



## 1 RAR Association (trading as: The First Battalion Association Inc.)

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Mr Mark Sullivan, AO  
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Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal  
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### **1 RAR Association Submission** **to the "Inquiry into unit recognition for service at the** **battles of Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral"**

#### **Preliminaries**

This submission was prepared in consultation with members of the 1 RAR (Royal Australian Regiment) Association (current actual incorporated name is 'First Battalion Association Incorporated. Application has been made to the Queensland Office of Fair Trading for the change to 1 RAR Association Incorporated (the Association)) and is submitted on behalf of the Association by President James (Jim) Masters. The Association has current members from all conflicts since the formation of 1 RAR after World War II. Among its membership is experience in all theatres in which Australia has been involved since the Korean War.

The Association focusses this submission on the 1 RAR Group involved in the Battle for Fire Support Patrol Base (FSPB) Coral. This involved the actions at FSPB Coral in Phases 7 and 8 of Operation Toan Thang I from 12 May 1968 (establishment of FSPB Coral) to 6 June 1968 (abandonment of FSPB Coral). However, some of the commentary and statistics reflects all the battles at FSPBs Coral and Balmoral over the period, given that the operation was a 1 ATF (1st Australian Task Force) operation and engagements were closely connected in time, proximity and against the same enemy, 7 NVA Division. It is understood that the 3 RAR Association is also making a submission that centres on 3 RAR Group at FSPB Balmoral and together our submissions represent the totality of battles for the purposes of the Inquiry, with emphasis and focus on those areas to which our respective members have the greatest knowledge and emotional attachment.

#### **Recommendation**

The 1 RAR Association recommends the presentation of the Unit Citation for Gallantry (UCG) to the following, given they have a unit lineage on the Order of Battle (ORBAT) today for current serving soldiers to be proud to represent the deeds of previous generations to ensure the ANZAC spirit and legacy continues for the benefit of today's Army:

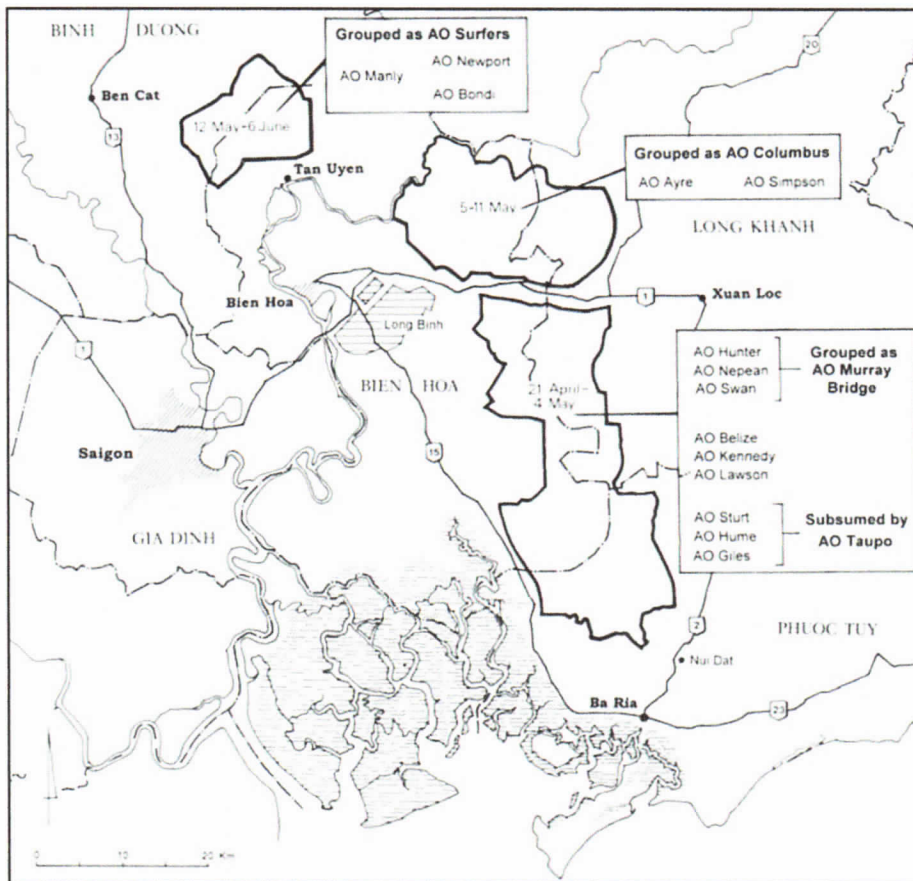
- 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (RAR),
- 102nd Field Battery (RAA),
- 1st Field Squadron (RAE),

