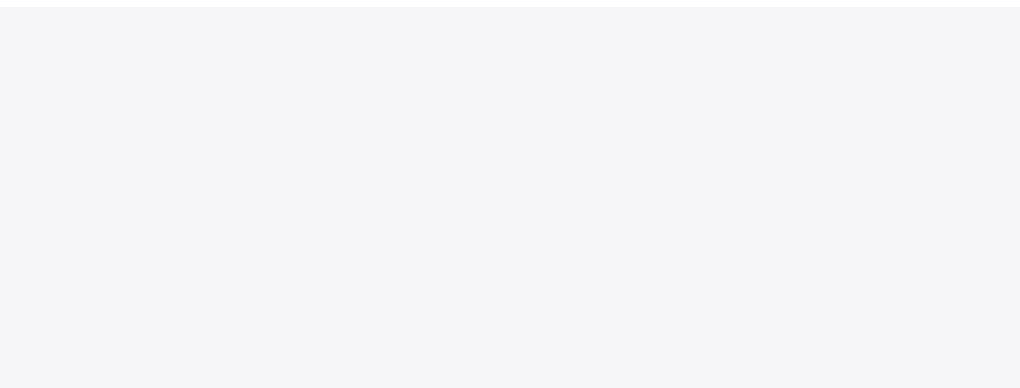


Major Ian McLean takes a break in his dugout at Coral. After the first attack on the base the Australians dug their pits deeper and added layers of sandbags for extra protection against enemy fire. (AWM HAL/68/0532/VN, photographer Colin Thomas Halmarick)

With his weapon at the ready, an Australian officer takes time to write a letter on a makeshift desk outside his dugout. (AWM ERR/68/0549/VN, photographer William Alexander Errington)



General William Westmoreland, the American Commander in Vietnam, speaks with members of an Australian tank crew from C Squadron, 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Regiment. Mick Butler, a tank commander, recalled the General being 'very interested in my tanks'. (AWM THU/68/0566/VN, photographer Kevin Denham Thurgar)





# Balmoral

*At Balmoral there was no area where the enemy could attack, that they could get in without getting shot.<sup>20</sup>*

In setting up a fire support base in AO Newport, Jim Shelton, 3RAR's commander, was determined not to repeat the mistakes that had almost led to disaster at Coral. Infantry from 3RAR walked in accompanied by headquarters elements in APCs. Only when the area was secured did the remainder of the battalion fly in, late in the day. Without the advantage of having been alerted by day-long landings, the North Vietnamese were unable to mount an attack on the new base that night, and the Australians had time to organise their defences.

The following day, 25 May, 2 Troop's tanks arrived from Coral. On their way between the two bases they, along with the escorting infantry platoon, came under heavy fire from an NVA bunker complex. The Centurions, having extricated the infantry from this dangerous situation, were already proving their worth. It was the first time since 1945 that Australian tanks had fought in close support of infantry. Their ability to close with enemy bunkers, into which they fired canister rounds—resembling oversized shotgun shells—made them invaluable during operations around Coral and Balmoral.

Early the next morning, 26 May, Balmoral was hit with a barrage of fire from NVA mortars, RPGs, machine guns and small arms. The NVA, hoping to prevent supporting fire from Coral's artillery and mortars, also hit that base with mortars and RPGs. Geoffrey Murray, an APC driver based at Balmoral, saw 'mortar rounds going off everywhere'. He heard shouts from the infantry and then, right in front of his position, louder than the other cries, a man yelled out 'here they come'.<sup>21</sup> NVA from 165 Regiment ran through openings in the Australian wire where, by day, the tanks and APCs made their way into and out of the base. Murray saw 'a fat so and so' kicking the assaulting troops, urging them on.<sup>22</sup> But the enemy's bravery was not enough to carry them into the Australian positions and the attack faltered in front of the wire.

The intensity of the defensive fire, as strong as that at Coral, forced the NVA to withdraw a little more than an hour after the attack began. Six men were found dead in front of the Australian lines; the characteristic drag marks told of many others having been killed in the battle. Two of 3RAR's men were dead and fourteen wounded. The NVA never had a chance.



# Into the bunkers

*There was no end to the bunkers. You'd take one out and there'd be more.<sup>23</sup>*

A few hours after the attack, tanks from 1 Troop, C Squadron and infantry, D Company, 1RAR, from Coral, were sent against the bunkers discovered during the previous day's action on the way to Balmoral. They made their way through the scrub and rubber into rainforest. Visibility was about 25 metres and, as the Australians approached the objective an airstrike went in. Almost six hours after they left Coral they reached the NVA complex; the tanks were soon in action.

