FIRE SUPPORT BASE CORAL. A GUNNER'S STORY.

At the end of my teacher training in 1966 I was informed that instead of teaching in the coming year I would be in the 7th intake of National Service, commencing in January 1967. After recruit training at Kapooka near Wagga Wagga, I was sent to Sydney's North Head to undergo corps training for the Australian Artillery. There I did some basic work with the guns and more intensive training with survey work before being posted to 102 Field Battery at Holsworthy as a battery surveyor and informed that we were off to Vietnam in early 1968.

The battery arrived in Vietnam in early March but my story begins at dawn on the 12th May 1968 when I was a gunner at Fire Support Base Harrison in the province of Bien Hoa. The title Fire Support Base was given to a position where either mortars or artillery were placed so that they were able to fire in support of other allied troops. Generally the Battery was established in a central site on a clearing in the bush to support the companies of 1RAR which did patrolling and set up ambush positions. The battalions always kept within the eleven kilometre range of our guns. As the artillery had to be either lowered into place by Chinook helicopters or brought by road in trucks, this together with the very loud sounds emitted by the guns firing their position was known to the enemy. As a result the fire support base had to be protected with strong defences.

Word had come through that we were moving to a new location further into Bien Hoa. For all previous operations the battery had moved to and from the base camp at Nui Dat. This gave us the opportunity of packing and preparing the day before the move. On this occasion we did not have that luxury. On moving day at Harrison the Command Post had to be dismantled, all the sand bags had to be slashed or recycled, sleeping holes had to be filled, barbed wire had to be rolled up, ammunition stacked etc., all before the helicopters came to move the battery. It was exhausting work under the unrelenting hot sun.

When we were ready to leave, the Americans could not provide us with the helicopters as an American division was in a fierce contact with the enemy not far from where we were headed and they needed the helicopters for their own use. This was our first indication that the enemy were present and in force. It was frustrating to be sitting in the sun and waiting when there would be so much work on arrival at the new position.

The battery selected an advance party of about five soldiers including the Gun Position Officer, Ian Ahern and a battery surveyor, Jeff Dwyer. They went off in an Iroquois to the proposed new position. The position had been secured by the Americans and elements of 3RAR. However, on viewing the site the artillery men saw that it was covered with trees and completely unsuitable for the 105mm Howitzers.

This unsuitable site was selected from a helicopter by the battalion commanders the previous day. With so much enemy activity the pilot refused to fly at a lower height to survey the position more effectively. The actions of the experienced pilot provided another indication that the enemy were present and that we had to be careful and respect them.

After some confusion and radio calls the advance party met with the advance party from Headquarter battery which consisted of another five soldiers. Headquarter Battery facilitated the smooth running of all the gun batteries in the Regiment and did not have its own artillery.

Off they trekked in this enemy-held country to find a site to locate the battery with its six guns. The day was passing and the guns needed to be brought to the new site as quickly as possible. After walking for a couple of kilometres they found a clearing suitable for the guns. On the walk they saw several places where the enemy had over a hundred freshly dug holes. It seemed that these holes were for the enemy to jump into to escape artillery fire. This was a further indication that they were close by and probably watching every move.

Usually, before the guns arrived, the fire support base area was secured by infantry. However, in this case the position was secured by an unlikely group of artillery men.

Back at FSB Harrison, the Chinooks arrived much to the relief of all concerned and began the shuttle service of moving the battery. The new FSB was to be called Coral.

The battery was arriving much too late to do all the necessary work and have its usual defences completed by nightfall. Firstly the guns had to be lowered into their correct position and set up to fire in the right direction, ammunition bays constructed, ammunition sorted and stacked, the command post dug with big beams providing the roof, and many other tasks for the battery and individuals. Due to the late arrival, some of the important jobs were not completed- there were no barbed wire defences, three howitzers had no soil pushed up around them to provide protection and machine gun pits out front were incomplete. What I did not know at the time was that there were no defences placed behind the battery at all. That is where I was to be camped with other command post personnel.

