

THE FURPHY

ARMADALE SUB-BRANCH OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER

June 2023 Edition



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General Meetings: Second Sunday of the month at 1030hrs
Annual General Meeting: Second Sunday of September

Committee Positions

Armadale Sub-Branch Committee	
President	Mr Ken Hepburn
Vice President	Mr Hans van de Velde
Secretary	Ms Carol King
Assistant Secretary	Mr Mike Fairweather
Treasurer	Mrs Cheryl Cowie
Assistant Treasurer	Vacant
Warden	Mr Graeme Cowie
Warden	Mr Bob Giles
Membership Officer	Mr Tom Rynn
Committee	Mr Laurie Sargeson
Committee	Mr Keith Northcott
Advocate / Welfare Officer	Mr Brent Errington
Bar Manager	Mr Mike Fairweather

ADVOCATE / WELFARE REPORT

(ERRO)

I currently am available as follows:

Operating out of RAAFA: Mondays and Fridays

between 0900 – 1230hrs and also at

Armadale RSL Sub-Branch between 0900-1400hrs on Thursdays

Contact Details: *Mobile: 0407 449 150*

e-mail: welfare2@armadalersl.com.au

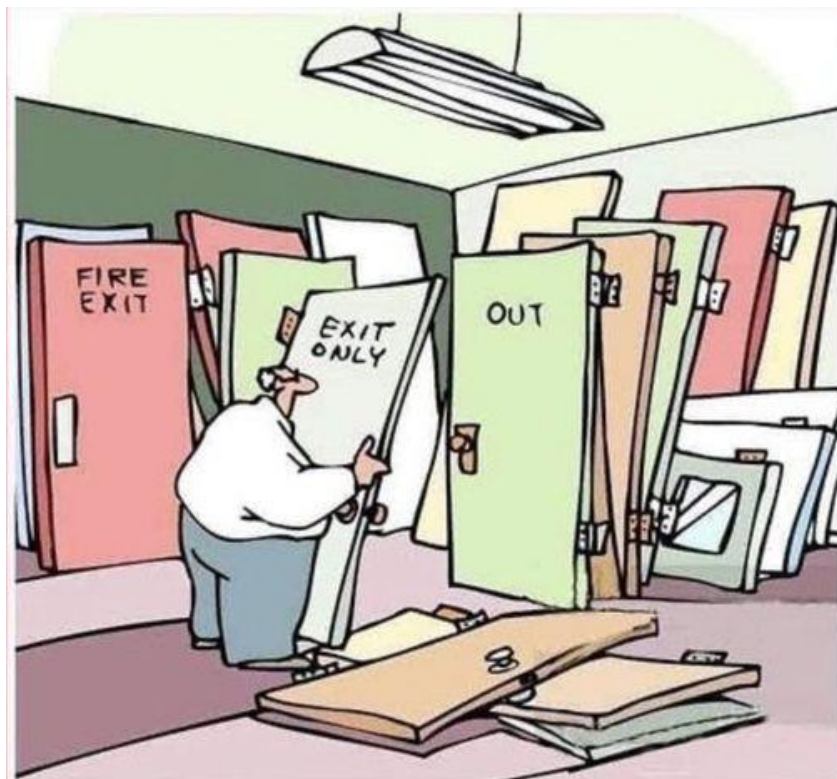
Diary Dates for June

<i>Day</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Time</i>
<i>Sunday</i>	<i>4th</i>	<i>Social Committee Meeting</i>	<i>1100</i>
<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>6th</i>	<i>Management Committee Meeting</i>	<i>1830</i>
<i>Saturday</i>	<i>17th</i>	<i>Plant Sale and Sausage Sizzle</i>	<i>0900</i>
<i>Sunday</i>	<i>11th</i>	<i>General Meeting</i>	<i>1030</i>

The next time your wife gets angry, drape a towel over her shoulders (like a cape) and say “now you’re SUPER ANGRY!”

Maybe she’ll laugh.

Maybe you’ll die.



Bob loved the outdoors. Wound up with quite a collection.

Secretary's Notes

Hi Everyone,

It was thought that after all the ANZAC Day organisation we would be able to take it a bit easy – but who really believed that? There's been quite a bit happening from an administrative perspective.

We have commenced on the documentation to support the closure of Club Inc., and this will be ongoing for a period of time.

Finally we have seen some “movement at the Station” with work actually commencing on the closed Railway Car Park on Monday 22nd May (originally scheduled to start on 9th May), however our advice is that the plan is to still re-open it on 16th June however I guess only time will tell.