Canister rounds destroyed the foliage, exposing the enemy and enabling the Centurions to fire directly into the bunkers. They fought for hours, men and tanks working together, forcing their way deeper into the NVA complex. For the defenders it must have been hell. Their fire, even RPGs, shredded anything attached to the outside of the tanks, but barely made an impression on their armour. The giant Centurions rolled over their positions, crushing some bunkers beneath their tracks, driving right up to the entrances of others and blasting the soldiers inside. Infantry, with small arms, grenades and even flame-throwers followed up, while artillery and mortar fire pounded the enemy positions throughout the battle.

The fighting went on for almost four hours. Four tanks and a few platoons of infantry were not, however, enough to destroy all of the bunkers in the vicinity. There were simply too many. This was a major complex and the risk of becoming trapped somewhere in its midst was too great. When it started raining at 3.30 that afternoon and with the light failing, the Australians broke off the battle. As artillery fire fell between them and the enemy, covering the withdrawal, they returned to Coral. Without a single Australian having been hit, morale was high. The infantry, wary that morning of working with the Centurions, couldn't have been happier with the way the tanks had carried out their part of the operation.

Mick Butler was in command of the tanks at Balmoral. He had missed the previous day's fighting in the bunkers, but word of the Australian actions around Coral and Balmoral had reached very senior ears. On 27 May, Butler watched as General William Westmoreland, the American officer in command of Allied forces in Vietnam, flew in to the base. The General expressed an interest in Butler's tanks, looking over the one operated by Corporal Trevor Lowe before moving on to D Company. After half an hour he was gone and Balmoral got back to normal.<sup>24</sup>

A Centurion tank at Balmoral. Regarded at first with misgivings by infantrymen, the tanks and their crews quickly became a welcome presence during both defensive and offensive operations at Coral and Balmoral. (AWM CRO/68/0564/VN, photographer Richard William Crothers)

An armoured personnel carrier (APC) of 'A' Squadron, 3 Cavalry Regiment, in the bush near FSB Balmoral, May 1968. (AWM P02322.003, photographer: G Murray)



## The second attack

*In some ways I sort of felt ashamed that we'd done what we'd done. You know, the bodies were lying there in sort of grotesque shapes and positions.<sup>25</sup>*

On 28 May, the NVA sent another mass attack against Balmoral. Hoping to keep the artillery at Coral quiet with a bombardment, they began their assault as they had previously. At 2.30 in the morning signal flares lit the sky and mortar fire fell among the defenders. An APC driver, Trooper Geoffrey Murray, saw 'three or four bright red flashes', realised they were close and, in the same moment, that they were enemy RPGs aimed at the 50 calibre machine gun on his vehicle.<sup>26</sup> Then some NVA blew up a gate on A Company's perimeter. Murray turned his machine gun on them. But the attack was a feint. As the firing died down near A Company, the far side of the base was hit. At least twelve mortars zeroed in on the area held by D Company. To their front was a wide expanse of grass over which the enemy had attacked two nights earlier. After that slaughter the Australians were surprised when they came that way again rather than through the bush on either flank.

Mick Butler was under his tank trying to sleep when the attack began. He leapt for the turret as accurate mortar fire bracketed his vehicle, destroying parts of its exterior. Butler remembers 'shooting at soldiers on the wire with my commander's 30 Cal. machine gun'.<sup>27</sup> His fire joined the cacophony of weaponry arrayed against the NVA: small arms, tanks, mortars, machine guns, aircraft, helicopters, the artillery from Coral and American artillery from Bien Hoa. In return a storm of mortar, RPG and machine gun fire swept over the Australians, but much of it went high, tearing trees apart but missing D Company. Tracer rounds seemed to be flying in all directions and dust-offs flew in through the maelstrom to collect the wounded.

A few days earlier, on his arrival at Balmoral, Trooper Geoffrey Murray had driven past still smouldering craters from a B52 strike on the base's surrounds.<sup>28</sup> Now the craters became a refuge for the NVA. Butler saw two men trying to get their wounded comrades to safety; others were dragging away corpses, but he couldn't hit them as they were in the dead ground of a crater out of reach of mortars, machine guns and his tank's weapons. Helicopter gunships fired from above and he could see tracer 'searching them out'.<sup>29</sup> Others were also trying to dislodge the NVA from the craters. At least one infantryman, David Mancer, was seen standing in full view of friend and foe alike, hurling grenades into the enemy's refuge.<sup>30</sup>



