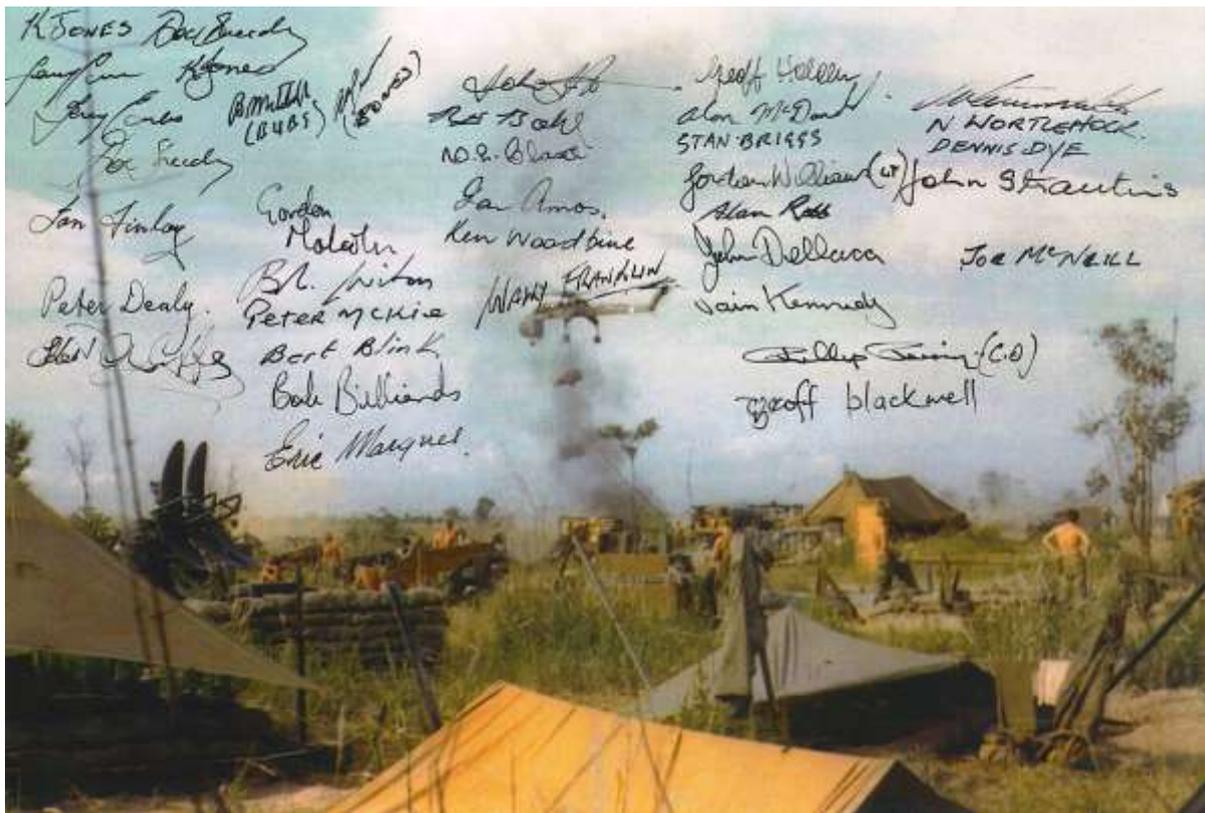


LOCREP

**The Newsletter of the Locating Surveillance & Target Acquisition
Assn Inc.**

June 2018 Volume 65 (Special Edition – Coral/Balmoral)



50 years on, Coral/Balmoral Recognition for Det 131 Div Loc Bty

Photograph taken at FSB Coral, signed by those members present.



The Battles of Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral

(Source: 100 years of ANZAC)

Australian, New Zealand and United States forces were involved in a series of actions between May and June 1968 at Fire Support Bases (FSB) Coral and Balmoral some 20 kilometres north of Bien Hoa City. These bases, established across a route used by North Vietnamese forces to attack Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) and Bien Hoa, provided defended positions for artillery and mortars which would, in turn, support infantry patrols of the area. The 1st and 3rd Battalions Royal Australian Regiment (1 and 3 RAR), 102 Field Battery Royal Australian Artillery, 161 New Zealand Field Battery, and, among others, elements of Australia's 131st Divisional Locating Battery deployed into FSB Coral on 12 May 1968. Defensive positions were incomplete when a North Vietnamese Regiment attacked the base during the early hours of 13 May. The North Vietnamese, having penetrated the artillery positions and briefly forcing the defenders to abandon one of their guns, were forced back after heavy fighting.

Coral came under attack for a second time at 2.15 am on 16 May when an estimated three battalions of North Vietnamese infantry assaulted the base which was now defended by armoured personnel carriers of A Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment as well as 1RAR's infantry. Fighting lasted several hours before the attackers were forced to withdraw

Further attacks on Coral followed, on 22 May, and again on 26 and 28 May, but the Base was not seriously threatened again. Having had the opportunity to establish a strong defensive perimeter, the Australians were able launch their own attacks against the North Vietnamese and did so on 26 May when infantry and tanks destroyed a North Vietnamese bunker system that had been discovered in the vicinity. The Australians continued to launch aggressive patrols from Coral, engaging in combat against North Vietnamese forces and experiencing some fierce actions through until the end of May.

By this time the North Vietnamese had turned their attention to FSB Balmoral, which had been established by 3RAR some 4.5 kilometres north of Coral, on 24-25 May. Tanks from Nui Dat helped Australian infantry defeat a two battalion-strong North Vietnamese attack just hours after their arrival at the base on 25 May. A second attack followed on 28 May, but a combination of infantry, tanks, artillery and mortars repelled the North Vietnamese assault. North Vietnamese activity in the area subsided and operations at Coral and Balmoral were suspended on 6 June 1968.

A total of 26 Australians were killed during the fighting at FSB Coral and Balmoral. Estimates suggest that more than 300 North Vietnamese were killed in these actions, but exact figures will never be known.

The Battles of FSB Coral & Balmoral 50th Anniversary Commemoration Canberra ACT 2018

(Compiled by Terry Erbs (President SEQ Branch, LSTA Association Inc.)

On Friday evening there was a “meet & greet”, organised by the Artillery Association, at the Federal Golf Club. Most attended and enjoyed drinks and a briefing of the planned weekend’s activities.

Mid Saturday morning the National Gunner Commemorative Service was held in very cold, wet & windy weather at the aptly named Mt Pleasant, within the grounds of RMC Duntroon and overlooking ANZAC Avenue. Thankfully the “Everyman’s” truck was there with hot drinks.



L to R- Ken Jones, Jill & Wally Franklin OAM

COL Ian Ahearn [Retd], GPO 102 Bty Coral, gave his first hand account “warts & all” of the first 24 hours at FSB Coral, and “the Soldiers Priest“, Father John ‘Tink’ Tinkler 1RAR’s chaplain 68/69, wearing a large black beanie, read the prayers, and later kept us laughing with his stories.



L to R Gordon Williams & Brian Mitchell

That evening we all gathered again at the Federal Golf Club for the Coral Gunner Dinner hosted by Representative Colonel Commandant BRIG Gerry Werner AM, LVO [Retd] & Head of Regiment BRIG Craig Furini AM CSC. Those who attended the 40th Coral commemoration may recall that Craig was then the CO of 12th Regiment and accepted the honor "Coral" on behalf of 102 Bty.



L to R Wally Franklin, Doc Sheedy, Ian Finlay, Ian Amos, Ken Woodbine, Ken Jones, Brian Mitchell & Terry Erbs.

The dinner's guest speaker was MAJGEN Steve Gower AO [Retd], Artillery FO 6RAR and Director of AWM for 16 years, who spoke again of 102 Bty's heroic actions during that first night. Although what he said was true and accurate, Wally had to query Steve politely, "was he aware that 131 Bty was also fighting at Coral too"! Throughout the weekend the media, and most speakers only mentioned the major units fighting at Coral & Balmoral but not 131 Bty.

Rightly, those Locators who were at FSB's Coral & Balmoral have been awarded the Unit Citation for Gallantry (see separate article).



Another oversight was the inaccuracy of the photo of FSB Coral used as the dinner mats, supposedly taken on the morning of Monday 13th May 1968. Unanimously disputed by Locators, who were there on that day, they stated there were no emplacements south and west of road intersection until a day or two later! Unfortunately this inaccurate photograph is on display at the AWM.