- 161 (Indep) Recce Flight (AAAvn), and
- 104 Signals Squadron (RASigs)

All organisations proposed to be recognised had significant presence in (area of operations) AO Surfers and AO Surfers II during the period 12 May to 6 June 1968. There were elements of many other units involved with detachments and elements engaged at FSPB Coral but our intent is that sufficient recognition in the units of today's Army is suitable and acceptable.

## **The Battles for FSPBs CORAL and BALMORAL**

**Terminology and Location.** The map below shows how AO Surfers was situated in relation to Saigon, including distances; the sequencing of movement between AOs in the series of battles that comprised



Operation Toan Thang I, and the grouping of the AOs. A more detailed representation of AO Surfers is shown on the second map below.

**US-led Coalition Operation Toan Thang.** The Battle for FSPBs Coral and Balmoral was one part of the largest operation undertaken by 1 ATF in Vietnam, which was of itself part of a coalition operation named Operation Toan Thang. Operation Toan Thang I was a coalition military operation in the III Corp area that began on 8 April 1968, with the intent of driving the enemy out of the area. The combat area was midway between the Iron Triangle and War Zone D, covering the northern



approaches to Saigon. This corridor was known colloquially as the 'Catcher's Mitt'. The United States, South Vietnam, Australia, New Zealand and Thailand contributed forces to the operation. It was the biggest coalition operation of the war to that date, with about 70,000 military personnel involved. Australia's involvement was led by HQ 1 ATF, commanded by Brigadier R.L. Hughes, DSO. 1 ATF's operations as part of Operation Toan Thang I were broken down into eight phases. Significant for the recognition of the battles for FSPBs Coral and Balmoral were phases 7 and 8.

Phase 7 began on 12 May with 1 ATF ordered to occupy blocking positions in AO Surfers to interdict enemy withdrawal routes from the south and south-west (ref. ['1ATF After Action Review of Operation Toan Thang I'](#)).



1RAR Group tasks in Phase 7 were to:

1. establish 102 Field Battery in FSPB Coral,
2. clear Route 16 from FSPB Coral to Tan Uyen (see Map 1) for convoy movements on 13 May, and
3. patrol to block and interdict enemy movement from south and south-west in AO Bondi.

Phase 8 began on 24 May and could be characterised as '1 RAR continued to conduct 'recce-in-force' operations in AO Bondi from FSPB Coral and supported 3 RAR's move from AO Manly to AO Newport where FSPB Balmoral was located'. By 6 June, AO Surfers II (same AO as in Phase 7 but re-designated for Phase 8) had been handed over to 1 (US) Division.

**Aftermath.** In the period of the battles for FSPBs Coral and Balmoral, Australia suffered 26 killed in action, by unit as follows:

4. 1 RAR. 16 soldiers
5. 3 RAR. 6 soldiers
6. 12 Fd Regt. 2 soldiers
7. 104 Signals Sqn. 1 soldier
8. 161 Indep Recce Flight. 1 officer

The excerpt below from the [1ATF After Action Review of Operation Toan Thang I](#) details the standard enemy statistics measured at the conclusion of Operation Toan Thang, for the period 12 May to 6 Jun 1968.

g. Area 3 Operations (Period 12 May - 6 Jun 68). During operations in AO SURFERS I and II, there were a total of 69 contacts, including two regimental sized attacks against FSPBs, with the overall result as follows:

NVA KIA (BC)	237
Enemy KIA Poss	56
PW	11 (1 VC, 10 NVA)
Detainee	1
Hoi Chanh	1
Crew served	
weapons	35
Individual	
weapons	94

**Significance of the Battles.** Units of 1 ATF confronted regimental-sized formations of the North Vietnamese regular army in fierce, often hand to hand combat, actions around FSPBs Coral and Balmoral. The battles for FSPBs Coral and Balmoral were Australian brigade sized battles against regular, disciplined forces. *The Official History of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948-1975* records these battles as Australia's "largest, most hazardous and most sustained battles of the war." These battles were also Australia's costliest and most protracted of the Vietnam War.