Members of 3RAR take a break while patrolling through the scrub outside the wire at Balmoral. The tank in the background has levelled the area through which it has driven in a search for North Vietnamese survivors of an attack on the base. (AWM CRO/68/0577/VN, photographer Richard William Crothers)

3RAR's Regimental Sergeant Major, Vince Murdoch, tends a wounded and blindfolded North Vietnamese soldier on the ground at Balmoral. (AWM CRO/68/0590/VN, photographer Richard William Crothers)





OPPOSITE PAGE: An Iroquois arrives at Balmoral bearing water supplies for the men on the ground. Beside the landing zone soldiers tend to a wounded comrade before the helicopter evacuates him from the base. (AWM CRO/68/0563/VN, photographer Richard William Crothers)

THIS PAGE: Warrant Officer Don Miller, head bandaged from a wound received during the fighting at Balmoral, awaits the helicopter that will take him from the base. (AWM CRO/68/0557/VN, photographer Richard William Crothers)

Surrounded by Australians, wounded North Vietnamese prisoners lie on makeshift stretchers and wait to be evacuated from Balmoral. (AWM CRO/68/0582/VN, photographer Richard William Crothers)



A North Vietnamese soldier, looking pale and exhausted, has his wounds dressed by two Australians after an attack on Balmoral. (AWM CRO/68/0580/VN, photographer Richard William Crothers)

In a peaceful, almost friendly looking moment, three Australians tend the wounds of a very youthful looking North Vietnamese soldier. (AWM CRO/68/0573/VN, photographer Richard William Crothers)

Watched by a group of shirtless Australians, a group of bound and blindfolded North Vietnamese prisoners await helicopters to take them away from Balmoral. (AWM CRO/68/0575/VN, photographer Richard William Crothers)

OPPOSITE PAGE: Having been wounded in the arm during an attack on Balmoral, an Australian soldier receives help with his boots while two others watch in the background. (AWM CRO/68/0556/VN, photographer Richard William Crothers)



When the battle died down, the craters still hid many of the surviving NVA. With daylight approaching they needed to get away from the Australians. Covering mortar fire gave them a chance to flee across the open grassland but most were shot down. Shortly afterwards some survivors, until then feigning death, took shots at Australian patrols sent to clear the field. To stop this Butler and his tanks had the unpleasant task of having to go out and shoot the corpses that littered the area. Seven NVA surrendered and were taken to the rear. After that the only living men on the clearing were Australian.

Butler's tank crews and the infantry were exhausted. They had found forty-two NVA dead. Some of them were teenagers, just 16 or 17 years old. It was a tragic sight and Butler recalled that he 'found it difficult' to look at the enemy dead, 'with chunks missing out of them. Half the bodies were smouldering ... it really got to me that we could do what we did'.<sup>31</sup> The NVA dead were searched and Peter Phillips saw the corpses, torn apart by artillery, scooped up by a bulldozer and tipped into a mass grave. It was, he said, a 'dreadful business'.<sup>32</sup>







## The last patrols

*My memories of Coral and Balmoral are all, and I smile when I think about them ... one was the delight of the success there. Two was ... my delight at these young troop leaders doing their job so well.<sup>33</sup>*

The assault on 28 May was the last major NVA attack on Coral or Balmoral. Australian infantry, however, continued to patrol outside the bases. On 30 May 1 Troop, at Coral, were busy servicing their tanks after the recent hard fighting while C Company, 1RAR, headed out on a patrol in APCs. Disembarking at the edge of an area of jungle the infantry filed in, searching for enemy whom they soon found, firing point blank at them from concealed bunkers. Years later C Company's medic, Lorne Clarke, was unable to remember whether the enemy were Viet Cong or NVA, but he did remember walking into the middle of their camp. Other moments also remain vivid in his mind—Private Payne standing up with his machine gun and firing towards the enemy; Kerry Keating losing a leg to enemy fire; another wounded man, his stomach opened by bullets; and the tanks and APCs coming up to get them out.<sup>34</sup>

The Australians were pinned down. Heavy NVA fire, RPG and mortars, kept their heads down while other North Vietnamese worked their way around them. The situation was desperate; the enemy was so close that artillery fire from Coral on their position wounded two Australians. The two working tanks from 1 Troop were sent into the fray. Clarke recalled that their arrival 'changed the situation dramatically'.<sup>35</sup>

From his vantage point, helicopter pilot Peter Spoor watched the Centurions race across the open paddy fields towards the battle. They reached the jungle's edge at the same time as the APCs that had dropped the infantry off shortly before. Together they crashed through the jungle, narrowly avoiding running over a couple of wounded Australians. Spoor saw 'the jungle laid down, not only by the tanks but by their canister rounds'.<sup>36</sup> They destroyed eight bunkers, but needed to get out of the area. Enemy troops still threatened to encircle them and no one knew how many more bunkers were hidden in the jungle.