The main event was the National 50th Anniversary of the Battle of Coral & Balmoral Commemorative Service held in ANZAC Parade at the Vietnam Memorial. MAJGEN Mark Kelly AO DSC, Repatriation Commissioner, was

Master of Ceremonies and the Call of Remembrance was read by LTGEN Angus Campbell AO DSC, Chief of Army, and again retired & respected Father Tinkler read the prayers.

Typical of Locators, on arrival they re-organised the seating into the shelter of a covered TV broadcasting stand - there was a strong cold wind blowing up ANZAC Avenue!



Back Row L/R: Gordon Williams, Stan Briggs, Peter Dealy, Wal Franklin, Banner, Iain Kennedy, Brian Mitchell, John Delacca.

Front Row L/R: Robert Billiards, Gordon Malcolm, Eric Marques, Ken Jones, Phillip Sheedy, Keith Ayliffe, Terry Erbs, Neville Wortlehock.

Seated: Ian Finlay

Hidden behind Ken Jones: Ken Woodbine.

Missing: Dennis Dye, Bert Blink, Geoff Jebb, Phil Mulgrew, John Bayford,

Many thanks to John Dellaca for bringing the 131 banner which unfortunately Jetstar mislaid for 24 hours. When it finally arrived in time for the parade it had 6 stickers on it! The usual wags suggested it had done the Commonwealth Games baton route and rightly toured every state.

Assembling the banner in strong wind proved a challenge, and Iain Kennedy took a tumble into the bushes. A very attractive young lady ambulance officer rushed to his aid, I think Iain was hoping for “mouth to mouth” resuscitation but fortunately it wasn’t required and Iain was able to march.



So proudly we marched “in step” behind the 131 banner past several larger units, who were muttering “who the hell do they think they are” and halted, as ordered, right in front of the memorial.

20th STA Regiment was well represented by 2IC MAJ Geoff Meekan and the RSM, soon to be Master Gunner, WO1 David Nutini. Importantly for us, BC 131 MAJ Alex McDonald and BSM Melvyn Wood laid a wreath on our behalf. Would have loved to got a photo but no one knew that it was to happen, not even Alex!



L-to R Alan Robb, Nev Wortlehook, Iain Kennedy, John Bayford, Ken Woodbine, Stan Briggs, Wally Franklin & Gordon Williams

After the service some boarded buses and others drove to the Canberra Convention Center for the Post Service reception. It wasn't quite the same as the 40th commemoration at the Great Hall of Parliament, we had buy our own beer this time but the finger food was very welcome and delicious.



In the evening the moving and emotional Last Post Ceremony at the AWM was dedicated to FSB Coral – to view <https://www.facebook.com/AWMemorial/videos/10155552314767525/>

Then it was back to the 'Pavilion' for drinks and a very enjoyable 131 Div Loc Bty reunion dinner. Thanks to Bert, "Dig" & Keith for their great organisation, the whole weekend went smoothly. Planning has started to all meet again during the 12/13/14th Oct in Brisbane for Locator's Reunion & Radar Dedication.



Ken Woodbine & Geoff Jebb



MAJ Geoff Meekan (2i/c 20 STA Regt) & Eric Marques



Gordon Malcolm, Ian Amos & Wally Franklin



Stan Briggs, Keith Ayliffe & Ian Finlay

UNIT CITATION FOR GALLANTRY



This is what the Unit Citation for Gallantry (UCG) looks like.

All personnel present at FSB's Coral and Balmoral at any time between the dates of 12 May-6 June 1968 are entitled to wear the Citation in perpetuity.

That much is clear.

What is not clear insofar as 20th STA Regt and/or 131 STA Bty is concerned, is the legacy issue regarding the right of members serving in 20th STA Regt/131 STA Bty from time to time, to wear the UCG. We await resolution of that issue.

The Association congratulates all concerned in the belated recognition of what went on in FSB's Coral and Balmoral 50 years ago.

Specifically in relation to former members of (Det) 131 Div Loc Bty, the Association wishes to place on record, sincere appreciation to Keith Ayliffe BEM, BA, Bert Blink and Grahame Dignam for their tireless work in the face of what was, at times, clear opposition to the inclusion of (Det) 131 Div Loc Bty in the UCG recognition process.

To quote Vietnam Veteran and author Barry Heard: "***Well done those men***".

