

NARRATIVE

Operation 'Toan Thang Phase 11'

(Toan Thang - Total/Complete Victory)

24th May - 6th June 1968

Vietnam.

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3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment

Veteran of FSPB Balmoral

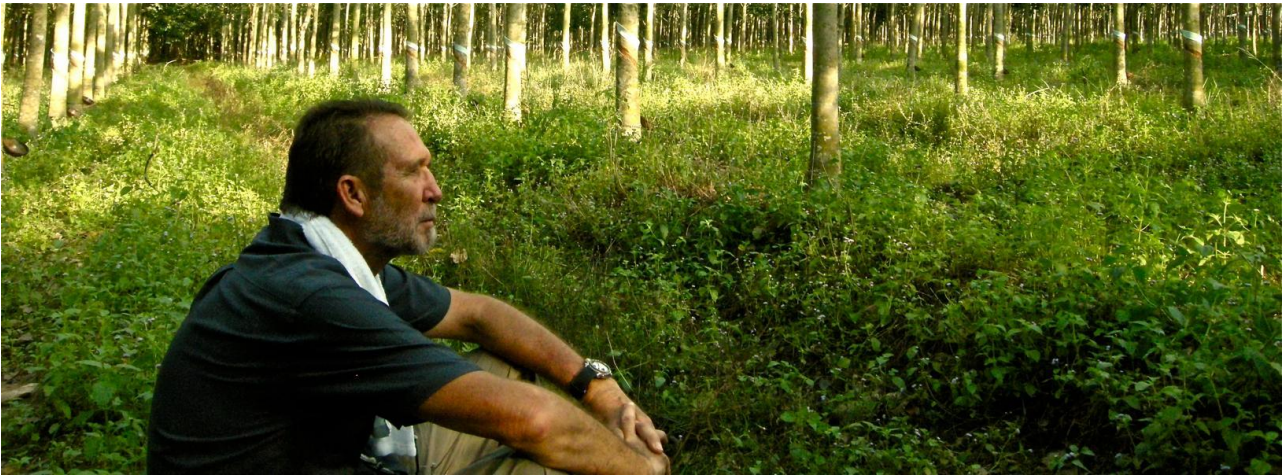
Witness to NVA assault on FSB Coral, 13th May, 1968

(February 2019)



Abbreviations:

1ATF - First Australian Task Force / Nui Dat
1RAR - 1st Royal Australian Regiment
3RAR - 3rd Royal Australian Regiment
AO - Area of Operation
APC - Armoured Personnel Carrier
ARVN - South Vietnamese Army
AWM - Australian War Memorial
BHQ - Battalion Head Quarters
Brew - Cup of tea or coffee
CHQ - Company Head Quarters
CO - Commanding Officer of a Battalion
Contact - Engagement with enemy
CSM - Company Sergeant Major
DMZ - Demilitarised Zone
DOW - Died of Wounds
FSB - Fire Support Base
FSPB - Fire Support Patrol Base
GP Boots - General purpose boots
Greens - General purpose clothing
HE - Tank/Artillery High Explosive Shell
Hoochie - Light-weight nylon tent/shelter
KIA - Killed in Action
LZ - Landing Zone
M16 - US made and issued automatic assault rifle
M60 - 7.62mm Machine Gun
MGRS - Military Grid Reference System
NCO - Non-Commissioned Officer
NVA - North Vietnamese Army
OC - Officer in Command of a Company
Picquet - Guard duty at a Machine Gun Pit / Bunker
POW - Prisoner of War
RAR - Royal Australian Regiment
RMO - Regimental Medical Officer
RPG - Rocket Propelled Grenade
SLR - Self-Loading Rifle. Australia's weapon of issue
VC (Viet Cong) - South Vietnamese sympathisers of the North Vietnamese Regime
WIA - Wounded in Action



'Signature image'. Taken in 2009 at the former battle-ground of FSPB Balmoral.

Establishing FSB Coral

Location: Map 48P XT 93 East ~ 29 North

... enemy eyes were watching:

Morning of 12th May 1968, two 3RAR companies moved into Coral's intended location in AO Bondi tasked with securing the area for the arrival of 1RAR, HQ, artillery, a mortar squadron, signals and supporting units. Whilst securing the area, enemy were sighted standing within the trees watching our movements and the arrival of units deployed to establish FSB Coral.

The establishment of FSB Coral was a total stuff-up. Chaos reigned on the ground, confusion created frustration and anger, combined with deep concerns about the lack of a defensive perimeter. The key ground controller could not be located as his task was to coordinate the incoming units and assure all landed in their allocated positions. Some units were dropped-off over 1.5 kilometres from their designated LZ position. The situation was a disaster waiting to happen, and as the day drew to an end there was no defensive perimeter fortifications established, nor infantry support. The NVA quickly assembled and took full advantage of the shambolic establishment of FSB Coral and its lack of perimeter infantry support and the large gaps in what defences could be established. There must have been a major NVA base close by as they quickly assembled and launched an assault during the early hours the following morning, 13th May 1968. (Reference attached: [fspb_coral_ian.ahearn.pdf](#))

Mid-afternoon of 12th May, 3RAR including BHQ moved away from the immediate Coral area, as ordered; and established separate Company night positions. 3RAR could have quickly established a semi secure harbour location for the dedicated units already located in Coral's position. 1RAR were not in a position to form-up and supply protective cover due to their late and scattered arrival. Therefore, FSB Coral was unsecured as per Australian Military standard harbour positioning; and they were ill prepared and open to any form of assault the enemy forces could plan at short notice.

.... the first assault on FSB Coral:

The NVA assault on Coral began during the early morning hours of the following day, 13th May 1968. From my night location, a few hundred metres north, in a clearing between two rubber tree plantations, I had an unrestricted view of the western sector of Coral. From my position, soon after midnight, I could hear the sound of running footsteps combined with hushed voices in the rubber trees to my left. Large numbers of enemy troops were moving quickly towards Coral's harbour position. One of our section machine gunners who was facing the rubber plantation requested permission to open fire, thankfully his request was denied.



Looking north-northeast across FSB Coral after establishment.

The assault began with the intentionally aimed high firing of ‘green tracer’ rounds, seconds later all hell broke loose. The battle for FSB Coral had begun, and raged-on with enormous intensity. Small arms tracer rounds, both red and green (*green-NVA / red-Australian*), were flying through the air in all directions. It was impossible to count the number of RPG rockets that rained in on Coral as it seemed continuous, *“it looked like fireworks night”*. This was the first time Australian Forces had engaged with Regular NVA units. This battle was a wake-up call for both 1RAR, 3RAR and 1ATF with the realisation we were now fighting the real enemy of South Vietnam, the well trained, well equipped and disciplined, North Vietnamese Regular Armed Forces. At some point during the assault US air fire-support arrived. First to sweep through the NVA ranks was the US helicopter light fire teams, followed by strike bombers, then, looming onto the scene from out of the night’s darkness was ‘Spooky’, the converted Douglas DC3 gun-ship. I had never witnessed such enormous fire power raining down from the night sky. Protruding from what was the side door of this converted plane were ‘mini-guns’, each capable of firing 6,000 rounds per minute. At the time I recall thinking, *“how could anyone on the ground survive this enormous amount of fire power”*.



Light Fire Team Helicopter. *Bell AH-1 Cobra Gunship*, with forward protruding Mini-Gun and side mounted rockets.



Fighter 'Bomber' loaded with munitions.



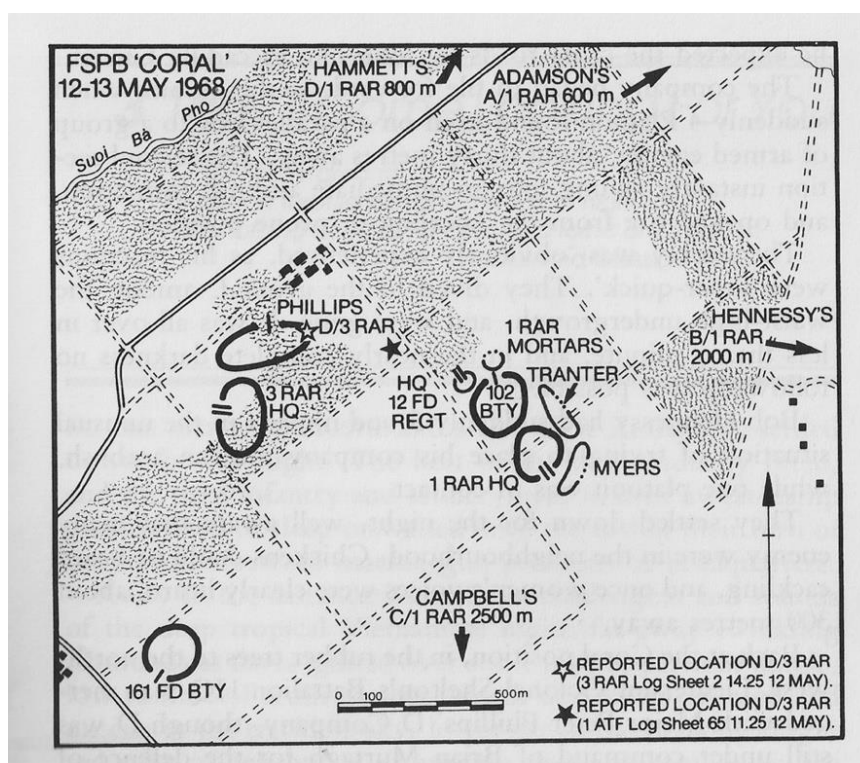
This low flying Gunship was affectionately known as 'Puff the Magic Dragon'. Armed with 3 side protruding Mini-Guns.

Having spent the night in a position a few hundred meters north northwest of Coral, I was able to watch and listen to the battle that raged during the early morning hours of 13th May. There was absolutely nothing 'D' Company, or any other 3RAR Company, or 1RAR could do by way of supplying infantry fire support. Normally, an Australian Fire Support Base would have infantry protecting the harbour perimeter. On this occasion FSB Coral was set-up as per a US Fire Support Base where the Artillery, Mortar, Signals and other units were to provide their own protection. Had we, 3RAR, endeavoured to move from our night position to supply supporting fire, we would have been caught in the cross-fire, and or, friendly fire. All we could do was watch, listen and spare a thought for the men who were under what was obviously an unexpected enormously large enemy assault on Coral.



Painting by Gavin Ireland depicting the NVA assault on FSB Coral, 13th May, 1968

When 3RAR were initially deployed on 'Operation Toan Thang 11', our orders were, *"to interdict NVA and VC stragglers who were exiting Saigon following the January TET Offensive"*. We were informed that these stragglers were moving north in small groups, they were battle weary, hungry and of low morale. The factual US intelligence which was provided to IATF, was not forwarded to 3RAR or any other unit deployed on this operation. The factual intelligence being, there was a massive flow of fresh NVA Regular forces of an estimated strength of 10,000 plus troops, were streaming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and assembling in our area of operation, an area known by the NVA, VC and locals as the Ba Da secret zone. Hence, 3RAR were deployed lacking in provisions and equipped to combat any major assault. *"We were lambs to the slaughter"*.



'D' Company 3RAR were positioned in a clearing between two rubber plantations as indicated by the *Solid Black Star*.

.... dawn brought the sights and smells of death:

Soon after first light morning of 13th May 1968, when the last shots had been fired and the NVA had withdrawn back through the scrub and rubber plantations, I was assigned to assist in escorting 3RAR's doctor through the rubber plantation used by some of the advancing NVA, and into Coral with the intention of providing any medical assistance required in treating the wounded, both Australian, NZ and NVA. (A New Zealand artillery battery was deployed to FSB Coral).

I was stunned to the point of disbelief at what I was witnessing during this escort patrol. Lying on the ground within the rubber trees lay the first of numerous dead NVA. One soldier received a round to the head, half his entire head was completely missing. Not a spot of blood on him that I could see as the patrol quickly moved on and into Coral's harbour position.

Upon reaching the surrounds of Coral there was barely a voice to be heard. A deathly silence had descended over Coral as men went about the tasks of after-battle clean-up duties. Some sat silently with that 'thousand-mile stare' in their eyes. They were psychologically traumatised by what they had endured during this horrendous battle. Enemy dead lay everywhere. Choppers were coming and going, taking out wounded and returning with fresh supplies. A 'medivac' chopper caught my attention, as I looked over to the LZ, there, lying on the ground were numerous bodies wrapped in hoochie's; GP boots protruding out one end. ***"Holy shit, they are Australian dead"***. My immediate thoughts were, ***"how many men lost their lives during this battle?"***

Here I was, standing in the middle of the immediate aftermath of a massive NVA assault on an undefended Australian/NZ Fire Support Base. Whilst my immediate attention was based on what I was witnessing, other thoughts were streaming through my mind, ***"3RAR could be under attack in a similar manner by a similar contingent of NVA and VC units, and, in the very near future. Where will we be deployed to; and what will be our objective"***. (A conservative estimated number of NVA Soldiers involved in the assault on FSB Coral: (3 NVA Battalions = 900+ soldiers).

I had witnessed the horrific sights, sounds and smells of this massive assault on Coral. The non-stop small arms, machine gun, artillery and mortar fire. US helicopter light-fire teams and aerial bombers were swooping out of the night sky. 'Spooky' with its enormous fire power, artillery from a nearby US base; and seemingly hundreds of NVA 'RPG rockets'. Everything one could utilise in battle was thrown into this fire-fight.



Generic photograph of Australian Forces on patrol.

.... retreat was not an option:

During the assault on Coral a mortar section was over-run. The mortar team had to retreat to safe ground, then mount a counter attack and physically fight back to reclaim their position and mortar tubes. Number 6 artillery gun (pictured) was also over-run and turned against the Australian forces. Fortunately, the gunner had removed the 'firing mechanism' before retreating to safe ground. The gun team fought back, reclaimed their damaged gun and turned it back against the assaulting NVA and continued providing supporting fire.



Damaged No. 6 Gun, now located at the AWM. Gunner Max Franklin (deceased) was the Gun Sergeant.

.... that horrid smell of battle and death:

I was within the perimeter of Coral soon after the engagement ended and what I witnessed left me physically sick in the stomach. I could not eat for several days. NVA dead were strewn throughout the rubber plantation, many having been inflicted by the artillery's deadly 'Splintex' rounds.



