



## **A NIGHT IN THE YEAR OF THE MONKEY**

**THE DECIMATION OF AUSTRALIAN ARMY SAPPERS ON STANDING PATROL  
DURING THE BATTLE OF FIRE SUPPORT BASE ANDERSEN, SOUTH VIETNAM  
TET OFFENSIVE 1968**

Compiled and Written by Peter Scott   March 2017

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**DEDICATION** *To all who fought and died at Fire Support Base Andersen, especially the Sappers of 3 Troop, 1st Field Squadron, Royal Australian Engineers. To the Late Mrs Norma Meehan, whose treasured lost son John Garrett died a brave Australian Soldier at Andersen – may they both rest in peace.*



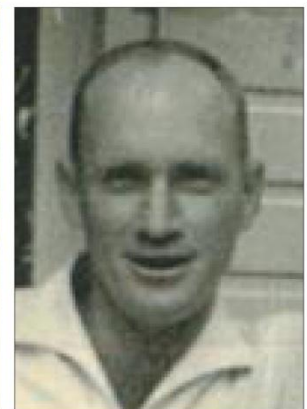
LCPL John Garrett



SPR Allan Pattison



SPR David Steen



SSGT Colin McLaughlin

### MEMBERS OF THE ENGINEER STANDING PATROL KILLED IN ACTION OUTSIDE OF FSB ANDERSEN 18 FEBRUARY 1968

**INTRODUCTION** This article seeks to look at what has been written about Fire Support Base Andersen and add commentary from some of the sappers who were there on that battlefield. The objective is to make the story of *Andersen* and its' soldiers ( Australian Infantry; Australian, New Zealand and American Artillery; and Australian Engineers and Cavalry) more widely known and acknowledged as a significant battle of the Vietnam War, and to honour the service and sacrifice of those who served and those who died there.

During their Tet Offensive of 1968, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army made numerous fierce assaults on the joint Australian, New Zealand and American manned Fire Support Base Andersen near the village of Trang Bom east of Bien Hoa, on the north-easterly outskirts of Saigon. It was the first time that the Australian Task Force (1 ATF) had operated outside of Phouc Tuy Province, and the Task Force deliberately established fire support bases astride the communist lines of communication, expecting

that the NVA and VC would attack and attempt to destroy them. And attack they did, in assaults which became precursors to further fierce assaults on Fire Support Bases *Coral* and *Balmoral* just a few months later.

During the battle on the night of 17/18 February 1968, seven Australian soldiers and one American lost their lives, with dozens more wounded, as fierce grenade, mortar and rocket attacks were launched at *Andersen* by a tenacious and skillful enemy. The defending Australians, Kiwis and Americans were no less tenacious, pouring artillery, mortar, machine gun and small arms fire onto enemy mortar and rocket launch sites, and engaging enemy soldiers as they threw themselves on the wire. The enemy attacks were timed to coincide with the lunar New Year celebrations for the Year of the Monkey, or “Tet Mau Than”, and occurred during 1ATF’s Operation Coburg.

Tragically, an overnight standing patrol sent ‘outside of the wire’ of *Andersen* by the FSB defence command was decimated during the enemy assault. This patrol comprised a full Section (No. 11 Section) of ten sappers from 3 Troop of the 1<sup>st</sup> Field Squadron Royal Australian Engineers, acting in the role of infantry, sent to a previously well used knoll feature some 300 metres outside of the protective barbed wire defences of the base. They were ordered to take up a fixed position overnight, lying on top of rocky ground, to provide an early warning listening post to detect advancing enemy forces. Though considered important for base defence, the patrol provided, in reality, a dangerously isolated and exposed target at an often used site well known to the enemy.

During Operation Coburg, Main Force elements of the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong had moved past *Andersen* for weeks to and from their targets in and around Saigon and Bien Hoa, and Australian Army Intelligence knew this. Notwithstanding the vital contribution of the standing patrols to base defence plans, the decision to continue to deploy listening post standing patrols to the knoll was extraordinarily risky. In the words of Sapper Jack Lawson, one of the survivors of the Engineer standing patrol on the night of the 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup>, “we were hung out to dry”.

During enemy assaults in the early hours of the morning the patrol received direct hits from mortar and RPG (rocket propelled grenade) fire, and was virtually wiped out: four of the sappers were killed, with three others wounded. The remaining three were unwounded but heavily traumatised by the brutal nature of the mortar attack and the death of their mates.

In cruel twist of fate, two of the surviving sappers were to be killed in action just one month later in a mine incident during Operation Pinaroo in the Long Hai Mountains south east of Nui Dat. Dark days indeed for the proud men of 3 Troop of the 1<sup>st</sup> Field Squadron RAE, who in a period of about one month, gave up seven of their number killed, and four more wounded in support of Operations conducted by infantry of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment.

Meanwhile, on that same night inside of the wire of *Andersen*, another four soldiers were also killed during the enemy attack; they were two 3RAR riflemen and an Australian and American artilleryman, whose names are listed in the Honour Roll at the rear of this article. The next morning the bodies of four enemy soldiers, who died on the wire while trying to take *Andersen*, were searched, then buried onsite by 3 Troop sappers inside of the Base. More dead and wounded enemy had been dragged away in the night by their comrades.





Above: FSB Andersen 18<sup>th</sup> February 1968 the morning after the First Attack      photo: Sapper Peter Macdonald 3 Troop  
1 Field Sqn RAE



Above: Looking out from a 3 RAR position at FSB Andersen      photo: Bob Dabinett OAM 3RAR



3 RAR soldiers at FSB Andersen photo: Bob Dabinett OAM 3RAR

Most tragically of all, the events and sacrifices at *FSB Andersen* are virtually unknown and forgotten during Australian Government and community remembrances of the Vietnam War, remembrances that disproportionately and repetitively focus on other landmark battles such as Long Tan, Coral/Balmoral and Binh Ba.

In the Official History of Australia's Involvement in Vietnam *On the Offensive The Australian Army in the Vietnam War January 1967-June 1968*, Ian McNeill and Ashley Ekins (2003) give a short passing reference to Andersen, but say nothing about the decimation of the standing patrol.