While the battery was getting itself prepared for its function of supporting the infantry, the companies of 1RAR were landing and patrolling to ambush positions well away from the battery. Last to land were elements of 1RAR mortar platoon. Their job setting up would be similar to ours but on a smaller scale. They too did not have enough time to establish all of their usual defences.

When nightfall came we were exhausted. The day’s events had caught up with us. Dismantling the former fire support base, waiting in the sun for the move, then rushing to establish a new FSB before night fall made us crave for sleep. Four battery surveyors- Peter Kiernan, Jeff Dwyer, Trevor Bryant and I - had had no time to dig individual sleeping holes. We planned to lie on top of the ground and dig holes the following day. Captain Brooks was passing and saw us on the ground and told us to dig a hole to sleep in. He must have noticed how tired we looked as he told a couple of Alpha gunners to help us dig. We dug one pit about fifty centimetres dip and wide enough to fit our four smelly bodies.

At FSB Coral that night there was a total of about one hundred and thirty soldiers, that is, about twenty with the mortars, twenty with headquarter Battery, ten with 131 Div Locating Battery and eighty with 102 Field Battery.

It took no time before my three mates and I were fast asleep. Early the next morning while it was still dark, I heard the guns fire, a sound I had heard many times before so I rolled over and continued to sleep, not realising the significance of the fire mission. One of our forward observers with D/1RAR, Lt Gordon Alexander had called for the fire mission as a well armed group of enemy had fired rockets in their direction causing many casualties. What was unknown was that they were part of a much larger force moving south to attack FSB Coral. After the fire mission finished the guns were left facing north, that is, the direction of the attack that was to come.

I was abruptly woken again, it was still dark, and the distinctive sounds were like those I had heard in war movies. The ratter tat tat of machine guns, the crack of rifles, mortars whistling and exploding and the roar and crash of rockets. It was all very close. Welcome to war.

I scrambled for my rifle, my best friend at the time. The four of us still half asleep and somewhat confused crawled through the long grass to the side of the road which was about eight metres away with a convenient ditch running beside it. We were on the back boundary of the battery. In the past we had always a company of infantry guarding our rear. We could not remember noticing them in this position. Were our infantry there? They could not be seen.

It became obvious that the shooting was happening on the other side of the battery, the northern side, as indicated by the volume of noise, tracer bullets and rockets flying overhead and through the base coming from that direction. The North Vietnamese had taken advantage of the situation. With the FSB being so vulnerable without any protective infantry and with limited defensive installations, the North Vietnamese soldiers attacked in strength. One rocket hit Alpha gun's ammunition bay which was only about ten metres away. In it were over two hundred rounds of high explosive, phosphorous, illuminating and splintex rounds. If it exploded we would all be dead. Trevor ran over with some others to extinguish the flames but the fire was too fierce. Jeff had an M60 machine gun pointing out in the darkness looking for possible targets while the noise of war continued on the other side of the position. We discussed whether to move away from the burning ammunition bay or stay. We decided to stay as we had the command post directly behind us and it had to be protected.

Jeff handed the machine gun to me as he wanted to go to the other side of our position to find out what was happening. He returned about fifteen minutes later with the news that hundreds of the enemy had attacked in extended lines and had overrun the mortar position and our Foxtrot gun. Echo gun had its barrel aimed on Foxtrot gun and been given the orders to fire if the enemy tried to use it. The crews on our two machine posts managed to fire a burst at the attackers and get back to the relative safety of the gun

position. Bravo Gun position was hit by a volley of rockets which damaged it and made it difficult to manoeuvre. In addition Delta gun was firing over open sights [that is, straight at the target] a mixture of splintex and high explosive rounds. Meanwhile many of the gunners were also firing small arms at the attacking force and carrying rounds to resupply Delta gun. Echo gun was also given the task of firing splintex across the mortar position as the mortar men were in a desperate battle for survival.

