

charlie company's bunker action

"probably one of the most brilliant actions ever fought by an Australian rifle company"



An enemy bunker, built strong enough to withstand sustained bombardment.



Left: A small cache of captured equipment.
Below: Ken Wood, Brian Doctor, Pepe Turra, Eric Tickner, Colin Knox and Peter Hope.



Long Tan, Coral and Balmoral are names synonymous with Australian bravery and, in many cases, represent the full extent of general knowledge of Australia's involvement in Vietnam.

However, during January and February 1968, Australian regular and national service soldiers fought another battle that could easily have gone down in the annals of history as one of the greatest engagements of the war, were it not overshadowed by the bigger picture of the first Tet Offensive.

WORDS BRIAN HARTIGAN PICS ADF AND MOLONEY COLLECTION

Operation Coburg was another in a long series of Australian search-and-destroy missions designed primarily to protect the American base at Bien Hoa.

Three Australian infantry battalions – 2RAR, 3RAR and 7RAR – were involved in Operation Coburg and all three saw heavy and prolonged fighting over the course of the operation from 24 January to 1 March 1968.

2RAR and 7RAR were inserted to their respective areas of operation by helicopter from their base at Nui Dat, 7RAR inserted into the western area called AO Ayre, a six-by-11 kilometre patch of Bien Hoa Province. Charlie Company, however, was detached from 7RAR and was made responsible for the defence of Fire Support Base Harrison until it was relieved by C Company 3RAR on 29 January and then designated the reserve company for the Australian Task Force. C Company 7RAR conducted its own patrols whilst located at Fire Support Base Harrison and was later given its own area of operations while acting as the task force reserve company.

Unknown to the Australians at the time, the enemy was already moving in large numbers to position for an attack on the American bases at Long Binh, Bien Hoa and Saigon where Tan Son Nhut airport was the primary target.

Fighting between 7RAR and a heavily armed and

well-motivated enemy, including some units from North Vietnamese regiments, started almost immediately after insertion and continued throughout the day. Battalion headquarters was pinned down and was forced to dig in on the side of a hill – a tactically precarious and uncomfortable position in the eyes of its commander.

Other companies encountered varying numbers of enemy while patrolling, and fierce but fleeting battles ensued – the enemy putting up a good fight where necessary, but preferring to simply flow around the Australian 'obstacle' on his relentless march towards his greater objectives where possible.

For several days, every platoon in every company saw action. In one encounter lasting two-and-a-half hours on 29 January, 2 Platoon, A Company almost literally bumped into the enemy, opening fire at a range of four metres, killing four in the first exchange. The enemy retaliated with rockets and heavy fire, wounding the platoon commander, signaller and medic.

On the morning of 5 February, however, the detached C Company walked into the most serious fight of all.

It started routinely enough. While conducting another patrol outside FSB Harrison, the lead scout of the forward section of 8 Platoon, Clive Swaysland heard a noise he didn't like.

"The muffled sound of chopping alerted me. I called a halt and signalled the section commander forward," he says.

Section Commander Corporal Graham Griffiths and Platoon Commander Lieutenant Mark Moloney went forward to assess the situation and make a report to Company Commander Major Graeme Chapman who ordered a more detailed reconnaissance of the area.

Private Swaysland took a small group down the hillside and followed a well-worn track through a dry creek and up an embankment. The chopping noise recommenced – but this time much closer.

"Suddenly I saw him through the trees and urgently signalled 'enemy'.

"As the section deployed silently on each side of the track, a Vietcong soldier came into view. He was armed with an AK-47 assault rifle and was walking almost nonchalantly towards us along the track.

"When he was just metres away, our machine-gunner killed him."

Following this initial burst, the Australians came under heavy return fire that forced their withdrawal.

A further reconnaissance was ordered and Clive Swaysland, Leon Fitzsimmons and Lance Corporal 'Massa' Clarke were sent out in the direction of the enemy.



Clarke, an Aborigine and a legend in the Army having served in WWII and every Australian conflict since, was a brilliant tracker and bushman and led the small group with such skill they got almost to within touching distance of the enemy without being seen.

"We had stumbled onto a hornets' nest – though we didn't know there were quite so many of them there at the time – four companies of what turned out to be the elite 274 Regiment on standby for the battle of Saigon," Swaysland says.

