

## THE LUCK AND FORTUNES OF WAR – A LOGISTICIAN’S PERSPECTIVE

By

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**Figure 1: David Catterall ~ 2018**

This story is submitted to outline how the ‘fortunes of luck’ sometimes go to make up war experiences that result with a ‘good ending’! Despite what occurred at the battles of Fire Support Bases (FSB) ‘Coral’ and ‘Balmoral’, between 13 and 28 May, 1968, a good outcome occurred, for at least one National Service Infantryman of D Company (Coy), 3RAR, at the battles of FSB Balmoral.

PTE Paul Donnelly, a Machine Gunner with 11 Pl D Coy 3RAR, became aware of my role as we talked over our experiences that eventuated from the heavy attacks upon his platoon’s position at FSB Balmoral over the nights of 25/26 and 27/28 May 1968. To quote the words of Paul himself, ‘...the fire power of those tanks, on both those nights, helped save our bacon’! Perhaps all of my Platoon, and even many of my mates in our D Coy position, could have lost their lives, had it not been for those tanks’!

His statement was made to me, almost 40 years later, when he learnt that, as a logistician in support of the Centurion Tank Squadron, I had possibly, in an ‘indirect way’, contributed to the success of the defeat by D Coy 3 RAR, from the attacks by 33 North Vietnamese Army Regiment upon its position at FSB Balmoral over those two nights in May 1968.

It all eventuated from the fact that, one of the tanks of 2Lt Mick Butler’s, 2 Troop (Tp) of C Sqn, 1 Armoured Regiment was located ‘...very close by’, to his MG Pit position, on the morning of the regimental-sized attack upon FSB Balmoral on 26 May, 1968. The repaired tank also supported D Coy, 3RAR during the attack on FSB Balmoral two days later on the morning of 28 May.

Unbeknown to Paul, I was at FSB Balmoral, only the day before the attack on 26 May, to deliver a much needed Repair Part to a tank of Mick Butler’s Troop that had caused its Gunnery Control Equipment (GCE) to become dysfunctional from a battle it had been involved in the previous day. Whether it was the tank that was located close by to him, or another that was also close by, that received the Repair Part I had delivered, we will never ever know, but what was important, was that some nearly 40 years later, we were all still around to talk about it...‘the luck and fortunes of war’ as it had affected at least three of us!

I go back then to the arrival of 1RAR at FSB Coral in Area of Operations (AO) Bondi, which commenced late on the afternoon of 12 May, 1968. This was much later in the day than planned as 3RAR, the initial battalion to be deployed, was also delayed due to lack of helicopters that were committed in a major US battle to the west of the proposed Australian AO. 3 RAR’s A, B and C Coys had commenced to move out to its AO Manly to the west of 1RAR as it began to arrive at FSB Coral. Battalion Headquarters (BHQ), D and Support (Sp) Coys remained in location slightly southwest of 1 RAR’s HQ, Sp Coy and 102 Field Battery (Fd Bty). Fortuitously for 1 RAR, 161 Fd Bty, RNZA remained in close proximity to FSB Coral together with 3 RAR’s two sections of its Mor Pl with the Assault Pioneer (Aslt Pnr) Pl as its protective element. Both the NZ Bty and 3 RAR’s mortars provided close fire support to the embattled elements of 1 RAR and 102 Fd Bty during the first major attack. On the early morning of 13 May, 1968, a regimental plus, sized attack was launched, with 1 RAR’s Mor Pl and 102 Fd Bty bearing the full brunt of it. After this attack, 3 RAR’s BHQ, its Sp Coy together with 161 Fd Bty and Captain Bruce Richard’s troop of APCs moved into AO Manly and occupied FSB Coogee.

The attack on FSB Coral was so ferocious that the Task Force, by first light the next morning, had suffered 9 soldiers killed and 28 wounded. 1RAR Mortar Platoon had suffered the heaviest losses (5 killed, 8 wounded) and in the attack upon a gun position of 102 Fd Bty, the Number 6 Gun had been captured. After heavy counterattacks throughout that morning by the Australians, that same gun was 'won back' before first light that morning.

Together with their supporting Artillery, Cavalry, Engineer, Signals, Logistics and other elements that continued to arrive into the area from 13 May onwards, both Battalions became engaged in very heavy actions through their 'Reconnaissance-in-Force' patrolling within the Area of Operations (AO) surrounding each FSB location.