The cobra gunships, [fast moving helicopters with devastating fire power], Spooky [a slow-moving aeroplane also with lots of fire power] and jets that were dive bombing anti-aircraft gun positions provided a spectacular sight. They also lifted our spirits. We heard later that the burning ammunition bay of Alpha gun had provided a marker to guide the aircraft to their targets.

As time continued the noise lessened as the enemy disengaged the contact and finally it became obvious that they had retreated. Gunners did sweeps across the front of the battery to clear any enemy left behind and reclaimed Foxtrot gun.

Now the gunners could go on the offensive as fire missions were called to fire on the fleeing enemy. At first only four guns could answer the call. With a lot of swearing and cursing and brute strength Geoffrey Grimish and the crew turned Bravo gun with its damaged wheels to be able to join the fire mission. Foxtrot gun was damaged too much to join in and together with Bravo was replaced later in the day.

While our guns were firing I stood on the road as helicopters landed on the road nearby to take away the wounded and the nine Australians killed. It was hard to believe that all this was real. Sergeant Creek came over to the four of us and told us to go and assist in the burial of the dead enemy. At the time I had just opened a can of baked beans. In retrospect it seemed a strange thing to do. When I saw the sight at the front of our position I poured the contents on the ground. There in front of me were over fifty enemy dead some only a couple of metres from Delta gun. I know I took part in these burials but my memory has blocked it out.

It was now daybreak on the morning of the 13th May, and I was standing in a panorama of ground-hugging smoke haze with the sight of death and destruction and the strong smell of cordite. It was only 24 hours ago that I was at FSB Harrison, a place of everyday army routine. It had been a long twenty four hours.

We were too busy building our defences and repairing the damage resulting from the attack to ask questions like why were the warning signs of a very active and aggressive enemy not heeded and why the appropriate action to prevent the situation was not taken by the decision makers. For example why didn't we have infantry support? Some one some where made a big error. There was no process to complain.

Later that morning the remainder of the Task Force arrived on site. From our position near the road I could see the long line of transport vehicles approaching and was extremely relieved to see that we would be much safer the next night. There were

Armoured Personnel Carriers, trucks with soldiers, ammunition and equipment, the engineers, and most uplifting of all were the American 155mm mobile guns. In addition, the companies of 1RAR were brought back from ambush positions to the FSB to form a defensive perimeter. It was an extremely busy day preparing defences and getting all of the equipment functioning. Everybody knew that the attack by a highly trained, well armed and determined enemy was likely to be repeated.

Peter Kiernan and I decided to dig our personal sleeping pits in the ditch beside the road. We thought it was a great idea as the ground was low and required less digging. Word had come to say that we were to expect a repeat of last night's attack as there had been nearby contacts with enemy reconnaissance patrols during the day. As a consequence a fifty percent stand to was called. However, in our area there was a hundred percent stand to. It wasn't that we were keen soldiers! That night the wet season began and we found that the ditch where our sleeping holes were located was actually a drain and our holes soon filled with water. So sitting in the rain was drier than sleeping in the hole.

Sitting in the rain was not as bad as it sounds for it was at these times soldiers talked to one another about home, their loved ones, their ambitions, life's experiences both tragic and humorous, told good jokes and bad jokes. I must add that we were not on the perimeter of the FSB. While this was happening the torrential rain was pouring incessantly and we were soaked to the bone all the time hugging our rifles trying to keep the mechanism dry and out of the mud. The enemy must not have liked the rain either as the expected attack did not eventuate. They say you learn from experience so the following day Peter and I dug another hole and this time not in a ditch or a drain.

On the third night I was rostered with Trevor Bryant to be the duty battery surveyors in the command post. Also on duty that night was a warrant officer and a signaller, possibly Phil Inman.

The Command Post was constructed by digging a hole about four metres long and two and a half metres wide and a little less than a metre deep and down the centre a trench a metre deep was dug. This meant that we could stand in the trench and operate our equipment on the earthen bench. At one end of the trench a seat was cut out for the signaller and at the other end were crude steps for the entrance. Around the hole were two layers of sand bags with a gap for the entrance and another for the tannoy wires. [The tannoy provided communication with the guns. It consisted of a microphone at the command post, wires to the six guns and speakers at the individual guns.] Across the ring of sand bags were placed 200x200mm beams and on top of these a covering of more sand bags. The whole structure was covered with a large tarpaulin to stop the weather coming in and any light going out and revealing our position.