Splintex Darts' fired from a tank or artillery round.

NVA dead lay in the scrub surrounding Coral, and inside Coral's un-manned perimeter. The NVA had broken through what little defences could be mustered the previous day. The smell of oily cordite and smoke filled my lungs as it lingered in the still heavily moisture laden morning air. The after-battle aromas swirled around as each chopper arrived and departed, all mixed with the ugly smell of death. There were numerous blood trails in the scrub, left as the retreating NVA retrieved their dead and wounded. *“Those sites, smells and inner feelings shook me to my very core”*. Never in my short time on active service had I seen so much war caused devastation and death. I began asking myself, *“why are we here in Vietnam fighting another countries war, a war we know very little about?”*



Mass carnage from the Artillery Guns 'Splintex' rounds at FSB Coral.

.... the number of KIA and WIA:

As the escort patrol entered Coral's harbour position I noticed there were no Australian injured lying about, they had already been air-lifted out to hospital. Some of the injured could have been medevac'd during mid-battle. Then another thought crossed my mind, ***"how many men were killed, and how many were critically wounded during this horrific battle?"***. (Defined fifty years later on 13th May of 2018, "this was Australia's first major engagement with NVA Forces; and one of the largest battles fought during the entire ten-year history of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War").

.... this is no picnic, it's real 'Life and Death':

My feelings and thoughts were completely scrambled as I stood there taking in the aftermath of this horrific battle. Thoughts of the wounded, how many? How many were seriously wounded? How many would live, how many would die from their wounds and how many were severely maimed for life? Many of the wounded would be in a critical condition. ***"Holy shit!"***. My thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a very authoritative voice, ***"get on with your work private, you don't have time to grieve"***. I was stunned beyond belief by this verbal order which lacked any form compassion, so I turned, walked off and made myself look busy.

.... the after-battle shock:

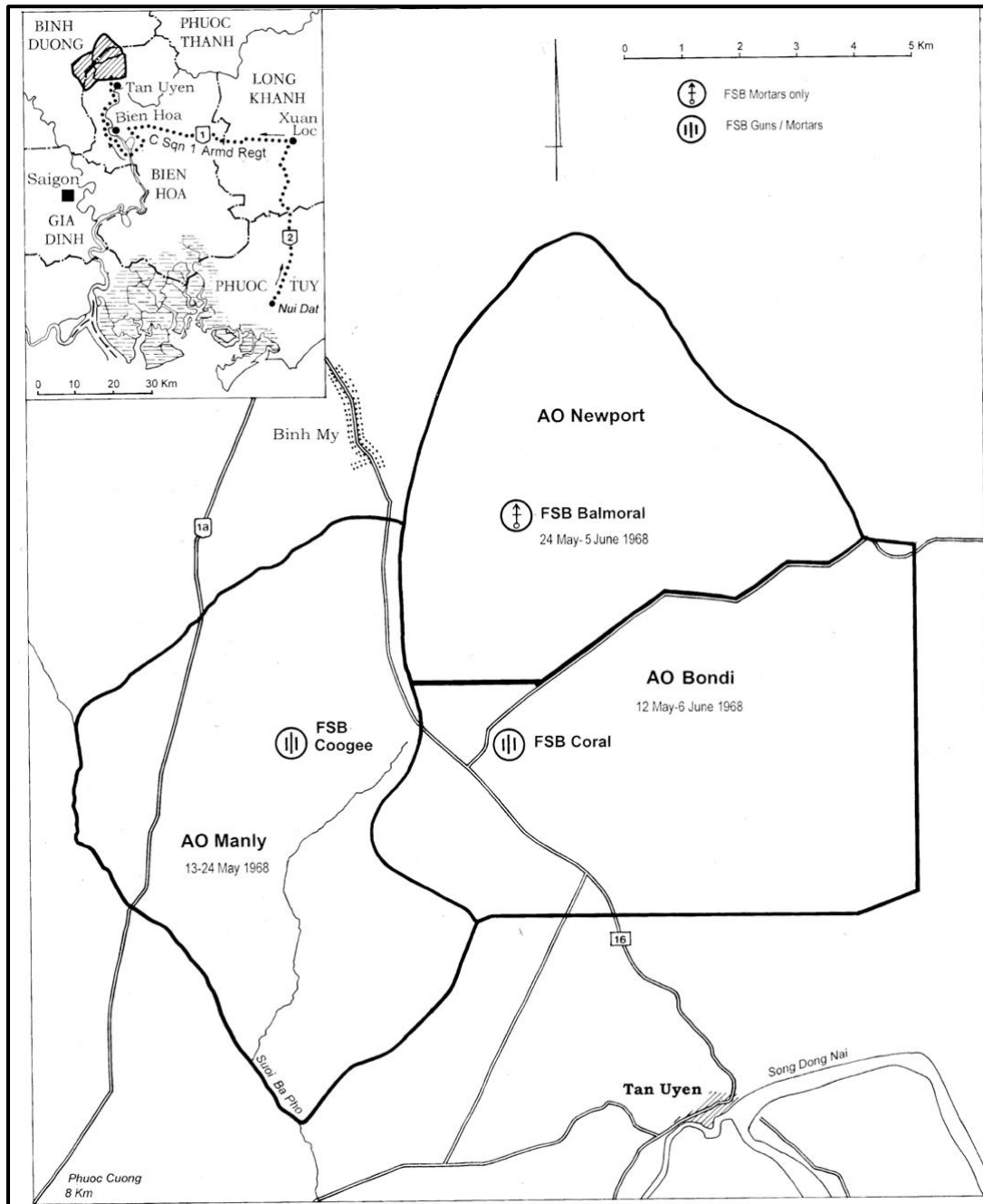
The smell of cordite lingered in the still morning air, and the general mood was solemn. Obviously, the men who engaged in this assault were in shock. Most were going about their general duties in a quiet, stunned and concerted manner. Groups were assigned to assemble the dead NVA in readiness for burial. For others, their minds would have been reflecting on the battle they had all endured. Some gathered in small groups with a brew in one hand, cigarette in the other. Their thoughts and small talk was probably of the events endured over the previous hours, and, of how lucky they were to have survived the night unscathed.

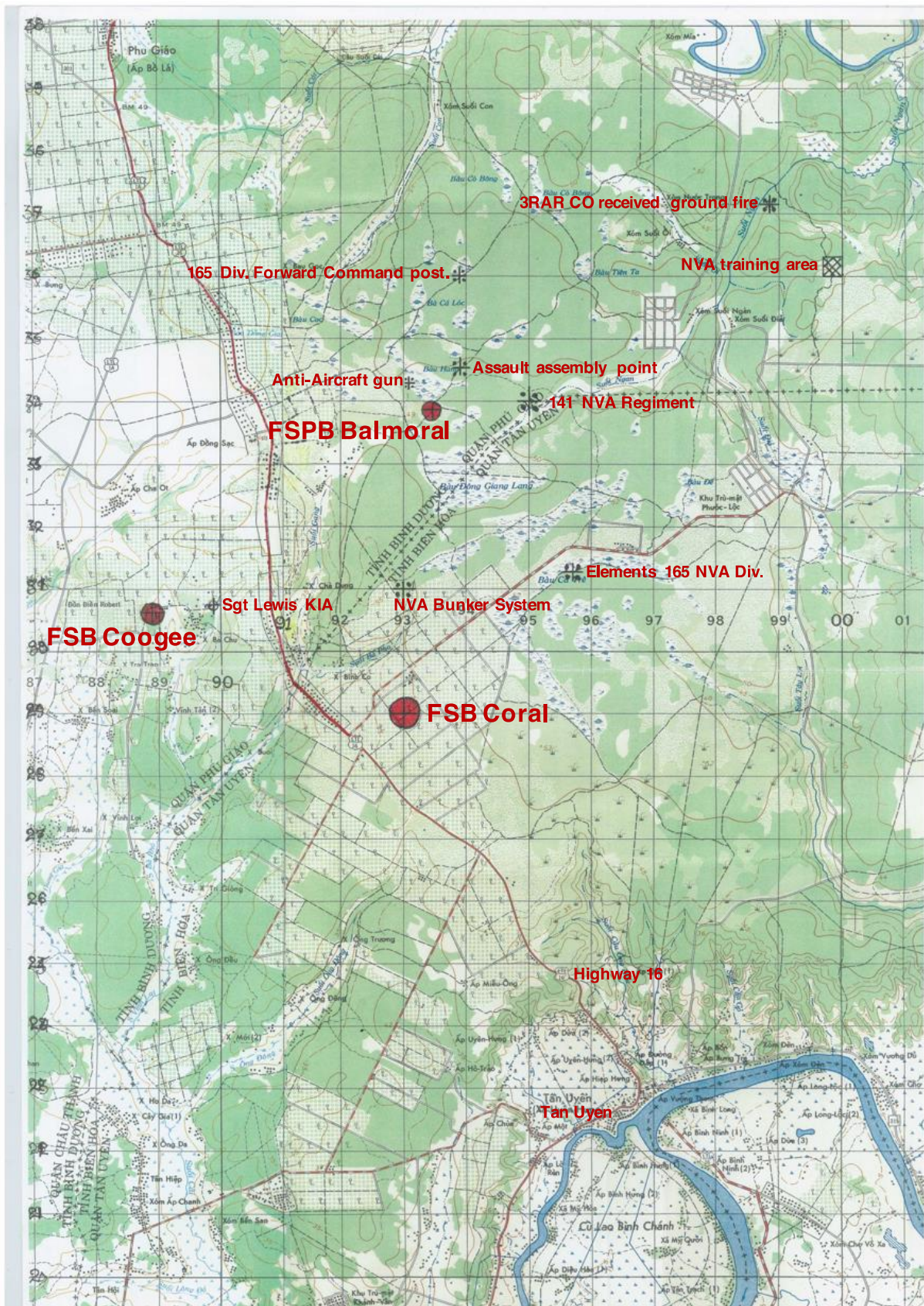
.... thoughts of mates:

Everyone would have been thinking of their mates who were either KIA or WIA, or, just not knowing the status of their mates. There were soldiers hard at work reconstructing damaged fortifications and bolstering personal pits as another assault was very much on the cards. What conversations were taking place was conducted in very hushed voices, the common camaraderie, joking and laughter one normally hears in a fire support base the likes of Coral was missing. Many a soldier's mind would have been thinking of when?... when will the NVA mount another assault?

.... shock and fear:

I was in a state of shock, accompanied by an elevated level of fear from what I had witnessed at Coral that morning. I did not, and could not eat for 3-4 days after witnessing the large number of lives lost, both Australian and Vietnamese. The destruction of human flesh that fighting in a war can cause; the horrid 'smell of death' that permeates your clothing and gets up your nose. My mind was stuck on what I had seen, witnessed and felt; together with thoughts that we, 3RAR, could end up 'face to face' with NVA forces under very similar circumstance, and in the very near future.





Area Map: Fire Support Bases Coral, Balmoral, Coogee and known NVA locations.

Operation Toan Thang 11

10th May ~ 6th June 1968.

FSB Coral 13th May, 1968

Australia's first engagement with Regular NVA Forces:

The NVA assault on FSB Coral was Australia's first battle with NVA Forces during. The aftermath and battle carnage from this assault on Coral was now firmly embedded in my mind. The thought and realisation hit me hard, as I assumed most men of 3RAR were also thinking, *"we were now fighting in a REAL WAR, in full blown technicolour. So, this is what fighting in a war is really like, nothing like what is seen in the movies"*. I was acutely aware of these thoughts running through my mind and dreading what may happen to 3RAR in the days and weeks ahead.



General Westmoreland, US Military Commander in Chief congratulating the Australian tank crew at FSB Coral.

.... trained and well-equipped enemy:

The NVA Soldiers who launched this massive assault on Coral were well trained, fully equipped, had attained a very high degree of morale; and led by experienced commanders. This enemy was a mix of NVA regular and conscripted soldiers, many believed to be only 16 to 19 years of age. They were trained in North Vietnam, then took the six-month journey south by foot, carrying all their weapons and equipment with them to reach the 'Ba Da Secret Zone' located in the provinces of Binh Duong and Bien Hoa, a mere 35 to 45 km north of Saigon. They were not the VC we had encountered on previous operations and patrols, nor did they engage in VC tactics of 'fire and hide, never to be seen again'. The NVA were the real enemy of South Vietnam, and thousands of soldiers were on Saigon's door step with orders to mount a second TET style assault on Saigon.

Australian casualties resulting from the assault on FSB Coral: 9 KIA, 28 WIA. (Coral/Ba 1973.doc)

The loss of Sergeant Peter 'Joe' Lewis

.... wounded in action ~ Died of Wounds:

13th May, 1968. By late-morning the battalion had moved away from the vicinity of FSB Coral via APC's, destination FSB Coogee. Whilst on the move we had a 'contact'. Small arms fire was directed at the APC's, they returned fire. All personnel traveling within the APC's disembarked and went to ground. At the time no one knew exactly where the shots came from except for the APC commander who engaged, but he only had an inkling as to exactly where the in-coming fire came from. A quick verbal exchange between commanders and an infantry sweep of the suspected contact area was conducted, nothing was found. This was thought to have been a typical VC contact, "**fire and hide**". To re-group, the battalion harboured up in thick bush with elements of 'D' Company facing a 20-30m wide clearing. After what seemed a long time after the battalion moved off, I took up the 'tail end charlie' position. I had only taken a few steps and saw something suspicious on a mound of dirt on the opposite side of the clearing. As I moved to take a closer look I realised it was a body. It was a dead VC who had been carrying a US M16 Armalite weapon, wore eye glasses and carried a satchel full of documents. At the time, due to the documents he was carrying he was thought to have been a VC cadre for the area. Therefore, the entire battalion had to return to the heavily wooded area we just left and re-form into a harbour position and dig-in for the night. Because I was the person who located this dead VC, it was now my sections responsibility to set up a night ambush using the dead VC as a lure. (4 Section, 11 Platoon 'D' Company). If this dead VC was traversing the area whilst accompanied with other VC, it was expected someone would return in the hope of retrieving the documents he was carrying.

Just before dark, whilst the battalion was on 'stand to', Lt Marc John (Commander of 11 Platoon), and Sgt Lewis moved forward of our dug-in position to set defensive claymore mines. There was a sudden burst of fire combined with the 'crack, crack, crack' sound of projectiles passing over my head and penetrating the low scrub around me. Lt John screamed out an order, "**fire high, fire high**". Everyone who had a visual on Lt John and Sgt Lewis opened fire hoping the VC would keep their heads down and cease firing to allow both men to move back to our semi-secured position. Lt John call out to Sgt Lewis, "**move back, move back**", then came another burst of automatic fire and I heard a 'dull thud'. Now Joe was calling out for help saying he had been hit. I called for a medic, left my shell scrape and crawled out to Joe. When I reached Joe, Lt John was already trying to help Joe move back towards our position and relative safety. With the two of us man-handling 'Joe' it made for a quicker and easier retreat back to our harbour position. A medivac chopper was called and seemingly arrived within minutes.

During that night the skies opened up with an almighty deluge of rain. Our 'shell scrapes' quickly filled to overflowing and I doubt anyone was able to gain any sleep. At first light the following morning I realised how lucky I was not to have been hit by the bursts of VC fire. The trees and scrub that surrounded my 'shell scrape' had sustained numerous bullet scars, all just above ground level. Whilst on 'stand to' the following morning, the word, situation report on Sgt 'Joe' Lewis, was passed through the ranks. 'Joe' had died of wounds whilst aboard the medivac helicopter. *See attached. (A Rifle Company.docx).*

Sergeant Peter 'Joe' Lewis.

WIA, subsequently DOW before reaching hospital.

13th May, 1968.

Location MGRS: 48P XT 898 - 308

.... lambs to the slaughter:

On every patrol I took part in following the assault on FSB Coral, fear ran through my veins. That level of fear had been elevated with the realisation that we were now patrolling in an area that contained a very large concentration of well-trained NVA Forces. Hyper vigilance was now well and truly embedded.

- Why were we not informed of the US intelligence that had been made available to 1ATF?
- Vital intelligence lost in transmission.

.... Outcome:

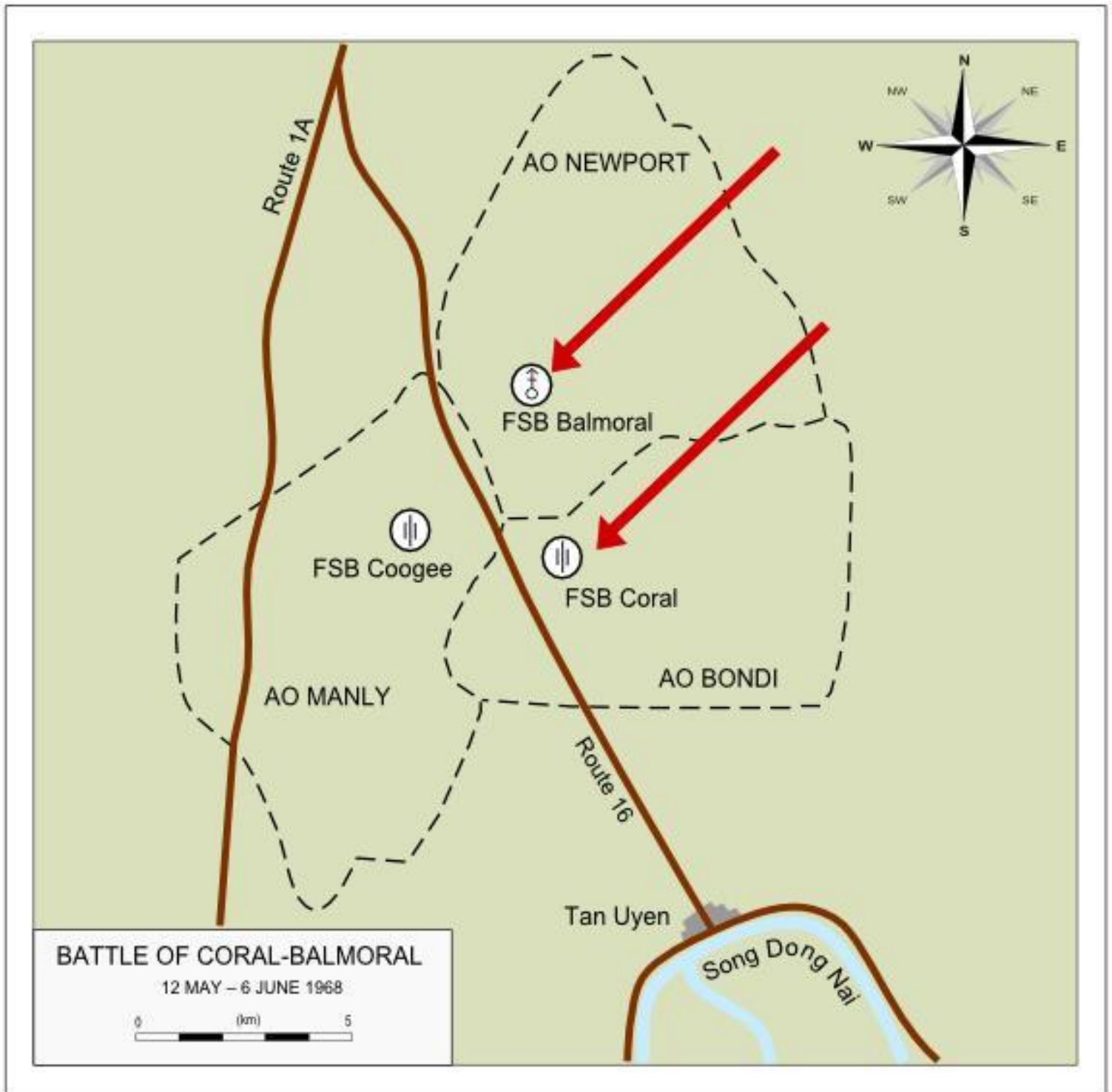
- We were deployed with insufficient supplies and under equipped in order to adequately defend ourselves against a possible large NVA assault.
- We were ordered into this area like 'lambs to the slaughter'.
- Most importantly, why were the NVA congregating in such large numbers in this particular area.
- All was revealed many years later.

.... aerial location survey for Balmoral harbour site:

Lt Colonel J.J. Shelton, OC of 3RAR conducted an aerial survey over AO Newport. As instructed by 1ATF he was to seek out a suitable site to establish Fire Support Patrol Base Balmoral. During this flight J.J. Shelton requested the US pilot to take the small 'Bell' helicopter lower so he could attain a good visual of the ground. The pilot refused, stating they would be fired upon if he went any lower. This was the first indication J.J. Shelton received that the designated area 3RAR were to move into had been inundated with a large concentration of fresh NVA Forces. However, a harbour location was identified, the dried-out drainage swamp called 'Bau Hung', and a plan was set in place as to how the Battalion would move into this location, hopefully without alerting the NVA of our presence or strength.



A 'Bell Sioux' helicopter as used by JJ Shelton to conduct the aerial survey.



Map depicting the locations of Coral, Balmoral and Coogee.

Establishing FSPB Balmoral: Location: Map 48P XT 93400 East ~ 33800 North

24th May 1968. 'D' and 'B' Company's of 3RAR, supported by APC's, were deployed on foot from FSB Coogee, tasked with securing LZ Sugar, which would subsequently become FSPB Balmoral.



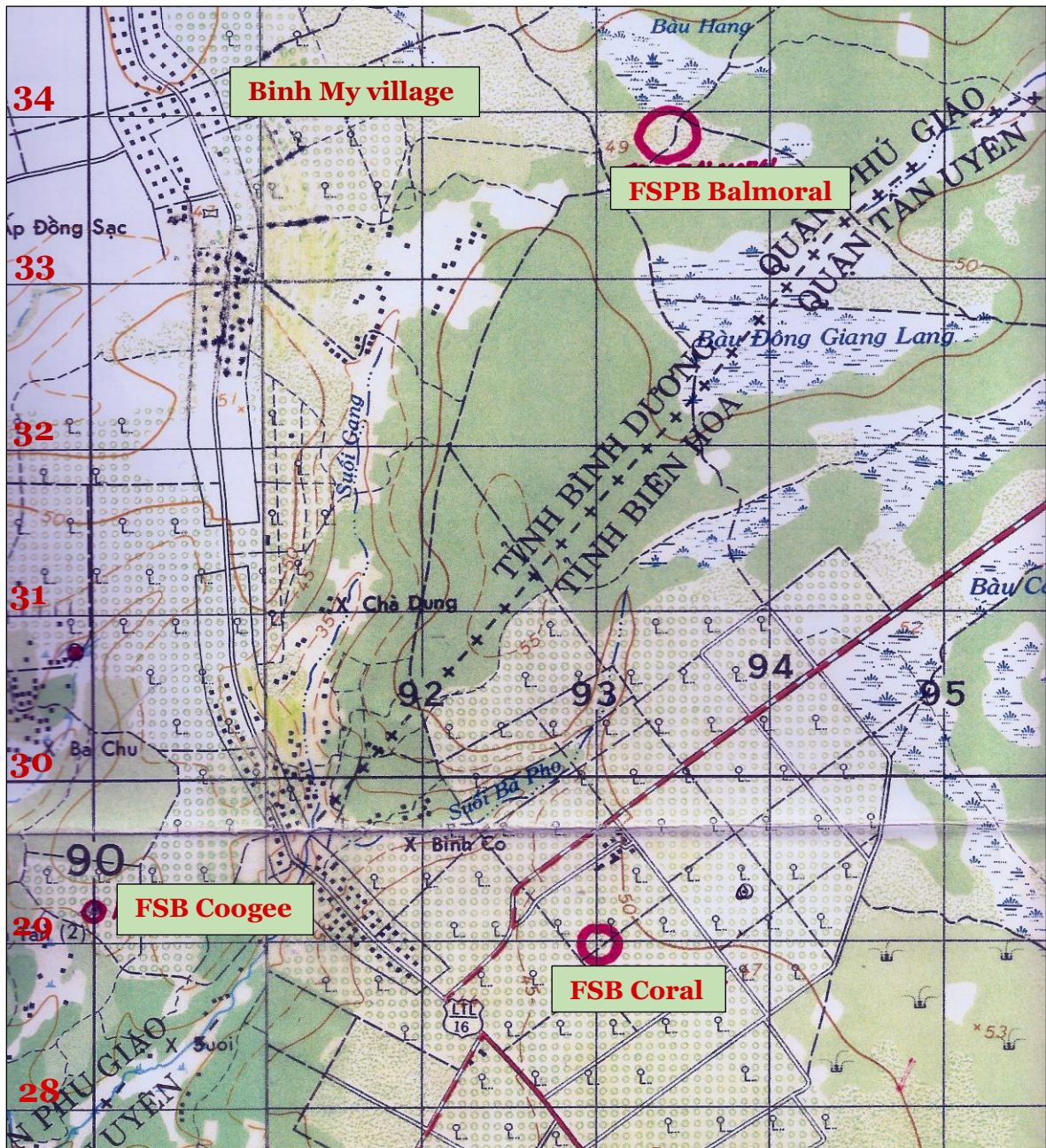
Over view of FSPB Balmoral's position looking north by northwest. 3RAR were harboured within the heavily wooded foreground trees. Note the numerous bomb craters left of image running across the clearing. These craters were presumed the result of a B52 bombing run.

.... sister Fire Support/Patrol Bases:

FSPB Balmoral was situated in the province of Binh Duong, 4.5 km north of FSB Coral located in the Province of Bien Hoa. Even though Balmoral has been referred to as a 'FSB', (Fire Support Base), Balmoral did not have artillery emplacements. Therefore, the correct term for Balmoral is 'FSPB' (Fire Support Patrol Base). These two bases could be referred to as 'sister bases' as each were set-up specifically for Operation Toan Thang.



Balmoral's harbour position at 'Bau Hang' swamp. Known by the local community, VC and NVA as 'Bau Cham, Dong Tram or Dong Tiam'. The green, purple and dark blue lines indicate the defensive perimeters of 11 Platoon, 10 Platoon and 12 Platoon respectively.



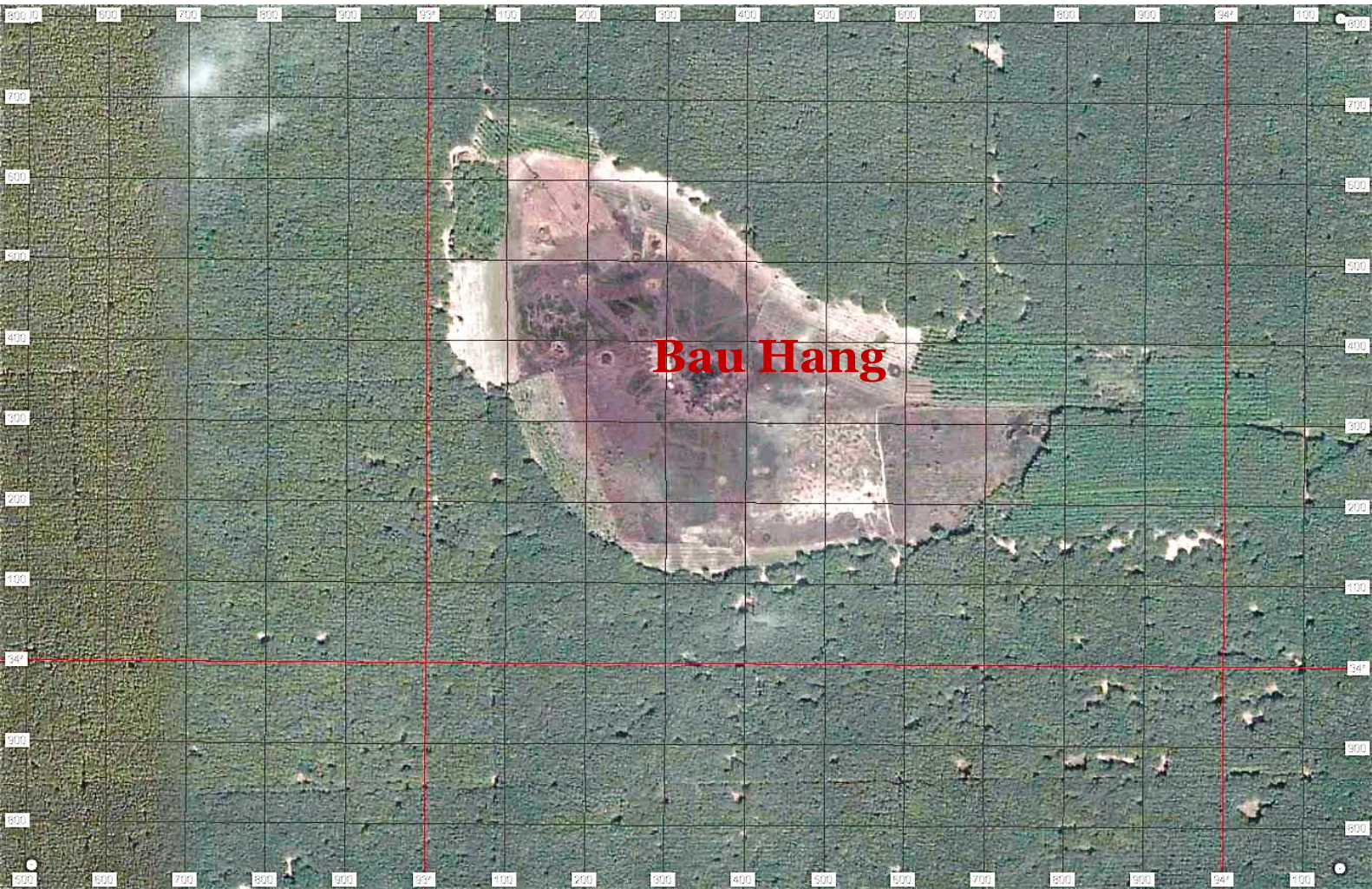
MGRS Locations: FSB Coral. 93 East - 29 North. FSPB Balmoral. 93400 East - 33800 North.