"They were occupying a huge and brilliantly constructed, fortified bunker system and were armed with light and heavy machineguns, recoilless rifles, cannons, RPG7 rockets, AK-47s and just about every conceivable variety of hand grenade."

Platoon Commander 8 Platoon, Lieutenant Mark Moloney explains that at that time, 7RAR and C Company in particular was at little better than half strength because of R&R, R&C and rear details and because, being almost at the end of its tour, it generally lost out on reinforcements to the other battalions.

"When you talk about numbers, we probably had six men to a section instead of 10. So we were basically three machinegun and scout groups as opposed to a full fighting platoon," he says.

"I think that's not uncharacteristic of a whole lot of platoons at the latter part of their tour.

"So, when people talk about a platoon they usually think it's a full fighting thing – but it wasn't in our case. And when

you start taking heavy casualties, the numbers game becomes even more difficult."

Regardless of the manpower odds, however, the Aussies had a job to do and were not keen to back down from a fight. So, plans for an attack on the camp were formulated.

With Kevin Lewis' 9 Platoon on the right flank, Moloney's 8 Platoon on the left, and 7 Platoon taking up a defensive position in the rear, Charlie Company, 7RAR attacked. 9 Platoon, augmented by Company HQ and a machinegun group from 8 Platoon, was to make the first assault.

As they neared the objective, the lead machine-gunner of 9 Platoon saw the first enemy raise his head above a parapet, and opened fire.

Fire from the Vietcong bunkers roared in response. "We went to ground and began to return fire immediately," Clive Swaysland says.

This attack was not successful and a withdrawal occurred.

Clive Swaysland continues, "George Turner, the gunner who had initiated the contact, was hit in the leg early on, and yelled out for a medic.

"I watched the company medic run through a hail of fire, then crawl the last bit to get to George. I have no idea how he wasn't killed right then and there."

After putting a makeshift litter together, Swaysland helped carry the injured Turner rearward, away from the fight. Passing through the 7 Platoon position he saw Corporal Peter Dowling cradling a dead comrade.

Turner was winched out by an RAAF chopper – which stayed in the hover while also taking heavy ground fire. This evacuation was organised by the Company 2IC, Captain Colin Titmarsh.

Following the initial engagement, which lasted about 20 minutes, the company pulled back from the fight to allow for a heavy work-over by artillery and air-support elements. It was becoming clearer that the size of the enemy encampment and the numbers within it were much greater than first thought.

Supporting the Aussies were a range of assets including US 155mm guns, Australian artillery batteries using 105mm guns, helicopter gunships and fast jets, including Australian Canberra bombers. All were employed.

In the mid afternoon, after the bombardment had stopped, 9 Platoon again advanced on the camp to conduct a reconnaissance. They again came under heavy fire, withdrew and the bombardment recommenced. Artillery continued pounding the enemy position throughout the night.

On this, the first day of the battle, one Australian was killed and three wounded.

The next day was spent reconnoitring the enemy position. Observations of the enemy's demeanour suggested that the severe and sustained bombardments had had little effect, indicating that his bunker systems were substantial.

Artillery bombardment continued throughout the second night. Clive Swaysland recalls the next morning's activity.

"We moved to attack again, this time coming in from the opposite direction of our previous assaults.

"We advanced in extended line (line abreast), with me on the extreme left flank and Corporal Graham Griffiths next in line. Because the undergrowth was so thick, however, me and Griffiths lost sight of the others, but decided to

press on at the same pace, trusting that the line would also continue moving at the same pace."

It wasn't to be, however, and the pair were the first to emerge from the jungle. In front of them, in plain sight, were enemy bunkers – but no sign of enemy.

There was a deathly silence.

Swaysland and Griffiths, acting as one and without saying anything to each other, attacked the nearest bunker and occupied it. There was no one in it – though latter-day legend says otherwise!

When the rest of the platoon emerged from the jungle, a wall of fire met them as other bunkers roared into action. The Aussies returned fire with everything they had – with Swaysland and Griffiths caught in the middle.

From this precarious position, caught in the crossfire between the two sides, Swaysland and Griffiths managed to silence the two bunkers closest to them with rifle fire and grenades and were also able to direct Australian fire on to other bunkers otherwise concealed from the main Australian force.