We have a few exciting things planned over the next few months. Heritage FM will be holding a Quiz Night in the hall on Saturday 24th June, with details elsewhere in this edition of the Furphy.

A Fundraising Quiz Night for the Sub-Branch is scheduled for Tuesday 18th July tickets are available from either Social Committee Members or from behind the bar.

We have been fortunate to contract the renowned Comedian “Austin Tayshus” for Sunday 3rd September from 2:00pm. Most of you will remember his hugely successful “Australiana” recording. Tickets will be \$25 per head, and these will be available from June. This is also Fathers Day, so what better gift than to celebrate by either buying Dad a ticket or ask the kids or grandchildren to purchase one for you – for what promises to be a fabulous afternoon.

Carol King

Sub-Branch Secretary

PRESIDENTS REPORT

Hi Folks,

I would just like to say again, thank you to all the members of Armadale RSL Club who made our first Dawn Service, in four years such a success, as it was very well received from the hundreds of people who attended.

After a very busy start to 2023, as we now move into a less active time, the committee is now looking at what needs to be done to keep the club moving forward.

We are looking at there being more entertainment in the club and the Secretary will cover this. By having more entertainment in the club, it may help get members attending more often.

Work has commenced by METONET on upgrading of the Armadale Railway Car Parks and this will continue.

Regards,

Ken Hepburn

President

Returned Services League Armadale Sub-Branch
Ph: (08) 9497 1972. M: 0428 001 949

email: president@armadalersl.com.au
Website: www.armadalersl.com.au

PLANT SALE

WITH

SAUSAGE SIZZLE



RSL Club Car Park

Saturday 17th June, 2023

9:00am to 1:00pm



Sausage Sizzle \$3.00

Membership Update

as at 31st May, 2023

Service Members: 181

Affiliate Members: 43

Social Members: 55

Total: 279

Unfortunately, we are losing more members than we are gaining as time marches on. It is a sad reflection that a younger generation of service and ex-service personnel are not joining Sub Branches notwithstanding that they support the RSL in many other ways.

Quite a few veterans are attracted to other organisations such as 'Soldier On' and the various veterans motor cycle clubs so metropolitan Sub Branches, in the main, appear less attractive.

Notwithstanding, we are a vibrant and fairly large Sub Branch in the metropolitan area and have a sound and faithful membership listing.

VALE Brian Watterston, a long time Affiliate Member who will be sadly missed.

Please contact me for any information on membership.

Tom Rynn

Membership Officer: Mobile: 0439 934 285

E-mail: tomrynn@bigpond.com

Happy Birthday!

June Service Members:

Adams	William	09/06	Bell	Timothy	26/06
Bennett	Andrew	06/06	Chesson	Adrian	13/06
Copley	Leonard	28/06	Cowie	Graeme	18/06
Ferguson	Peter	11/06	Geraghty	Patrick	08/06
Granland	Margaret	25/06	Hine	Paul	14/06
Millar	Garry	03/06	Peisley	Andrew	16/06
Symes	Jonathon	08/06	Wearne	Graham	07/06
Willmott	Albert	14/06	Wright	James	05/06

June Affiliate Members:

Craster	Irene	11/06	Ewers	Felicidad	27/06
Jordan	Barry	28/06	King	Carol	16/06
King	Val	14/06			

June Social Members:

Hair	Julie	02/06	Hutchinson	David	22/06
Ritson	Mary	20/06	Welch	Graham	23/06

*If anyone has been missed off the list, please advise
Tom Rynn (Membership Officer)*