.... on patrol to secure LZ Sugar (FSPB Balmoral):

Two infantry platoon's plus a squadron of APC's departed Coogee 0400 hours on 24th May, allowing ample time to move into and secure LZ Sugar, the intended location for the establishment of FSPB Balmoral. As the night was pitch black, each soldier had a strip of white rifle cleaning cloth attached to their packs so as to maintain visual contact. No sooner had we crossed Route 16 we encountered a contact. Following a short exchange of fire one enemy was KIA. We encountered seven contacts with either NVA or VC patrols before stopping for breakfast. By crossing route 16 we had entered an area, not known at the time, to be the NVA assembly region. The NVA and local VC units called this area the 'Ba Da Secret Zone', (area of tall trees).

.... heading into 'Injun' country:

As we continued our patrol towards LZ Sugar, the location for the establishment of FSPB Balmoral, we happened upon two US soldiers stretching a wounded soldier. They were heading for a 'Medivac' helicopter pick-up point. After being asked where we were headed, one US soldier commented *"hey man, that's 'Injun' country in there"*. The US unit, commonly known as 'Big Red One', had been operating in the 'Ba Da Secret Zone' in the weeks prior to the establishment of FSB Coral.



Google Earth image of the 'Bau Hang' drainage swamp.

FSPB Balmoral was established in the heavily wooded area on the southern edge of Bau Hang.

3RAR harboured up in a circular configuration with elements of 'D' Company facing the southern contour of 'Bau Hung'.

Balmoral had a 300 meter-wide frontage facing the 'Bau Hang', by approx. 250 meters south into the thickly wooded area.

(Reference image above. Each square measure 1,000 x 1,000 meters).

.... securing FSPB Balmoral by stealth:

Had the entire Battalion been air lifted into LZ Sugar, (FSPB Balmoral), we could have alerted any NVA in the area of our arrival and approximate strength. Therefore, two Platoon's and APC's took the quiet yet hard and arduous stealthy option by patrolling into the area on foot. Upon arrival at 'LZ Sugar ~ Bau Hung', the area was secured allowing the remainder of the Battalion to be brought in by helicopter that afternoon.



Helicopters laying down a smoke screen prior to the arrival of the balance of 3RAR.



A and C Company plus CHQ and supporting units arrive at LZ Sugar to firmly establish FSPB Balmoral. 24th May 1968.

.... orders were to 'dig-in' deep and add overhead cover:

With the establishment of FSPB Balmoral on 24th May, I was well aware of the very high probability of an imminent NVA assault similar to that inflicted on FSB Coral. In reality, I did not know what to expect, but many thoughts were flitting through my mind. Thoughts of WHEN, when would the NVA launch an assault as we all had no doubts they would. I was also thinking, *"we could be under siege at any time, possibly as soon as tomorrow morning"*.

Having had no previous experience of being on the receiving end of a large assault, I had no idea how I would react; and who would, until the NVA decided to launch their assault on Balmoral. *"Waiting it out, and anticipating when will the NVA launch an assault, was a very nerve racking time"*. Orders were issued to 'dig in deep and add overhead protection - three layers of sand bags'. However, our time was severely limited by other duties.

i.e. establishing our perimeter defence with what little barbed wire was provided and conducting perimeter patrols. A number of 'D' Company personnel who were positioned in the forward line of defence could only manage to dig 'shell scrapes', others being a little complacent. These soldiers were ill prepared to defend themselves against the onslaught of fire power the NVA could and would unleash against us when they launch their assault, and if they assault 'D' Company across the open ground. An approach thought to be unlikely.

Definition of a 'Shell Scrape.

A personal hole in the ground that is wide enough, long enough and deep enough to lay in and be below ground level to avoid flying shrapnel.



Centre foreground. A combined machine gun and personal pit in 12 Platoon 'D' Company's forward defensive line.

.... personal protection was paramount:

Even though I knew only too well the NVA were probably aware of our arrival, I also felt we would be attacked the morning following our arrival. Fortunately, this did not happen giving the us more time to bolster personal pits, assist in finishing our very limited perimeter defences, or be sent out on a perimeter patrol.

'D' Company were supplied with a minimal quantity of perimeter defensive equipment and munitions. This decision was based on the fact we were facing open ground. Many thought it highly unlikely the NVA would launch an assault across open ground. Fortunately, 'D' Company's CO, Colonel J.J. Shelton must have had some reservations as he placed two tanks on the western and eastern flanks of 'D' Company's harbour position. (Ref Google Earth image on page 19). Of each set of flanking tanks, one pointed towards the clearing, the other into the adjacent trees. (Ref Google Earth image on page 19).

25th May, day one at Balmoral. From first light patrols were sent in all directions around Balmoral looking for any signs of enemy activity. A very high number, if not all returning patrols reported having either a 'contact', or saw physical signs of NVA, camps, troop movement or well used foot tracks This was further confirmation of the build-up of NVA forces within the 'Ba Da Secret Zone', and a definite probability of an assault on 3RAR's position at any time soon.



Google Earth image of 'Bau Hung' and the location of FSPB Balmoral.

.... limited perimeter defences erected:

Elements of 'D' Company were positioned facing the open ground of Bau Hang, (ref page 19) an area many believed would not be utilised for an NVA assault. Therefore, we were issued with one only single strand of perimeter barbed wire, not the usual 'multiple strands and/or concertina wire', nor any other defensive weapons, i.e. Claymore Mines. In reality, one could say the guys positioned up front and facing the clearing had very limited perimeter defences.



.... knowing where you are during pitch black nights:

What was of vital importance to all was to have a clear and precise knowledge of the location of your assigned section's machine-gun pit in relation to one's own personal pit, and the location of your relief's pit. Everyone was required to conduct nightly two-hour picquet duty in his section's machine-gun pit whilst the gunner and his 2IC could sleep. Night picquet duties were based on a rolling roster with a fresh man commencing his two hours watch each hour, therefore, the gun pit was manned throughout the night by two men, one fresh and one beginning his second hour. We all needed to navigate to and from the gun-pit at night and when required. I also noted there was very little moon light, or perhaps it was due to cloud cover. Whatever, these dark nights made moving around very challenging.

With the establishment of FSPB Balmoral complete, considerably smaller to that of Coral, and without the support of artillery, I was now even more aware of an NVA assault likened to the intensity to that which was inflicted on FSB Coral morning of 13th May. There would have been an elevated level of fear in all of us, particularly those who were positioned on the forward defensive line, on the very southern edge of the 'Bau Hang' clearing. Those of us who were in a position set back from the tree line, the second line of defence, could not see the clearing due to the fall of the land. This only made our situation more alarming because we would not be able to see what was happening if the NVA were to assault us across the clearing, nor could we assist by engaging with the NVA during an assault.

... alarm bells were ringing within my gut:

As the first few nights fell into darkness over Balmoral, so the anxious wait for a NVA assault escalated to new heights. We were lucky on night of 24th, (early hours of 25th May), there was no assault, but the level of anticipation had been wound up several notches. I was now absolutely sure Balmoral would be under assault by NVA forces sooner rather than later. When was the big question, a question that would have been running through all our minds? **"We were playing the waiting game"**.

First assault on FSPB Balmoral:

0345 hours, 26th May 1968. I was woken from much needed sleep by the sound of mortar explosions. *“Here they come, the first shots had been fired signalling the beginning of the assault we had all anticipated”*. The mortar fire was coming from the northern side of the clearing and exploding in ‘D’ Company’s forward line of defence. The NVA had then walked their mortar barrage through 12 Platoon and into 10 Platoon with deadly accuracy. No sooner had the mortar barrage stopped, NVA small arms, machine gun and RPG rocket fire rained into ‘D’ Company’s position. Their infantry had approached our harbour position under their own mortar fire; across the open ground. First to receive the onslaught of incoming mortar and small arms fire was 12 Platoon’s, first line of defence, those men positioned facing the clearing. The assault very quickly spread to 10 Platoon, then into 11 Platoon’s 4 Section machine-gun position. The intensity of incoming small arms, heavy and light machine gun fire and RPG rockets was relentless. Our machine gunners and forward positioned riflemen immediately opened fire. Eventually the tanks came into play with heavy machine gun, canister fire and illumination flares. At a later stage during this non-stop fire fight, the US ‘Light Fire Teams’ swooped through the NVA infantry from east. On each passing the in-coming fire lulled slightly, allowing our forward personnel to be re-supplied with much needed ammunition, and just as important, our medics moved forward to treat our wounded.

Flares fired from either the tanks or forward machine gun crews lit up the clearing with a swinging glow as each slowly descended from the sky. The eerie light and drifting smoke from these flares sent disturbing shadows dancing across the entire area. Waves of dust and acrid smoke began floating across our position, then suddenly swirling each time the tank fired. From my position I could see ‘green tracer rounds’ and RPG rockets pouring in, mostly aimed at 4 Section’s machine gun, and the tank I was positioned behind. My task, if the NVA broke through our defences, was to ensure that no enemy soldier gained access to tank 32A.



4 Section, 11 Platoon machine-gun pit morning after the first assault on FSPB Balmoral. 26th May 1968. (L/right) Machine Gunner, Privates Paul Donnelly and his 2IC, Ian ‘Pommie’ Robertshaw, (deceased). Note the pile of machine gun shell casings, bottom left corner of photo. (Photo courtesy John Bryant).



*Tank 32A digging itself into the ground to create a forward defensive sand bund 'night position'.
Watching on is Sgt Dave Mancer, 11 Platoon, 'D' Company. Sitting on top of tank is Pte John Bryant.
During daylight hours the tank would pull back to an 'out of sight' position. (Photo courtesy of John Bryant).*

'D' Company's forward front-line troops consisting of 10 Platoon and elements of 11 & 12 Platoon fought back with M60 machine-gun, rockets and small arms fire. What flares that were issued were exhausted within minutes of the first burst of AK47 fire. The four tanks that were positioned on 'D' Company's flanks engaged the fast moving NVA with supporting fire. This was 3RAR's first engagement with Regular NVA Forces.

I was in a position behind tank 32A, set back from the forward defensive line. I was not able to see what was happening on the clearing, this in-turn raised my level of anxiety. I could only gauge what was happening by the immense volume of fire from both sides, all I could do was *"be prepared"* for whatever may happen, watching and waiting, my rifle at the ready. As the in-coming fire steadily increased my thoughts were, *"we are at the mercy of a very large number of assaulting NVA troops who were hell bent on killing us"*.

Elements of 'D' Company, 3RAR were under a massive assault by an estimated battalion size strength of NVA. 12 Platoon took the brunt of this assault, and as the NVA spread out across the entire clearing they walked their mortar barrage through both 12 and 10 Platoon's forward line of defence.

Immediately prior to the assault on 'D' Company, the NVA performed a feint attack on 'A' Company by blowing a hole in their defensive perimeter wire with a 'Bangalore Torpedo'. However, this gap was not exploited and the enemy withdrew. (Whilst Balmoral was under a sustained NVA assault, a simultaneous assault was being executed on FSB Coral).

During this assault on 'D' Company 3RAR, FSB Coral provided artillery fire whilst they were under a simultaneous assault. Our mortar teams fired continuously; and a US helicopter 'light fire team' swooped in with rockets, machine gun and blazing mini-gun fire. As the first rays of dawn's light lit the eastern sky the NVA began retreating; and the engagement began to lose momentum. However, Balmoral continued to receive sporadic mortar, rocket and small arms fire for an additional hour before the NVA finally broke contact and withdrew. Coral's artillery, our mortars and the 'US light fire team', continued engaging the enemy during their final withdrawal back across the Bau Hang clearing.

Casualties. 4 KIA plus 14 WIA:

KIA: Private Brown, 10 Platoon and Private Desnoy from 12 Platoon 'D' Company.

Private Cooper and Private Thomas from 'A' Company were also KIA.

14 other personnel from 3RAR, mostly from 'D' Company, were WIA. Many having sustained serious wounds.

As the NVA withdrew back from whence they came, a sweep of the perimeter recovered six NVA dead, plus discarded weapons, ammunition and personal equipment. There were numerous drag marks and blood trails indicating additional dead and wounded had been removed from the battle ground during the engagement. The six dead NVA were buried in shallow graves adjacent to 12 Platoon. No burial locations were recorded.



The battle ground as seen from 4 Section, 11 Platoon machine-gun pit morning of 26th May 1968.

Photograph taken whilst the NVA were retreating from the battle-ground. Note the artillery explosion in the far tree line. (Photo by John Bryant).

.... be prepared and cover all bases:

The NVA's assault tactic was considered highly unusual. We had not expected them to launch an assault across open ground as it was thought they would have utilised the surrounding trees and scrub as cover to gain close contact before launching their ground assault. Thankfully, with the Battalion's CO's fortitude, he positioned two tanks on each of 'D' Company's flanks that faced the open ground.