There was a considerable rearrangement of all defensive positions throughout the AO, including the re-positioning of the Gun Batteries of 12 Fd Regt to enable direct support between both Battalions. 3RAR, less 161 Fd Bty RNZA which was re-located to FSB Coral, was moved, very reluctantly, (according to its CO, Lieutenant Colonel 'Jim' Shelton, MC) from the West of FSB Coral (named FSB Cogee) to its North to AO Newport. This became FSB Balmoral from 24 May, 1968.

Initially, this led to many of the problems that arose for the Australian Force over the next several days of the Operation in the South-East sector of Bien Hoa Province. The AO surrounding Coral/Balmoral was some 130 kilometres to the North-West, of the main Australian Task Force Base, at Nui Dat, in Phuoc Tuy Province. It was there that the tanks had been held back to provide a 'mobile defence' for that base, together with the newly arrived 4RAR/NZ Battalion that had just replaced 2RAR/NZ Battalion.

The Australians had therefore arrived 'onto the big-scene' as it continued with operations after that first attack. Aggressive, active patrolling was embarked upon by both 1RAR and 3RAR, whilst the defensive positions of unit locations, within each FSB, were upgraded and improved. This was to the extent that both FSB's would be capable of repelling any further similar-sized major attacks to that which was experienced on the morning of 13 May. There was no need to worry about whether there would be an attack but rather, when, and from what direction!

That next regimental-sized attack upon FSB Coral came on the night 15/16 May: this time from the South-East, at 2.40 am. In this attack, the Australians lost 5 soldiers killed and 19 were wounded. Because the situation had become so dire, in relation to the firepower that was available to the infantry battalions in their by now, aggressive patrolling outside of the FSB's, the tanks were warned, on 21 May, 1968, to be prepared to move forward to join in Operation 'Thoan Thang 1'. The Squadron of Centurion tanks that was deployed was quite 'limited'. It was made up of 2 x Troops of 4 tanks (1 Troop (Tp) commanded by Lt Gerry McCormack and 2 Tp, commanded by 2Lt Mick Butler). The third Troop; comprising 2 x tanks from the HQ Squadron and 2 x Dozer Tanks from Special Equipment Tp was commanded by 2Lt John 'Rooster' Wilson. The Squadron eventually commenced deployment to FSB Coral on 22 May, 1968. The decision to deploy the tanks was due to the major regimental sized attacks suffered at FSB Coral as mentioned on the above dates.

The Deputy Commander of the Task Force, Colonel D.B. Dunstan, who took over command of the Task Force when Brigadier R L Hughes had departed for R&R on 18 May, had decided to call the tanks forward so that they could give strong and mobile, close fire-support to the infantry in attacks on the bunker systems (of which there were many!) in the AO. The tanks would also provide much needed firepower to the defensive positions when harboured inside the FSBs of an evening.

What a stroke of genius for my National Service infantry friend from D Coy, 3RAR, that the Deputy Commander took over command and ordered the tanks up from Nui Dat, almost immediately! But it was still to get better for him!

The tanks departed Nui Dat, in Phuoc Tuy Province, on the morning of 22 May. After an overnight stay over at Long Binh, which was virtually half-way to the AO, the tanks arrived at FSB Coral in the late afternoon of 23 May. The entire outlook for continued offensive operations had now changed and the presence of the tanks, although noisy, smelly, loud and cumbersome, seemed to lift the morale of everybody; especially 3RAR as it commenced to occupy FSB Balmoral, approximately 5 kilometres to the North of FSB Coral from 24 May.

On 25 May, 2Tp, C Sqn was escorted by B Coy of 1RAR; commanded by Captain Bob Hennessy, to join 3RAR at FSB Balmoral. On its way to FSB Balmoral, the joint Infantry/tank force (consisting of a 4 tank troop, led by 2Lt Mick Butler) and Hennessy's depleted company, became engaged in a heavy fight at a bunker complex. Once again, the tanks proved their worth by providing mobile and effective close fire-support that enabled one of the company's platoon, that was 'pinned down' by accurate and effective machine-gun fire from the bunker system, to be extracted from the battle. The tanks provided enormous suppressive firepower during the battle, through their application of lethal and deadly 'canister' rounds, upon the enemy's machine-gun positions.

From this encounter, one of Butler's tanks had incurred some damage to its GCE to the extent it had become seriously dysfunctional and its GCE Panel needed to be replaced; urgently!

