FIRE SUPPORT PATROL BASE (FSPB) CORAL REMEMBERED

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Introduction

This article is a selection from a larger thesis titled ‘Our guys were very good. We were a very capable battery; in fact we were an arrogant bunch. We were good’, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts (Honours), University of Wollongong 2014. The thesis’s purpose is to provide an account of the role played by seven veterans who fought in the Battle for Fire Support Patrol Base (FSPB) Coral, 12 May to 6 June 1968 in South Vietnam. Concentrating on 12 and 13 May, the veterans’ memories challenge the account given in On the Offensive: The Australian Army in the Vietnam War 1967-1968, the Official History series devoted to the Vietnam War. The thesis allows seven veterans the chance to tell the story of FSPB Coral in their own words, to set the record straight as they see it. The veterans are: Capt Donald Tait, Lieut Ian Ahearn, Bombardier Laurence D’Arcy, Gunners Thomas Carmody, Robert Costello and David Thomas from 102 Field Battery Royal Australian Artillery, and Lieut Anthony Jensen, second-in-command Mortar Platoon, 1RAR.

This article provides the soldiers a voice and offers an insight into what the gunners and mortarmen remember about FSPB Coral. It examines four key point of the battle: intelligence provided to the units, the positioning of the gun batteries, two Final Preventative Fire tasks, and the use of splintex. The soldiers’ memories are at odds with the version put forward in the Official History.

Operation Toan Thang

The Battle for FSPB Coral, occurring between 12 May and 6 June 1968, was part of the largest operation undertaken by the Australian Task Force in Vietnam, Operation Toan Thang, (Complete Victory), yet it remains virtually unknown to most Australians. The establishment of FSPB Coral began with a combined allied military operation in the III Corp area beginning on 8 April 1968. American, South Vietnamese, Australian, New Zealand and Thai troops were involved. Totalling 70,000 service personnel, it was the biggest allied operation of the war to date.2

The First Australian Task Force Progression

Australian Maj Gen A.L. MacDonald was approached by American Lieut Gen Weyand, Commander of II Field Force Vietnam, requesting the use of the Australian Task Force to block enemy infiltration routes into Saigon. The area that needed securing was the Bien Hoa/Long Binh complex, situated well north of the relatively secure province of Phuoc Tuy. On 21 April, the move into AO Giles (Fig.1) marked the beginning of the Task Force engagement in Toan Thang.4

With only minor contacts occurring during this phase, the Task Force proceeded north into the Bien Hoa province. From 23 to 25 April, they commenced a multi-battalion reconnaissance-in-force operation.5 On 5 May, Australian units comprising the First Battalion, Royal

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1 McNeill and Ekins, On the Offensive, pp.347-381.
2 ibid, p.347.
3 ibid, pp.349-350.
4 ibid, pp.348-349.
5 ibid, p.349.
Australian Regiment (1RAR) and the Second Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (2RAR) were airlifted into AO Columbus relieving the United States Army’s 199th Brigade. The Australian Task Force had now established a protective belt east of the Bien Hoa/Long Binh complex. Since 5 May, enemy contact had been minimal, and the second offensive on Saigon faltering, the remaining enemy were considered weak, uncoordinated and to be generally in small disorganised groups.⁶

On 10 May, Weyand held a Commanders’ conference at II Field Force Vietnam Headquarters located at Long Binh, attended by Brig Hughes, First Australian Task Force commander. Hughes was informed about moving the Task Force further north into an area known to the Americans as ‘The Catcher’s Mitt’.⁷ On 10 May, 3RAR flew into AO Simpson to relieve 2RAR; 3RAR sighted no enemies on 11 May. For the 21 days of operations, the Task Force had very little to show.⁸ By the time Weyand called his meeting, a second report had been prepared. It stated that the village of Binh My (Fig.2), located in AO Surfers, was accessible to

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⁶ ibid, p.353.
⁷ ibid, p.354.
⁸ ibid, p.353.
enemy troops moving either north or south. The village was well known as an important staging and resupply area for the NVA and Viet Cong units.\textsuperscript{9} Although both reports also showed that the enemy forces outnumbered the Australian forces being deployed to the sector, only the first report suggested that this represented a threat to FSPB Coral.