.... day patrols and 'contacts':

Day patrols were conducted throughout the 26th & 27th May, with reports of 'contacts' and significant signs of enemy activity. One patrol reported having walked into a substantial bunker and tunnel system 1,500 meters north of Balmoral, indicating the possible established of a major base camp, or HQ Base. There was now no doubt that Balmoral was situated in an area containing a very high concentration of NVA forces. The major northern NVA base was set upon by our tanks and accompanied by infantry units, subsequently inflicting a considerable amount of damage to this base. Whilst conducting research for this narrative, the bunker and tunnel system mentioned above turned out to be the HQ for the 7th NVA Division.

.... battle field 'clean-up' and piquet duties:

Men were posted on all machine gun locations to stand watch as others relaxed, cooked-up a brew and have breakfast whilst reflecting on the events of the past few hours. Others in 'D' Company were delegated with the terrible job of battle-ground clean up duties. The dead were 'cleansed', searched for possible hidden grenades, documents or any personal items that may identify who they were; and which unit they were attached too. Numerous discarded AK47 weapons, RPG rockets, rocket launchers and webbing were retrieved from the battle ground. This battle was regarded as a 'probe', to check our strength in readiness for a much larger assault. *"Great. When will they launch their next assault; and which Company will they strike? How many troops can they muster? Who knows, no one except for the NVA battle Commander. Now we play the waiting game yet again, knowing only too well they will launch another assault on FSPB Balmoral"*.

.... burying the NVA dead:

The six NVA dead were buried in shallow graves in the vicinity of 12 Platoon. The dead looked to be very young soldiers, possibly conscripts like myself. They were boys aged in their mid to late teens. We also noted their weapons were new, some had never been fired, some had 'cleaning cloth' jammed down the barrel to keep it clean.

.... NVA propaganda:

These young NVA Soldiers were new arrivals from the north and lacked any prior battle experience. The NVA Commander had instructed his engaging troops to emulate the successful assault launched on Coral, 13th May 1968. Proof that lies and propaganda was used against their own soldiers. *“Assault this US Base and wipe it out”* was the command given by the NVA battle commander.

.... mistaken identity:

The NVA Commanders thought we were a US Base and up for easy pickings. In a Vietnamese Military book titled, ‘The History of Division Seven’ published at wars end, it is quoted that both FSB Coral and FSPB Balmoral were believed to have been established and manned by US Forces. The publication also states; *“the battles of 13th May at FSB Coral, and 26th May at FSPB Balmoral, each base was over-run by NVA troops and all personnel within were killed”*. The NVA were of the belief that both bases were then re-established and re-manned with a much larger contingent of troops and additional fortifications.

Ambush

27th May 1968

A patrol of approximately 10 men from 11 Platoon departed Balmoral's harbour position mid-afternoon of 27th May. As per normal I took up the 'tail-end-charlie' position, a position with responsibilities likened to that of the forward scout. I needed to ensure our 'backs' were securely covered. All my senses were now on ultra-high alert and I recall thinking, *"this patrol is very light on in strength and we could be hugely outnumbered if we ran into a NVA patrol. We were on our Pat Malone"*. Ten men at the mercy of the elements, the NVA; and the territory the NVA would now be calling their back yard.



11 Platoon on patrol outside the perimeter wire awaiting the 'move-on' order. 27th May 1968. (Photograph courtesy?)

.... going out on a limb:

I conducted myself as I deemed necessary for the safety of this patrol, knowing only too well I was putting myself out on a limb. I adopted my 'tail-end-charlie' patrolling manner with a much higher degree of vigilance than on any previous patrol. I had not received any formal training, nor instructions on the intricacies of how best to conduct myself whilst allocated to this patrolling position. I did what I felt I had to do for the safety of the patrol, 'to cover their backs'.

.... the horrid smell of death:

As the patrol continued through the trees along the western edge of the 'Bau Hang' clearing, I detected the horrid smell of rotting bodies, an odour I was already familiar with due to an earlier incident. Further investigation led me to locating a very fresh 'mass grave site'. No one else had detected the smell nor observed the mound of freshly turned soil, slightly off our patrolling course. I stopped the patrol, called the patrol leader back to inspect the site. The smell was horrid and extremely strong, "*I had to turned my head away*", not that it did any good. The smell was much worse than anything I had previously encountered, it seemed to permeate my clothes as if in particles, and clung to the inside of my nostrils. Long after leaving the burial site, the stench seemed to linger down my throat and rose with each breath. It stuck there like invisible glue as we continued to patrol towards the dedicated ambush location. That horrid smell of death is an odour I will never forget, nor ever want to experience again.

.... digging of graves prior to going into battle:

I had only heard stories about the NVA digging mass graves prior to going into battle; this was now confirmed. The NVA also had dedicated 'stretcher bearers', soldiers who would carry their wounded off the battleground. The dead were dragged off via a hook through the shoulder blade. These manoeuvres were conducted so we could not obtain an accurate body count, this being General Westmoreland's priority during his deployment as Commander in Chief of the Vietnam Conflict. It was his way of reporting on the wars progress. The greater the head count was proof that the allies were winning this war, according to General Westmoreland.

.... we were possibly out-numbered:

Whilst on this patrol I was very anxious, concerned not only for the patrol, but myself included. Vigilance was required by all who were elected to participate on this ambush. We needed to be fully switched on and prepared for anything as we slowly moved towards the dedicated location. As there was only ten of us, and by accounts from returning patrols, there were a lot of NVA patrolling the area around Balmoral.

.... ambush set-up:

As we approached the foot track 'ambush location', the patrol leader directed both JB and myself where we were to take-up our positions as rear defence. We were in open low sparse scrub country and our task was to cover the 'rear' of the ambush. JB was a few metres to my right and approximately 30 metres behind the actual ambush location. We were out of sight of the main group who were to take up their positions beside a well-used foot track. I conducted a visual survey of the area we were to cover, I'm sure JB would have done the same. I noted that if the ambush was sprung and a counter attack was mounted, the attack would come from our right flank, or directly from the rear. We were following normal ambush procedures, with the exception of now having two guys protecting the rear, normally this was a 'one man' position. The remainder of the patrol would have formed up in an ambush position alongside the foot track; and several 'claymore mines' would have been placed out of sight beside the foot track.

.... ambush sprung, chaotic reactions:

From the time we left the security of Balmoral I had a very strong feeling this ambush was going to be sprung, and to my surprise it was sprung within minutes of having been laid. I heard a '*click, click, click*' from at least three or more 'claymore mines' firing mechanisms, but no following explosion, "*shit, dud claymores*". This was quickly followed by several bursts of AK47 automatic fire, and the '*crack, crack, crack*' sound of rounds passing overhead. I heard our machine-gun and small arms open up with returning fire. The noise of numerous short bursts of gunfire continued for a minute or two, as did the overhead '*crack, crack, crack*' of AK47 fire. "*I was aware the ambush had not gone as planned*", this was more than enough for me to pull my head down and try to dig my body deep into the ground. Dust and smoke, combined with the smell of cordite drifted back across the rear. Now I was expecting the NVA to take advantage of the situation and quickly mount a counter attack from the right flank or rear. I was lying there, watching intensely, listening and waiting for the first sign of movement. I was later informed our machine-gun had a stoppage during the first few bursts of fire. This would have created havoc for those lying beside the foot track.

.... high probability of a NVA counter assault:

I felt sure the NVA would swing around and hit us from the rear, depending on their numbers. Now was the time to be '*fully switched on*'. I was ready and waiting to engage if the NVA swung around to hit us from the rear. I was fully focused on my task in protecting the patrol, covering the backs of the guys who would be still laying in the ambush set-up. This engagement was all over within a few minutes, but I lay there, as per normal procedure, watching and waiting for the anticipated rear or flank counter attack.

.... 'bug-out' called, but not heard:

Now my senses were fully switched on as I watched and listened from my rear position. Rifle at the ready, safety switch off, finger beside the trigger, butt in the shoulder, ready to open-fire without hesitation. I was scanning our rear, *"right to rear, rear to right"*, listening and watching intently for any sign of movement.

A 'bug-out' had been called, a call I did not hear, nor was I expecting to hear this call. Possibly due to the fact that I was so fully focused on the prospect of a rear assault. I glanced to my right and to my surprise JB was gone. Alarm bells were ringing as the fear within struck a high notch. *"Where the FWYZZX-hell is JB"*.

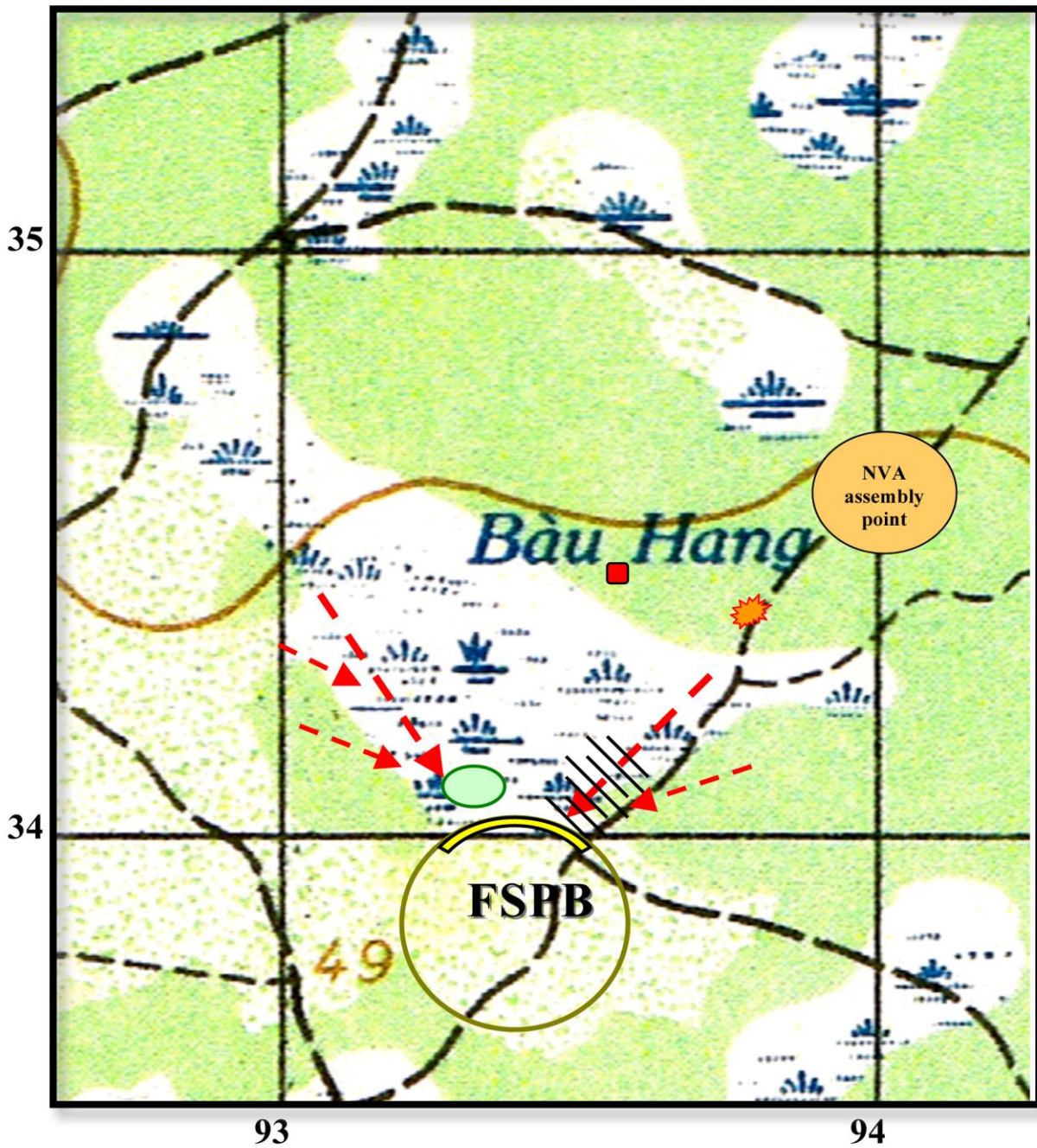
I began belly-sliding backwards whilst remaining focused on the rear. I was still expecting the NVA to swing around and hit us from behind. Then I heard my name being called out, it was JB, he heard the 'bug-out' call and left his position to link up with the main group. Realising I had not followed him JB returned to my location, gained my attention and we were out of there like *'the bats out of hell'*. Normal after ambush procedures had not been followed, hence, I was not listening nor heard the 'bug out call'. I remained totally focused on covering the rear, fully expecting the NVA to counter attack. JB thought I had 'frozen'.

.... was I unintentionally left behind?

Standard 'after an ambush procedure' had not been followed on this occasion, possibly the very reason why I did not hear the 'bug out' call. We would normally have stayed in our positions until the patrol leader called 'all clear'. Then a search of the area would have been conducted, looking for and checking on bodies, and searching any dead or wounded; and possibly following any drag marks or blood trails. None of the 'after ambush standard procedures' took place on this occasion. It was total mayhem and confusion from my perception, as of when the ambush was sprung.

FSPB Balmoral

South Vietnam, May 1968 ~ Operation 'Toan Thang'



27th May. Section ambush activated.



Direction of assault 26th & 28th May.



More than 180 shell scrapes dug by NVA troops.



'D' Company 3RAR defensive position.



NVA Mortar Base Plate position



Area of Bomb Crater Grave site containing 42 NVA.

Produced by Brian J Cleaver. June 2010

.... I was a 'sitting duck':

As I ran from my ambush position my heart was pounding so hard I thought it would burst out of my chest. On reaching the foot track I recall thinking, *"NVA could still be in the area, worse still, right behind me"*, as I was the last man to exit this location. Upon entering the clearing there was a large gap between myself and the main group. The guys to my front were running at full speed back towards Balmoral's harbour position. I was now very concerned for my own safety as I was fully exposed and I felt vulnerable to the elements behind me. *"I'm was a sitting duck"* for any NVA back on the foot track, or at the edge of the clearing.