Then, Clive Swaysland says, he and Griffiths were almost left behind when their colleagues withdrew in the face of the first wall of fire.

"From where I was, I could see that the camp was very professionally laid out. The bunkers were well constructed and they all had well-marked fire lanes.

"If Griffo and I were going to get out with the others, I could see we'd have to cross over several of those lanes.

"I yelled out to a mate on the other side, 'Do you think we can get across there?' and he yelled back that he didn't think we would make it.

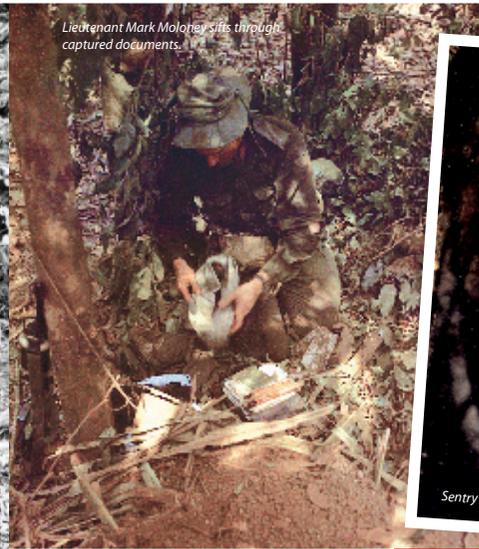
Below: Ted Lewis takes time out for a brew.



Moloney's artillery and aerial assault helped save the day.



Lieutenant Mark Moloney sifts through captured documents.



Sentry duty in thick jungle.



When the rest of the platoon emerged from the jungle, a wall of fire met them as other bunkers roared into action. The aussies returned fire with everything they had - with swaysland and griffiths caught in the middle!



“seven air strikes were made in all, two of them with napalm within 100 metres of us, as well as almost continuous fire from helicopter gunships.



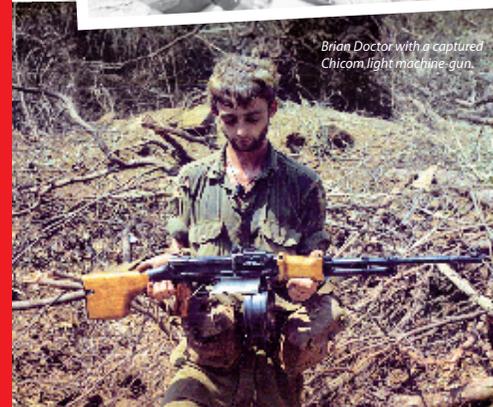
Charlie Company's lines



Brian Doctor with a captured Chicom light machine-gun.



A resupply chopper flies over jungle shattered by heavy artillery.



Eric Tickner, Thomas Hunt, Ken Wood and Peter Hope

“But, there was no way I was staying there – so we leopard-crawled all the way out – and got away with it.
“We didn’t know it then – thank God – but that was just the beginning of seven hours of fierce fighting.”
Over the next seven hours, the fighting was indeed fierce. Disaster almost beset the Australians as the enemy proved very determined.
Early in the ensuing battle, forward elements of the Australian assault were all-but outflanked and receiving fire from three sides.
Throughout the day, artillery and air support was called on to the position at ever-closer ranges to the Australians.
At one point, as the enemy were observed to be massing for a counter strike, fast jets were ordered to drop their loads on the smoke thrown by the Australians – no more than 10 metres away.
Swayslaid recalls, “The ground shook as the planes attacked. Shrapnel was screaming through the air and the noise of the aircraft climbing steeply away after strafing and firing their rockets was deafening. It was an experience both horrifying and sublime.
“Seven air strikes were made in all, two of them with napalm within 100 metres of us, as well as almost continuous fire from helicopter gunships.
“Unlike earlier air strikes, these did temporarily halt the Vietcong impetus and the small respite gave us the chance to turn defence into attack.
“With the choice to kill or be killed, we fought as if possessed.”
These latter assaults were supplemented by mortars, as a section of mortars had been relocated to support the company following its return to battalion control.
Swayslaid recalls seeing platoon commander Lieutenant Mark Moloney repeatedly charging at bunkers with M-72 rockets, exposing himself to enemy fire with every charge