*These members may collect a free drink of their choice
during the month*

We hope you have a very special Birthday

Bar Manager's Report

G'day All,

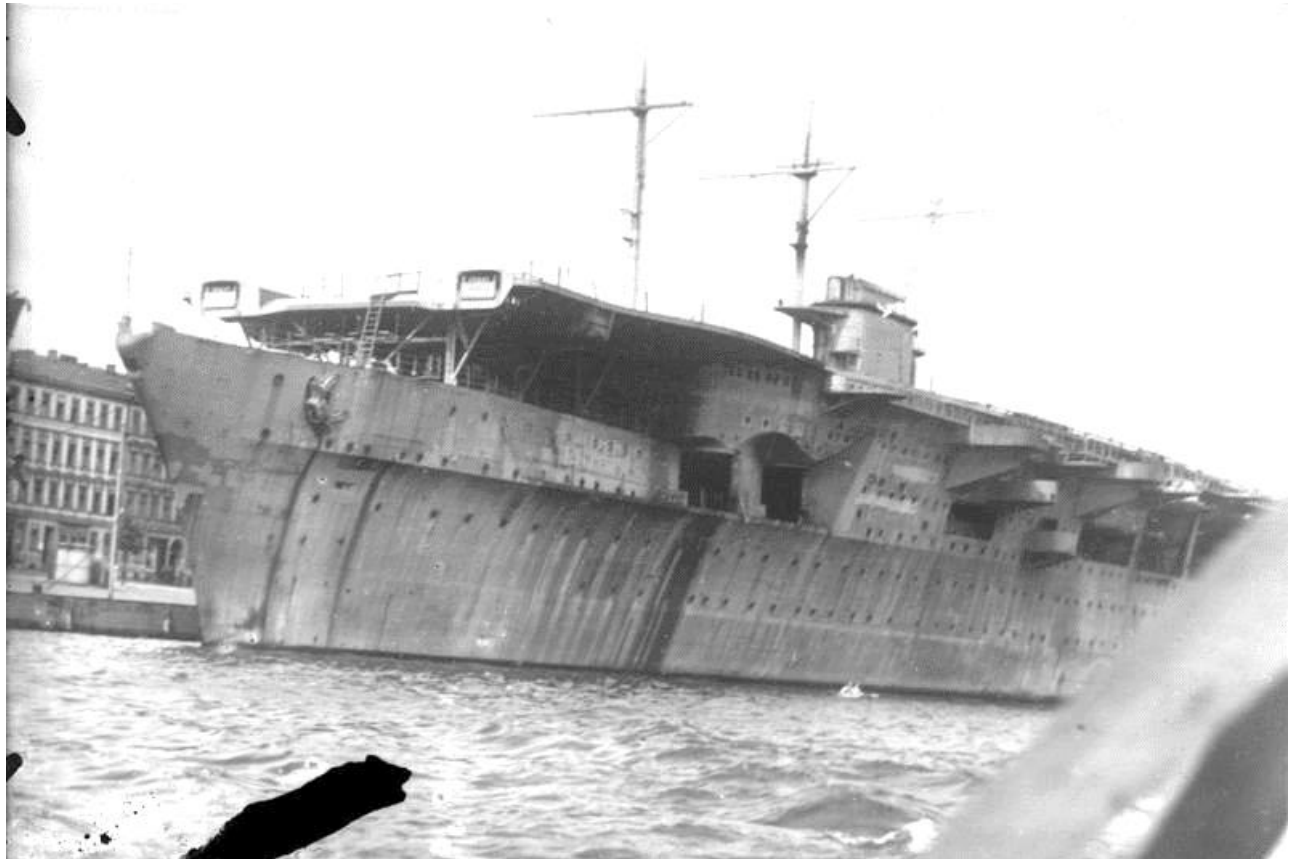
It's been a fairly quiet month but I'm a bit disappointed that members aren't frequenting as often as they used to.

I'm hoping that some of the events we are holding over the next few months will turn this around.

Other than that, things are going pretty well.

Stormy





The only aircraft carrier Germany has ever launched, the Graf Zeppelin. Displacing 32,000 tons, 861 ft long, and slated to carry 42 aircraft, which may have included 12 x Me Bf 109 fighters and 30 x Ju87 dive bombers. She was never completed and is seen here at Stettin in 1941

Quiz Night

Armadale RSL Sub-Branch

Tickets - \$10 per Person - (Table of 8)

Tuesday, 18th July, 2023

Heads down at 6:30pm

Raising Funds to help Veterans and their Families who are in need

Tickets available from the Bar or from any Social Committee Member

Byford Rail Extension - Update



22 May 2023

Preparations for the 18-month Armadale Line Shutdown are ramping up, with works on three new bus interchanges and 1.2 kilometres of priority bus lanes now underway, and road modifications along Albany Highway, Welshpool and Shepperton roads to begin next month.

