



THE EYES and EARS

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The following is a compilation of memories, thoughts and photos of the period in May 1968 when the Detachment was involved in FSB CORAL in the Binh Duong province north east of Saigon in an attempt to block enemy withdrawal and supply routes.

. Firstly let's start with an extract from Keith Ayliffe...

FSPB CORAL manning

Detachment 131 Divisional Locating Battery RAA SVN

TFAIO

(attached to 12 Fd Regt

Tac HQ)

Capt. Phil Perrin

Sgt Jim Lawler

L/Bdr Peter Dealy

Gnr Alan Robb

Gnr Peter McKie

Gnr Robert Wilson

Alpha Radar (A6)

2/Lt Gordon Williams

Bdr Keith Ayliffe

L/Bdr Frank Pepper

Bdr Colin Gordon

L/Bdr Ian Finlay

Gnr Wal Franklin

L/Bdr Iain Kennedy

Gnr Ian Amos

Gnr Murray Smaile

Gnr Gordon Malcolm

Gnr Dennis Dye

Gnr Ken Jones

Gnr John Ianson

Gnr Alan McDonald

Gnr Tony Coutts

Gnr Phil "Doc" Sheedy

Gnr Vic Claxton

Gnr Brian Mitchell

RAEME

Radar Mechanics

Cpl John Strautins

Cpl Joe McNiel

Cpl Stephen Palmer



Listening Post 31E

L/Bdr Eric Marques

Gnr Geoff Blackwell

L/Bdr Neville Wortlehook

Gnr Michael Bohl

Gnr Gary Leplaw

Listening Post 31F

L/Bdr John Dellaca

Gnr Ken Piesley

Gnr Stan Briggs

Gnr John Bayford

Authors Note: The above list is not an official list, as no record was kept of Det 131 Div Loc Bty members deployed to FSB CORAL.

Other members suspected as being at CORAL at some stage were (Never Confirmed):

Gnr Neil Kessey

Gnr Fred Kruiink

This list was compiled from the memory of those who took part and may or may not be accurate. At a reunion which took place in Canberra ACT in 2008 of which many of the people named above attended, it was agreed to be a fairly truthful representation.

AS is nearly always the case no Survey members are mentioned, although it is known that Survey was completed by Det 131 surveyors at both CORAL and COOGEE

The following are recollections and memories published in the order that they were received –

Wilson, Bob -

“Dicko....Dumb question...I was keeping my head down. I was there with Phil Perrin, Neville Wortlehock, Gary Leplaw, and Pete McKay in the Tac HQ. There was another bloke there but I can't remember his name...Nev Should be able to help! Bob”

. Keith Ayliffe –

“G'day Paul, Sorry it took so long to get back to you, but I've had Computer problems and ended up building a new set. The old one stopped taking orders.

I like your idea of asking what people were doing. A small detail the 12 May 68 was Mothers Day in OZ.

We calculated there were about 33 X 131guys at Coral (Coogee) there was no official list. We believe we did come up with a fairly exact list of members, who were there, if you would like that list I'd be happy to forward it to you (see above).

A small but to me important point which is often overlooked is the fact that our surveyors were the first people on the ground at Coral and had completed their survey work before the Gun batteries arrived. Best regards Keith”

. Peter Binns -

“Hi Paul, This is just a short email to thank you for sending the eyes and ears to me.

I was in Vietnam from Nov 67 to Nov 68 on the listening posts, if my memory serves me correct, 31c 31b and 31a at Nui Dat hill.

As for info about Coral where were you, I was at Horse shoe when Coral happened and still remember to this day, when Mick Bohle arrived back from Coral where the tops of his boots had bullet holes in them as they were above ground next to his sleeping pit.

I live in Cleveland now and don't have much contact with members of the detachment, but was glad I met Jim Hogno, which was by chance, as was doing a stint in the Coffs Hospital with heart probs which seem to be under control touch wood.

Keep up the good work Regards Peter Binns.”

. Ian Amos –

“Paul,

With regards to “where were you at the time of Coral”, I very clearly remember what I was doing in the early hours of 13 May 1968 - cowering in the bottom of what didn't seem to be a very deep hole in the ground. Ian”

. Steve Boutlis -

“Hi, Dicko Coral happened a few months after I took discharge from the Army.

By then I had got married and we were expecting our first child towards the end of '68.

While I was still in the army, discharging Nashos at Watsonia, Melbourne, my wife and I were able to find a small one bedroom flat close to a tramline at Hawthorn and were enjoying the first blooms of marriage.

By Coral, I had gone back to my pre army job with the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works and was transferred to its Survey Department as I wanted to utilise my army training. I was promoted to an Assistant Surveyor position with a slight pay increase. By Coral, it was too late to enrol in the Survey Diploma at RMIT for that year.

We were trying to save for the future as we were intending that my wife would stay home when our child was born and be the typical stay at home wife/mother that was the norm at that time. So, when our mates were fighting for their lives at Coral and Balmoral, I was getting up at 4.30a.m. so that I could be at Balwyn to get the paperboys organised to do their newspaper deliveries. Then home for a quick breakfast and then off to my primary job.

I do not recall that much was made in the news media of these two sustained battles during which our 131 boys were so valiant (or I was tuning out to Nam). I have subsequently read a few books on the battles and as our honorary gunner said, “well done those men”.

There, by the grace of that God, in whose existence I have doubts, wasn't !! Cheers, Boots.”

. Bert Blink –

“Hi Paul, Well I was still in Vietnam at Arty Tac. I was due for RTA but this did not happen until the 21st of May. I think very few of us that weren't at Coral, but still in country, realised just what had happened and how bad that night really was. Bert”

Bob Billiards – sent this photo in and I think it says a lot and **Ed** thinks you'll recognize your name...



. then **Bob** went onto add...

"Where were you for the Battle of Coral?"

I would like to say that I was there, but fortunately or unfortunately I missed the original nights, so at this stage 31D had closed down as the ARVN took over the compound and I must have been somewhere in the Survey lines doing menial tasks for Geoff Jebb (WO). I eventually went to see sunray (Phil Perrin) and suggested that I should be out at an LP on the Coral operation. I was a reo about a week after all of the big action of May and relieved (took his place) Bluey Peisley because he was off for R&R. Flew there in a Chook and couldn't hear for a day afterwards because of the whine of the engines for a 1hr 20 minute flight(or thereabouts). After reporting to sunray, headed back to the helipad and coppered (at tree top level) to FSB Coogee where I was stationed with Pablo (Stan Briggs), John Bayford, Nick Armstrong and somebody else whom I can't remember, or maybe there was only the four of us."

<p>John Bayford and Stan "Pablo" Briggs on the APC that was accidentally set alight.</p>	<p>31E in the Headquarter Company lines with Nick Armstrong contemplating how deep our weapons pit should be.</p>
	<p>Our HQ company mates after a rain storm. Amazing who you meet, but the bloke facing front was at Pucker when I was there. Some of us were in 4 Platoon "A" company and this bloke was in "C" company.</p>
	<p>The captured Lambretta scooter that was mentioned in Lex McCauley's book on Coral. That model Lambretta scooter in that condition is worth between \$6k and \$8k nowadays. (wish I had kept mine!!)</p>

"The interesting trivia about the rain shot is that we decided to catch the rain in our hutchie and filled our jerry cans. A couple of days later there was a bad case of diarrhoea from the water supplied by the engineers from a nearby well. We managed to miss out on the experience. For the radar boys, the RPG's fired at them landed in the trees behind us. We thought it was the guns firing until we were showered with twigs, leaves and other rubbish! We were also fortunate that the mortars landed on their side of the trees as well. Bob Billiards"

.Iain Kennedy – sent the following which created some good rapport with some following responses by **Gordon Malcolm** and **Phil Sheedy**...

.Iain Kennedy -

Dicko, Just back from another O/S trip and see this mail about what where you doing at the time of Coral? Well digging a deeper hole in the ground for one. Young Keith has all my photos from Coral; he used them at our 40 year get together in Canberra. 40 years ago, I sometime have trouble remembering 40 minutes ago.

Gordon Malcolm and John Dellaca are the two blokes that were out there with us that would have the best recollection of events at that time.

All I know is after the first night and seeing where (NV) they came from. I realise how lucky they had not come around by another 90 or so degrees, otherwise I wouldn't be writing this.

Regards, Iain K

.Gordon Malcolm – replied to Iain

Regarding what we were doing at the time of Coral, saw Iain's (refer Iain Kennedy above) response and I'm amazed that he would think I could remember more. Like him, keeping your head down and digging deeper, was the order of the day. I think you'll find that the memories of every one there are different even though you were next to each other. When that jet flew over and napalmed the dug in heavy machine gun is indelible in my mind as the bottom of it was lit up by the flames of everything burning, however I can't remember whether it was the first night or a few nights later. Gordon

. Iain Kennedy – answered Gordon with...

Gordon, You are right I remember that fighter coming over and dropping that napalm that was later in the action. I remember the first night, sticking my head out of my little rabbit hole and wondering what the hell was going on as the RPG hit into the tent we had put up for our first night radar control room. That we didn't use as we had the Cat from Arty Int come in and do a big scrape and we put the pallet we use transport the radar across the top.

I think the Napalm was about the third attack? John D, John B, Ian A, Ken J what are your recollections?

Regards Iain K

. Phil Sheedy - then replied...

Nah, It was the 1st night: I can still hear that jet scream in and feel the heat of the napalm on my flesh. I was only there for nights 1 & 2, so I have no idea whether there were other drops subsequently, but...Phil Sheedy

. Warwick Brooker -

"Dicko, at the time of Coral I would have been marking time at Holsworthy, awaiting my discharge. Lots of guard duty, nights in town (in a brand new Ford Falcon purchased for \$2500, mostly with my hard-earned 'danger money') and a few training exercises, including a few freezing days at Mt Tianjara south of Sydney. The Tianjara exercise might have come a few weeks after the Coral period, as I assume the Army would have picked the coldest time of the year for that. The frozen puddles were in stark contrast to the steamy environment from which I'd recently escaped. Indeed, during those last few months of military service, there were times when I wished that Warwick Hamilton's submission to keep some of us in Vietnam for a few extra months (voluntarily) had been successful. In retrospect, however, I'm not sorry I missed out on Coral and I sympathise with those who had to experience it! Brookey"

.Keith Ayliffe -



"G'day Paul Thought this may come in handy a photo taken by Bob Wilson LP Op on the night of first attack on Coral.

The 16th is also significant as it was the date of the 2nd large scale attack on Cora. The second photo (gunships) I took early morning of the attack.

Regards Keith"



1968

23rd January. 1ATF H.Q., 2 RAR and 7 RAR are moved to Bien Hoa Province to help protect U.S. positions in Long Binh and the Saigon area against an expected attack. 3 RAR remain at Nui Dat. 1 RAR and 4 RAR arrive to relieve 2 & 7 RAR.

The Task Force is moved in to defend Fire Support Base (FSB) Anderson. NLF/PAVN (National Liberation Front and People's Army of Vietnam) forces launch three attacks on the firebase. Assault troops attack in waves supported by machine guns and rocket propelled grenades (RPG's). The Australians with American support withstand the heavy fighting which resulted.

31st January. The TET Offensive begins with over 100 major attacks on cities and major towns throughout South Vietnam, including several attacks around Saigon.

1st February. D445 VC Battalion attack and enter military compounds in the provincial capital of Baria. A Company 3 RAR, in nine APC's crash through the VC cordon to rescue ARVN (Army of the Republic of South Vietnam) and U.S. forces. D445 Battalion counter attack, but with the assistance of the two ARVN battalions and American air strikes they are repulsed and withdraw from the capital.

5th May. National Liberation Front (NLF) and People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) forces attack 119 cities, towns and military targets across the Republic of South Vietnam. FSB Coral occupied by elements of 1 RAR and 3 RAR, supported by the New Zealand 161 Field Battery and the Australian 102 Field Battery are established in Binh Duong province north east of Saigon in an attempt to block enemy withdrawal and supply routes.

13th May. NVA carry out a pre-dawn attack supported by rockets and mortars. 1 RAR's Mortar Platoon is overrun and a gun position is captured. The Australians repel the PAVN with American helicopter gunships.

16th May. Coral is attacked again by PAVN forces this time do not breach the defensive perimeter. The attacks on Coral cost the lives of nine Australians and 28 wounded.



Centurian tanks firing over open sights at FSB Coral

26th May. FSB Balmoral, five kilometres from Coral is attacked by a large force of NVA regulars. Assault waves attacked D Company 3 RAR's defence perimeter. With support of the tanks the NVA are repelled.

27th May. FSB Coral, D Company 1 RAR, with the support of four tanks conducts a sweep between the two fire support bases, discovers and smashes an extensive bunker system killing a large number of NVA and VC.

28th May. A pre-dawn attack is carried out by the 141st NVA Regiment against FSB Coral and Balmoral and again the NVA are repelled. The actions fought at Coral and Balmoral cost the lives of 26 Australians and a further 110 wounded.

June. The Task Force returns to Phuoc Tuy Province, with the familiar routines of clearing and ambush patrols.

From now on it becomes unquestionably a no-win war!

.The Australian Wednesday May 15 1968 front page, 'Second worst day of the war for Australians'

Over almost four weeks of fighting at Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral the story received a degree of press attention in the Australian media, but less, perhaps than may have been expected of such a major series of engagements. This example from The Australian of 15 May 1968 places the coverage of the early fighting at Coral in the context of other newsworthy events of the time.



Ed - The second front page of The Australian is on May 28 – this is all it gets after their quote - “The actions fought at Coral and Balmoral cost the lives of 26 Australians and a further 110 wounded.”

. 'Sydney Morning Herald' – May 15 then 'The Age' on May 27, 1968...that's about it!



It's hard not to be marginally philosophical.