and, although eventually badly wounded, did not leave the field until the battle was over.
“Anthony Hughes and Bert Baayens, whose machinegun would have been white hot by this stage, stayed at their post until they were both badly wounded and their weapon was destroyed when a bullet lodged in it.
“Machine-gunners Ross De Gray and Ken Woods and their number twos never wavered under a non-stop barrage from the Vietcong.
“Johnny Sargent, the 8 Platoon signaller, fell seriously wounded with his radio blasted off his back.
“Massa Clarke and Graham Steele fell wounded near Fitzsimmons and me – but neither of us were touched.
“Artillery signaller Mike Williams was seriously wounded in the head but refused to leave his position and continued to call in artillery until he blacked out.
“Jim Baty, 9 Platoon’s section commander, somehow dragged two of his men back through the fire to the choppers.
“I have nothing but admiration for our medics and those helicopter pilots – Australian and American – who held firm under serious ground fire to get our wounded boys out.”
The platoon suffered nine casualties in all, six requiring eventual evacuation to Australia.
I don’t know what drives men on like that, Mark Moloney says.
“I’m hesitant to say it’s one thing or another.
“I have to remember that within my platoon there were a number of Brits who migrated and joined 3 and 4RAR – so I can’t say it’s particularly an Australian characteristic as opposed to simply a characteristic of fine soldiers.
“Regular soldiers accepted it was their duty and they just got on with it, while the National Servicemen – well, you couldn’t distinguish between them in many ways.

They just accepted that they had to do it and they did it magnificently.
“I think the Australian method of operating was certainly different to the Americans and we just stuck by our belief in the way we needed to operate.
“The soldiers were magnificent in that. Nothing more could be asked of them.
“Despite the numbers, they never refused – they just kept coming. That was the way we operated.”
In all, 15 Australians were wounded on this third day of battle while, much to the surprise and disbelief of 7 Platoon who were held back in reserve and swept through for the final clearance, none were killed. However, over the course of the whole three-day engagement, two Australians were killed and 32 wounded, while others, “suddenly imploded with battle fatigue and had to be taken from the field,” Clive Swayslaid says.
This engagement, for all its ferocity and despite considerable bravery shown by all – ‘above-and-beyond’ by quite a few – has largely gone unnoticed and unremarked in the grand scheme of things. In 1968 the Vietnam War was becoming unpopular in both Australia and the United States and our politicians were distancing themselves from it.
Or, whether the low Australian casualty statistics kept this action out of media spotlights or whether it was simply overshadowed by the sheer size and ultimate significance of the ‘Tet Offensive’, the ‘Battle of Bien Hoa’ (otherwise simply referred to as ‘C Company’s bunker action’) has largely been missed by all but the keenest historian.
For those involved, however, this battle cannot be forgotten.
“At the end of it all, I have the greatest pride in those soldiers and what they achieved under extreme circumstances,” Mark Moloney says.

“There’s not been a lot written about their actions – though it isn’t hidden either – it’s just that, well, we won and we didn’t lose anybody [in the final battle] – which I can tell you was a real miracle.
“Of course there was a certain amount of skill involved, otherwise we wouldn’t have been there.
“Luck – I’m not sure. We were trying to make the pace ourselves, attacking not defending and he was certainly dug in, intending to stay. And we were certainly outnumbered.
“Devine intervention – who knows?
“I guess there was a bit of all of the above involved, plus professionalism, determination, courage and leadership.”
Mark Moloney says the actual engagement was also remarkable for the fact that the Australians employed artillery and air support down to well below what is recommended as normal safe distances, despite an earlier experience where the platoon suffered casualties when using artillery at reduced safety distances.
“The supporting gunners, mortar numbers and pilots need praise for their efforts too. These were the things that saved us,” he says.
“The final airstrike, which also contained napalm, probably had a lot to do with it – but, while that caused considerable damage, I think it was just our sheer persistence that eventually enabled us to get in.”
Commanding officer 7RAR Lieutenant Colonel Eric Smith later described C Company’s bunker action as “Probably one of the most brilliant actions ever fought by an Australian rifle company”.



A fraction of the stores captured in the bunker system