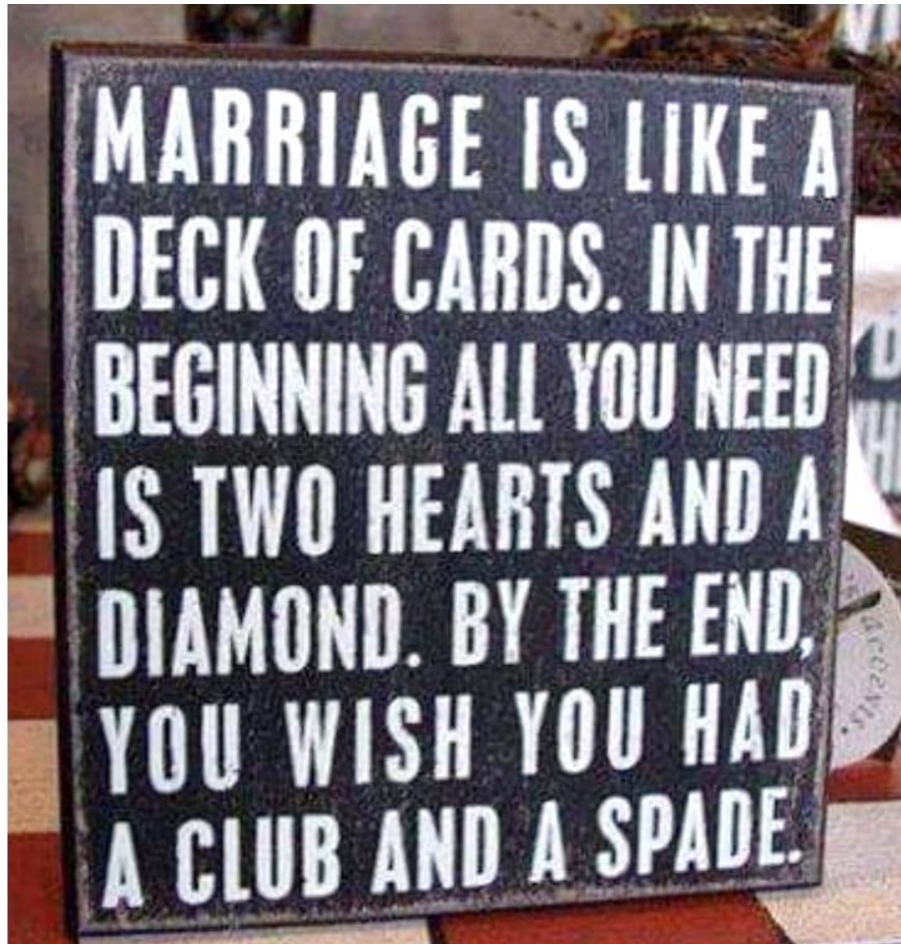
The upgrades to the Armadale Line are being made as part of three METRONET projects and include the removal of 13 level crossings, building seven new stations and the addition of 5.5 kilometres of elevated rail. The line will also be extended to Byford, providing thousands of people living in Perth's south with access to a public passenger train for the first time.

To assist with traffic flow along key roads during the shutdown, new intelligent transport system technology will also be installed.

The technology includes Bluetooth receivers and CCTV cameras that provide real-time bus location and traffic information which will integrate with traffic signalling to provide improved travel times and movements.

More than 100 additional buses will be brought online to support the closure in addition to the three new temporary bus interchanges in Armadale, Victoria Park and Cannington.







The Fabulous 80s Quiz Night, Fancy Dress

Karaoke/ Air Guitar Contest (sponsored by the Narry)

Event Night

Come dressed in your favourite 80s look and win a prize

6.30pm Saturday, June 24th, 2023

RSL Building

1 Commerce Avenue Armadale

Tables of 8-10

\$15 per head

Great Prizes with loads of 80s fun

Licensed Bar (Bring your own Snacks)



Tickets thru
EVENT BRITE only

Find 107.3 HFM on EB

OR click on link on FB

<https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/the-fabulous-80s-quiz-night-fancy-dress-event-tickets-639945824187>

107.3 is a NFP Community Radio Station. All funds will help us purchase new equipment to help us continue to serve the local community.



A Pz.Kpfw II after falling from a railway platform during loading, May 1943

Significant June Event

Coral Balmoral

The battle of fire support bases 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”.

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 1st 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 guerrilla 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 guerrillas 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.



Members of 131 Divisional Locating Battery on 12 May 1968, waiting with their full kit to be taken by air to Fire Support Base (FSB) Coral, which was just being established in Bien Hoa Province. Like many Australian units, their move to the new base was delayed. The 5 soldiers on the left of the picture are (left to right): 1411285 Gunner (Gnr) Walter George 'Wally' Franklin; 2787174 Gnr Kenneth John 'Bluey' Peisley; 54941 Bombardier Neville Charles 'Nev' Wortlehook; 3791355 Gnr John Victor Dellaca; 421326 Gnr Ian Donald Kennedy. The identity of the other soldiers is not known. That night and the following day, FSB Coral would come under heavy attack from a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) battalion, marking the start of the Battle of Coral-Balmoral.

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.

Operation Toan Thang

“We thought you were going to an area where...you had to go looking for the enemy.”

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 3rd 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.



An aerial shot of Fire Support Base Coral taken on 13 May 1968, the day after the base was established and after the first attack on the base the previous night

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'.³ 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."

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'.

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', while an officer told Company Sergeant Major Wally Thompson that Surfers promised 'easy pickings'. 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 1st 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.



The crew of 102 Field Battery's Number 6 gun on the day after the first attack on Coral. During that bloody fight in the early morning of 13 May 1968, this gun had been overrun by the North Vietnamese and then recaptured by the Australians

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. 'We weren't prepared for anything' recalled Colin Adamson, a major commanding A Company.

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.



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

Fire Support – Base Coral - 12–13 May 1968

"I think we were all very grateful to be alive."

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'. 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.



Soldiers at Fire Support Base Coral unloading supplies from a hovering Iroquois helicopter, May 1968. This is where the Battle of Coral-Balmoral began on 13 May 1968.



Sergeant Richard Creek of 102 Field Battery inspects the damage inflicted on the Battery's Command Post by North Vietnamese mortars during an attack in the early hours of 13 May 1968



38071 Corporal David Ashwell McCallum of the AFV Detachment, 1st Division Supply and Transport Workshop, Bien Hoa Province, South Vietnam, May 1968. He's examining bullet and shrapnel damage to a truck windscreen in the aftermath of a North Vietnamese attack on Fire Support Base Coral



Two Australian privates, weapons in hand, dive for their half-completed pit during an alert at Coral



4718752 Bombardier Larry Alan Davenport handling an M60 machine gun after one of the attacks on Fire Support Base (FSB) Coral, Bien Hoa Province, South Vietnam, May 1968. A member of the 12th Field Artillery, Royal Australian Artillery, Bombardier Davenport was defending FSB Coral from enemy attacks on 13 and 16 May 1968

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'. Alan Parr saw 'a mass of bodies and parts of bodies' in front of the mortar position.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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'.

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 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR) makes its way through the perimeter wire at Fire Support Base Coral as they search for signs of the enemy after an attack on the base, June 1968. Behind them are the rubber trees through which the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong attacked early on the morning of 13 May 1968 during the Battle of Coral-Balmoral



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

The second battle for Coral

"In the end it was like a shooting gallery."



A 102 battery gun fires from Coral, spent cases lie in front of gun while an artilleryman waits to load another shell

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 flashships coming in very close to

the positions'. It was, he remembered, 'just fantastic really'.¹⁷ 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'.



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

By 6.30 am the battle was over. The NVA rear guard 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.¹⁹ 1 Troop from C Squadron of the 1st 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.



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.



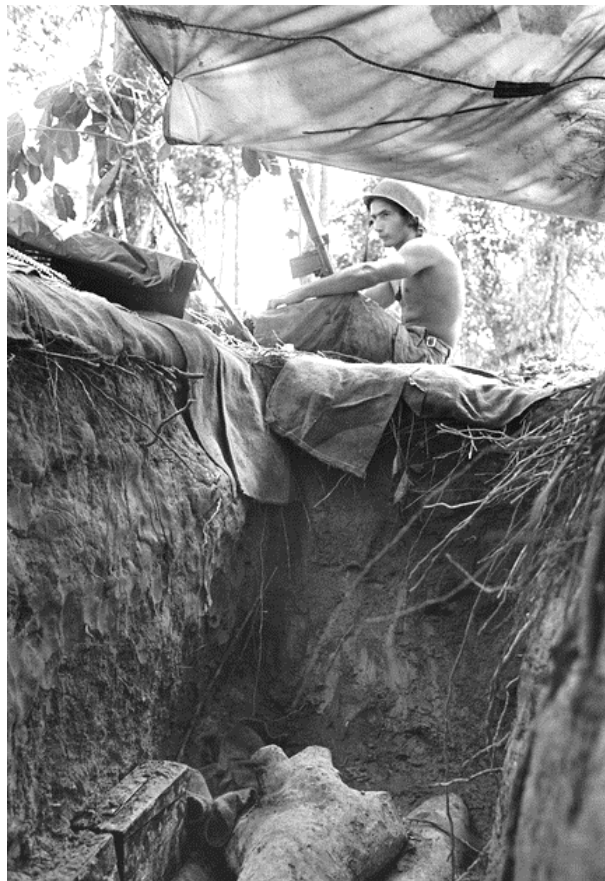
Two Australians examine a hole made by a piece of shrapnel in a drinking mug during one of the attacks on Coral



With their artillery piece in the background, gunners occupy defensive positions at Coral. Steel helmets have replaced the 'bush hat' commonly associated with the Australians in Vietnam because of the danger posed by enemy RPG and mortar fire



Private John Iwankiw at Coral. Having experienced 2 heavy attacks on the base, Iwankiw has surrounded himself with belts of ammunition for the M60 machine gun that he is holding.