Hughes, however, did not pass this information down to the next level in the chain of command, the unit command level. When Lt Col Bennett and other unit commanders met at the Task Force Commanders’ ‘orders group’ meeting at the American base, Bearcat, on 10 May, there was no suggestion that there would be a large enemy presence in AO Surfers. The operations would be as they had been over the last three weeks. Contact with the enemy had been limited to small groups of approximately 10 to 20 men, moving to a proposed rendezvous point, avoiding any confrontation.\textsuperscript{10} The decision at Bearcat, then, was to establish the base at Coral. With the commanders’ air reconnaissance complete by 5.00pm, Brigadier Hughes initiated the move to AO Surfers for 12 May.\textsuperscript{11} With the AOs established, 3RAR flew into FSPB Coral on 12 May to secure the landing zone, designated K Pad, followed by the remaining elements of 3RAR and 1RAR.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{9} ibid, p.356.
\textsuperscript{10} ibid, p.363.
\textsuperscript{11} ibid, p.354.
\textsuperscript{12} ibid, pp.354-56.
THE SOLDIERS RESPOND

Intelligence Reports

The Official History states that through intelligence reports, captured documents and prisoners questioned, contact with enemy regiments had occurred in AO Surfers. It states that the Task Force was to interdict enemy withdrawing from the south and southwest. The Commanders’ conference referred to the presence of 7 NVA Division (to which 141 and 165 Regiments belonged) to be somewhere within AO Surfers. The intelligence reports went on to state that ‘this was not considered a significant threat to FSPB Coral’. The Operational Orders noted that the enemy units expecting to pass through AO Surfers would contain a substantial enemy main force and local force units. They would be deployed tactically, be well-coordinated, and possess high morale.13

The veterans interviewed state that the intelligence reports and Operational Orders were not passed down to them. Capt Don Tait remembers the men were expecting an entirely different scenario:

First of all I need to dwell on the intelligence. There is no doubt, absolutely no doubt that we were told from an intelligence point of view that we were going in against a rifle battalion that had been reinforced and we expected to operate against groups of up to 10.14

Lt Ian Ahearn is just as emphatic:

This information was not passed on to us, the intelligence provided to all deployed components only indicated enemy withdrawing from Saigon, not reinforcing Saigon. It seems strange, but I never saw the actual orders until about 10 years after the event.15

Battery and Mortar Positioning

The Official History states that the air landing at FSPB Coral was delayed due to enemy contact in the area.16 It states that 161 Field Battery was landed at an improvised landing zone, and with 102 Field Battery located 1500 metres away from 161 Field Battery, left Major Brian Murtagh with a difficult task of how to defend the base.17 It also states that Murtagh was not at K Pad to meet the following parties but offers no explanation for his absence.

Flying into FSPB Coral, Lt Ian Ahearn, who was the Gun Position Officer for 102 Field Battery and part of the Battery Reconnaissance Party, is adamant that his battery’s flight into FSPB Coral had not been delayed by enemy fire as stated in the Official History. According to Ahearn,

The airstrikes did not delay the insertion of the 12 Field Regiment, 102 Field Battery, 161 Field Battery and 1RAR Reconnaissance Parties. They arrived on time at the landing zone designated in the orders. No indication was given to the reconnaissance parties that the fly in had been changed.18

Upon arriving at K Pad, Ahearn did not see Bravo Company 3RAR who were supposed to have secured K Pad, any Australian infantry or Major Murtagh.19 The Americans securing the area reported to the arriving reconnaissance parties that a group of Australians had moved out of

13 Australian War Memorial, AWM 95 http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/AWM95/7/1/.
14 Don Tait interview.
15 Ian Ahearn interview.
17 ibid, p.360.
18 Ahearn interview.
19 ibid.
the area into what the Americans called ‘Tiger Country’.\textsuperscript{20} This group of Australians contained Major Brian Murtagh who was the FSPB defence commander. His absence created the problem for 161 Field Battery and 102 Field Battery as now there was no area allocated for the two gun batteries.

