

**A SEQUEL TO LTCOL DAVID CATTERALL's 'THE LUCK AND FORTUNES OF WAR  
~ A LOGISTICIAN's PERSPECTIVE' ON THIS OCS WEBSITE**

**FSPB BALMORAL ~ THE JOHN BRYANT STORY ~ REMEMBRANCE DAY 2024**

[Combined article of a Speech delivered by Major General PR (Peter) Phillips AO MC, as the Officer Commanding Delta Company 3 RAR in 1967/68, to the Canberra Rotary Club, with additional notes by retired Lieutenant Colonel OE (Ossie) Kleinig, OCS CI Dec '57, 3 RAR's Regimental Signals Officer during the battalion's first tour ].

**Major General PR Phillips AO MC (Retd) ~ Rotary Club Address:**

Today I honour the memory of the seven members of my company who were killed in action in Vietnam in 1968. Those memories are especially fresh in my mind at this time because one of my diggers, **John Bryant**, a Victorian was buried only a week ago in Sale. Here he is pictured this year in Vietnam with a Vietnamese Army captain.



John was a fine infantry soldier and son of a Kokoda veteran. John had been involved in the Battles of **Coral and Balmoral** in South Vietnam in May 1968. They were, arguably, the longest, the largest, and the bloodiest fights in which Australian troops were involved during the Vietnam war. There, we were attacked on several occasions by two regiments of the North Vietnamese Army's 7<sup>th</sup> Division as part of their Tet Offensive. Back in civvy street John became a successful irrigation contractor and a keen deer hunter. In recent years, John and some of his digger mates had been trying to locate the bodies of the enemy dead from those battles so as to bring some peace to their families. We all remembered burying large numbers of enemy dead, especially some twenty whose remains were hurriedly bulldozed into a nearby B-52 bomb crater. After several years of effort, they found only one set of remains of which was disappointing. The ABC did produce a documentary drama on this find. It was titled simply, "The Crater".

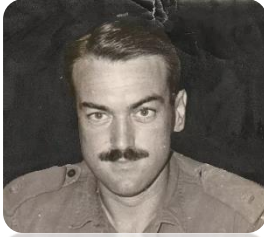
**Photo: John Bryant with two Viet sisters of a dead soldier.**



Not deterred, however, John Bryant decided to go back to Vietnam *last year* and, with help from government officials, was able to find the location of the elusive crater. He was praised and thanked by the next of kin and government officials at an interment ceremony in Hanoi. John visited me twice this year to tell me about his success.

In 2024, he used his memories of the battle and photos he had kept to assist a team of veterans from both sides and their families locate the crater where the North Vietnamese had been buried after years of searching.

His last visit to Canberra was on 2 September 2024, when I joined him at the Vietnam National Day reception at the Canberra Hyatt Hotel. There he was warmly praised by the Vietnamese Ambassador, Pham Hung Tam. John and I planned to meet this



*Maj Peter Phillips ~  
1968*

year, but his family later told me he had suddenly passed away. It followed complications from a routine operation to replace a stent in his heart. John was twenty when he served in South Vietnam at the Battle of Balmoral in D Company 3 RAR, the rifle company I had the honour to command in 1967/68. His funeral was held on 1 November 2024 in Sale, Victoria.

However, he has left a proud legacy for all of us who remain.

**Lieutenant Colonel Ossie Kleinig (Retd) ~ Additional Notes:**

These additional notes are added to complement both General Phillips’ address to Canberra Rotary as well as the previous article by our own OCS Graduate in retired Lieutenant Colonel David Catterall (OCS Clas Dec ’65). See OCS Website’s article: **“The Luck and Fortunes of War ~ A Logistician’s Perspective”**. This is located under the Menu Heading **“Topical Topics”**. Scroll to **“Bits n Pieces”**, then to David’s story under the subject heading listed above.