Shirtless in the tropical heat, an Australian sits holding his weapon atop a deep dugout at Coral



Bombardier Keith Hylife, 131st Divisional Locating Battery, checks radar equipment used to pinpoint enemy mortars being used in attacks on Coral



A soldier checks a strand of perimeter wire at Fire Support Base Coral after large North Vietnamese attacks on the base, Bien Hoa Province, South Vietnam, May 1968. 2785918 Private Anthony Medelis member of the 1st Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR), which bore the brunt of both attacks on 13 and 16 May during the Battle of Coral–Balmoral



In an indication of the volume of fire provided by the Australians' guns, these shells constitute a resupply for 102 Field Battery at Fire Support Base Coral



Members of a Centurion tank crew watch a Sioux helicopter landing nearby



A Centurion tank from the 1st Armoured Regiment passes through a village on the long and hazardous drive from Nui Dat to Coral, 1968



Gunners from 102 Field Battery, Royal Australian Artillery, stand outside their hoochies (temporary shelters) at Fire Support Base Coral, Bien Hoa Province, South Vietnam, 23 May 1968. They are watching the Centurion MkV/1 tanks of C Squadron, 1st Armoured Regiment, move into their defensive positions after their arrival from Nui Dat. From left to right: 18110 John Lawrence Burns, 3791026 Malcolm Dalkeith (Mel) Chambers, 3791965 Peter John Storey and 3792122 Ian Douglas Ryan (or 4719413 Ian John Jones).



Centurion crews of C Squadron, 1st Armoured Regiment, arrive at Fire Support Base Coral on the afternoon of 23 May 1968, Bien Hoa Province, South Vietnam. These tanks were a welcome sight to the defenders of the base, which had sustained attacks for several days as part of the Battle of Coral–Balmoral.



A Centurion tank from the 1st Armoured Regiment stops near a group of Vietnamese children on the way from Nui Dat to Coral



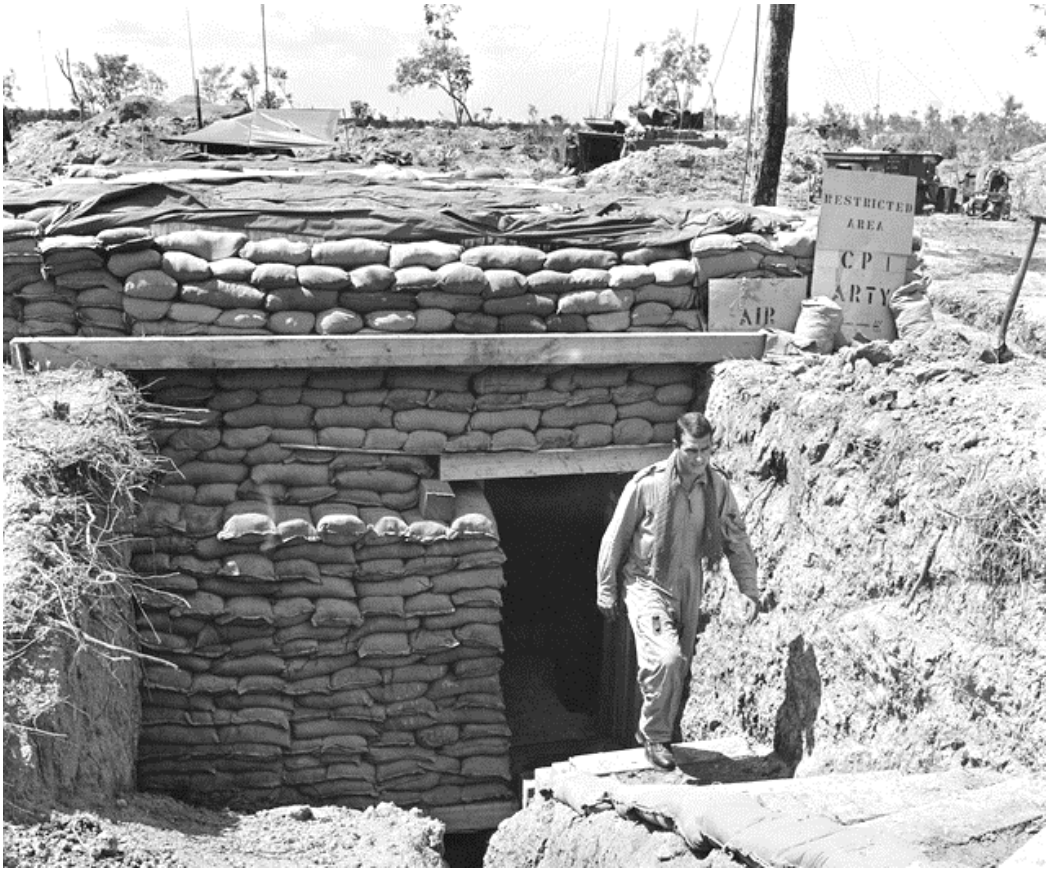
Two soldiers sit under the shelter that housed 102 Battery's stores at Coral. Around them are varieties of tinned food, water supplies—there being no fresh water point on the base—and nearly empty cartons of eggs