The Official History states that 161 Field Battery landed 1000 metres to the southwest of K Pad.\textsuperscript{21} This is incorrect as the Duty Officers’ logs clearly indicate the grid reference where 161 Field Battery landed was 100 to 200 metres from K Pad (See Figs.3 and 4), and not 1000 metres from K Pad as stated in the Official History. The Duty Officers’ logs match more closely with the veterans’ version of events and they question why the Official History has neglected this evidence drawn from a primary source.

Fig.3: 1RAR Duty Officers Log indicating 161 Field Battery at K Pad, XT926284.\textsuperscript{22} Note: This log shows a discrepancy of 100 metres from their landing zone.

Fig.4: Headquarters, 1 Australian Task Force Duty Officer’s Log indicating 161 Field Battery at K Pad, XT927284.\textsuperscript{23} Note: This log shows a discrepancy of 200 metres from their designated landing zone.

The confusion for 161 Field Battery and 102 Field Battery resulted as no area was allocated for the artillery guns and Murtagh was absent from the area.\textsuperscript{24} The area that 161 Field Battery Reconnaissance Party landed at was understood as being the grid reference for the FSPB. With the positioning of 161 Field Battery at the correct location, the remaining elements of the arriving Task Force were to be built around the 161 Field Battery location.\textsuperscript{25} When the artillery guns of 161 Field Battery arrived overhead by Chinook helicopters, approximately two hours before they were expected, the 161 Field Battery Reconnaissance Party accepted the guns and set them into position.\textsuperscript{26}

The Official History accurately states that 102 Field Battery was located 1500 metres away from 161 Field Battery, leaving Murtagh with a difficult task when it came to defending the base.\textsuperscript{27} What the Official History has failed to understand or has failed to correctly acknowledge is why Murtagh chose to have 102 Field Battery 1500 metres away from 161 Field Battery. It was his decision that put the lives of approximately 100 men in jeopardy when 102 Field Battery and the 1IRAR Mortar Platoon were attacked on 13 May 1968.

\textsuperscript{20} ibid. McAulay, \textit{The Battle of Coral}, p.34.
\textsuperscript{22} Australian War Memorial, AWM 95-7-1-78 Part 2, \url{http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/record}.
\textsuperscript{23} Australian War Memorial, AWM 95-1-4-97, \url{http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/records/awm95/1/4/97}.
\textsuperscript{25} ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ahearn interview.
\textsuperscript{27} McNeill and Ekins, \textit{On the Offensive}, p.360.
At K Pad, Ahearn needed to locate Murtagh to be able to establish the gun layout for 102 Field Battery. Ahearn eventually established radio contact with Murtagh who advised Ahearn that ‘he was up the track’. Ahearn requested Murtagh to throw a smoke grenade to indicate his position, which he did. Ahearn and the 102 Field Battery Reconnaissance Party then headed in Murtagh’s direction. At Murtagh’s location, Ahearn along with the Section Commander and a Battery Surveyor established their exact position, which was 1500 metres away from K Pad and 161 Field Battery. At this, Ahearn recalls he commented to Murtagh: “That’s a hell of a long way away for when we [102 Field Battery] get on the ground,” to which he [Murtagh] replied “there is a lot of people to fit in here”.

When Bravo Company 1RAR flew into FSPB Coral, they did not fly into K Pad, but flew into 102 Field Battery’s new location. Ahearn was asked by the Forward Observers where they were. Tait was the Forward Observer for 1RAR and recalls:

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

1RAR Mortar Platoon arrived at FSPB Coral at 5.00pm, around one hour short of last light. The late arrival of the 1RAR Mortar Platoon severely reduced the amount of time they had to prepare their weapons pits and establish their defensive fire positions before last light. Lt Tony Jensen was met by Capt Hugh McInally and was taken to the Mortar position. McInally apologised that the 1RAR Mortars were situated on the perimeter of the 102 Field Battery gun position and told Jensen ‘it will get sorted tomorrow’. The 1RAR Mortars were positioned 50 to 70 metres out, slightly in front of and located between No.5 and No.6 guns. Jensen approached Murtagh and asked where everybody was and what was going on. Murtagh informed me that 3RAR was about somewhere providing protection and waved his arms in the general direction of the rubber plantation. I asked about manning machine guns and was told by Murtagh it was not necessary. I stated that my men were only just in country, and we should man a machine gun sentry, yet Murtagh was not interested.

With 102 Field Battery and 1RAR Mortars being further north than planned, the discovery of enemy weapons pits, and Murtagh’s dismissive attitude of the situation regarding defences, added responsibility was placed upon Ahearn and Jensen. The two lieutenants now had to establish defensive fire positions for the machine guns, a task that was the responsibility of Murtagh, who failed to conduct more than one of his roles as the FSPB defence commander.

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28 Ahearn interview.
29 ibid.
30 ibid.
31 Tait interview. ‘Huey’ is the unofficial term used to describe the Bell UH-1 Iroquois helicopter.
32 ibid.
33 Jensen interview.
34 ibid.
35 ibid.
36 ibid. ‘In country’ means that the soldiers had only recently arrived in Vietnam.
37 ibid.
Two Final Preventative Fire Tasks

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

In the early hours on 13 May, 102 Field Battery was called to provide supporting artillery for the infantry. The six guns that were originally pointing east were manoeuvred by their crews and pointed north. The guns then delivered their 105mm projectiles with deadly accuracy. The fire mission lasted 20 minutes before the six guns were advised that the mission had ended. With all six guns now pointing north, Andrews asked Ahearn if the gun battery could handle two Final Preventative Fire tasks. A Final Preventative Fire task is one battery (six guns), loaded with information on a target, normally selected as the most probable area of enemy activity. The gunners only need to pull the lanyard to fire the gun and the projectile will land where assigned. Andrews wanted one section (three guns) laid north and one section returned to its original eastern bearing. Ahearn selected guns Nos. 4, 5 and 6 to stay pointing north and the other three (Nos. 1, 2 and 3) to be laid on the original east bearing. Ahearn provides his reasoning for selecting the guns:

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

The use of Splintex

The Official History states that Jensen, in desperation, called for direct fire from the Anti-tank Platoon’s 90mm Recoilless Rifles. Splintex was fired across the front of the mortar position, providing some relief for the 1RAR Mortars. The veterans interviewed reject the action as being an inaccurate account of what happened.

At around 2.30am, the mortar position was under fire from small arms and RPGs. Jensen and his men were being overrun. 3RAR Mortars and 161 Field Battery were called to fire on Jensen’s position as the enemy was swarming through them. The Operations Officer, Kim Patterson, asked Jensen three times for the fire order to be repeated. Each time Jensen did just that. Finally, Jensen held his radio hand piece up so Patterson could hear the contact, hoping this would convince Patterson of the severity of the situation. Jensen’s only option was to call in a fire mission. Jensen recalls: ‘We had to hold our ground and do what we could and the only way we could do that was to call in a fire mission on our position which is what I organised.’

After some discussion between the Mortar Command Post and the Battalion Headquarters, the

40 ibid, p.17.
41 Ahearn interview.
42 ibid.
44 Jensen interview.
45 ibid.
Commanding Officer (Bennett), agreed to have splintex fired over the mortar position.\footnote{ibid.} With Murtagh in effect absent throughout the battle, Bennett, although not in command of FSPB Coral (along with his Battery Commander and Headquarters staff) authorised Jensen to have 102 Field Battery fire across their position.\footnote{ibid.} As Jensen recalls:

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

Since dawn, Ahearn had been trying to contact Jensen to ascertain if he and his men were indeed alive. He eventually managed to get him to answer by voice. This created another problem as each time Ahearn, positioned near No.5 gun, called Jensen, who was positioned between No.5 and No.6 guns, both were met with a volley of enemy machine gun fire.\footnote{Ahearn interview.} Ahearn returned to the Command Post to hear Jensen on the Battalion radio asking for splintex to fire across his position. Jensen, bluntly stated, ‘if you don’t do it then we are all dead’.\footnote{ibid.}

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

To comply with Jensen’s call, Ahearn returned to No.5 gun and informed the gunners to aim the gun across the mortar position.\footnote{ibid.} Ahearn continues:

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

Jensen adds:

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

Lance Corporal Alan James (Jack) Parr was Jensen’s signaler and looked after two radio sets. One was connected to the Battalion command network, the other used for commanding mortar fire missions. With FSPB Coral overrun, Parr called in direct fire support from 3RAR Mortars, a Light Fire Team of two helicopter gunships and a ‘Spooky’ gunship. Parr deliberately called fire onto his very own position in an attempt to kill the enemy and save his mates. One metre way in the other fighting pit, Jensen called in direct fire from 102 Field Battery.\footnote{Australian War Memorial, Splintex Dart, Battle of Coral: Lance Corporal A J Parr, 1 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, \url{http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/REL35838}.} As Jack Parr recalls:

The guns fired HE [High Explosive] and splintex rounds making an awesome sound coming
through one’s own position. These [splintex darts] were lodged everywhere in equipment and weapons...millions were fired into and across our positions in an attempt to clear the enemy.\(^{56}\)

Other evidence corroborates the men’s version of the event, showing that, despite the Official History’s claim, it was not the Anti-tank Platoon’s 90mm Recoilless Rifles that fired splintex across the front of the 1RAR Mortar Platoon.\(^{57}\) Fig.6 indicates the position of all three units involved, and clearly shows that the 1RAR Mortar Platoon was partially protected by the 102 Field Battery guns. If the 90mm Recoilless Rifles did fire across the front of the Mortars, then 102 Field Battery would have been hit with splintex. This would have resulted in serious injury or death to the gunners. The strongest evidence, however, that corroborates the veterans’ version is in the After Action Report, a source readily available to the Official Historians. It clearly states that the gunners from 102 Field Battery engaged the enemy with splintex rounds by firing over the 1RAR Mortar Platoon’s position. It also recorded the time, which matches the recollections of the men (see Fig.5).\(^{58}\)

![Image](image_url)

**Fig.5:** The After Action Report clearly indicates that, Gunners from 102 Field Battery ‘were able to engage en [enemy] with HE [High Explosive] and splintex rounds and fired over the Mor Pl posn.’ The time indicated in the top left corner is 0425 hours.

### Close-Quarter Fighting

Despite the fact that the enemy launched an effective surprise attack on FSPB Coral, and failed to overrun it, and that the fighting over 12 and 13 May was intense, the men from 102 Field Battery and 1RAR Mortar Platoon feel that the Official History obscures, or overlooks, their role and actions during those eventful days at FSPB Coral. This has disappointed the Coral veterans interviewed, and they question just how ‘official’ the Official History is. This section of the article provides the soldiers’ voice and offers an insight into what the gunners and mortarmen remember about FSPB Coral.

With the 102 Field Battery guns arriving at Ahearn’s position, he immediately informed the gunners that something was amiss, but was unsure as to what it was. He therefore directed the soldiers to dig to stage one weapons pits.\(^{59}\) This made Ahearn very unpopular, as he remembers.

Some will say that they only had shell scrapes, and they might well have, but we as Officers had to go around and kick ass to make sure that people were digging. I think that shows in the results as you don’t get a number of RPGs and things in without having excessive casualties.\(^{60}\)

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\(^{56}\) ibid.


\(^{59}\) Ahearn interview.

\(^{60}\) ibid.
Fig. 5: The positioning of 1RAR Mortars, 102 Field Battery, and the 90mm Recoilless Rifles on the night of 12-13 May 1968 (Lowry, The Last Knight, p. 94). Note: The heavier black line indicates the firing direction of the splintex round as mentioned in the Official History.

On 12 May, no defence stores had been delivered to FSPB Coral. With no barbed wire, claymore mines or trip flares set up, the area lacked adequate protection. When the attack came, Ahearn was lying in his weapon pit. There was no sound, but he was awoken by a green glow over his hootchie (personal tent), a result of enemy tracer coming into FSPB Coral: ‘Literally there was no sound; I didn’t hear anything until it came in like a ‘whomp’, it was the sound of RPGs, mortars and machine guns.’