.... running low in a 'zig-zag' motion:

I was running across the clearing following the eastern edge of 'Bau Hang', running as fast as my skinny legs could carry me, running in a zig-zag bent over motion trying to catch up with the main group and avoid that odd angry shot from behind. In my mind I was looking behind me, back towards that foot track. Whilst running, I recall having a very distinct feeling I was about to be shot in the back. *"I was scared, shit scared, and I recall having a bodily motion"*. Upon reaching to the safety of Balmoral, my memory switched off..... it had gone blank...! There is truth in the saying, *"I was so scared I shit myself"*.

.... APC pick-up:

Apparently, so I was informed some four decades later. CHQ or BHQ heard the 'triggering fire' of the ambush having been sprung. Realising it had gone belly-up, an APC was despatched to pick up the patrol.

.... loss of memory:

I have no memory of the APC, nor my actions when I returned to my personal pit. I do not remember anything until 0030 hours the following morning, now 28th May. I have no recall of any event during that 8-hour period, (late afternoon of 27th to 0100 hours of 28th). This 7 to 8-hour period of my time at FSPB Balmoral has been permanently 'blanked out' from my memory bank.

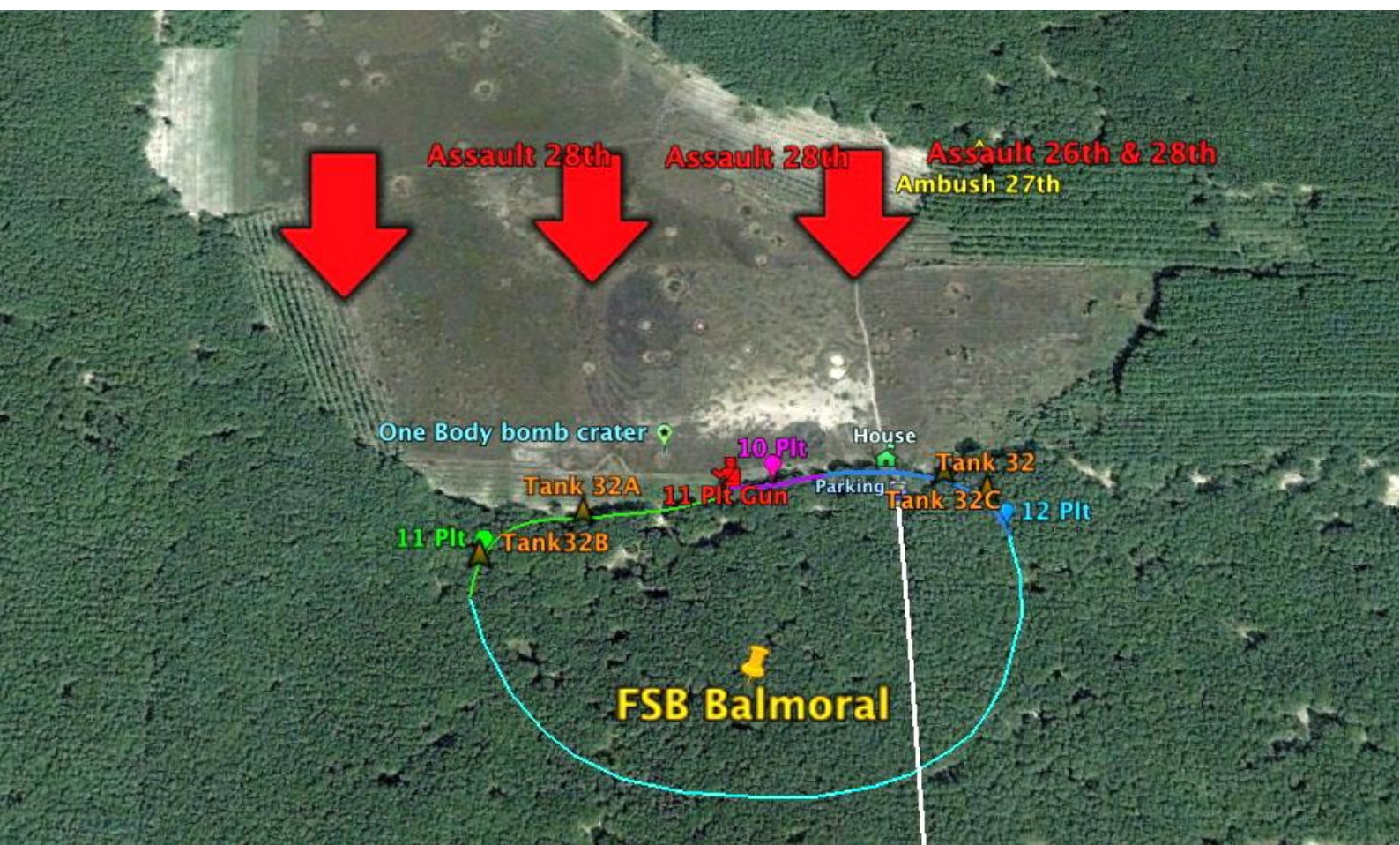
.... a deathly quiet night:

0030 hours: It was my allotted time to conduct two hours of picquet duty on 4 Section's machine-gun. During those two hours of duty the atmosphere felt very tense; and way too quiet for comfort. There was no normal 'night noises' emanating from the surrounding bush. I scanned the area with a 'night scope', nothing seen, possibly because there was no moon-light to activate the scope. This only made the atmosphere, and myself, even more uncomfortable. I had a bad feeling we were about to be hit again. I was anxious to get out of the gun pit, wake up my relief and return to the relative safety of my personal pit. I did not want to be stuck in the machine-gun pit if another assault was to be launched whilst I was on watch.

Second and major NVA assault on FSPB Balmoral:

.... outnumbered and at the mercy of the NVA:

0230 hours, 28th May 1968. I had completed my two hours piquet duty, woken up my relief and returned to my personal pit. As I was about to drop into my pit I heard the distinctive first few 'pop, pop, pop' sounds of mortar primers being fired. *"Oh shit, here they come"*. Again, the mortar primer sounds were emanating from the north side of the clearing, the very sounds of a launching of another assault on Balmoral. Then the 60 and 82-millimetre NVA mortar barrage began with amazing accuracy, hitting their intended target with their first round; 12 Platoon's forward dug-in positions. Many years later I was informed by General Doan, the NVA's 7th Division Battle Commander, he despatched one of his infantry soldiers during nights darkness with orders to creep up to our wire with a roll of cord and return to their mortar plate position to obtain an exact 'mortar to target' distance. They had our measure down to the metre and used it with deadly accuracy during both assaults. The NVA mortar team were well practiced and had the ability to 'walk' their mortar barrage through both 12 Platoon and 10 Platoon's forward dug-in positions.



Google Earth image of 'Bau Hung' depicting the location of FSPB Balmoral, the direction of the NVA assault, and the layout of 'D' Company who took the brunt of both assaults.

Under their own mortar-fire, the NVA infantry moved up to within striking distance of 'D' Company's forward dug-in line of defence. They also dug over 280 shell scrapes to the front and in striking distance of 12 Platoon. (Reference illustration on page 35). No sooner had the NVA mortar barrage ceased firing, their infantry were immediately up and on our perimeter wire. Although the mortar barrage did not penetrate into 11 Platoon, positioned on the left flank, 11 Platoon's 4 Section machine-gun immediately engaged with the fast advancing mass of NVA infantry. All 'D' Company personnel who were located in a forward position and facing the open ground were immediately set upon by the NVA infantry. (An estimated 50 only 'D' Company personnel were in a position to engage with the confronting NVA infantry).

I was well aware the in-coming fire was much heavier than the assault two nights earlier, and I was surprised they were repeating the same tactic by storming across the same open ground, this time in an estimated regimental strength.

.... the NVA are on our wire:

No sooner had the NVA mortar barrage ceased, immediately came their infantry's rockets, heavy & light machine gun and small arms fire. The 'forward' NVA teams moved up under their own mortar barrage to within striking distance, using their self-dug shell scrapes and the numerous bomb craters as hides. This was just the beginning of a three-hour ferocious non-stop firefight between wave upon wave of fast advancing NVA infantry forces of an estimated strength of over 3,000 soldiers. Their aim was to eliminate our forward dug-in troops, breach our wire and over run FSPB Balmoral.

When the tank to my immediate front opened fire with full intensity, I realised the situation was becoming extremely serious. Although I could not see nor engage with the advancing NVA infantry, I was acutely aware they were attacking in much larger numbers than the previous assault. All four tanks positioned on the flanks of 'D' Company were firing almost non-stop, as too 3RAR's mortar team. By battles end, Tank 32A, the tank positioned a few metres to my front, had almost depleted its entire munitions load.

.... over-heating machine gun:

Normally a machine gunner would fire his M60 in short bursts of 4 to 6 rounds to avoid overheating and stoppages. However, due to the large number of fast advancing NVA, I could hear 4 Section's machine-gunner firing almost non-stop. I recall thinking, *"this situation must be getting very serious for our gunner to be firing his weapon in this manner"*.

Approximately 8,000 to 10,000 rounds were fired through 4 Section's machine-gun during this engagement. During mid-battle a second barrel had to be sourced from a non-engaging gunner as 4 Section's machine-gun was over heating causing nerve wracking stoppages. Urinating on the barrel by the gun crew had no cooling effect, it just gave off a bad smell. At battles end the machine-gun was deemed 'US ~ unserviceable' and immediately replaced. Rarely does a machine gun have to be replaced due to 'over firing', a very clear indication of the enormity of this battle that raged during the early morning hours of 28th May 1968.



A manipulated image of what the battle at FSPB Balmoral would have looked like from a circling support aircraft.

.... tanks engage with the advancing NVA:

I was becoming very concerned, concerned not only for my life, but for those on our front line of defence, men who were prepared to stick their head above ground level and engaging in this battle. Heavy & light machine gun fire, small arms and RPG rockets were raining in on 4 Section's machine gun position; and the tank to my immediate front.

Due to my position I could only hear and watch the non-stop tracer and rockets raining in from the clearing as this battle elevated, plus the fact the NVA were now targeting more rocket fire into 4 Section's machine-gun position and the tank to my front. I was in a position approximately five meters behind tank 32A that was engaging with the enemy fronting elements of 11 Platoon. The back blasts from each shot fired was deafening, and the air that swirled around me was filled with a mixture of cordite, smoke and dust. This tank was now firing, seemingly, non-stop.

.... the RPG rocket that could have killed me:

I saw the rocket propelled grenade coming, a small ball of flame flaring out from the projectiles exhaust. It was coming straight toward me, obviously aimed at taking out the tank to my front. Within a split-second the rocket exploded in a tree a few meters to my rear, showering white hot shrapnel in all directions. I was deafened by the explosion, my ears were ringing as a cloud of dust, smoke and cordite fumes descended over me. Tree branches and shredded leaves rained down over Tom and myself. A large branch fell and covered the entrance to Tom's pit. I felt a hot searing pain in my back, and my shirt became sticky with oozing blood and bile rose within my gut. I had been hit by a piece of 'white hot' shrapnel from the exploding rocket. A quick assessment and I told myself I was OK, it's only minor, I think?

My concerns turned to Tom, I called out to check if he was OK. *"Affirmative"* he yelled with a thumb stuck up in the air through the tree branch. Tom yelled out he was OK, saying he had sustained a minor shrapnel wound to his head. It took several minutes for my head to clear and my hearing to return to some degree of normality from the close proximity rocket blast, and that of the tank's continuous firing. Only then was I able to fully confirm that both Tom and myself were OK.

All my personal gear, which was laid-out at ground level was now completely destroyed, shredded by flying shrapnel from the exploding RPG rocket. My hootchie, webbing, water bottles, food, everything had been destroyed. My rifle, *"my lover and protector"* had been struck by a shard of shrapnel rendering it 'US', (unserviceable). *"Now I am in DEEP shit"*. I'm now without a weapon to protect myself with, and there was no way I could have obtain a replacement.

.... looking death in the eye:

I had just experienced looking death in the eye. Numerous thoughts were flashing through my mind, *“I am now stuck in a hole in the ground and at the mercy of the NVA. If the NVA were to breach our defensive wire, forward machine-guns and front-line riflemen; and the tank fronting me, I’m a dead man”*.

I was down in my pit taking cover and wondering how I was going to get out of this ‘no weapon’ situation. *“I was well and truly in the shit”*. I did not have a weapon for protection, nor was there any way of securing another. This battle that raged around ‘D’ Company had increased to a much higher degree of intensity. The only thing I could do was to fix my bayonet and use it, if it came down to a man-to-man fight.

I am not a religious man, but, I was on trembling knees at the bottom of my pit saying a prayer to that person above, if one exists, and prepared to listen to my plea. I asked for help to survive this situation. I knew if the NVA broke through our defensive perimeter, *“I was a dead man”*. As said and scribed during the course of wars past, *“there are no atheists in the trenches”*.

THEN, like fire-works night, the heavens opened up in a blaze of glory as a US helicopter ‘light fire team’ and ‘strike bombers’ arrived, swooping down out of the eastern dark sky across the battle-ground. ‘Spooky’ the ‘gun ship’ was circling around in the night sky awaiting to be called-in to slowly cruise down over the battle ground and let loose with its powerful ‘mini guns’, rockets and cannon fire. The fire power that roared out of this slow-moving aircraft’s ‘mini-guns’ was enormous and very welcomed. The arrival of the US fire power was very timely as the NVA, as recorded in the after-action report, were on our wire.



‘Spooky’ the Gun Ship. This slow flying converted plane fires 6,000 rounds per minute from each of its side protruding ‘mini-guns’.

All possible supporting fire-power one could muster had been brought to bear onto the 'Bau Hang' battle-ground that fronted 'D' Company, 3RAR at FSPB Balmoral. US & Australian artillery, our own mortars, a US helicopter light fire team, strike bombers, plus 'Spooky', a converted DC3 aircraft with door mounted 'Mini-Guns'. During mid battle a 'light fire helicopter' was observed banking away very sharply. Years later I read in a report that the helicopter was receiving fire from the ground. The pilot utilised his radio and made contact with the Tank Squadron leader, requesting the left flank tank direct red tracer into this NVA position. This was carried out and the pilot acknowledged. Minutes later the pilot radioed that the NVA who had been firing at him was down. During the battle-field clean-up, the dead NVA was found lying on his back in a shell scrape with his Soviet made 12.7mm hand held Anti-aircraft machine-gun beside him. He was buried in his own shell scrape which was located on the western edge of the clearing. In 2009 whilst conducting a search for the 42 NVA who were buried in a bomb crater on the battle-ground, a rubber worker handed me a 12.7 calibre shell casing, then he showed me where he had found it. This location coincides with the pilot-to tank radio log, and the Australian soldier who found and buried this NVA infantry soldier.