The Stores Section that I commanded, which was part of the supporting Workshop of the Squadron, had deployed a 'Scaling' of specially selected Repair Parts (about 1,500 items) forward with the tanks for Operation 'Thoan Thang 1'. This became necessary because of the daily resupply tonnages that went forward to the tanks during Operations Pinnaroo and Ashgrove Tram, in the Long Hai hills, earlier in the year, shortly after the tanks had arrived in February, 1968. It had been decided to increase the range of Repair Parts in the Forward Scaling, so as to reduce the significant amounts of daily replenishment that needed to be supplied from Nui Dat to the tanks deployed forward on those Operations.

A GCE Panel was included in that scaling. But the soldier sent forward to operate it, Private Eric Bishop was unfamiliar with identifying Centurion tank parts. Eric was also unaware of how the GCE Panel would have been 'crated or boxed', and therefore, 'what to look for'. Since I had gained that 'familiarity' with tank parts from an almost 2 year posting at the Bandiana Area Workshop, I considered it essential that I should go forward to FSB Coral, (where the Forward Stores section was), in order to get the Panel to the tank of Mick Butler's Troop up at FSB Balmoral. Besides, it was the only spare GCE Panel 'in country' and it desperately needed to be found!

In the meantime, and because there was a damaged tank back at Nui Dat that had already started being 'cannibalized' of its parts; to provide other 'higher priority' tanks with 'essential and important Repair Parts on an operationally justified' basis, a GCE Panel had been taken from that 'crock' tank and sent forward with the evening re-supply run up to FSB Coral the previous night.

Despite that Panel having been forwarded the day before, (on 24 May), I still decided to go forward to FSB Coral to assist Private Bishop to find the GCE Panel in our Stores Section Forward Scaling. I flew forward to FSB Coral early on the morning of 25 May, by Iroquois helicopter, and by the early afternoon: we had located the GCE Panel that was needed by one of Mick Butler's tanks. Sqn HQs, at FSB Coral, consequently tasked a Bell Sioux (Possum) helicopter for me to get the GCE Panel up to FSB Balmoral and get it to the RAEME Forward Fitters Crew, supporting Mick Butler's troop, in its M113A

Recovery Vehicle. Fortunately, for me, I was immediately dispatched back to FSB Coral during which another Infantry/Tank battle was raging in between the two FSB positions. This was at the bunker system that had been located the previous day, by Bob Hennessy's Coy and Mick Butler's Tp, on their advance from FSB Coral to FSB Balmoral. As I flew back to FSB Coral from FSB Balmoral early in the afternoon, Gerry McCormack's 1 Tp, together with Tony Hammett's D Coy, 1RAR, were in the process of destroying that complex.

Having delivered the GCE Panel to the RAEME Fitters Crew, I was satisfied that we had accomplished our mission! In the meantime, a Napalm strike was called in onto the bunker system shortly after I had returned to FSB Coral and I could feel the rumble of the ground under me as the bombs were dropped and the heat of the Napalm was evident in the air! Very scary for a simple logistician!

Whilst I was 'safely' ensconced back at FSB Coral, in the 'ballroom' sized bunker that Eric Bishop had developed for himself over the few days he had been there, I settled into a late afternoon preparation. This consisted of an early evening meal, before retiring early; given the circumstances, for hopefully, a reasonable night's sleep! This seemed sensible, since I could not return to Nui Dat until the following morning, at least, due to the battle activity surrounding us and flights back to Nui Dat had been suspended until at least then.

I was quite at ease with all of this but really questioned why I had gone so far forward to FSB's Coral and Balmoral to get the GCE Panel to Mick Butler's Troop; despite the fact that the cannibalized GCE Panel, from the 'crock' tank back at Nui Dat, might have already got there before me! Again, another unknown!

We were all never to know! But the tanks that night (25/26 May 1968), at FSB Balmoral, caused so much havoc upon the attack, by an estimated Battalion-sized force on the 3RAR, D Company position. Mick Butler's Tp, with its replaced GCE Panel, had played a very important role against that attack which commenced at 3.45am on the morning of 26 May. That battle raged for most of that morning, until first light, when the NVA withdrew from its unsuccessful attack.

Whilst the saving of Paul Donnelly's life; and that of his 3RAR mates, was occurring over at FSB Balmoral, about only 5 kilometres away, at FSB Coral where I was, I became ever so grateful for the overhead protection that Eric Bishop's bunker offered me that night! This was because, for about 15 minutes between 4.15 and 4.30 am, a suppressing barrage was placed upon FSB Coral from Mortars, Recoilless Rifles and Rocket Propelled Grenades. Had I not been able to personally get back to that bunker, who knows what could have happened to me? A Meteor Engine (for tanks) in the Forward Scaling was damaged in that attack, from an indirect hit, and needed to be evacuated back to Nui Dat the next day.