COMD 1 ATF, in his 'Analysis', reported in the [1ATF After Action Review of Operation Toan Thang I](#), made this statement.

b. Operations in AOs SURFERS and SURFERS II introduced the Task Force into operations where for the first time the enemy was met in regimental strength and where he launched determined ground attacks against our FSPBs. These attacks were preceded by heavy and accurate mortar, RCL and RPG fire.

### **Justification for Recommendations**

**Time will tell.** In this submission, the Association does not present a 'blow by blow' history of the battles of FSPBs Coral and Balmoral which the Tribunal will obtain from official military records, official histories and other authoritative sources. However, it is expected that consideration will be given to the circumstances and context of the contemporary official records. There are many influences and considerations that affect the interpretation of contemporary records and the actions taken, or not, because of them. Some of these include:

- the political mood and motivations and interests of political parties in Australia at the time;
- perceptions and expectations of the Australian public, especially with respect to the Vietnam War and Australia's involvement;
- the significance of other world and local events in the news in the same period that affect perceptions then, of what can now be seen more clearly;
- operational circumstances that may have affected the perception of the significance of Australian battles, for example measuring them against the experiences (especially casualties) of other units and formations (especially coalition forces) participating in the same coalition operations; and
- the actual intelligence available, that when given is often assessments without complete information, with significant judgement added, and the impact this has on commanders planning and outcomes.

It was often the case, many years ago, for the reasons noted above, that significant time would pass before battle honours were bestowed and sewn to colours.

**The changing nature of warfare and generations.** As the nature of war changes and expectations of veterans evolves along with generations like the Baby Boomers and Gen Y, so too does the need for a system of honours and awards that is recognised by them as appropriate. Australia recognised this shift with the commencement of the Australian unit citation regime in 1991. This system is not dissimilar to the system the US employs of meritorious and presidential unit citations, to achieve the same effect. And if the old-regime of recognition - battle honours on colours - is to remain the ultimate recognition, then the 1991 system of unit recognition must add value not confuse. On this basis, it is hard to see how a unit could have a battle honour on its colours and not be recognised by the award of the UCG. It would follow then that a unit could have a unit citation and not a battle honour, as a way of deepening the system of recognition. In our view, it is incongruous and confusing, if not illogical, that the age-old recognition is not kept in perspective of the new-age requirements for recognition from a younger generation.

The real conundrum is that there is an overlap in periods from the age of recognition of significant collective achievement by battle honours on colours; to the contemporary need for more timely and visible recognition by younger generations, evidenced by the introduction of Service commendations for awarding by 2-star officers and above. This is compounded by the more contemporary approach to building battle groups, rather than units in their entirety and solely responsible for combat outcomes, as largely happened in WWI and WWII. The Vietnam War, with many veterans still in their late 60s and early 70s, would appear to be one of the contemporary theatres that is at the overlap. To make the situation worse, this is the



generation that was required to arrive back in Australia late at night, was spat on, and had paint thrown at them on parade. They did not get a formal welcome home until 1987. For some at least, it is likely that the lack of recognition of the achievements of the Army in Vietnam, even if they were not specifically involved in the battles being considered at this Inquiry, is a contributor to the mental health problems suffered by many of our Vietnam Veteran community.