NVA/Soviet 12.7mm shell casing found on the Balmoral battle-ground.

At some point during this battle our own mortars were ordered to fire at 'zero range', meaning straight up and almost straight down. Why, because the NVA had amassed in large numbers on our wire which was strung-up no more than 20 meters forward of our first line of defence. This was a very dangerous call, but it had to be executed for the safety of Balmoral and all personnel within. If the enemy broke through our minimal perimeter defence, it was very possible that FSPB Balmoral could have been completely over-run; and as they say, 'wiped out'.

During this battle, the NVA utilised a number of large bomb craters as 'hides and as firing positions'. These craters were located close to our wire, the majority fronting 11 Platoon's position, located on the western side of 'Bau Hang'. (*Reference aerial photo page 19*).

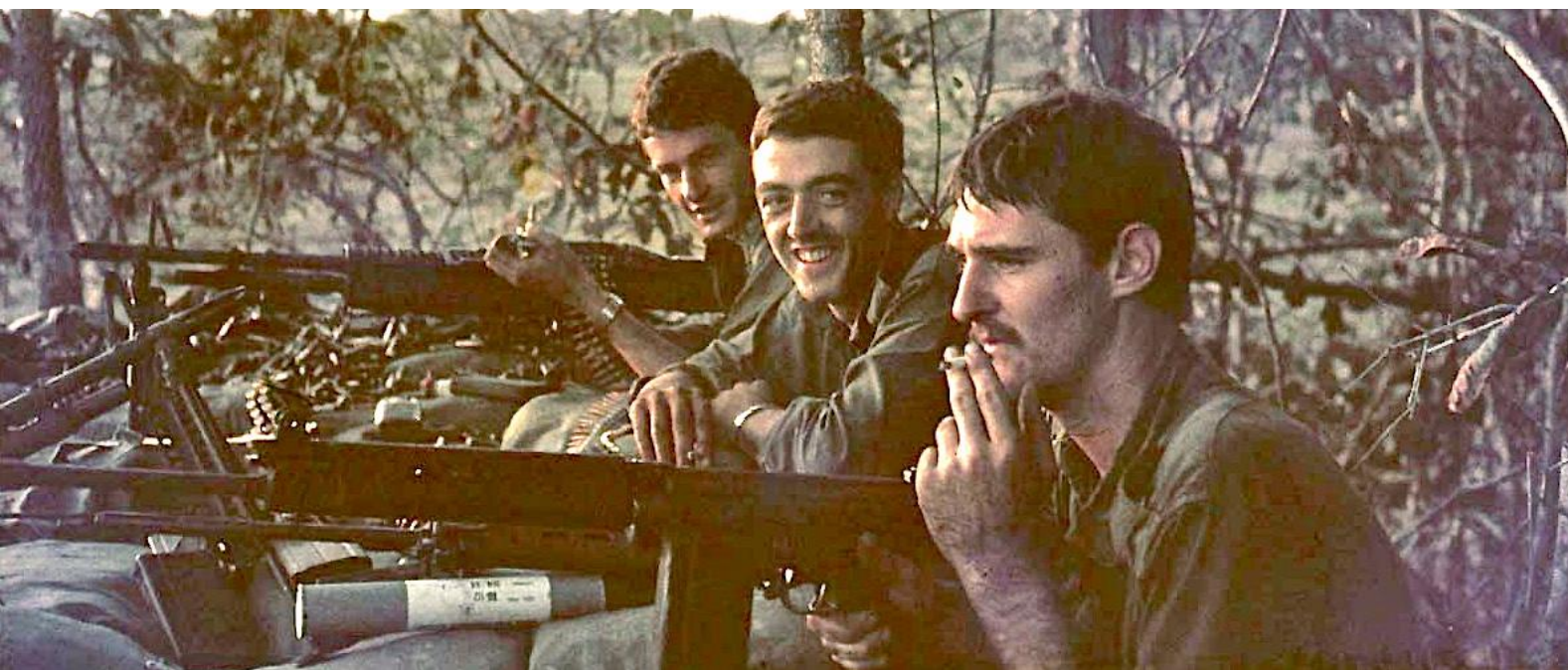
.... A panoramic view of the battle-ground:



28th May 1968. Panoramic view of the battle-ground at first light as seen from 11 Platoon, 4 Section, machine-gun position. Star pickets, right of frame to centre frame indicate how close our defensive perimeter wire was located to 11 Platoon's dug-in front-line of defence. The rising smoke is from a burning body having been hit by a phosphorus round. This body was located and recovered, April 2009. Tanks seen cruising the battle-ground to clear the area of NVA and secure the site for the after-battle clean-up process.

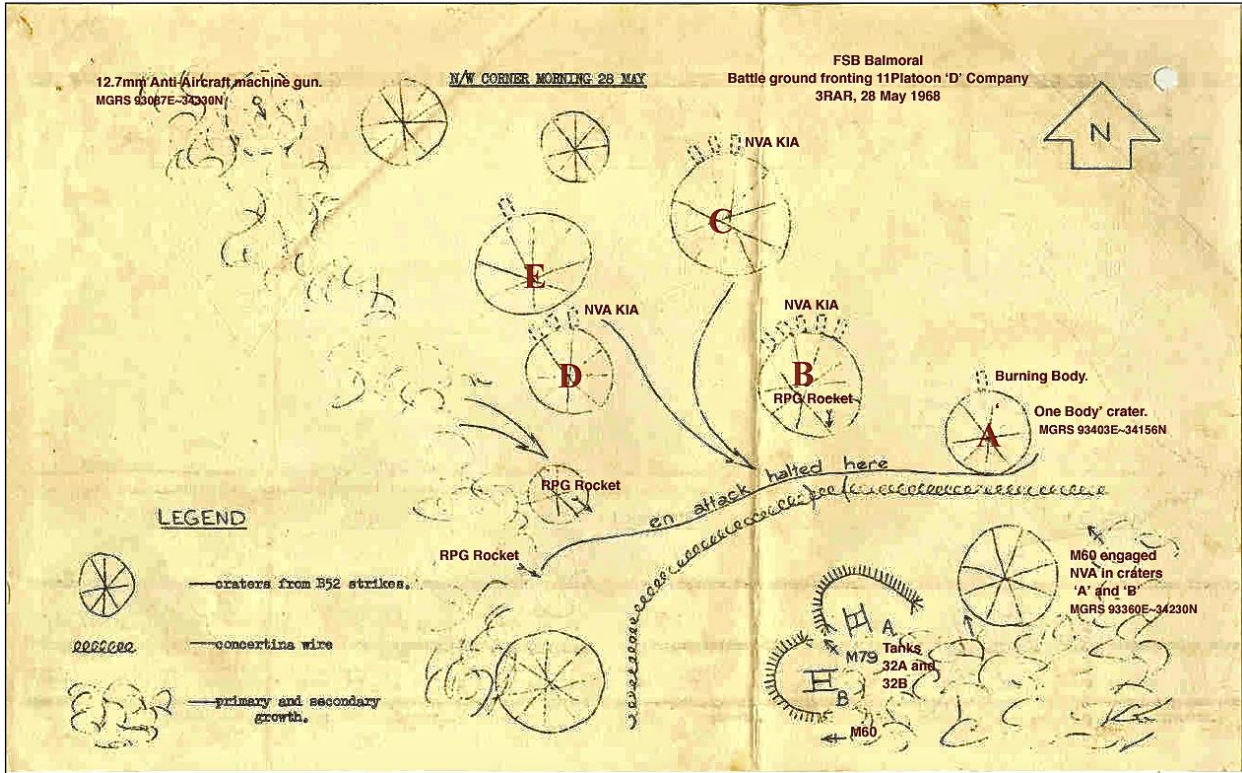
.... the sickening after battle sights:

As the first rays of light broke the eastern horizon, and as the last shots were fired, the NVA infantry began retreating back across the clearing. A tank was deployed to engage any enemy who had taken up positions within the tree line that surrounded the 'Bau Hang' battle-ground.

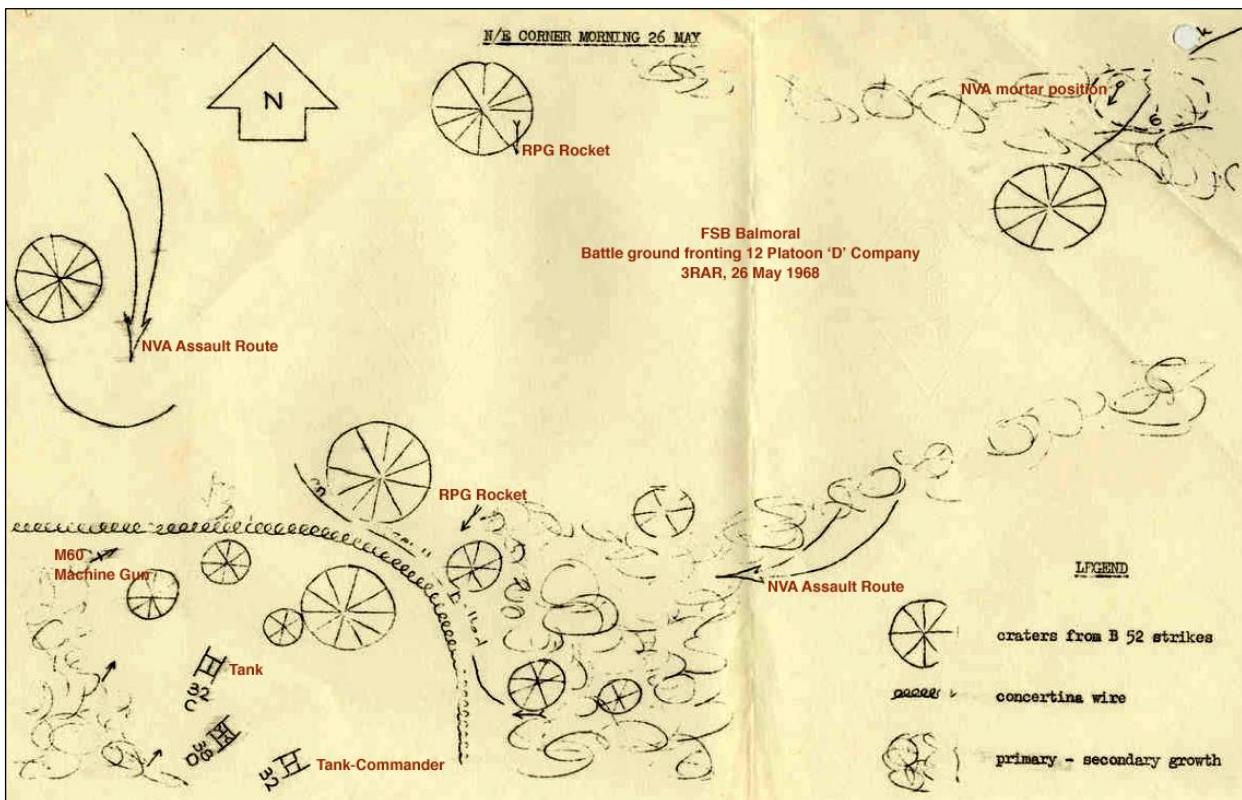


4 Section, 11 Platoon 'D' Company machine-gun pit.
(Left) Machine Gunner, Private Paul Donnelly.
(Centre) Machine Gunners 2IC, Private Ian 'Pommie' Robertshaw. (Deceased).
(Right) Private John Bryant. Forward scout for 4 Section, 11 Platoon, 'D' Company, 3RAR.

.... battlefield illustrations from Lt Mick Butler's 'after action report':



The battle-ground fronting 11 Platoon following assault on 28th May, 1968. Illustrations by Mick Butler, Tank Troop Commander.



The battle-ground fronting 12 Platoon, 26th May, 1968. Illustration by Lt. Mick Butler, Tank Troop Commander.

.... NVA dead and wounded lay everywhere:

As the first rays of the morning sun shed light on a new day, the battle quickly drew to an end, now it was time for the entire Battalion to 'stand to'. This was a procedure that was conducted at 'sun up & sun set', every day no matter where we located, as it was deemed the most likely time for an enemy attack. It was during this period our CSM, Neil 'Lofty' Eiby, conducted a personnel check. He moved from pit to pit checking to ensure that everyone was OK. When Lofty checked on Tom, he looked through the fallen tree branches that covered the entrance to Tom's pit and called out, there was response. Lofty then asked if I was OK, *"yes Lofty, I'm OK, but what about Tom"*. Lofty's response was, *"looks like we lost Tom"*. I have no recall of the events that took place immediately after hearing those words. How could this be when Tom had called out and told me he was OK, he even gave me the thumbs-up. As soon as 'stand to' had ended, I snapped back into gear as I was ordered to move out onto the battle-ground and begin escorting any walking wounded NVA back to our first aid post. Lofty later informed me that Tom's head was completely covered with blood, making it look as if he had received a fatal wound; and with no response to his call during 'stand to' Lofty thought Tom was dead, when actually he was asleep.... *"the bastard"*. Both Tom and I received first aid treatment to our minor wounds and resumed to our allotted duties.



At first light, morning of 28th May as the NVA retreated from the battle-ground.

Whilst a tank cruised the out skirts of the battle-ground looking for and engaging with any stragglers, a small dozer was instructed to begin back filling the bomb craters utilised as hides and firing positions by the NVA. There were numerous craters fronting 11 Platoon, plus a few to the front of 12 Platoon's position on the eastern flank. As the dozer moved onto the clearing the operator was fired upon from the tree line. Hence, all activities ceased immediately, leaving the tanks to engage the harassing enemy and clear the tree line.

When the all-clear was given, the dozer and the battle-field clean up teams moved out onto the clearing to carry out the clean-up duties. Myself and several others were instructed to assist in this process by escorting the wounded NVA / POW's back to our first aid post. Whilst this was underway the Battalion doctor, who broke all regimental rules, took it upon himself and entered the battle-ground intent on giving medical aid to some of the wounded enemy. There is a set procedure when dealing with wounded enemy, you have to ensure the enemy is not hiding a hand grenade under himself. Wounded enemy have to be 'cleared' first, but Captain Lippett could not wait. He walked onto the battle-ground and headed directly towards a wounded soldier lying face down on the ground. This NVA soldier was prepared to martyr himself as he lay there with a live hand grenade hidden under his body, just waiting for the opportunity to set it off. Unfortunately, as Doc Lippett rolled this soldier over to inspect his wounds, the NVA soldier placed a grenade between the doctor's legs. Doc Lippett received severe wounds to his lower body.