At this early stage of the battle, No. 6 gun was out of action as it had been overrun by the enemy. Gun Sergeant Max Franklin, however, had had the presence of mind to remove the No. 6 gun firing pin before withdrawing. This is a difficult task that requires a series of moves, and made all the more difficult by being under attack and with wounded men under his command. Sgt Franklin’s actions made the 105mm howitzer inoperable in enemy hands. Ahearn quickly made his way to the Command Post to find out what was happening. At this stage, No. 4 gun opened

61 ibid.  
62 ibid.
fire with small arms (rifles) and shortly after, the Gun Sergeant, John Stephens reported to the Command Post that they had expended small arms ammunition and requested an ammunition resupply. Stephens also reported that there was a considerable amount of activity happening at No.4 gun and requested permission to fire the 105mm howitzer over open sights.\(^{63}\)

As a result of the close-quarter fighting, 102 Field Battery had suffered casualties. Supporting fire was called for and was delivered by 161 Field Battery, 3RAR Mortars and an American battery located in and around Bien Hoa. The Battery Commander also arranged for Cobra gunships and a 'Spooky' gunship to assist in the fight and they began to pound the perimeter of FSPB Coral.\(^{64}\)

At FSPB Coral, Jensen sighted the mortar tubes and told the section commanders to dig in and get organised before he and Signaller Parr started digging the command post and sleeping bay.\(^{65}\) The mortars had approximately 75 rounds each and were supported by two machine guns. By last light the mortar pits and the command post had been prepared.\(^{66}\) At midnight, NVA soldiers engaged the 1RAR Mortar machine guns. The machine gunners fired back. There were moans and groans from the enemy and then they fell silent. The mortars remained alert for another half an hour and at 12.30am they returned to their positions. At around 2.30am, the enemy came through the mortar position ‘in no time flat’.\(^{67}\) Everything was happening very fast, with enemy and small arms fire all through the mortars, as Jensen recalls:

> There were 18 men in the Mortar Platoon and we were like a pimple on the side of the gunners and when they (NVA) came through, we basically surprised them and that created a bit of a problem as they didn’t expect us to be there. On top of that, we held our ground and fought hard.\(^{68}\)

Bombardier Larry D’Arcy of 102 Field Battery No.3 gun, had not been concerned where the next FSPB was to be located; his role began when the guns and men landed on the ground. At approximately 2.25am, 102 Field Battery was called on to provide supporting artillery fire for Delta Company 1RAR and all six guns were involved. At the completion of the fire mission, D’Arcy was busy reorganising the gun ammunition bay when small arms fire started. He assumed it was 1RAR firing their weapons. This had happened previously at FSPB Harrison when an Australian armoured personnel carrier had fired its guns without notifying the battery in the vicinity.\(^{69}\) D’Arcy comments:

> When the first few rounds came into Coral I wasn’t really alarmed, just thought it was another balls up. As soon as I heard the ‘crump’ of the mortars being fired and the RPGs coming into our position, I soon realised it was no mistake.\(^{70}\)

D’Arcy made a quick return to his weapons pit to find out what was happening. It was at this point that he was ordered to get his M60, move onto the gun bund of No.5 gun, and told in no uncertain terms to ‘give everything a spray’ as the advancing NVA were attempting to flank the Australians.\(^{71}\) He still remembers the incredible noise and the intensity of the battle:

> The sky was pitch black and the incoming tracer rounds were very clear to see. The noise of the

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\(^{63}\) ibid.  
\(^{64}\) ibid.  
\(^{65}\) Jensen interview.  
\(^{66}\) ibid.  
\(^{67}\) ibid.  
\(^{68}\) ibid.  
\(^{69}\) D’Arcy interview.  
\(^{70}\) ibid.  
\(^{71}\) ibid.
enemy mortars being fired was probably one of the worst feelings. Once you heard the primer
go, indicating the mortar had been dropped into the tube, you just waited to hear it coming and
hoped it did not land near you or your mates. 72

The enemy had moved close enough to start throwing grenades at the Australians. One landed
a few feet from D’Arcy’s position, rolled away and then exploded. The dirt spoil from his shell
scrape protected him, but the shrapnel from the exploding grenade damaged the M60 link belt
ammunition causing the machine gun to jam. 73 Unable to clear the stoppage, D’Arcy called to
Gunner Costello to pass his rifle. Without hesitation Costello did so, and D’Arcy emptied the
magazines into the enemy area. Now, having two guns not working, the M60 jammed and the
rifle out of bullets, D’Arcy decided on clearing the M60 as it fired the most bullets.

