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Battles of Coral and Balmoral Part 2: Time Spent in Reconnaissance Is Rarely Wasted

Submitted by [Neil Bradley](#) on 30 January 2009 - 7:38am.

The deployment of the 1ATF can only be described as lacking both in detail planning and effective execution. I never did see the written orders, although I did find out many years later that they did exist. Everything at my level was organised by word of mouth. We did receive marked up maps, and picto maps for the area. Picto maps were made up from aerial photos, with grid lines and contour lines superimposed. They were not accurate enough for detail work, but they did let you see what was on the ground, like paddies, trees, roads and earth works. They were very useful for navigation.

Securing the LZ

B Coy 3RAR, under the command of Major Burt Irwin to which I was attached as the Direct Support (DS) Forward Observer (FO), had the task of securing the fly-in LZ. We started out immediately after first light, moving from our night defensive position some distance to the pickup LZ.

AO Surfers

AO Surfers was divided into three subsidiary AOs. AO Bondi to the south-east was to contain FSB Coral and was allocated to 1RAR. AO Manly was to the west and was allocated to 3RAR. A third AO Newport was to the north and had been left unallocated.

The area of the fly-in LZ and the subsequent FSB Coral to its immediate north-west had been secured by a small detachment from the US 1 Division known as Big Red One. They had met us as we landed as a company group. At about the same time the Recce Party from 161 Bty under the command of the Battery Captain (BK) Major Clyde Stewart and the Gun Position Officer (GPO) Lt Rod Baldwin also arrived. Other recce parties arrived from then on. There was initial confusion as the person responsible for the layout of FSB Coral, namely the 2IC 12 Fd Regt, was not there.

The fly-in LZ which was to be separate to the FSB may have been sited off an out of date Picto Map. It looked fine for the task until we arrived and found it to be a field of rubber saplings about 2m tall. These had to be cleared by hand and it held up a lot of the fly-in movement, until it was complete. The crazy part was that the area round where the FSB was to be sited was relatively free from any sort of vegetation.

Burt Irwin asked for the site to be moved, which would have been the simple solution, but this was refused. The delay probably more than anything, caused total confusion within the airlift plan. Aircraft, whose tasking was being controlled at levels above 1ATF, were diverted

to other tasks. They only came back to their fly-in task in dribs and drabs. The fly-in never really recovered.

My FO party of Bombardier Truck Carr (the older of the two Carr brothers who served in the Bty, both known as Truck) and Gunner Red Whyte, did our bit along with the rest of the rifle company, swinging machetes. There was no security as the urgency of getting troops on the ground, left no time for it. This may have had consequences later.

The Battery guns arrive

At the same time as the clearing was being undertaken, 161 Bty guns were aboard a flight of Chinook helicopters (CH47s) circling above. I was told later that the Bty Recce Party received an ultimatum from the lead CH47 to tell them where to put the guns down or they were going to have to take them away and refuel. On the reasonable assumption that an artillery battery in the hand was better than one you might not see for a long time, and because no one else seemed to be in charge, the BK made a decision to put the Bty down on what he understood to be the grid reference for the FSB.

The ground was flat and largely without trees, having been land cleared sometime in the immediate past. It provided the chance for the FSB to be built round 161 Bty as other elements of the TF arrived. Such logic it seems defies what eventually happened.

The 2IC of 12 Fd Regt RAA who had been given the task of laying out the FSB and responsibility for its defence eventually arrived on the ground. As best as I can remember this was a short while after the guns of 161 Bty. His choice of layout was novel and was some distance from where the orders indicated on the marked up maps and where 161 Bty was.

As B Coy 3RAR was on the ground cutting down rubber saplings to open up the LZ, the Regt 2IC in his wanderings came to see us. I can recall he had a very large map folded in a concertinaed way that he was flicking back and forward while we were talking to him. He was lost. He was also in my tutored opinion at the time, clearly out of his depth. He had the desperate look an Opossum gets when caught in headlights. I pointed out to him on several occasions where we were on the ground. It went straight past him. This was the first and thankfully the last time I saw the Regt 2IC during my tour. I later heard he left the RAA for some other corps.