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



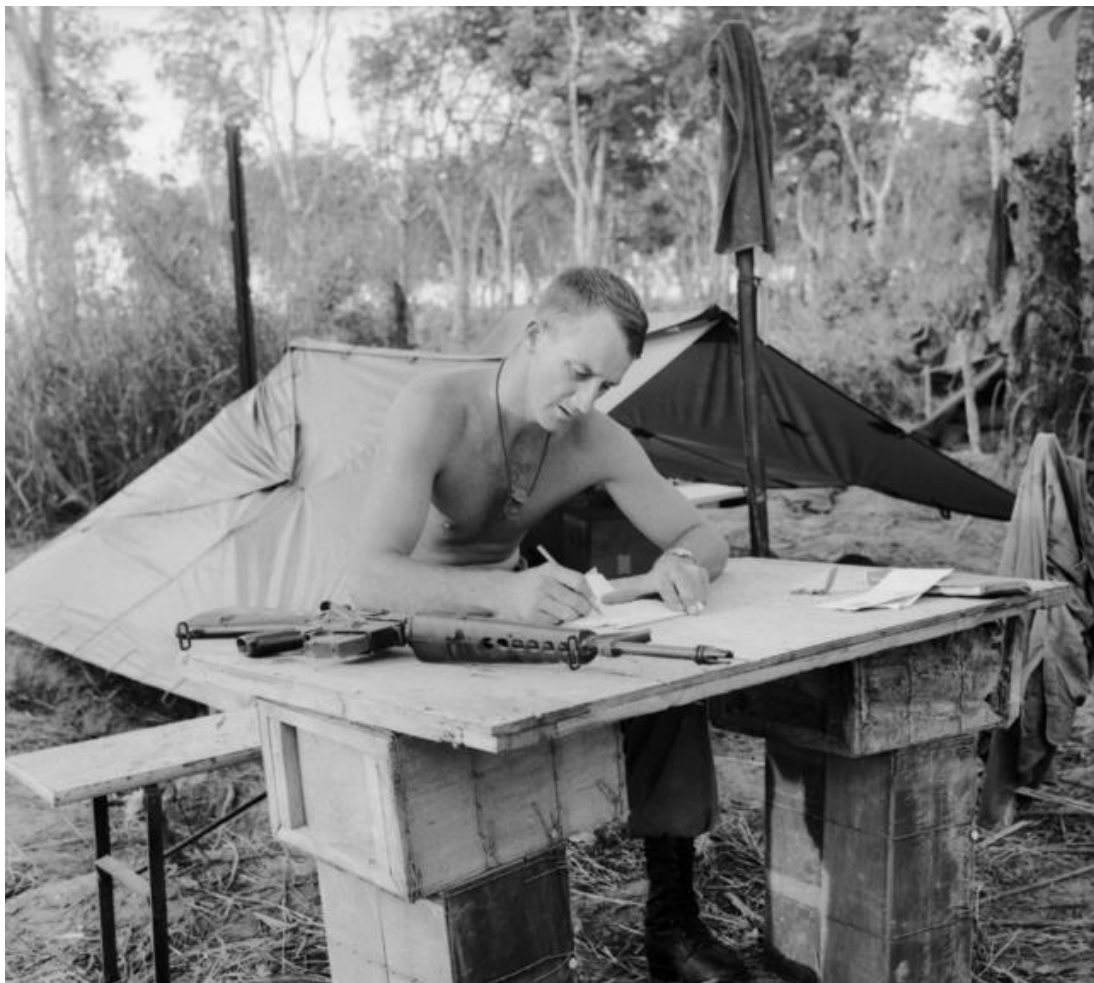
Alan Vickers leaves the heavily protected command post at Coral. The level of fortification surrounding the post is indicative of the ferocity of North Vietnamese attacks and bombardments against the base.