Gunner Tom Carmody of 102 Field Battery’s No.3 gun, did not know what was planned for
FSPB Coral; the gunners were not privy to such information. 74 Carmody was standing to,
awaiting fire orders as the infantry reported a contact when the enemy attacked.

I recall a green glow in front of me and thought that the fireflies were bright tonight and next
minute, whoosh whoosh a series of RPG’s flew overhead, then the mortars started coming in. All
hell broke loose. I thought this couldn’t be happening to me. 75

A fire mission was called which No.3 gun conducted with a limited crew, and then the gunners
ran ammunition up to No.4 gun. Carmody was sent to the helipad to break open an ammunition
crate. Approaching the helipad, fellow gunner Ross Prowse, in the light of the flares, was
attempting to open the ammunition crate with an axe. As Carmody emerged out of the dark,
Prowse whipped around and was about to put the axe through Carmody’s head: ‘I swore at him
and said “don’t do that” – words to that effect’. 76

Gunner David Thomas of 102 Field Battery’s No.3 gun recalls that it was sometime through
the night when all the whiz bangs started. Thomas was under his hootchie when the
bombardment came. ‘I thought it was just a few rounds, I didn’t think it was going to turn out
like it did’. 77 Thomas recalls that a fire mission was called to support 3RAR as they were in a
contact with the enemy. No.3 gun executed the fire mission with only three men available on
the gun: Gun Sergeant Elgar, Gunner Costello and himself. Bombardier D’Arcy was firing the
M60 on one of the gun bunds and Gunner Carmody was in another area. The fire mission went
on while rockets and bullets were going through the gun position; this was all in the dark of
night. 78 It was at this moment of the interview that Gunner Thomas recalled a poignant moment
that has remained with him since it occurred on 13 May 1968.

I will never forget carrying splintex over to No.4 gun, Stevo’s gun, and I tripped and fell down
and had a poncho wrapped around my ankles. You know, I looked down and there was Bluey
Sawtell, he was dead, he had been shot in the head and was under the poncho near our gun bay.
I covered him back up and kept going. 79

Gunner Costello of No.3 gun had been waiting with the other gunners at FSPB Harrison since
daybreak to be flown into FSPB Coral. Landing at FSPB Coral late in the afternoon, the gunners

72 ibid.
73 ibid.
74 Carmody interview.
75 ibid.
76 ibid.
77 Thomas, interview.
78 ibid.
79 ibid. Gunner Sawtell was killed instantly when the attacking NVA fired point blank into his pit.
established the gun positions, but were unable to prepare defences due to inadequate stores being delivered. Weapons pits were not completed and at this stage Costello had only half prepared his weapons pit by the time ‘Stand To’ was called.\textsuperscript{80} Very early in the morning all hell broke loose as rockets were going above the heads of the gunners about six to eight feet and mortars were exploding around them. The artillery was firing over the protective dirt bund at the enemy running across their front.\textsuperscript{81} The interview with Costello reveals more than just his memory of the battle; he reflected on the importance of mateship and the camaraderie that is built with the men he served alongside:

> I may be biased in my thoughts here, but our group, not only as a unit, but you could call Charlie Gun (No.3), the immediate family if you like. I’m very biased towards Charlie gun as I have always thought that our mateship and comradeship is something that could never be broken. In my eyes, it’s a true relation to what mateship really is. I’m sure every gunner feels the same way about their guns.\textsuperscript{82}

\textit{Fig.7: No.3 (Charlie Gun) crew. Left to right, ‘Pommy’ Fisher, Costello, D’Arcy, Thomas (obscured) and ‘Stoney’ Bourke sitting under their shelter on 13 May after a tough night of fighting. Note the holes in the tent from exploding shrapnel, rockets and bullets (photo courtesy of Robert Costello).}

As morning approached, incoming rounds were still falling around FSPB Coral, and the NVA fired sporadically at the Australian positions. Ahearn instructed 2\textsuperscript{nd} Lt Lowry to take a clearing patrol and head out through No.6 gun. At the same time Ahearn would take the medical officer and others and head through the 1RAR Mortar Platoon. This was to do two things: clear the

\textsuperscript{80} Costello interview.

