

# Mudgee veterans reflect on battles of Coral and Balmoral

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Local News



This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Australia's most protracted and costly battles of the Vietnam War.

In 1968, fire support bases 'Coral' and 'Balmoral' were established in the vicinity of routes used by the North Vietnamese to attack Saigon and the US base at Bien Hoa. In the early hours of May 13, the North Vietnamese attacked Coral, beginning three weeks of fierce combat which also saw Balmoral (about 4.5km north) engaged.

The Australians repelled the assault, which forced the postponement of further attacks on the southern capital. However, the battles resulted in more Australian casualties than any other series of engagements in the war, with 26 killed and over 100 wounded.

Mudgee's Ian McMaster fought at Coral with C Squadron 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Regiment after an eventful trip with his tank and crew from where the Australian Task Force was located in Nui Dat to Saigon. Which involved the roadside replacement of the entire engine of his Centurion Tank by the Squadron's Light Aid Detachment in a little over eight hours after the new engine was flown in by chopper.

Tom Spring, also of Mudgee, served with the small 104 Signals Squadron detachment with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Royal Australian Regiment and was present during the North Vietnamese attack on Coral, before the next day being flown across to the interim Fire Support Base 'Coogee'. After a short period the full battalion and supporting arms moved across on foot to the site selected for establishment of Balmoral.

Despite the significance of the battles little is known about them. The public perception of Australia's involvement in the war meant little attention was given at the time and they've since been lost in the annals of history.

To mark a half-century the veterans were presented with Gallantry awards.

Serviceman at both Coral and Balmoral – Tom – said the battles were “full on and very noisy” and “very much overlooked”, but is glad to see the belated acknowledgement.

“It just so happened this particular one didn't receive any recognition, at the time or in the intervening 50 years, until May this year,” he said. “So I'm very pleased to receive that”.

Ian said that he hopes that now a spotlight can be shone on the exhausting conflict, during which they encountered sniper fire nearly everyday.

“I couldn't care less about the citation, I'll wear it Anzac Day and no one will know what it is, but I'm pleased that we got the recognition of such horrific battles,” he said. “Battles that went so long, over three weeks, 24/7, but I'm glad that it's finally recognised that it did happen and people can tell their stories.”

## Gallantry awards presented after 50 years

In May a national service was held to recognise the Battles at Fire Support Bases 'Coral' and 'Balmoral'.

Mudgee's Ian McMaster and Tom Spring were in Canberra with their wives for the commemoration and parade held at Australian Vietnam Forces National Memorial, Anzac Parade.

During the service the Minister for Veteran's Affairs, the Hon. Darren Chester MP, announced gazettal on May 15 of the award for the 'Unit Citation for Gallantry' to the units and formations that took part in the two battles.

These were; 1st Australian Task Force (Forward); the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the Royal Australian Regiment; A Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment; C Squadron 1st Armoured Regiment; the 12th Field Regiment of the Royal Regiment of Australian of Australian Artillery; the 1st Field Squadron Royal Australian Engineers, and Detachments in direct support of the Task Force.

The award as gazetted reads, “for extraordinary gallantry in action in the Dinh Duong/Bien Hoa provinces of South Vietnam from 12 May 1968 to 6 June 1968 during Operation TOAN THANG”. With a longer citation.



Mudgee's Ian McMaster fought at fire support base 'Coral' during the Vietnam war 50 years ago, he'll give an address at the local Vietnam Veterans Day memorial service on Saturday.