The night shift was usually an easy one. As we generally only fired harassment and interdiction fire – commonly called H and I's. Target co-ordinates were issued earlier in the day and an earlier shift of surveyors decided on the charge to be used, and calculated the bearings and elevations for the guns to hit the target. So the duty officer and signaller

were all that was required. At the time of firing they gained permission to fire and provided the necessary information to the gunners.

The shift started about sunset and we were expecting to be relieved at 3am. All was going well as we were having a quiet time just chatting to each other and firing the H and I's. Trevor went out and sat on a chair a couple of metres from the entrance to get some fresh air. At some time early in the morning the silence was broken by the approaching fizz sound of rockets and whistling sounds which had to be either incoming artillery or mortar fire. I raced to the entrance and called out to Trevor who dived back into the command post. The mortar rounds hit the ground a fraction later, peppering the tarpaulin covering the entrance with hundreds of shrapnel holes. The sound was deafening and it was so close that we could feel the compression waves. You could say our cover was blown, as our position was visible to the outside world.

At the same time machine guns and small arms fire erupted and a fire mission came over the radio from a forward observer. The signaller gave us the co-ordinates and we started calculating the range and bearing. But where was our officer? He was on the floor of the command post in a state which made him incapable of offering leadership. Some call it shellshock. I grabbed the tannoy to call fire mission but the line was dead as the shrapnel had destroyed it. The signaller advised us that he only had the battery net available. Our other network the Regimental net had been knocked out. The Regimental network monitors what is happening with the Batteries to ensure correct procedures are followed and gives permission to fire. So there we were with no functioning officer, no tannoy and limited radio frequencies. We were not taught how to deal with this at artillery corps training.

We could not leave our post to tell others of the situation for this was our station until relieved. I went over to the entrance and called out as loudly as I could 'fire mission battery'. There was no response. Still the noise of battle continued outside. The FSB was again fighting for survival as it had two nights earlier. The crescendo of rockets and mortars exploding and the loud sounds of rifle and machine gun fire were extremely close. It seemed that the FSB was being overrun again. There we were in the CP with light streaming out through the gaps in the sand bags and holes in the tarpaulin. It is moments like this that you think you are not going to survive the night and briefly think of the loved ones at home.

Suddenly, our Gun position Officer, Ian Ahern burst into the CP running through the hail of mortar explosions and told the duty officer to help resupply the guns with ammunition. Ian quickly became aware of the situation and told me to cock my rifle and point it at the entrance and shoot if I saw any enemy. I guess it was necessary but how do you tell friend from foe when they are in the dark. I figured if they shot at us then I would fire back.

The shrapnel-splattered tarpaulin covering the entrance began to move. Was it friend or foe? In jumped Sergeant Elgar. I did not fire my rifle, thank God. That was so close! He said that Charlie Gun was ready for a fire mission. That was music to our ears. At last we

were communicating with the guns. Quickly a voice relay system was organised to get the information to the guns. In no time the guns were adjusting fire and firing on the target. Now we were doing the job we were trained to do.

It wasn't long before we had a second fire mission so we had three guns firing on the original target and three on the next. Then we had a call for another fire mission, this time for illumination. My first reaction was that we could not calculate three fire missions simultaneously, however, with suggestions from Trevor and the lieutenant, and quick manipulation of our equipment and with our high level of training we accomplished it without making errors. This was not textbook stuff. It was survival for the FSB and providing support to those who were in desperate need. For every adjustment to the firing the surveyors had to recalculate and the bearing and elevation of the guns altered. The radio messages kept coming for the three fire missions, adjust fire, add two hundred metres, fire, drop fifty metres, fire, five rounds fire for effect, fire, add two hundred metres ten rounds fire for effect, so on for hours and hours.