3RAR, at FSB Balmoral, had suffered 3 dead and 14 wounded. By the time the NVA evacuated their positions; having abandoned their attack, they had removed many dead and wounded bodies. This was evident by the amount of 'drag-marks' on the battle site next morning. Shortly after 'first light', just before 5.00 am that morning, the initial Clearing Patrols discovered 6 dead NVA. The assumption that many dead bodies had probably been removed by the NVA themselves was based upon the large quantity of enemy weapons, ammunition and equipment that was also recovered that morning.

The tanks, with their effective and direct firepower upon enemy targets; being identified by the nearby Infantry, were responsible for the annihilation of the attacking enemy upon the D Coy, 3RAR position throughout that morning. This was again, especially from the deadly 'canister' rounds that were fired into them at virtually point blank range. The NVA barrage upon FSB Coral, only 5 kilometres away, for those 15 minutes, killed 1 soldier and another was wounded.

Although I returned to FSB's Coral and Balmoral again on 29 May, I was not there the day before when on that morning, Paul and Mick endured the experience of another (and final) attack on FSB Balmoral. The Australians in that attack had lost 1 killed and 8 wounded. 42 NVA were found dead on that battlefield and 7 prisoners were taken. Many of those NVA soldiers killed were only aged between 16 and 17 years old. This was noted by the Authors in the book, 'On the Offensive', that it was '...evidence that the People's Army of North Vietnam, had begun to draft 15 year-old boys for service into combat units'. I will never forget the mass graves that were being prepared by our Engineers for those bodies of such young men (boys) to be placed into as I returned back to Nui Dat that afternoon.

Other than thinking about the disturbing things I experienced and witnessed back in May, 1968, from time to time, I did not think about anything specifically until I bumped into Paul Donnelly, in late 2008, when we had our initial discussion in the Victorian Office of the TPI Association.

Who will ever know whether it was that GCE Control Panel that I got to Mick Butler's Troop; from the Stores section Forward Scaling on 25 May, or whether it was the 'cannibalized' Panel from the 'crock' tank back at Nui Dat that had been forwarded from there the day before. Regardless, the life of Paul Donnelly and his D Coy, 3RAR mates had been saved by the tanks of 2 Tp, C Sqn, 1 Armd Regt!

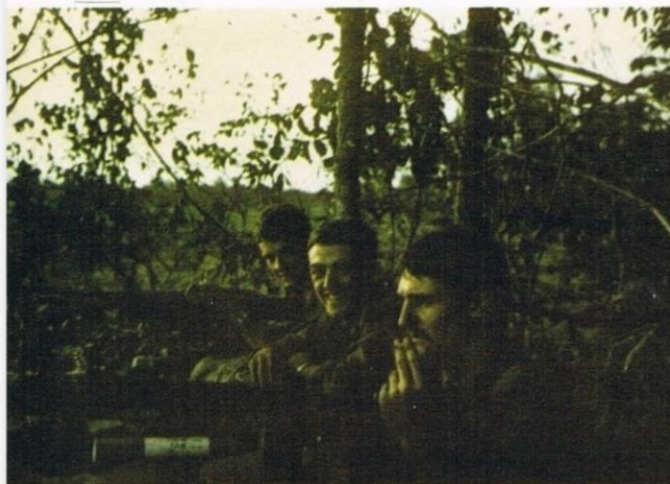
Was it also fortuitous that the Task Force commander went on R&R, and the Deputy Commander decided to call the tanks forward from Nui Dat; virtually immediately that he took command, up to Coral/Balmoral?

The answers to all these questions will never be known, except that '...what happened, happened!'

and all the major units involved in the battles at 'Coral/Balmoral' received the right to 'Battle Honours' for their roles in those battles. Other than Paul, Mick and myself; there were plenty of others, as well, who could count themselves 'lucky and fortunate' to have survived such an experience.

Either way, in about 2008, when Paul and I first spoke to each other about the 'luck of coincidence', that led to what occurred at the battle of Coral/Balmoral on the nights of 25/26 and 27/28 May, 1968, we were still there to remember it all and to be able to talk about it!