Weary looking members of 3RAR, their weapons close at hand, take time to rest and eat near their weapon pit at Balmoral. The scrub abuts the base in this area; fortunately for 3RAR the North Vietnamese attacked over open ground. (AWM CRO/68/0558/VN, photographer Richard William Crothers)

An infantryman from 3RAR, watched by another, makes repairs on his bunker after it was struck by mortar fire during a North Vietnamese attack on Balmoral. (AWM CRO/68/0588/VN, photographer Richard William Crothers)



An American gunship flew in, killing more of the enemy, and the Australians on the ground attempted to disengage through the din of gunfire and explosions. Once the wounded were in the APCs the rest of the force began to fall back. Spoor flew over NVA withdrawal routes, where he saw men dragging their dead and carrying their wounded. He called artillery in on them, hoping not to be shot down as he did so. Then more gunships arrived, playing, Spoor said, 'merry hell' with the enemy until they made it into deeper jungle.

Spoor directed the gunships onto the area in front of C Company, where they exposed more heavily fortified bunkers every time they came in. This was a significant system that, without the two tanks to help, may have cost C Company very heavily. Certainly that was the conclusion reached by the commander on the ground, 'Digger' Campbell, as well as Colonel Dunstan.<sup>37</sup> Spoor, who had seen the extensive complex from the air, reckoned C Company had 'got off lightly that day'.<sup>38</sup> One Australian had been killed and seven wounded. For someone closer to that reality, Lorne Clarke, the medic, 'it was a pretty bad day'.<sup>39</sup>

The more distant observers were right: tanks had saved the Australians from a serious situation in which more men may have been killed and wounded. Had they not arrived, Clarke may have heard many more men shouting 'medic, medic, medic,' the words he 'absolutely hated'.<sup>40</sup> For the North Vietnamese there was no such consolation; no one had a figure, but their casualties were far higher. Once more, the sheer volume of fire directed against them, at close range from infantry weapons and tanks, from artillery and mortars in the rear and from aircraft and helicopters above, ensured that the Australians could get away from a deadly contact.

More patrols were sent out from Coral and Balmoral over the following days, but the contacts became fewer and less intense. The worst was over. The NVA conceded that this route to Saigon was no longer open to them and they began to move out of the area to replenish the divisions that had lost heavily in the fighting. Soldiers at the two bases took on a more leisurely routine until they began to leave Surfers and return to Nui Dat. The last of them got back to the Task Force Base before sunset on 6 June.

The end of Coral and Balmoral coincided with the conclusion of *Toan Thang*. Hundreds of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong had been killed in the fighting at Surfers, some 276 according to the official figures, with the caveat that a further 69 may have also perished. The official figure of nine wounded, however, seems impossibly low.<sup>41</sup> Twenty-six soldiers from Australian units died and almost 100 were wounded in the fighting at Coral and Balmoral.

The battles were unprecedented in the Australian experience of Vietnam. Brigadier Ron Hughes, the Australian Task Force Commander, described the combat at Coral and Balmoral as 'some of the heaviest fighting that the Task Force ever undertook'. They had played an important role in thwarting further enemy attacks on Saigon, and for their role in *Toan Thang* the Royal Australian Regiment, the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Regiment and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment were awarded the battle honour 'Coral-Balmoral'. In 2008, the Governor-General of Australia approved the Honour Title 'Coral' for the 102<sup>nd</sup> Field Battery, Royal Australian Artillery, the first such honour to be bestowed upon an Australian unit.

Four members of 3RAR inspect captured North Vietnamese weapons and equipment at Balmoral during May 1968. (AWM CRO/0587/VN, photographer Richard William Crothers)

Two Australians, wearing steel helmets for protection against the RPG and mortar fire that fell regularly on Balmoral, man their sandbagged weapon pits. The scrub just beyond the two men looks benign, but at night, when attacks on the base were an ever present possibility, it seemed full of menace. (AWM CRO/68/0559/VN, photographer Richard William Crothers)

NEXT PAGE: Heads bowed, members of 1RAR attend a mass conducted at Coral by Father George Widdison, a Roman Catholic Padre, for those who died during the fighting at the base in May and June 1968. (AWM THU/68/0595/VN, photographer Kevin Denham Thurgar)