We fired more than a thousand rounds. We could not afford to make mistakes for lives were dependent on our accuracy. All of these adjustment and orders were being relayed by gunners and other ranks calling out the instructions from one to another right across the whole position to the Gun Sergeants. How fantastic to have the battery doing their job under extreme conditions. The battery had overcome enormous difficulties to answer the desperate calls on the radio.

While we were concentrating on our individual jobs, Gunner Bruce Hicks stumbled in with blood streaming down his head. A call was made for Doc McKenzie to attend to the injured soldier. He had been hit by mortar shrapnel. After Doc McKenzie was finished with him he looked like a Sikh with a turban around his head. Fortunately he was a signaller so he stayed and assisted Phil.

Much of the battle outside was happening right in front of the battery. In between A and C companies of 1RAR was a large gap in the perimeter which the companies were protecting with machine gun fire. The enemy must have been aware of the gap because that is where they concentrated their attack. The battle was fierce with losses on both sides. Much of the enemy small arms fire was directed straight towards the battery as indicated by the waves of green tracer bullets flying into the position.

The sun was beginning to appear so the enemy were withdrawing from the offensive resulting in the sounds of war lessening. There was no respite for the gunners though. The forward observers studied their maps and calculated by the terrain where the enemy were likely to assemble or retreat. So the guns continued to fire on the withdrawing enemy. It was at this time that I felt my concentration waning and I asked to be replaced.

I cannot remember what I did next, I guess I would have made a large brew of coffee and sat down with my mates to discuss the night's events. After three nights with no sleep the body would have been crying out for sleep but the adrenalin would not let that happen. There was more work and repairs to be done.

After that night the FSB was not threatened again with ground assaults but the battery was mortared several more times. These occurred in the morning when there was conflict somewhere else and the enemy tried to stop us firing in support, particularly when FSB Balmoral was attacked. However, they never stopped the guns firing. Daily 1RAR patrols made contact with the determined enemy and daily there seemed to be casualties. This kept the gunners on their toes for with every contact there was the call for assistance and this could mean hours of firing before the engagement had ended. It seemed that the North Vietnamese had a large base nearby which they wanted to protect at any cost. The infantry kept probing at the enemy and developed successful techniques incorporating our Centurion Tanks and the artillery which proved to be quite decisive. Towards the end of our stay at FSB Coral it seemed that the enemy had had enough and vacated their base.

It has been said and written that the battles in and around Fire Support Base Coral were the biggest, bloodiest and most protracted fought by Australians in Vietnam. The operation began on the 12th May and finished on the 6th June 1968.There were nineteen Australians killed and many more wounded in and around FSB Coral. A quote in a Department of Veterans' Affairs publication says 'the battles were unprecedented in the Australian experience in Vietnam'.

In May 2008 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the battles at FSBs Coral and Balmoral there was a weekend of official functions in Canberra for all the units involved. On the first night we were welcomed by the Prime Minister at Parliament House and provided with refreshments and congratulatory speeches.

The next day was a more solemn experience for all of us with many dignitaries at the Vietnam Memorial. In the afternoon the artillery men went to the Australian War Memorial to see a new display which was dedicated to the actions of 102 Battery at FSB Coral. It was amazing to see film and photos of people you knew in such a revered place. There was ex-Gunner John Hahn and his granddaughter getting their photograph taken in the museum in front of a picture on display of John in action forty years ago. There too were some of the crew of Foxtrot gun posing in front of the actual gun that was overrun by the enemy on the first night at Coral.

The next day we assembled early in the day at Mount Pleasant on the grounds of the Defence Force Academy for a special and moving ceremony. Major General Michael Jeffery, the Governor General of Australia, in front of artillery veterans from Vietnam and the families of the artillery men who were lost at FSB Coral approved the Honour Title 'Coral' for 102 Field Battery, the first such honour to be bestowed upon an Australian unit.

Stan Carbines ex Gunner 2785732 102 Field battery 1968