*11 Platoon D Company machine gun pit on morning after second attack on Balmoral (front to rear — Pte Bryant, Pte Robertshaw and Pte Donnelly).*



*Figure 2: 11 Pl D Coy MG Group ~ FSB Balmoral.  
Rear ~ Paul Donnelly.*

David Catterall  
OCS Class of Dec '65



## PHOTO GALLERY



*Figure 3: 3 RAR move to FSB Balmoral ~ 24 May 1968.*



*Figure 4: Move in with APCs to FSB Balmoral ~ 24 May 1968.*

**Photo Gallery cont:**



*Figure 5: 3 RAR Patrol about to move out of the defensive position at FSB Balmoral ~ 24 May 1968.*



*Figure 6: 3 RAR Mortar Sect in action during first attack on FSB Balmoral ~ Early Morning 26 May 1968.*



**Photo Gallery cont:**



*Figure 7: B 52 Crater outside of the defensive perimeter being cleared by D Coy 3 RAR Patrol.*



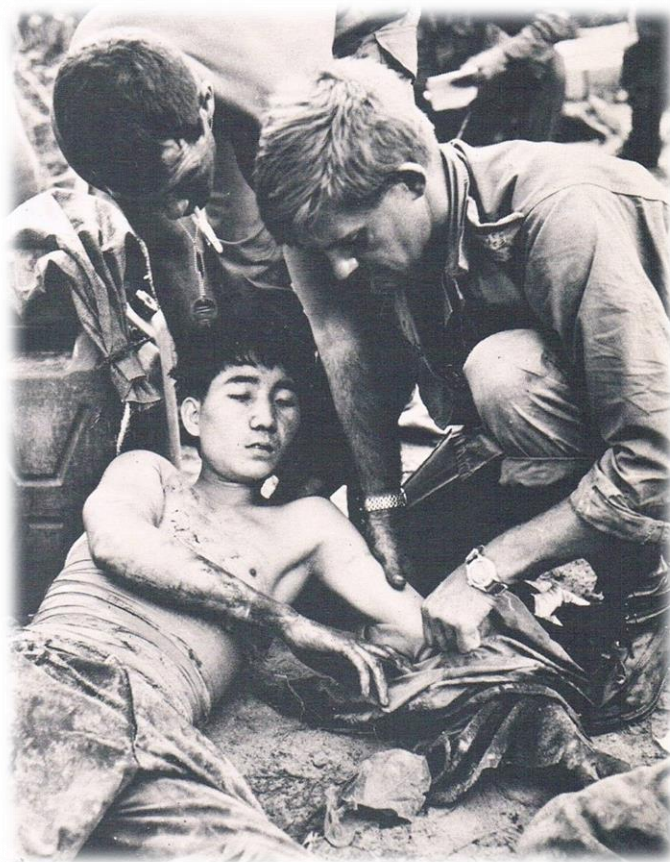
*Figure 8: Armour with Infantry clearing the battlefield at FSB Balmoral ~ Morning 28 May 1968.*



Photo Gallery cont:



*Figure 9: Tank Support ~ FSB Balmoral ~ May 1968.*



*Figure 10: Treating captured enemy at FSB Balmoral ~ Morning 28 May 1968.*

Photo Gallery cont:

## FIFTY YEARS ON



*Figure 11: Affixing the Coral Balmoral Ribbon to 1 Armd Regt's Standard ~ 13 May 2018.*



*Figure 12: May 2018 ~ Tp Comds L to R ~ Mike Butler 2 Tp, Gerry McCormack 1 Tp and Author David Catterall at 50th Year Reunion in Canberra.*

## THE UNIT CITATION FOR GALLANTRY



Governor-General of the  
Commonwealth of Australia  
and Commander-in-Chief  
of the Defence Force

*BE IT KNOWN* that with the authority of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Second,  
Queen of Australia, I have awarded the

### *UNIT CITATION for GALLANTRY*

to

**1ST AUSTRALIAN TASK FORCE (FORWARD) which includes  
Headquarters 1st Australian Task Force (Forward)  
1st and 3rd Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment  
A Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment  
C Squadron, 1st Armoured Regiment  
12th Field Regiment, Royal Regiment of Australian Artillery  
1st Field Squadron, Royal Australian Engineers  
Detachments in direct support of and located with  
1st Australian Task Force (Forward)**

*in recognition of acts of extraordinary gallantry in action*

#### *CITATION*

*For extraordinary gallantry in action in the Binh Duong/Bien Hoa Provinces of South Vietnam  
from 12 May 1968 to 6 June 1968, during Operation THOAN THANG.*

*GIVEN at Government House, Canberra  
this fifteenth day of May 2018.*

*By His Excellency's Command*

*Official Secretary to the Governor-General*

Figure 13: Awarded to Units that participated in Operation Thuan Thang 1.