1. Papers of Bombardier Andrew Forsdike, AWM PR87/219.
2. Jeffrey Shelton, interview transcript, Australians at War Film Archive, 1012, 06:18:00:00, [www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawwfa/transcripts/491.aspx](http://www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawwfa/transcripts/491.aspx).
3. Jeffrey Shelton, 08:24:30:00, [www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawwfa/transcripts/491.aspx](http://www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawwfa/transcripts/491.aspx).
4. Alan James Parr as a mortar number, Mortar Platoon Support Company, 1RAR, South Vietnam 1968, AWM SO3151.
5. Peter Bernard Spoor as a lieutenant helicopter pilot 161st (independent) Reconnaissance Flight, South Vietnam, 1967–68, AWM SO3159.
6. Lorne Alan Clarke as the corporal medical orderly, C Company, 1 RAR, South Vietnam, 1968. AWM SO3154.
7. Wallace Thompson, interview transcript, Australians at War Film Archive, 0907, 06:18:00:00, [www.austaliansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawwfa/transcripts/1774.aspx](http://www.austaliansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawwfa/transcripts/1774.aspx).
8. Matthew David Cleland as a lieutenant gun section commander 102nd Field Battery 12th Field Regiment, South Vietnam, 1968, interview with Lex McAulay, 3/8/86, AWM SO3136.
9. Colin Adamson, interview transcript, Australians at War Film Archive, 1171, 06:26:00:00, [www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawwfa/transcripts/1100.aspx](http://www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawwfa/transcripts/1100.aspx).
10. Matthew David Cleland, AWM SO3136.
11. Papers of Bombardier Andrew Forsdike, AWM PR87/219.
12. Papers of Bell, Harry (Major), AWM PR01920.
13. Alan James Parr, AWM SO3151.
14. Barry Charles Brown (Private) rifleman C Company, RAR, South Vietnam, 1968–69, AWM SO3195.
15. Papers of Bell, Harry (Major), AWM PR01920.
16. Lorne Alan Clarke, AWM SO3154.
17. Lt. Col. Alan Lindsay Vickers (Retd) as the captain 2nd in Command, C Squadron, 1 Armoured Regiment, South Vietnam, 1968–1969, AWM SO3134.
18. Papers of Bell, Harry (Major), AWM PR01920.
19. Lt. Col. Alan Lindsay Vickers (Retd), AWM SO3134.
20. Jeffrey Shelton, 08:31:00:00 [www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawwfa/transcripts/491.aspx](http://www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawwfa/transcripts/491.aspx).
21. Geoffrey Charles Murray as a trooper AC driver, A Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment, South Vietnam, 1967–1968, AWM SO3161.
22. Geoffrey Charles Murray, AWM SO3161.
23. Ray Curtis, quoted in Lex McAulay, *The battle of Coral*, Hutchinson Australia, Melbourne, 1988, p. 252.
24. Lt. Col. Michael John Butler (Retd) as the lieutenant officer commanding 2 Troop, C Squadron, 1st Armoured Regiment, South Vietnam, 1968–69, AWM SO3198.
25. Lt. Col. Michael John Butler (Retd) AWM SO3198.
26. Geoffrey Charles Murray, AWM SO3161.
27. Lt. Col. Michael John Butler (Retd), AWM SO3198.
28. Geoffrey Charles Murray, AWM SO3161.
29. Lt. Col. Michael John Butler (Retd), AWM SO3198.
30. Lex McAulay, *The battle of Coral*, pp. 277, 335.
31. Lt. Col. Michael John Butler (Retd), AWM SO3198.
32. Lex McAulay, *The battle of Coral*, p. 277.
33. Lt. Col. Alan Lindsay Vickers (Retd), AWM SO3134.
34. Lorne Alan Clarke, AWM SO3154.
35. Lorne Alan Clarke, AWM SO3154.
36. Peter Bernard Spoor, AWM SO3159.
37. McAulay, *The battle of Coral*, pp. 298–299.
38. Peter Bernard Spoor, AWM SO3159.
39. Lorne Alan Clarke, AWM SO3154.
40. Lorne Alan Clarke, AWM SO3154.
41. Ian McNeill and Ashley Ekins, *On the offensive, the Australian Army in the Vietnam War, January 1967 – June 1968*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2003, p. 396.
42. McNeill and Ekins, *On the offensive*, p. 401.
43. McNeill and Ekins, *On the offensive*, p. 403.



As they prepare to leave Coral and return to Nui Dat, members of 102 Field Battery walk past the pit in which were buried North Vietnamese killed in the fighting of 13 May. Someone has placed signs above the graves suggesting that the area is a vegetable garden, in a gesture that, while appearing callous, is typical of the grim humour that sustains soldiers in the face of the awful realities of combat. (AWM P01635.013)