*Capt Ossie Kleinig  
~ 1968*

The battles at Balmoral are referred wrongly as The Battle of Fire Support Base Balmoral. In reality the battles fought in late May by 3 RAR in 1968 were as a battalion group. Our artillery direct support battery (161 Field Battery, Royal New Zealand Artillery) had been relocated to Fire Support Base Coral when the battalion was given the order to move from Fire Support Base Coogee to the new location known as Fire Support Base Balmoral in Area of Operations, Newport.

On 24 May, B and D Companies supported by an armoured personnel carrier troop were tasked to secure Landing Zone Sugar at the new location at Balmoral. Repeated contacts were made during this move. D Company, having made an early start by foot at first light, had five enemy contacts before stopping for a secure breakfast break.

The remainder of the battalion group was airlifted in and the battalion group consolidated its defensive position on the ground and started to prepare its defences late on 24 May. The troop of armoured personnel carriers (3 Troop, A Squadron, 3 Cavalry Regiment) that had moved the landing zone securing companies remained under command, as did the attached Engineer Combat Team from 1 Field Squadron. Our attachment of Task Force signallers and the Battery Commander’s and Company Forward Observer parties were on the ground at Balmoral. On 25 May the battalion group was strengthened by a troop of tanks from C Squadron, 1 Armoured Regiment.

3 RAR’s Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel JJ “Jim” Shelton MC, a Korean veteran with 3 RAR at the major Battle of Maryang San, after discussion with his Tank Troop Commander ( 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Mike Butler), and with the Armoured Personnel Carrier’s Troop Commander (Captain Bruce Richards), ordered the tanks to take a day position further back in the tree line, and then to move into a night position covering the forward defence lines ~ a successful tactic used in Korea. This was to prove decisive in the coming night battles.

The Battalion Group was as ready as possible within the limited timeframe for anything our enemy could throw at us. Troops were dug in, at least to shell scrapes, and wire obstacles had been erected. The first attack came in the early hours on the morning of 26 May. On the first night attack

every element of the defensive group was magnificent in the defence of the Balmoral position. By the second attack the field defences had been improved tremendously with all pits having overhead protection. The wire obstacles also had been further developed.

D Company, strongly supported by tanks and with artillery support now located south of Balmoral in a regimental grouping at Fire Support Base Coral, repelled the main enemy frontal thrusts on both nights. The battalion's own mortars provided excellent close fire support and counter bombardment on enemy mortar base plate positions. A Company, on the southern flank, also repelled feint attacks.

During the second major attack that occurred on 28 May, almost unbelievably, it followed the exact replica of the first attack. The enemy approached over open ground to again attack D Company's forward defence lines, with a further attempted incursion against A Company's defensive position.

Own casualties were sustained during both major attacks on 26 and 28 May due to a mortar bomb direct hit on a weapon pit during the first attack, and further heavy enemy mortar and rocket propelled grenade shelling causing many tree bursts. Sustained small arms fire added to our casualty list. However, the well-coordinated defences held under intense enemy pressure.

During the occupation at Balmoral, offensive infantry/armoured Area of Operation patrols were conducted in order to dominate the surrounding area.

The operations in the Australians' allotted area were terminated on 6 June 1968. All units involved returned to Nui Dat with priority placed on future operations in Phouc Tuy Province.

**NOTE:**

Battlefield clearance after both attacks on Balmoral was of paramount importance, not only for our own troops, but also the enemy's wounded and dead. The carnage inflicted left many of us with lifelong memories. However, for a group of D Company soldiers, this weighed heavily on their minds and they sought to at least help to ease the pain still held by the remaining close relatives of our enemy dead who had been buried on the battlefield. Thus this poignant story of John Bryant and his digger mates returning to Vietnam, not once but many times, armed with their intimate knowledge of the battlefield's location.

It took time, but for all concerned, theirs was finally

~ **MISSION ACCOMPLISHED** ~



**Photo L to R:**  
**Mike Butler, Balmoral Tank Troop Commander,**  
**Ossie Kleinig, ex RSO 3 RAR 1967/68 ~ Rye RSL 2021**