Problematic location

Histories about the choice of Coral's location are many. As one who was there watching the mayhem develop, the stories that now get told are more to do with self justification. However the decision on where to site the remainder of Coral left 161 Bty in splendid isolation about 1500m to the West on open ground. It also meant that a rubber plantation to the east, was next door to the 1RAR Mortar Platoon and a substantial tree line about 150-200m to the south of 102 Fd Bty RAA. If they had been back in the vicinity of 161 Bty they would have had wide fields of fire available to them.

B Coy 3RAR once finished with clearing the LZ, was then directed by HQ 3RAR to move west to a vicinity to the rear of 161 Bty's position, prior to moving off to our own Area of Operations (AO). It gave us a chance to have a brew as we were well into the day and had not

eaten since the night before. This was our first stop since the early morning fly-in, having started at first light. The stop also gave me a chance to see what the Bty was up to.

The Bty had a well developed and very pragmatic approach to deployments that was different to most other artillery batteries. Gun crews went with guns and their first line ammunition, Command Post (CP) staff went with CP stores and there was a standard logistics pack both of ammunition and defence stores. An Australian battery for example would take all their personnel in two helicopters and the stores and guns separately. It is not hard to imagine how personnel and their equipments can and did get separated.

Once on the ground, 161 Bty had a set routine to get the Bty ready and defended. Everyone on the position had a job and they swung into doing their part. It was one of the big advantages that came from the continuity of keeping the battery in country and drip feeding replacements, but it also meant that the Bty was always short of manpower as soldiers were either getting ready to go home or were just arriving.

In contrast Australian artillery batteries would change over every twelve months as a whole group. While they knew what had to be done, it took time for them to establish their deployment needs and routines as they found out how different real Operations were to Australian based exercise activities. This was driven home to me on my second tour when an Australian CO about to deploy his battalion to SVN, came on an orientation visit. He remarked how much ammunition, equipment and stores the battery had which he found at a distinct variance to what they were practicing back in Australia. My simple explanation was that is the difference between peacetime exercises and operations.

With 161 Bty, field defences had been rapidly built with stage 1 wire. Protective bunds had been dozered up round each of the guns and fighting trenches were being developed. But the isolation and the lack of permanent security to the Bty rear where B Coy was temporarily located, was a concern.

Bert Irwin and I sat quietly behind the Bty position and talked about the situation that was developing round us. We had no idea what was going to happen that night, but we did have that sense of discomfort that you get when you know you are part of a stuff-up. In particular we were concerned about the isolation of 161 Bty, but equally concerned about the disorganised mayhem going on elsewhere on the emerging FSB.

D Coy 3RAR under the command of Major Peter Phillips with Martin Steeds at c/s 34 as his DS FO had been tasked to provide FSB defence within the defence plan provided by the Regt 2IC. They came in fairly late in the afternoon while we were still located behind the Bty. With their arrival about two hours before last light, we were released and directed to move off into our Area of Operation (AO) across the other side of Route 13 to our immediate west. We headed off to give ourselves a chance to set up for darkness. Meanwhile elements of 1ATF were still being flown in. The position that we had vacated behind 161 Bty was eventually filled by a platoon from D Coy 3RAR, which I understand brought a great sense of relief to the Bty.

A and C Companies of 3RAR with Mike Harvey as c/s 31 and Wally Steward as c/s 33, had been deployed on arrival into their AOs as had all the companies of 1RAR. It is hard to believe that if the intelligence of the threat had been known, that this form of deployment

would have occurred. The reality was everyone was thinking of low level, rather than something verging on mid level conventional Ops against main force units and formations.

FSB Coral attacked

As the fly-in had progressed, it had been observed by reconnaissance elements of 141 NVA Regt that were in close proximity. These were not a rag tag mob of Viet Cong, but a main force formation from the North. Well trained and well equipped by enemy standards.

The opportunity that they observed of a poorly prepared position with few infantry was too good to miss. So after getting their main elements to run about 20km as I was told in the debriefs, they formed up to attack FSB Coral under the cover of night, in the tree line to the east and the south of 102 Bty. The move was largely covered by the sound of the monsoon rain which stopped about midnight.

The fighting started at about 0230 hrs on the 13th, with the springing of an ambush by one of 1RAR companies operating in their own AO about 1000m from Coral. This was simply a mistake by a small party of the NVA and they quickly corrected by breaking off that engagement and rejoining up with their main body to attack the main position an hour later.