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



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



With his weapon at the ready, an Australian officer takes time to write a letter on a makeshift desk outside his dugout



General William Westmoreland, the American Commander in Vietnam, speaks with members of C Squadron, 1st Armoured Regiment after the attacks on the Coral and Balmoral fire support bases, Bien Hoa Province, South Vietnam, June 1968. From left to right in front of the Centurion tank are: 37530 Corporal William Thomas (Bill) Burton, Crew commander; 4410977 Brian William (Jock) Kay, 5411641 Phillip Lewis (Phil) Payne and 3789306 Peter William Lukeis. 1731558 Mick Butler, a tank commander, recalled the general being 'very interested in my tanks.'

Balmoral

“At Balmoral there was no area where the enemy could attack, that they could get in without getting shot.”

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'.²¹ 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.²² 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.



Wearing steel helmets against the RPG and mortar fire of the attack on Fire Support Base Balmoral, 2 Australian soldiers are in their weapon pits, Bien Hoa Province, South Vietnam, May 1968. 4717899 Private Leslie John (Les) Coff and 6708720 Private Robert Maxwell Wells were 3rd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR) members.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

CRO/68/0564/VN

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



An armoured personnel carrier APC of 'A' Squadron, 3 Cavalry Regiment, in the bush near FSB Balmoral, May 1968

Into the bunkers

“There was no end to the bunkers. You'd take one out and there'd be more.”

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.



Members of 3rd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR), take a break while patrolling outside the wire at Fire Support Base (FSB) Balmoral, Bien Hoa Province, South Vietnam, May 1968. 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 during the Battle of Coral–Balmoral.

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.”

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.²⁶ 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'.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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'.²⁹ 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.



3RAR's Regimental Sergeant Major, Vince Murdoch, tends a wounded and blindfolded North Vietnamese soldier at Balmoral, 1968



An Iroquois arrives at First Support Base Balmoral delivering water supplies in plastic containers for the men at the base, Bien Hoa Province, South Vietnam, May 1968. Men wounded in action at FSB Balmoral were quickly ferried to hospital by this helicopter. 3790383 Trooper Michael John (Mick) Jackson is running towards the helicopter in the background, and 38381 Trooper Erasmus James (Rus) Kiellerup is standing in the centre, both from C Squadron, 1st Armoured Regiment, Royal Australian Armoured Corps. Beside the landing zone, soldiers tend to a wounded comrade before the helicopter evacuates him from the base



34613 Warrant Officer (WO) Donald Keith (Don) Miller, Bien Hoa Province, South Vietnam, May 1968, during the Battle of Coral-Balmoral. WO Miller's head is bandaged from a wound received during the fighting at Fire Support Base Balmoral, and he's waiting for the helicopter that will take him from the base



Surrounded by Australians, wounded North Vietnamese prisoners lie on makeshift stretchers and wait to be evacuated from Balmoral.



Two Australian soldiers dress the wounds of a North Vietnamese prisoner of war captured in the aftermath of an attack on Fire Support Base Balmoral, Bien Hoa Province, South Vietnam, May 1968. Both 335058 Major Geoffrey Frederick (Fred) Cohen and 54768 Corporal David Francis Butler were members of 3rd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR)



Soldiers from the 3rd Battalion treat a captured North Vietnamese soldier's wounds, 1968



Watched by a group of shirtless Australians, a group of bound and blindfolded North Vietnamese prisoners await helicopters to take them away from Balmoral.

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'.³¹ 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'.



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



Weary-looking members of 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR) at Fire Support Base Balmoral, May 1968. With their weapons close at hand, the soldiers take time to rest and eat near their weapon pit. They had established the base only 24 hours before the first enemy attack during the Battle of Coral-Balmoral



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

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.”

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.

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'.

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'.³⁶

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.



Four members of 3RAR inspect captured North Vietnamese weapons and equipment at Balmoral



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

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.³⁷ Spoor, who had seen the extensive complex from the air, reckoned C Company had 'got off lightly that day'.³⁸ One Australian had been killed and seven wounded. For someone closer to that reality, Lorne Clarke, the medic, 'it was a pretty bad day'.

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'.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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 1st Armoured Regiment and the 3rd Cavalry Regiment were awarded the battle honour 'Coral– Balmoral'. In 2008, the Governor-General of Australia approved the Honour Title 'Coral' for the 102nd Field Battery, Royal Australian Artillery, the first such honour to be bestowed upon an Australian unit.



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.



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 (Carrots, Parsnips, Spuds, Brussels) 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.



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