**Criteria.** The Association is aware of many other submissions that recount and summarise the official records with significant detail added from personal recollections. It is the Association's intent to put its case for the awarding of the UCG to the units noted above, based on two principles:

- Suitability
- Acceptability

There are two underlying philosophies employed. The first underlying philosophy to these principles is the maintenance of the integrity of the honours and awards system, without which there would be fewer, if any, attempts to want to gain recognition from the system in the first place. And the second philosophy is that the purpose of an honours and awards system is that the recognition of the actions of the past helps to reinforce in the minds of soldiers and the public today that the work of the Army and the ADF often calls for great feats of gallantry, 'lest we forget'. The efforts today to remember the deeds of our forces in WWI, 100 years ago, is testament to the importance of this. The pride in units, which has an impact on the love of mates in danger in combat, that the Australian honours and awards system generates, is deep in our psyche that drives courageous performance and incredible acts of bravery on the battlefield.

**Suitability.** In the Association's view, the awarding of a UCG to the units of the 1 RAR Group is suitable. On any scale of: courage, bravery, gallantry, magnitude, intensity, casualties, effect on the battlefield and in support of the contemporary campaign, or consequence of failure - the battles at FSPBs Coral and Balmoral are very suitable for recognition. While the veterans of FSPBs Coral and Balmoral believe their efforts and sacrifices have not been recognised, a cursory look for evidence of the few stand-out battles of the Vietnam War most definitely includes the battles for FSPBs Coral and Balmoral.

**Acceptability.** On the question of acceptability, especially among the veteran community, the Association believes the awarding is highly acceptable. It is likely that the Australian value of 'fairness' is the lead indicator of the acceptability of recognition of the units involved in the battles for FSPBs Coral and Balmoral. Is recognition of these battles fair for other units involved in significant actions in Vietnam and other conflicts? (goes to integrity of the honours and awards systems); and is it fair to the veterans of the battles for FSPB Coral and Balmoral when compared to other battles in the Vietnam War and theatres other than Vietnam.

The factors considered by these groups will likely include:

- As far as battles in Vietnam go, there are a few that would need to be considered to ensure equity in recognition. In the Associations view, unit recognition of gallantry at the battles at FSPBs Coral and Balmoral sits comfortably with the Australian contenders for recognition.
- There has been no other recognition, including no other foreign award, other than the battle honour on the colours of The Royal Australian Regiment – bearing in mind these colours reside in most unit headquarters and are not readily seen by anyone other than those who have occasion to go to the unit HQ.
- If the premise that there is/was a shift in how recognition of unit gallantry is effected - from the era of recognition by battle honours on colours to recognition by the wearing of a symbol on the shirts of those soldiers involved and those serving in units that carry the honour on behalf of the veterans in today's Army - then Vietnam is likely to represent the point at which those who fought before and after will always argue sits untidily in the middle.

### Conclusion

The Battles for FSPBs Coral and Balmoral are very significant to the Australian public, members of today's Army and all veterans, especially those of the Vietnam War. In this submission, our Association has focussed on the 1 RAR Group participation in the battles as this is where our knowledge and sentiments focus us. We would not be able to do justice to 3 RAR Groups submission and so have left that for them to bring the other half of the incredible story of gallantry at FSPBs Coral and Balmoral in 1968. Our comprehension of the totality of the battels at FSPB leaves us in no doubt 3 RAR Group is as worthy of UCG recognition as the 1 RAR Group.

The presentation of the UCG is considered suitable by any measure by which battles are regarded; and considered acceptable to all communities from Vietnam veterans to the Australian public. Our Association believes the awarding of the UCG will enhance the honours and awards system and could clarify the orderly blending of the old battle honours system with the new unit citation system.

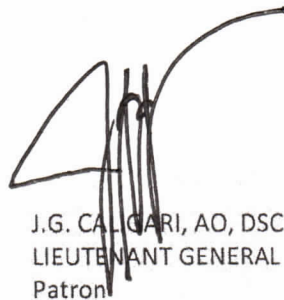
Our Association does not believe there would be any objection to recognition of the gallantry of those men at these battles by presentation of the UCG to elements that made up the 1 RAR Group.

Respectfully submitted for consideration by your Tribunal.



J.R. MASTERS, OAM  
MAJOR  
President

15 June 2017



J.G. CALICARI, AO, DSC  
LIEUTENANT GENERAL  
Patron