Fortunately for 161 Bty, the speed with which the attack was mounted by 141 NVA Regt, limited their time for recce. It seems the enemy were mostly unaware of the Bty's location, although I heard later that some of the defensive Claymore mines that were put out each night as part of the defence had been turned round. There is little doubt that if the NVA had been more thorough in their reconnaissance, the Bty could have been targeted and been at distinct risk.

The attack on Coral came in through the tree line that was close to 102 Bty RAA and the 1RAR Mortar Platoon. It is quite normal for guns to be on the perimeter, as they represent significant firepower. To site a mortar platoon in such a position is just plain madness. So it proved to be. The 1RAR Mortar Platoon with only four tubes was almost wiped out and one gun from 102 Bty was captured in the initial attack. That gun was eventually won back by the Australian gunners. While literally fighting for their lives, the three rear guns of 102 Bty were firing in support of 1RAR companies who had also come into further contact out in the AO away from the FSB.

When the battle started, B Coy 3RAR had a ring side seat. We had stopped for the night on the other side of Route 13 in an area that had been land cleared and had a series of large parallel windrows of cleared trees. These provided both protection and shelter. The windrows also provided good elevated observation over the flat cleared land to the East. For those with a sense of history, it occurred to me that we were a bit like the Washington civilians watching the first battle of Bull Run, except it was night and we did not have picnic lunches.

Full-scale battle

It quickly became apparent that what we were seeing was a bit more than an ambush or encounter battle. It involved sizable NVA forces complete with their own fire support. I can recall the plop sounds of mortars as they were fired. I recorded a compass bearing to them and called it in for a possible counter battery fire task. I both saw and heard the fiery whoosh as RPGs arced towards impact. Also, there was the faint sound of a bugle carried on the

breeze and very distinctive green tracer that was fired by the enemy to provide direction to their attack.

Most of the HQs elements were not yet deployed, but were due on the 13th. This included Arty Tac HQs, normally responsible for coordinating all fire support. It quickly became apparent that communications on the Regimental Net were not as good as they should be, especially from Coral back to Arty Tac where ever it was.

The 77-set radio in my FO Party that was used on the Regimental Net, was one of those unique sets that just happened to get everything right in the manufacturing process. Bdr Truck Carr, my Regt Sig could get communications almost anywhere. I can vouch for plus of 40km on regular occasions, from a set designed for 10 km. He told me that he had a constant battle with the Bty Sig Sgt to retain the set. I was not surprised. Truck and Red Whyte spent a good part of the night relaying messages that involved organising the air support and generally keeping the Arty Tac HQ informed.

As the situation developed, Burt Irwin and I started contingency planning for a counter attack task if 161 Bty came under attack. We were the closest, about 1500m across fairly open ground, over which we had just travelled. The move would have been OK, but because it would have been unrehearsed, it would have been messy once we got there. We were unaware of the D Coy platoon at the rear of the Bty. We both had to exercise our memories from earlier in the afternoon, of how the Bty was laid out. Fortunately for both ourselves and the Bty, it was all unnecessary.

161 Bty due to the distance of its separation from the rest of Coral was able to provide limited supporting fire to that part of Coral under attack. This was restricted by the ammo holdings as there had been no resupply and the guns only had their first line deployment allocation.

Air support was brought in from Bien Hoa – initially a flare ship and then helicopter gunships. They quickly ran out of ammunition and were finally replaced by a Spooky Gunship (DC3 type of aircraft that fired flares and mini guns out of the side door). This was the first time that we had seen this capability. It seemed to have an endless supply of flares and mini guns that fired as it slowly lumbered round. In the dark of night above the flares, even with a moon, it was difficult to see. Its own tracer made it look like dragon's breath coming from the sky with an accompanying roar from the mini gun. It was good for morale and I would not have liked to have been on the receiving end. The NVA attack lasted until dawn.

The most effective defensive close-in fires turned out to be the [splintex](#) rounds fired by the 102 Bty guns. Those stocks had been quickly expended. One history records on one occasion, while the 1RAR Mortar Platoon was being over run, the platoon commander ordered his men who were still alive to get in their shell scrapes and asked for splintex to be fired over his position from the guns of 102 Bty RAA that were next door. Splintex was fired and it cleared the mortar position of live enemy.