\textsuperscript{81} ibid.

\textsuperscript{82} ibid
area of any enemy and to check the situation of 1RAR Mortars.\textsuperscript{83} Ahearn recalls:

The first one we came across was a wounded NVA and I distinctly remember that he had been hit with a burst on F1 9mm (sub machine gun ammunition) and you could see the rounds in his chest as it was just getting light. It was 1944 ammunition so it had only just gone in, he wasn’t feeling great, but he wasn’t anywhere near dead. He was the first we came across.\textsuperscript{84}

Ordered to take a clearing patrol out through the gun position, Bombardier D’Arcy gathered Bombardier Burns (Burnsie), Gunner Floyd and a few others before cautiously moving out to begin a clearing search. The gunners had not moved far from the gun position when Gunner Ayson opened fire and shot an NVA in the grass. On instinct, the men went to ground. D’Arcy was now looking at an NVA soldier and the muzzle of his AK47. D’Arcy pulled the trigger of his M60; the sound was a resonating thud as his M60 jammed.\textsuperscript{85}

All I remember was Ayson firing; I hit the ground as trained to do and seeing the barrel of an enemy gun I pulled the trigger and nothing happened. I was yelling at Burnsie to bloody shoot him, just bloody shoot him. I did this more than once. Burnsie assured me that he was already dead and I can get up and stop shouting.\textsuperscript{86}

As a result of that first night’s contact, the Australians suffered nine soldiers killed and 28 wounded. The biggest loss was with 1RAR Mortar Platoon. With 18 men flying into FSPB Coral, they suffered five men killed and eight wounded. Of the men in 1RAR Mortar Platoon who were in the battle, only Lt Jensen and signaller Private Parr remained at FSPB Coral. All the other men were injured or suffered from battle shock and were returned to Nui Dat. The enemy dead numbered 52 on the battlefield around FSPB Coral.\textsuperscript{87}

The attack on 12 and 13 May demonstrated the attacking capabilities of the enemy. The idea now was to strengthen the defences at FSPB Coral, providing the enemy with some big targets. FSPB Coral would be heavily defended at night and aggressive daytime patrols would ensure that the fight was taken to the enemy. Maj John Keldie, commanding the armoured personnel carriers, now became the local defence Commander.\textsuperscript{88} He was to coordinate the defence of FSPB Coral, a role previously held so inadequately by Murtagh. The second attack on FSPB Coral occurred on 16 May at approximately 2.30am. Once again the enemy hit under the cover of darkness, launching a sustained barrage of rockets, mortars and small arms.\textsuperscript{89} The fight for FSPB Coral went on until 6 June and involved a large number of clashes with NVA and heavy rocketing and mortaring of Coral.\textsuperscript{90}

In early June, the First Australian Task Force was informed that operations in the ‘Catchers Mitt’ area were terminated. On 6 June FSPB Coral was abandoned and remaining units returned to Nui Dat via air or road.\textsuperscript{91} By the time the Australians withdrew, over 270 NVA had been killed, 20 captured and an untold number wounded. The Australians suffered 25 killed and 109 wounded.\textsuperscript{92} Lt Ian Ahearn from 102 Field Battery wrote 13 citations for actions at FSPB Coral. Of those, two gunners were decorated for their part in the battle: Sgt Leslie John Stephens

\textsuperscript{83} Ahearn interview.
\textsuperscript{84} ibid.
\textsuperscript{85} D’Arcy interview.
\textsuperscript{86} ibid.
\textsuperscript{87} McNeill and Ekins, \textit{On the Offensive}, p.370.
\textsuperscript{88} ibid, p.374.
\textsuperscript{89} ibid, p.375.
\textsuperscript{90} ibid, p.379.
\textsuperscript{91} ibid, p.395.
\textsuperscript{92} ibid, p.396.
received the Military Medal (MM) and Sgt Lindsay Arthur Elgar was Mention in Despatches (MiD). Events that occurred over 45 years ago still resonate in the minds of the veterans and recognition of their action in the battle of FSPB Coral are still being sought. Yet the veterans wonder how, or even if, the Battle for FSPB Coral will be remembered.

* 

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