As I moved out from our harbour to assist the wounded, I had a mind-set that was passive and compassionate, intent on helping these very young wounded soldiers. My thoughts had shifted from these soldiers 'being the enemy', to 'being men in need', in need of medical attention. There were dead and wounded everywhere, including one soldier having been hit by a phosphorus round fired from a tank. His body lay in two smouldering parts. (Ref photo next page). There were bodies and body parts strewn across the entire battlefield. Many wounded were located in or beside the numerous bomb craters. The ugly after-battle smells of cordite, smoke and burning flesh hung over the entire area like a foul cloud.

My 'compassionate thoughts' were snapped back to reality when the enemy soldier set off a hand grenade between the legs of Doc Lippett. I hit the deck, scanned my immediate surroundings looking for the first sign or indication that any other wounded NVA who was willing to challenge us. The atmosphere was extremely tense for several minutes, and slowly it became clear no other NVA was prepared to put his life on the line. My passiveness, or compassionate thoughts towards these wounded soldiers had now turned into 'intense anger'. The actions by that one soldier had sent my raging anger through the roof. I very quickly realized that they, 'the wounded', remained my enemy. From that moment onwards, it was always to be, 'them and us'.



*Centre of frame. The body of a burning NVA soldier having been hit by a phosphorus round fired from a tank.
Two other dead can be seen to the right of the burning soldier.*

.... munitions expended by tank 32 and 32A:

These two tanks were in a position to directly engage with the assaulting NVA. By battles end both had very little ammunition left. All HE, splintex, phosphorus, flares and most of their 30 & 50-calibre machine-gun belts had been depleted. What they had left, so I'm led to believe, was of little use during this battle.



*(Left) Myself escorting a slightly wounded NVA soldier back to our first aid post, my damaged and useless weapon in hand.
(Right) 3RAR medics attending to a very young wounded NVA soldier. 3 RAR's Vietnamese interpreter centre rear.*

When the seven wounded or captured NVA / POW's had been removed from the battle field, I remained at the first aid post and stood guard over several of the wounded. Whilst the medics were attending to the wounded, our interpreter was questioning each soldier intent on gathering intelligence. One of the more senior soldiers, possibly an NCO or Officer, suddenly lashed out and began kicking a younger soldier whilst he was being questioned. This disruptive guy was quickly isolated from the main group.

I began thinking of the NVA soldier's state of mind, and how they had been brain-washed to the point of martyring themselves for their cause and their country. This was a state of mind no Australian soldier, nor any other international ground force could accommodate, not during this 'dirty war'; and certainly not under the circumstances we had to endure.

Sadly, not one of these POW's returned to their respective homes at wars end. Initially, all the wounded were sent to the Australian hospital in Vung Tau. Following treatment of their wounds they were handed over to the South Vietnamese Military. No one has been able to inform me as to what happened to these young soldiers from there on.



Medics attending to the wounded NVA.



Pte John Bryant with a collection of discarded NVA weapons and personal equipment recovered from the battle-ground. (Photo courtesy John Bryant).

.... mass grave:

During the battle-field clean up, 42 NVA dead were located across the battle-ground. All were assembled at one location and individually searched for documents or personal effects. I have been informed by others involved in the clean-up process that several other dead were buried at various locations around the 'Bau Hang' battle-ground. I am of the opinion these additional dead NVA soldiers were not included in the official 3RAR count, as there is no mention of this in any of the official 'after action reports'. The Australian Military 'Official After-Action Report' states; '42 NVA soldiers KIA were buried in a common grave/bomb crater, located on the battle-ground'. The precise location was not recorded.



A section of the mass grave at FSPB Balmoral following the NVA assault, 28th May 1968. (Photo courtesy 'C' Squadron, 1st Armoured Reg.)

Included in the dozer operator's instructions to back-fill all the bomb craters fronting 'D' Company, the craters that were utilised as hides and firing positions by the assaulting NVA, was to locate the largest and deepest bomb crater for use as a mass grave. The selected bomb crater was approximately 50 meters to the front of 4 Section, 11 Platoon's forward dug-in position. Of the many bomb craters that were located within close proximity to 'D' Company's forward line of defence, only two contained water. One directly to the front of 4 Section's machine-gun position, this being the mass grave crater. The other crater that contained water was located in front of 12 Platoon.

.... the Battalion survived a massive NVA assault:

It was a miracle only one 3 RAR soldier, Pte Worle of B Company, was KIA having been hit by a mortar round during the course of this massive assault, and only 6 WIA. Two members from 'D' Company received minor shrapnel wounds from an exploding RPG Rocket, both received first aid and remained on duty, this being (Tom & myself). Maybe it was a miracle, or maybe testament to the training, discipline and leadership within 3RAR. To this day, I continue to shake my head in total disbelief when I think of how enormously outnumbered we were during the engagement on morning of 28th May 1968, at Fire Support Patrol Base Balmoral. (See attached: [Contingents MASTER.docx](#)).

Outcome of Operation 'Toan Thang Phase 11':

With the combined strength of US units, plus the establishments of FSB Coral and FSPB Balmoral, a second planned TET style assault by the NVA on Saigon by more than 10,000 regular troops who had assembled in the 'Ba Da Secret Zone', 45 kilometres north of Saigon, was thwarted.

Total Operational Casualties (Coral & Balmoral):

26 Australians were 'killed in action' during the 26-day operation.

109 soldiers were 'wounded in action'.

Operation Toan Thang Phase 11 was the largest, most costly and protracted engagement with regular NVA Forces during Australia's ten-year involvement in the Vietnam war.

Personal thoughts on the Vietnam war:

I, and many other Veterans knew within our hearts there was absolutely no way the allied forces could defeat the NVA when they were prepared to 'martyr' themselves for their country. This was a psychological factor that aided the NVA and VC when going into battle, a factor we would not and could not compete with. These tactics made this war an 'unwinnable war', no matter the number of allied forces on the ground, nor the enormous quantity of munitions fired, or the allies enormous fire power from land, air and sea.

‘Mini TET’:

January of 1968, during the annual Vietnamese TET holiday period, the NVA & VC launched a massive offensive against many major cities in South Vietnam, despite a truce having been agreed for the lunar new year holiday period. The follow-on battles fought by the US, ARVN, NZ and Australian forces during May-June 1968, became known as **‘Mini TET’**.

This was a Civil War between northern and southern Vietnam. I, and many others were of the opinion the allied forces should not have intervened. It was a very costly war in more ways than outright dollars and lives lost. It was a ‘Dirty War’, and that dirt remains within our society today, particularly with regard to those who served a ‘Tour of Active Duty’, many having succumbed to the onset of PTSD and now totally reliant on the Government (DVA) to see out their lives.

Agent Orange:

There are the long-term effects related to the use of a numerous range of toxins, particularly ‘Agent Orange’. It has now been confirmed by US authorities that ‘Agent Orange’ is generational. The flow-on is now affecting Veteran’s grandchildren. The two most heavily contaminated areas in Vietnam are, the Province of Quang Tri, situated close to the former DMZ, and ‘Nui Dat’, the area that housed the 1st Australian Task Force. The US began a ground clean-up of the Quang Tri in 2017. The ‘Nui Dat’ area, located in the Province of Bien Hoa has been deemed as, too difficult to conduct a clean-up of toxins due to the undulating terrain.



Agent Orange defoliant being sprayed during the Vietnam War.

(This defoliant was called ‘Agent Orange’ because it was supplied in orange coloured drums.

.... NVA casualties:

In 2014, whilst visiting Hanoi and the office of MARIN, (Martyrs Information Centre), I was informed that 457 NVA soldiers were KIA whilst deployed to the area of FSPB Balmoral during Operation Toan Thang 11. This information had been compiled from official NVA Regimental records, battalion documents passed to the office of MARIN by retiring military officers from the 7th NVA Division. These records were handed to MARIN in a manner to assist the families of NVA Soldiers who had been KIA.

NOTE: Many NVA official records did not survive the war.



The battle-ground fronting 4 Section, 11 Platoon, 'D' Company at FSPB Balmoral morning of 28th May 1968. (Photo courtesy Bob Beveridge. RAAF)

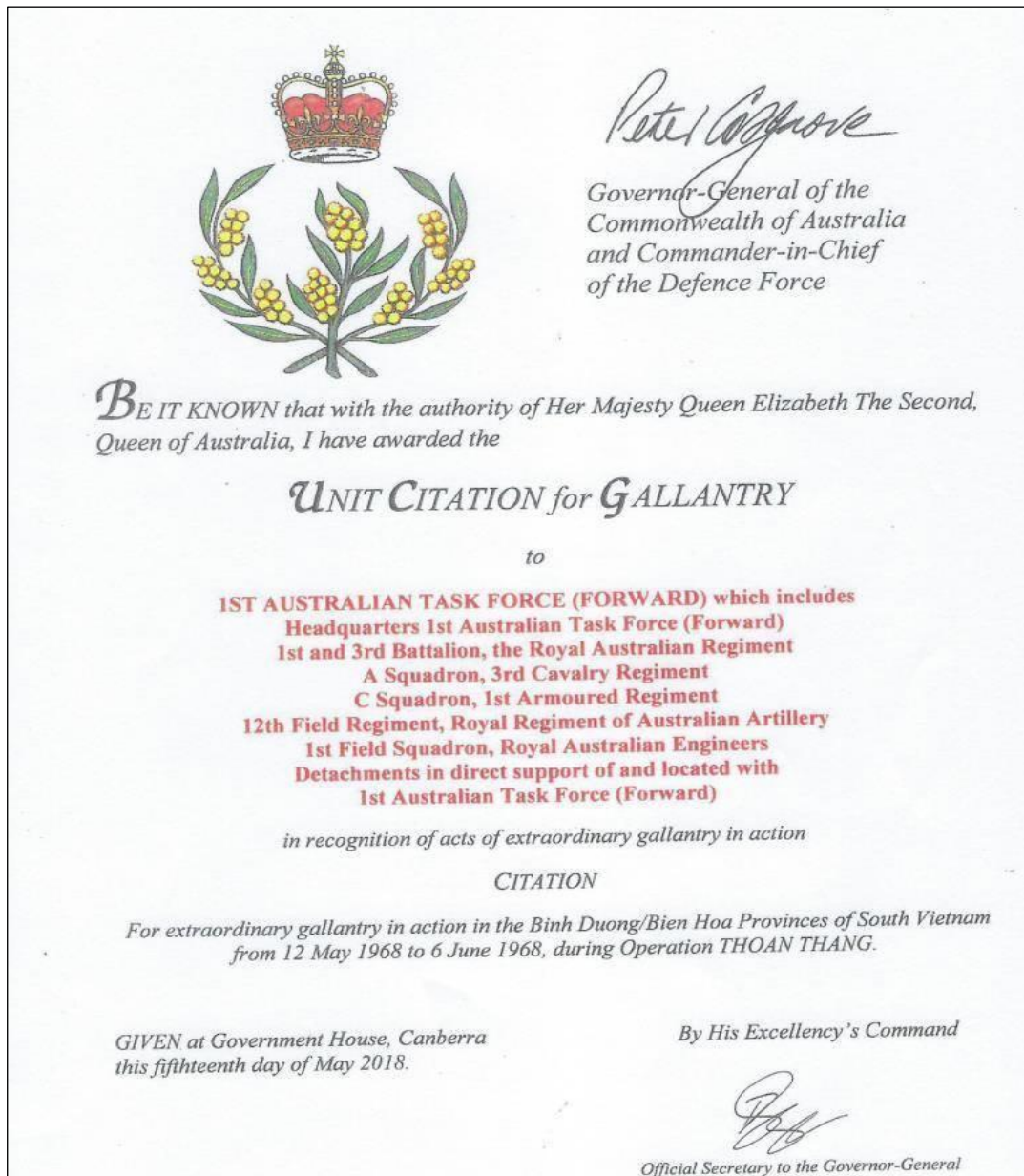
Points of interest in the above photograph.

- *Depicts the battle-ground fronting 4 Section, 11 Platoon, 'D' Company, 3RAR.
- *After engagement battle-field clean in progress following the second assault. 28th May
- *Depicted far right of frame. Two men squatting down tending to a wounded NVA.
- *Top left of frame in front of APC. A wounded NVA is being carried into Balmoral's first aid post.
- *Top of frame and slightly left of centre is Tank 32A. This is the tank I was instructed to protect if the NVA broke through our defensive perimeter.
- *Slightly right, top edge of frame, Tank 32B is partially in view.
- *Second bomb crater from left of frame with one body inside. I believe this to be the bomb crater that was utilised as a mass grave to bury the 42 NVA Soldiers who were KIA.
- *Bottom of frame stands an APC keeping guard whilst the clean-up process is being conducted.
- *Two APC lengths to the front of the above quoted APC stands a 'wheeled/Soviet' heavy machine gun that was left behind by the retreating NVA.

Recognition after 50 years:



All Australian units who were deployed to establish and defend FSB Coral and FSPB Balmoral, were awarded the UCG on 13th May, 2018. The 50th Anniversary of Operation Toan Thang 11.



Disclaimer:

I verify that the work I have produced is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

I would like to extend thanks to all personnel of 'D' Company, 3RAR. 1967-68 Tour of Duty. Namely:

Mr. John Bryant.

Mr. Paul Donnelly.

Mr. Mick Butler.

Mr. Peter Phillips, former OC of 'D' Company, 3RAR.

All above are veterans of FSPB Balmoral.

Mr. A.H. Jensen. Veteran FSB Coral.

Mr. Ian Ahearn. Veteran FSB Coral.

Mr. Gavin Ireland for his painting depicting the action at FSB Coral.

Mr. Doan, former battle commander, 7th Division, North Vietnamese Army.

The Australian War Memorial by supplying official records and photographs.

I am also very grateful to Mr Tom Locke for his encouragement, understanding and patience whilst I undertook this project.

In the end, while distracting surface errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling have hopefully been eliminated, any faults which remain due to memory and representation rest entirely with me.