The reality of combat for the front guns of 102 Bty that night was that anything that went bang was fired over open sights. The next day, gunners of 102 Bty who I recently saw spoke with at a reunion told me of finding blinds and unplugged rounds (rounds that did not have fuses fitted), as well as illumination and smoke shells. Also found were the bodies of a large numbers of NVA in their attack line covered in little splintex darts.

One history put out by the Australian Department of Veterans Affairs, quotes the writings of a Major to a friend several weeks later:

The true story of the first attack on Coral will never be told – too many bastards' heads would roll. For sheer incompetence I've never seen worse.

As a result of the shambles, the whole defence of Coral was restructured. The 1RAR rifle companies were taken from their patrolling locations, back to defensive tasks on the FSB where they should have been in the first place. 161 Bty along with the HQ 3RAR, D Coy 3RAR and APCs were redeployed to a new FSB Coogee some 4 km to the north-west on the western side of Route 13. The newly arrived in country Centurion tanks and the US 155mm Self Propelled (SP) Artillery known as Husky Alpha who lived next door to the 161 Bty in Nui Dat, were called forward. It would take a number of days for them to get there across roads and bridges not built to hold such loads.

From Coogee the Bty was better able to support the deployed companies of 3RAR as well as Coral. Given what had happened at Coral and the obvious threat of main force enemy activity in the area, I was surprised that Coogee was left on its own and the other 3RAR rifle companies were not put into a defence round it. But then a Bty, a rifle company and APCs represented a lot of defensive firepower.

Second attack

One history that I have read about this period of re-defending Coral was the shortage of defence stores, especially wire, all of which had to be flown in. The history claimed the majority of what was flown in went to the HQ 1ATF. I have seen photos of wire in front of the infantry at this time, being down to one roll, without pickets or pins to hold it down and often with large gaps. Such poor defences can be and were observed by the enemy.

This drew the direction of the next attack by another NVA Regt on the night of 15/16 May. This time I was not able to observe the battle, but could hear it in the distance. It was a bigger attack, and went straight into the infantry companies of 1RAR with the least wire. The enemy fire support was also better targeted. However an integrated defensive fire plan had been worked out by 1RAR. It worked, including ground attack aircraft at night which at that time was most unusual. While the attack went on for 4 hours, the enemy was not as effective as the earlier attack on the night of the 12/13th. 161 Bty did fire in support of the defence as did 3RAR mortars.

The next day, the 1ATF Commander Brigadier Hughes went off on scheduled leave and his deputy Colonel Don Dunstan took over. Dunstan was a well experienced no nonsense soldier of good reputation and confident manner. He was destined to rise to be Chief of Army in Australia.

Operations continued in the AOs for the next few days where a number of small groups of NVA were intercepted mostly moving north away from Saigon. A Coy 3RAR with Mike Harvey (c/s 31), operating to the immediate south of Coogee, ambushed paths along a small stream that proved to be a main movement corridor. They had a lot of successful ambushes catching section and platoon size groupings.

B Coy worked further to A Coy's south-west, only had some small contacts. On 17th of May, I used 161 Bty to fire on a platoon size group that was observed moving across open paddy fields, about 2km away. It was an airburst mission that proved to be very effective. After that initial fire mission, helicopter fire teams were used to mop up those trying to escape or to drive them towards A Coy ambushes to the east. We did not see the results for several days when we discovered 6 dead and clearly a number of wounded had been moved off without their equipment.

It was the only time in two tours that I fired an observed fire task as taught in Waiouru the year before. More normally, you fired artillery missions based on sound. You would start out at a standard safety distance of 1000m from where you thought you were. Using artillery methods you could then move the artillery fire left or right a set distance. By taking compass bearings on their impacts you could gauge fairly accurately how far the rounds were impacting from you. As the fire got closer in, you would initially start receiving dead shrapnel at about 250m (still dangerous) and you knew it was really close when the live shrapnel was zinging round your ears.

After seven days, the defensive structure at Coral having been reconfigured, 161 Bty was moved back into a new location at that FSB. Tanks arrived by road along with the US 155 SP Bty. Meanwhile, 3RAR prepared for a new phase in its operations, with a move to the north-east into AO Newport and a battalion defensive position to be known as Balmoral.

Reference:
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Categories: