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Coral and Balmoral – Vietnam, May-June 1968

This year is the 40th anniversary of the battle for fire support bases Coral and Balmoral, where some 2000 Australian and New Zealand soldiers were confronted by more than 5000 North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong troops between 12 May and 6 June 1968. It was the largest Australian engagement of the Vietnam War and Australia's largest land battle since World War II.

The two fire support bases were established by the 1st Australian Task Force in Bien Hoa Province, some 50 km north-east of their normal area of operations in Phuc Tuy Province. The purpose of the bases was to assist the Americans block North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units withdrawing from a failed attack on the South Vietnamese capital, Saigon. This attack had been part of the Viet Cong's offensives of April-May 1968 coinciding with the 150th anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx. These offensives were known to the Americans "Tet II" or the "Second Wave" and were less successful in the Saigon area than the Tet offensives of February 1968 had been.

The plan was for 1st and 3rd Battalions, Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR and 3RAR), 102nd Field Battery, Royal Australian Artillery, and 161st New Zealand Field Battery to deploy by helicopter into Coral on 12 May 1968, with the infantry to precede the artillery and to secure the base for them. Other task force elements were to follow by road the next day.

In the event, the helicopter fly-in was delayed and disrupted. It failed to deliver the troops and defence stores in the planned order or to the correct positions. The artillery arrived first and the two batteries were deployed 1.5 kilometres apart, rendering them vulnerable to defeat in detail. The infantry, when they eventually arrived, immediately moved out to prepare pre-determined blocking positions beyond the base. Meanwhile, the enemy was already present in strength in the area and had been engaging American troops. He observed the fly-in and adjusted his plans so as to seize the opportunity afforded to him by the Australian-New Zealand dispersion and confusion.

As a consequence the late arrival and lack of defence stores, base defences were incomplete when a North Vietnamese regiment attacked the base during the first night. The North Vietnamese penetrated the 1RAR mortar platoon and 102 Field Battery positions which were co-located, briefly capturing one of the field guns, before they were driven out of the base after heavy fighting. At 0215 hours on 16 May, three North Vietnamese infantry battalions again attacked Coral. Fighting lasted several hours before the attackers were forced to withdraw. In these two attacks, 16 Australians were killed and 47 were wounded. Enemy dead were confirmed at around 100, but were estimated to be considerably higher. The base was not seriously threatened again, despite further mortar and rocket attacks on 22, 26 and 28 May.

Having established a strong defensive position, the Australians conducted aggressive patrolling. Fierce skirmishes, during which another three Australians were killed, occurred up until the end of May, including a major engagement on 26 May in which infantry supported by Centurion tanks destroyed part of a North Vietnamese bunker system.

The North Vietnamese now turned their attention to Fire Support Base Balmoral, which had been established by 3RAR some 5 kilometres north of Coral on 24 May. The base was on relatively flat ground mostly covered by low trees and scrub. During the approach march to the position there were several skirmishes and the base was mortared and subjected to probing attacks during the first night. These attacks failed to breach the defences and were defeated by company small-arms fire, and canister and machine-gun fire from Centurion tanks deployed with the infantry. A second, much more substantial attack followed two nights later. A North Vietnamese regiment launched a diversionary attack from the south followed by a major two-battalion assault on Balmoral from the north-west and north-east, accompanied by accurate mortar and intense rifle-propelled grenade fire. The grenades exploded in the trees above the Australians, who by this time fortunately had good overhead cover – troops resupplying ammunition and attending to the wounded, however, were exposed to it. These attacks were repelled by the Australians employing a combination of infantry (especially machine guns and mortars), armour, aircraft, and artillery fire, at considerable cost to the enemy. The Australians lost two killed (by enemy mortar fire on the first night) and six wounded in the actions at Balmoral. Enemy losses were estimated at around 70.

After these defeats at Coral and Balmoral in late May, North Vietnamese activity in the vicinity of the two fire support bases subsided. As a consequence, Australian and New Zealand operations at Coral and Balmoral were suspended on 6 June.

Further Reading

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