In Paul Ham's weighty tome *Vietnam: The Australian War* (2010), there are no references to FSB Andersen at all, nor to 'Engineers', nor to the 1<sup>st</sup> Field Squadron RAE being part of Operation Coburg.

In the Australian War Memorial's *Wartime issue 20*, a passing comment is offered by Chris Coulthard-Clark "Three times between 18 and 28 February, Andersen came under attack but each time the Viet Cong were beaten off." In both cases, there is no commentary of the ferocity of both the enemy assaults and 1ATF response, and no acknowledgement of the Australian soldiers (infantry, artillery and engineers) who died there in violent and traumatic warfighting.

Perhaps the decision to continue to mount standing patrols outside of the wire was unsafe in light of known intelligence on enemy activity and fact that the Base was very much undermanned. A whole Infantry Company was added to the defence of *Andersen* on the day after the first attack and was sent out to the knoll area. Perhaps battles such as that at *Andersen* that didn't result in a resounding victory were seen (and still are) as lacking in 'merit' and therefore best forgotten. McNeill and Ekins in *On the Offensive* refer to Commander Australian Force Vietnam (AFV) **MAJGEN Arthur MacDonald** being critical of the 'sheer lack of basic knowledge' of many junior NCOs and officers at the time, and, despite believing that Operation Coburg was a success and that the statistical results were considerable, "they were not spectacular..." (pages 303,304)

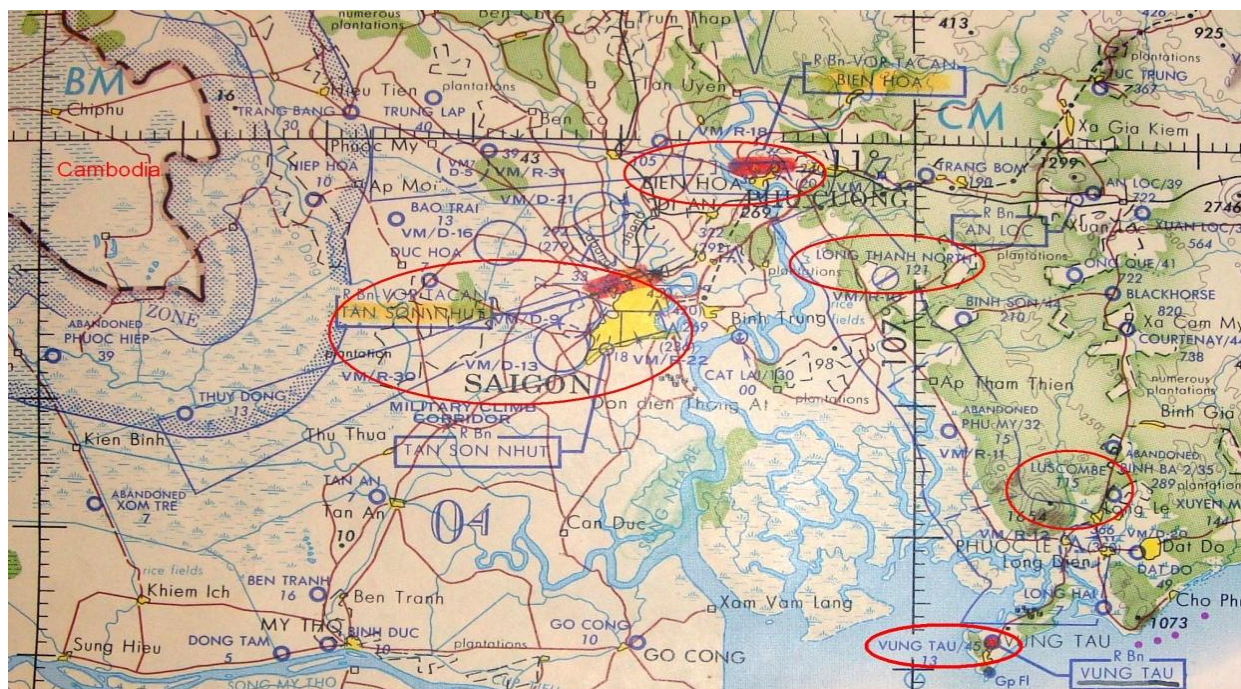
Not spectacular! Not enough dead on both sides? By what ratio did the enemy body count have to exceed that of 1ATF to please AFV Headquarters?

General MacDonald, according to Paul Ham (2010), was a usually grumpy man who mistakenly believed that the Viet Cong were virtually defeated in Phouc Tuy, and subscribed to the American view that body count and kill ratios were a measure of success. His disparagement was perhaps the blow that snuffed out the likelihood of any recognition for the brave soldiers who fought at Fire Support Base Andersen during the Tet Offensive.

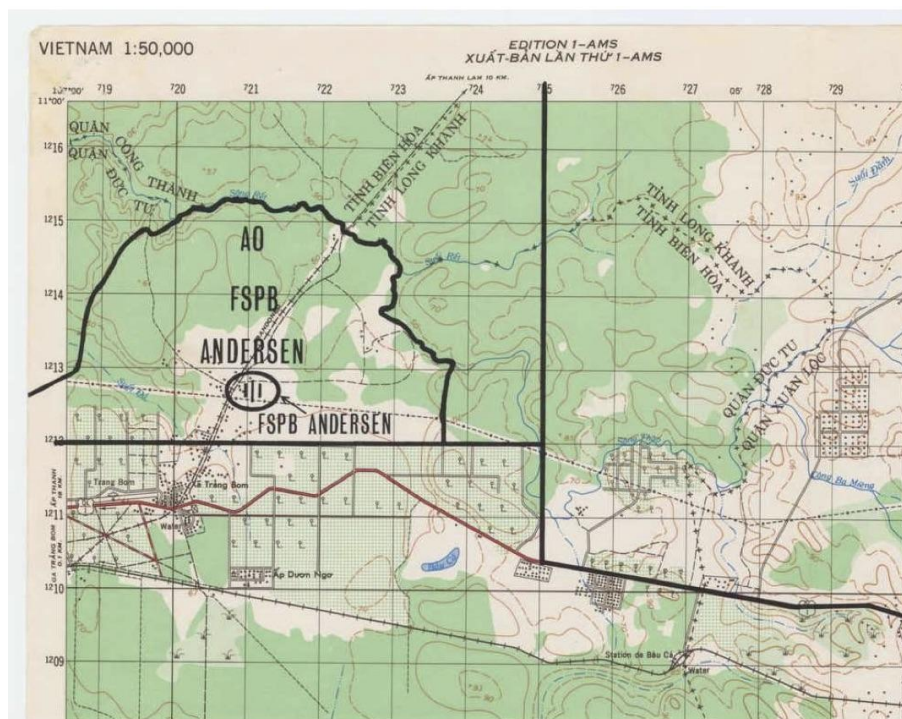


Australian Force Vietnam Commander, Major General Arthur MacDonald (centre), Task Force Commander, Brigadier Ron Hughes (right), arrive at FSB Andersen. With them is the Commanding Officer of 3rd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR), Lieutenant-Colonel Jim Shelton Source: AWM





Map of Saigon-Bien Hoa-Vung Tau area showing Bien Hoa, and Trang Bom east of Bien Hoa. Source: vietnamairlift.com (Nui Dat area shown as Luscombe on this map, and Trang Bom is located just south of the blue CM letters)



Topo map of Trang Bom on Route 1, overlaid with the approximate location of FSB Andersen. The Standing Patrol on 17/18 Feb 1968 was located at YT202128 on the slope of the knoll feature.





3 Troop 1 Field Squadron Engineers enjoy a BBQ at Nui Dat prior to Operation Coburg. L to R (standing) SPRs GEOFF COOMBS, DAVE STEEN and VINCE TOBIN, who were on the ill-fated Standing Patrol at FSB Andersen. Dave was one of the four Sappers killed at *Andersen*, while Geoff and Vince survived that horror only to be killed in a mine incident a month later in the Long Hai Mountains. Photo: Peter Macdonald 3 Troop

**BACKGROUND TO OPERATION COBURG.** In the last months of 1967, allied intelligence had detected sure signs of communist plans for an offensive, timed to coincide with the traditional Vietnamese celebrations of the 1968 lunar New Year at the end of January. These signs, however, provided no clues about the likely enemy targets and methods, or the nature of what was planned. No one knew that the North Vietnamese leadership, having become no less frustrated than the allies at the apparent military deadlock that had developed in the war, had opted for a massive strike which they hoped might lead to decisive victory. (Wartime, Issue 20, AWM)

In response to this intelligence, the then Australian Forces Commander **MAJGEN Douglas "Tim" Vincent** (MAJGEN MacDonal'd's predecessor) offered the use of the 1ATF outside of Phouc Tuy Province. American and other forces were put on full alert and positioned to deal with any attacks that the NVA and VC/irregular forces might launch.



**US Commander LTGEN Fred Weyand** had asked Vincent to send 1ATF Forces to neighbouring Bien Hoa province to operate alongside American forces preparing to block any thrust by NVA and VC forces against the vast complex of military installations around Bien Hoa city and adjoining Long Binh, located some 25 kilometres north-east of Saigon.

The task force move, codenamed Operation Coburg, involved the bulk of 2RAR /NZ (ANZAC) and 7RAR, along with supporting armoured cavalry, artillery and engineers. Left behind in the 1ATF base at Nui Dat, until later rotation into Operation Coburg, was 3RAR, while a New Zealand company of 2 RAR/NZ held the Horseshoe feature near Dat Do.

By the afternoon of 24 January 1968, the first two Australian battalions were on the ground in their new area of operations, named AO Columbus, on the eastern boundary of Bien Hoa with Long Khanh province, and about 55km north of Nui Dat. Almost immediately patrols began having contacts with enemy forces, and these increased over the next four days in both scale and frequency as a number of enemy camps were uncovered and attacked.

**1 ATF: WHO WAS DEPLOYED AND WHERE** Initially, along with 1ATF Tactical Headquarters and Taskforce Maintenance Area forward echelon, 2 RAR/NZ and supporting Combat Arms were deployed to *FSB Andersen*, with 7 RAR and support at the western end of the AO towards Bien Hoa at *FSB Harrison*.

Supporting Combat Arms were 4<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment Artillery RAA including New Zealand 161 Battery (105mm howitzers) and the Australian Locating Battery (artillery radar), A Squadron 3 Cavalry Regiment armoured personnel carriers, 1<sup>st</sup> Field Squadron RAE forward Headquarters with 1 and 2 Field Engineer Troops and plant operators for construction and combat support tasks including provision of water points.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P01 539.01 2

3 Troop Engineers were transported to FSB Andersen by US Army Chinook helicopter (AWM)

**Patrolling and Blocking.** Despite the precautions that had been taken at General Weyand's instigation, the Bien Hoa-Long Binh complex was still heavily attacked by 5 VC Division, resulting in much damage to aircraft, buildings and facilities. The role of the nearby Australians was then promptly changed from reconnaissance-in-force (operations to gather information especially about the strength and positioning of enemy forces) to intercepting and blocking enemy forces as they attempted to move back to their sanctuaries. In the words of the commanding officer of 7RAR **LTCOL Eric Smith**, *for the next few days Viet Cong flowed past his company positions "like water"*. During this period, the enemy was at times demoralised and disorganised and avoided contact, and many were caught in platoon ambushes set by the Australians.



Searching the body of a dead Viet Cong soldier after an ambush (AWM)

**THE ENEMY** moving through AO Columbus comprised thousands of main force 84A Artillery (Rocket) Regiment NVA equipped with 122-millimetre rocket launchers and 82-millimetre mortars, and Viet Cong 5 Division troops including 274 and 275 infantry Regiments and a small element of the Dong Nai Regiment.



They were well trained and indoctrinated, and equipped with Chinese made copies of AK47 assault rifles, rocket launchers plus ample supplies of ammunition, mines, grenades and explosives. As a general rule they were aggressive and, even when faced with serious losses they bounced back. If they chose to fight in a particular circumstance, they did so with tenacity and skill. They wore an assortment of uniforms from green or blue-grey to black, and, while not well fed, had caches of rice hidden locally for their use. They staged through numerous well constructed base camps with connecting communication trenches and some surgical and dressing stations. They tended to move in small groups accompanied by local guides, often under cover of night along well planned trail systems and river crossings. The Australians used knowledge of this to set up successful night ambush positions.



Enemy troops in attack

### **THE ROLE OF 1<sup>st</sup> FIELD SQUADRON ENGINEERS.**

The majority of the Engineer Squadron was deployed with the 1ATF Operation Coburg, under their OC **Major John Kemp**. This was the first time that all three Troops of the Squadron's Combat Engineers were deployed to the same area, operating under operational control of their respective infantry Battalions... 1 Troop was attached to 2RAR/NZ, 2 Troop to 7RAR and 3 Troop to 3RAR to provide close Engineer support. It was 3 Troop that drew the short straw.

**1 TROOP 1 FIELD SQUADRON RAE.** When 2RAR/NZ went in on 24 January, many enemy bunker systems were located and destroyed by attached 1 Troop sappers.

On the night of 31 January/1 February, the VC village of Trang Bom just south of *Andersen* was the site of fierce fighting and destruction. It was overrun by the Viet Cong but the RF Post held out until first light. D Coy 2RAR/NZ with A Sqn 3 Cav Regt, supported by a Combat Engineer Team and Mini Team respectively, began clearing operations towards Trang Bom. The road between Anderson and the village had been mined during the night and was cleared by the engineers the next morning (Florence 2013).

**2 TROOP 1 FIELD SQUADRON RAE.** 7 RAR deployed with the initial task of securing the FSBs (*Harrison* and *Andersen*) and establishing a series of blocking positions. Two combat engineer teams from 2 Troop were placed under the operational control of 7 RAR from 10 January, while 3 mini teams of 2 sappers were placed with A Squadron 3 Cavalry Regiment's armoured personnel carriers from 11 January, with a further team added on 20 January due to the threat of mines.

Prior to this time Andersen was a hastily built American position which was re-built and fortified to a higher level, mainly by the sappers of 2 Troop under **LT John Jasinski**.



**THE START OF THE STANDING PATROLS** It was at this time apparently that the first sappers (deployed as a full Section) were thrown into the role of front-line infantry to mount the standing patrol outside of the wire, at a listening post originally established by the Americans, some 300 metres to the west of Andersen, and near a knoll /quarry site referred to by the 2 Troop sappers as 'the lone pine'.

It is not known who originally committed Engineers to this task, but the decision to send these overnight patrols to the knoll indicated some degree of 'expendability' of whoever was sent out from FSB Andersen, including trained infantry.

**Colonel John Kemp** AM (Retd) (2016): *The standing patrol task was accepted by the Engineers as within their capabilities as one of the shared responsibilities of base defence. As it transpired, the level of combat training of whoever was on the standing patrols had nothing to do with the outcome. It all came down to fate and circumstance.*

Former OC A Company 3RAR at Andersen, now **Major General (retired) Brian 'Hori' Howard** recalls (2016): *Andersen was larger than a normal FSB due to the presence of the US Artillery Battery and the APCs, so it needed more protection and of course patrolling than a smaller FSB. The patrol program would have been worked out by the 3RAR Battalion HQ not 1 ATF and I would have been surprised if the Engineer troop had not been included in it. After all, their stated secondary role was to operate as Infantry. However, be assured that they weren't tasked as Infantry but as well as Infantry.*

Former 2 Troop Sapper (later CPL on 2<sup>nd</sup> Tour) **John "Ben" Benningfield** recalls being out at the listening post on the night when the fight started at Trang Bom, in a standing patrol comprising himself and **Sappers Dave Matulick, Geoff "Smokey" Craven** and **Warren McBurnie**, and led by **Cpl Mick Grey**. From some distance they observed enemy soldiers in numbers, moving down the road in the darkness, laying anti-tank mines and booby traps, and so the next morning were able to help locate the killer devices as the road was cleared.



Previous photo: Unexploded mines and shells at FSB Andersen, including Russian TM46 anti-tank mines\* cleared from road to Trang Bom photo: SPR Brian Hopkins 3 Troop \* Andersen was the first time that these Russian mines were found in Vietnam

### **3 TROOP 1 FIELD SQUADRON RAE**

Recently arrived in Vietnam, Infantry from 3RAR were rotated into (the end of) Operation Coburg as its first major operation In Country, and was its' first opportunity to work with what it called 'flanking units'. Of those 'flanking units', 3 Troop 1<sup>st</sup> Field Squadron RAE, provided Engineer support, including Combat Engineers.

3RAR 'inherited' FSB Andersen, with all its faults, from 1ATF who took the original decision to expand a base initially established by the Americans. In its After Operation Analysis of Operation Coburg, 3RAR noted: *The most significant lessons learnt were .... FSBs should be located away from civilian habitation ....should be clear of civilian traffic routes and garden areas ....should have a clear 200 metres around the FSB .... adequate digging with overhead protection should be a priority.... all personnel must sleep below ground level and if time permits, with overhead protection .... civilians must be kept away from FSB defences by quick aggressive action.* In the lead up the first NVA/VC attack, one Company of 3RAR was allocated to remain at Andersen.

**Sapper Peter Macdonald:** *When 3 Troop arrived on FSB Anderson it was obvious someone had been there before us as the perimeter was fenced in barbed wire and the base was generally untidy. Even at this early stage I pondered our purpose, it appeared our role on FSB Anderson was to act as infantry. We were combat engineers who work with and can carry out a role as infantry, but we were not (fully) infantry trained.*

*As we were working hard finalizing our positions and digging our shell scrapes we noticed a sky crane coming from the south with a D4 hanging below it, the dozer was lowered and began digging a trench. A short time later the sky crane returned with 12x12 planks and laid them across the completed trench, then hooked up the D4 and took it home. At this point we were all wondering who was going to fill the 1000 plus sandbags to cover trench. Our concerns were answered through the return of the sky crane with a cargo net hanging below it containing the 1000 plus needed sandbags. The sandbags were lowered to cover the trench and there it was in all of its splendor, the Americans' new 'safe' home on Anderson. The only thing missing was the inhabitants and they arrived shortly after in choppers and walked into their new home without even lifting a spade. We all agreed we were in the wrong army.*



ABOVE: US ARMY 155mm TRACKED HOWITZERS AT ANDERSEN      B Battery, 2nd Battalion, 35<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery, US Army    BELOW: US ARMY HUEY 'BUSHRANGERS' AT ANDERSEN    Photos: Bob Dabinett OAM 3RAR



Deficiencies at Andersen were particularly evident to the New Zealand 161 Artillery 161 Battery. In *New Zealand's Vietnam War* (2010), **Ian McGibbon** writes: *'The 18<sup>th</sup> brought by far the most dramatic moment of their sojourn at Andersen, the one that demonstrated marked deficiencies in defensive preparations at the base. The general attitude to digging in had been 'half hearted', a lack of materials prevented overhead cover being provided, communications were deficient and the defences were not*



*properly coordinated. **FO Mike Harvey** had great difficulty in getting any US battery outside the area to register defensive fire targets, finally doing so on the 17<sup>th</sup> and then registering only two. Civilians from the village to the south [Trang Bom] had been allowed to come close to the base. 'Some of the local girls were even conducting business 200 m from the perimeter wire,' Harvey observed later. Under cover of this civilian presence, the enemy had been able carefully to study the base dispositions.*



KIWI 105mm GUN AT FSB ANDERSEN. 3 TROOP 1 FIELD SQUADRON RAE GUN PIT position just to the left Photo: Spr Brian Hopkins 3 Troop 1<sup>st</sup> Field Sqn RAE

**Sapper Barry Gilbert** had been in a Splinter Team with A Coy 3RAR and walked back into *Andersen* with 3RAR riflemen after a reconnaissance patrol. Rather than staying overnight with the infantry, he asked to go to join his 3 Troop mates on their perimeter wire defence sector next to the American 155mm howitzers. Barry had been trained as a radio operator and when he learned that the 1 Field Sqn engineers had been tasked to do standing patrols out at the listening post, he volunteered to go out with the radio. However Lance Corporal John Garrett, who was on the patrol for that night, said that he would take the radio as Barry had already had his turn with 3 RAR and should stay inside with the Troop. Barry was understandably devastated when the boys were hit that night, not least at the realisation it could have been him but for the gesture of John Garrett.

**Sapper Peter MacDonald:** *Section Corporal Merv Dodd informed us on his return from an Infantry 'O Group' that two battalions of the North Vietnam Army had been detected and were moving south. He also mentioned strong VC movement had also been detected in the area and we needed to be prepared. The thought of what could happen was naturally a little worrying.*

*Clearing patrols were conducted at dusk each evening by A Coy. The patrol would exit their position and move across the 3 Troop perimeter and make arrangement to enter back through the American lines. It was essential the clearing patrol was finalized by 1849 hrs, as the Americans commenced their clearing patrol at 1850 hrs. Their clearing patrol consisted of 10 minutes of machine gun and small arms fire out from their perimeter until sundown.*

**THE BALLOON GOES UP: THE START OF THE TET OFFENSIVE** At 6 pm on 29 January the Tet truce came into effect, and operations by the Australians were put on hold. During the early hours of the following day, however, some communist forces in the northern half of the country mistakenly began their part in the planned Tet offensive a day early. President Thieu of South Vietnam immediately cancelled the ceasefire and at 3 am the next day the relative calm was shattered as towns and cities across the nation came under massive attack from the NVA and VC.

A particular focus of the offensive was Saigon, the population of which was sent reeling by an onslaught which was both frightening and staggering in its savagery and destructiveness. Soon large tracts of Cholon, the adjoining Chinese town, were leveled by fighting between enemy and government troops.



NVA/VC DESTRUCTION IN CHOLON, TET 1968

The Australians were called upon to deal with a Viet Cong Tet incursion into the village of Trang Bom. D Company of 2RAR, supported by 3 Cavalry Regiment armoured personnel carriers, became involved in house-to-house fighting to clear the village, only to see the Viet Cong return the next night and cause the whole process to be repeated. Fighting there lasted into 2 February.



TRANG BOM MARKET AFTER TET 1968 Photo: Nick Quigley



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

THU/68/0133/VN

3 Troop Commander CAPT Viv Morgan, speaks with a Vietnamese interpreter, while other villagers watch on, at Trang Bom village, about replacing the many houses destroyed in the Viet Cong attack.



**3 RAR at ANDERSEN.** According to English in *Brave Lads*, **MAJ Geoff Cohen** 2 I/C 3RAR, was put in charge of the defence of FSB Andersen, and "had approximately 500 troops under his command and dug in at the FSB. His force comprised a troop of APCs, two mortar tracks ...from A Sqn 3 Cav and a Troop of Engineers from 3 Troop 1 Field Sqn." (p.123) and "One area of concern to Major Geoff Cohen was a knoll situated outside the perimeter. The knoll was undefended, but with his typical efficiency, Major Cohen insisted that it would have to be covered. He decided to reinforce that part of the perimeter with extra claymores. He also left instructions for a small standing patrol to be positioned on the knoll to give early warning in the event of an attack - Engineers provided men for the patrol." (p.124).

**The first Section strength standing patrol provided by the 3 Troop Engineers** was on the night of 16/17<sup>th</sup> February and, after the toss of a coin, was provided by 10 Section under **CPL Frank Sweeney** and included **Sappers Norm Cairns, Vic Underwood, Chuck Bonzas, John Hoskin and Brian Hopkins.**

**LCPL Barry Swain** of the 3RAR Antitank and Tracker Platoon recalls (2016) *"On the 17<sup>th</sup> we were warned out by LT Colin Clarke that it was our turn to go out to the knoll and got ready with ammunition, radio etc. The Section commander was CPL Dan Shine, with LCPLs Hans Vanzwol and Barry Swain, and Privates Bruce Critchlow (M60) Ron Cruise, and Giuseppe Lacava. Then about 1700hr we were stood down and told that Engineers were to provide the patrol that night...."*

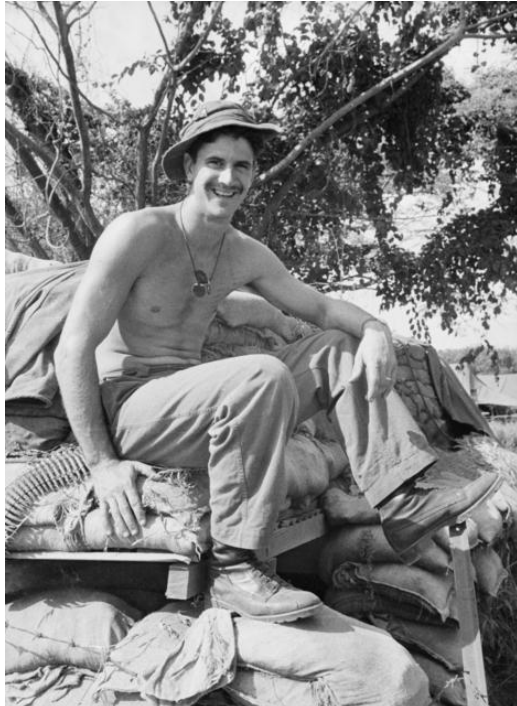
**Lieutenant Peter Perry**, the Engineer Troop Officer, was alarmed that his men were being sent out to the knoll: *"Suddenly without warning ... I was advised that we were to provide the standing patrol ... Why ... not Infantry? Apparently they needed a rest and anyway 'Engineers can fight as Infantry'. A heated argument ensued as I pressed for answers to some fundamental requirements such as:*

- a. reconnaissance?*
- b. detailed orders as opposed to 'you're doing it tonight'?*
- c. a briefing from those who had gone before?*
- d. making an informed plan?*
- e. selection and briefing of the participants?*
- f. Rehearsal?*
- g. How would the patrol's harbour location be transmitted to the command post?*
- h. What action was to be taken on enemy contact?*

*No win for me and little time left to walk to the knoll. I took command of **Corporal Dave Cook's Section** as Cookie was ill having being bitten by a scorpion, and I had been trained as an infantry Platoon Commander. Our (CMF) **Staff Sergeant Colin McLaughlin (Mac)** argued that it wasn't an Officer's job to command a section and anyway, he had been a Minor Tactics Instructor at the Jungle Training Centre at Canungra. Mac asked our boss **Captain Viv Morgan** to decide, and he got the nod, not me. The next time I was to see Mac was in the morgue at Long Binh the following day. There go I except for the power of the short straw."*

Note: Peter Perry's account "FSB Andersen- Operation Coburg: The First Fight of the Trilogy, The Untold Story" (2016) has been distributed on Veteran networks.

So, the patrol set off before dark for the knoll, and in plain sight of the villagers of Trang Bom, not that this mattered as the enemy had known for some time where the listening post was located. The patrol comprised ten men: **Staff Sergeant Colin McLaughlin** age 38, the radio operator **Lance Corporal John Garrett** age 20, **Sapper David Steen** age 21, **Sapper Allan Pattison** age 19, **Sapper Geoff Coombs** age 22, **Sapper Vince Tobin** age 24, **Sapper (later LCPL) Murray Walker** age 22, **Sapper Robert Creek** age 22, **Sapper Jack Lawson** age 18 and **Sapper Lyndon Stutley** age 21.



3791192 Sapper Robert Neil Creek. Photo: Sapper Graham Burgess

Survivor **Sapper Robert Creek** remembers: *John Garrett had been instructed to 'radio to base .. any activity that we observed or experienced'.. then return to the Base .. through the American sector as soon as practicable' .. John had a signal torch, red and green lenses to enable the Americans to identify us. We were heavily armed; my mate Jack Lawson carried the M60 machine gun, with me as his offsider. I had never been so heavily laden in my life: a hand grenade in each top breast pocket, seven SLR magazines of 20 rounds each clipped to my belt, a continuous metal belt of machine gun rounds over my shoulder down to my thigh, a claymore mine complete with detonators, wire leads and hand generator, plus my rifle.*

*At the pre-determined location among the banana trees we lay in a defensive arc, in pairs, waiting, listening, in silence, very tense, with the sounds of the night surrounding us. Nine o'clock, ten o'clock, eleven o'clock. Time ticked away very slowly. We dozed on and off and, apart from the annoying buzz of mosquitoes; all we heard was the occasional suppressed whisper of a mate. Still nothing happened.*

Back inside the Base, 12 Section **Sappers Norm Cairns and Vic Underwood** were manning the 3 Troop M60 machine gun on top of their gun bunker on the perimeter, waiting and looking out into the dark. Back from the perimeter, **LT Peter Perry** was sitting on the top of his bunker with **CAPT Dick Lippert**, the 3 RAR Doctor, again waiting and watching.

Meanwhile, in the 3 RAR Command bunker, a message was received that enemy activity could be expected early a.m. on the 18<sup>th</sup>. A coded message from Hanoi had been intercepted, ordering the communists in the south to launch an attack at 0300hr on the 18<sup>th</sup>. Intelligence also indicated that the VC had distributed 3 tons of ammunition among their units, had in the Bien Hoa area conducted propaganda talks, and that Saigon shipping companies were refusing to work on the docks on the 18<sup>th</sup>. It was suggested that 'this information be called to the attention of the commander'.

**So, the stage was set for the first of the enemy assaults on the Base.**

**The first attack on the 18<sup>th</sup> was preceded by a heavy rocket and mortar barrage on the base in the early hours of the morning, followed by two waves of VC infantry each of company size.** This attack focused on the south-west of the perimeter manned by 3 RAR's echelon and mortar platoon, as well as an American medium artillery battery. The perimeter wire was subsequently breached, but the attack was repulsed by mortar counter-battery fire, Claymore mines and the heavy weight of machine-gun fire from armoured personnel carriers and the American gunners. The communist mortar bomb barrage had had a devastating effect, falling among the American and New Zealand gun positions, the 3RAR mortar lines and the battalion echelon, as well as scoring a direct hit on the Australian Engineer standing patrol.

**Ian McGibbon** (in *New Zealand's Vietnam War: A history of combat, commitment and controversy* 2010): *"The gunners had settled down for the night. About midnight Battalion Commander Jim Shelton and Battery Commander Tony Martin were 'sitting in the CO's tent admiring the stars and sipping – coffee when a green signal flare arced ominously across the base. At 1am a shower of mortars and RPGs heralded the first of two assaults on the base by a determined enemy force. Mortar bombs fell on the Australians then 'walked' across the base and onto the standing patrol, which, caught in the open, suffered serious casualties.*

*Five minutes later another green flare went up, and Viet Cong waiting behind a paddy bund to the south-west surged forward against the US Battery, the mortar platoon and the unit echelon area. After hurling grenades, they penetrated the wire and managed to get into a gap between the mortars and the American battery. Although this presented some difficulties in bringing fire to bear, the attack was halted by machine gun fire. The second assault, both north and south-west, was halted in front of the wire. This was followed, after a brief respite, by another barrage on the American and New Zealand gun positions.*

*About 150 mortar bombs landed in the firebase during the two-hour action, inflicting considerable damage on three American 155mm guns and vehicles and Australian APCs. Although none of the New Zealand gunners was injured, 3RAR was not so fortunate, losing 8 men killed\* and 25 wounded.....the deficiencies in the firebase defences having been starkly revealed, next day 'the digging was furious'. "*

*\*McGibbon counted the four Engineers as part of 3RAR troops*

**LT Peter Perry:** *About midnight a green flare was fired from the south west of our position in fairly close proximity to where our patrol was located, As nothing further eventuated within the next 40 odd minutes and after a radio check with John (LCPL Garrett) I hit the pillow.... when all of a sudden the first two enemy mortar rounds were launched. All hell broke loose .... we began receiving RPGs and machine gun fire followed by two ground assaults primarily against the US guns.. The enemy mortar bombs were*



*cleverly walked through the base from east to south west passing beyond our perimeter and through to our standing patrol position."*

**Sapper Norm Cairns:** *After the green flare went up we were all on tenterhooks. Then all of a sudden we heard the pop of the primary charges and the first enemy mortar bombs dropped into the base well back behind us. Vic Underwood and I had climbed to the top of our bunker to see if we could locate where they were being fired from, when our field telephone rang. Vic answered it. 'I think we are being mortared' said the officer on the other end of the line, stating the bleeding obvious, just as one of the bombs landed virtually under our feet at the foot of our sandbag wall. We were immediately knocked back by the blast wave; arse over head, but luckily the sandbags took the shrapnel.*

**Sapper Vic Underwood:** *We were shaken up but, with ears ringing and dust and leaves swirling around us, somehow alive, and I still had the telephone in my hand. Norm Cairns:* *In the best ANZAC tradition Vic gets up and with the telephone still in his hand and with his dry sense of humour replies: 'You THINK we are being mortared Sir!. Sir, I can tell you for absolute fucking sure that we ARE being mortared!' and we both pissed ourselves laughing, for which we were later given a dressing down. Vic Underwood:* *Our thoughts soon turned to defence and turning back any frontal attack. Norm and I got in behind the M60 and flicked off the safety catch; we picked up the source of an enemy heavy machine gun out in the night and brought our M60 fire onto it. After we had fired about 1 ½ belts the enemy gun fell silent.*

**Sapper Robert Creek (at the listening post):** *About midnight came a small popping sound as the enemy set off a green flare, high in the sky, high above the Fire Support Base. It hung like a bright green lantern for what seemed a very long time, lighting up the whole base – tents, store bunkers, the artillery, helipad, sentry boxes and razor wire fencing, all against a blackened night sky.*

*The enemy had set up a mortar base on the hill behind us and fired over our heads to the other side of the base. At least two perimeter sectors of the Base were under attack. The night crackled with small arms fire and the explosions of grenades, the noise deafening like a tropical thunderstorm but with deadly lightning strikes of rifle fire and light and heavy machine gun fire, and RPG and mortar shells exploding and peppering the air. The sky lit up like day as flares from the base burned underneath their cotton canopies as they floated down to earth over the jungle. The Viet Cong mortar crew lifted their sights and lobbed their projectiles with great accuracy, as their mortar explosions cut a path of destruction across the FSB, each explosion coming closer to us.*



Enemy Mortar Troops

**Ian McGibbon:** Woken by the noise, LT Harvey sprinted to his command post.... and soon had the gunners sweating over their guns as they engaged the suspected site of one of the two enemy mortar base plates detected; the other was too close to the standing patrol. When he tried to bring in outside artillery fire, he found none available – enemy probes on other firebases were obviously designed to prevent such support.

**LT Peter Perry:** Our radio operator told me we had lost contact with the standing patrol after the mortar barrage but I kept on trying to contact them during breaks in the fighting and whenever I could get on the command radio network. No response came.

**Sapper Robert Creek:** Then all of a sudden a massive explosion deafened us as shrapnel flew and cries of intense pain filled the air. Banana trees fell amongst us. The enemy mortar crew had scored a direct hit on our position and before we could recover from the shock, another round exploded behind us, smashing and crashing more banana trees. The enemy mortar crew were still adjusting their sights and firing.

With ears ringing and mates calling for help, we yelled back and forward to each other. Two didn't reply, Sapper Allan Pattison, a popular bloke from Kadina S.A., and Sapper David Steen from the Falklands; they were gone quickly, and we thank God for that. SSGT McLaughlin followed them some time later.

The young Lance Corporal John Garrett called out to the sergeant but he didn't answer. John became concerned and called out to us 'are you all right?' As his pain got worse he became delirious and his voice weaker. He was still wearing bits of the radio that hadn't been blown away. His main concerns were for us; He was a real soldier – concerned for his mates despite his mortal wounds. We called to him, offering the only thing we could – reassuring words. We hoped that the VC couldn't hear his cries over the noise of the battle for I am sure that, if they had, I would not be here today.

Small arms fire continued to crackle, interspersed by light and heavy machine gun fire. A helicopter gunship swept very low over us, its search beacon sweeping the jungle fringe. Bullets with tracer spat from its sides, and flames spat out of pods as underslung rockets were fired and exploded in the jungle below.

There then came a dramatic lull, a few minutes of spasmodic firing, then silence. The battle stopped as quickly as it started. A lone bird made a mournful cry in the silence that filled the approaching humid dawn.

Next to me, **Sapper Jack Lawson** called out in pain as he tried to turn towards me, a piece of shrapnel ripped into his hip, unnoticed until then by himself as he went about his duty. I quickly went to his assistance, grabbing at the field bandage taped to the butt of my rifle, but my left arm collapsed under me. I too had been hit but didn't know it. We applied bandages to each other and reassured each other that we were OK.

Meanwhile, **Sapper Murray Walker** and a mate who had not been wounded, crawled across and told us of the injuries inflicted on the others; two had worn the full force of the explosion, their organs exposed and bodies lying in acute angles of repose and covered in blood.

*We quickly decided to get word back to the base. Murray and a wounded but insistent Jack set off immediately, running from cover to cover and using their instinctive bushcraft skills, equipped only with their rifles and a few magazines of ammo. They soon crawled into a clump of scrub relatively close to the wire gate they had exited to commence the patrol the evening prior. About the same time as the dawn made a slight hue in the eastern sky, Johnny Garrett, the Regular Soldier with the one stripe, cried out for the last time and took his leave of us.*

*At the wire gate which he knew was booby trapped, Murray called out loudly to the Americans, identifying himself as an Australian soldier. A southern drawl was quick to respond, thinking it was a deception by the VC. "Show yourself or we shoot" said the American, and with great anxiety the two Aussies stood up then ran at the coiled Dannet wire, clearing it with ease.*

**LCPL Barry Swain 3 RAR:** *We all vividly remember after the attack the two Engineers yelling out loudly "we are Aussies and we are coming in", over and over again until they were behind the wire: It was dark and not long before stand to on the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup>. Dan, Hans and myself shiver to think that it could have been our group who were decimated; the memory will be with us forever.*

**Sapper Robert Creek:** *Once inside the base, the two Sappers were taken to the 3 RAR Command Post and interviewed by MAJ Ian Hands and also LT Perry RAE. Jack was immediately sent to the Regimental Aid Post for treatment of his wounds, while Murray Walker was asked to lead an infantry platoon back out to the knoll to recover the remainder of the Engineer section, living and dead.*

Michael English: **"Lt Harry Clarsen's 3 Platoon A Company** led the patrol out to bring back the engineers bodies:

*The flare aircraft was so up there, casting this eerie light tho seemed to suck the colour out of everything. We were guided out by one of the survivors [SPR Murray Walker] who had managed to crawl back through the American gun position. It was not a pretty sight.*

**Corporal Jack Davies,** the A Company medic attached to 3 Platoon went out on the patrol to recover the dead engineers. He later recorded *"as I moved into the position I felt that I was in the killing ground of a perfect ambush site. The patrol had received a direct mortar or RPG hit as well as possibly small arms fire."* The patrol quickly formed a perimeter and located the engineer's bodies and was greeted with a scene of devastation. After a short time the patrol moved back to the FSB, carrying the dead and their equipment."

**LT Harry Clarsen** recalls (2016): *"as we went out in the night to recover the Engineer patrol, my main fears were not of the enemy, but the Americans; their idea of a clearing patrol was to brass everything up for ten minutes outside of their perimeter with all the firepower they had. Unlike us they never actually sent anyone outside to have a look to see if any enemy were about. The continuing eerie, ever changing light from the Snoopy flares, in my mind, only served to make us better targets for the Yanks. My Platoon Sergeant John Hoffman organised the recovery of the bodies of the Engineers onto the stretchers, while I was keeping a very anxious eye on the surrounding scrub for any signs of enemy presence. My anxiety continued as slowly we moved back to the FSB perimeter with our heavy burden, but again my anxiety increased as we approached the American position. Would they be so spooked as to brass us up as we came back? Fortunately not, and it was then that I really appreciated the courage of the two Sappers who had earlier come back in through the American perimeter to report the destruction of the standing patrol."*



**For his actions that night and later during Operation Pinaroo, Sapper Murray Walker was awarded a Mention in Despatches.** Murray Walker's Citation is published in full in Florence, pages 188,189

**Sapper Robert Creek:** *From our position behind the fallen banana tree, Sapper Lyndon Stutley and I could hear a strange sound, a brushing, rustling sound. With the machine gun cocked and our rifles at the ready, we lay tensed, our trigger fingers quivering. Then at point blank range, directly in front of us, we heard a voice "Where are you?" .... it was Murray and the platoon of infantrymen come to gather us up and take us back to the base.*

*The four bodies were picked up by their clothes and carefully placed on two stretchers. One body on top of the other.... what else could be done? Their arms dangled lifelessly over the edges as the infantrymen took turns to carry the stretchers.*

*The sight of these squashed bodies of our friends, who were alive just a few hours before, was too much for me, and I doubled over, fell to my knees and started crying uncontrollably, letting my rifle fall to the ground .... to this day that sight of my deceased friends, just lying there in a dishevelled heap, is as clear as it was then and often brings tears to my eyes.*

**LT Peter Perry:** *I have no idea what the hour was when I crawled among the rest of our troops to deliver the devastating news. The dead were removed to Long Binh, where Cookie and I flew later that day to make a formal identification. The wounded were evacuated to Vung Tau from where Robert Creek was subsequently medivaced home to Melbourne. The others returned to Nui Dat.*

**Sapper Peter Macdonald\*:** *In the early stages of Anderson I spent my time working with A Coy 3 RAR on standing patrols north of the FSB. I had two shell scrapes, one with 3 Troop and the other with 3 RAR. I would be informed late afternoon if I was staying with 3 Troop or heading off to A Coy. On the night of the first attack on Anderson I was on a standing patrol with members of A Coy. It was a moon-lit night and from our position we had clear 180 degree vision.*

*We had just settled down and within 10 minutes found ourselves in the centre of significant movement of VC. One group set-up approximately 30 metres from our position and commenced firing mortars into the FSB. There was nothing we could do without being heard or sighted. Radio contact was attempted to provide the VC position, but was unsuccessful, we just had to wait it out. When the VC had moved on we packed up and headed back to the FSB. On return to my 3 RAR position, the situation I was faced with made me fully realized the term "when your number's up". A mortar had landed alongside my shell scrape destroying it and killing an A Coy member in an adjacent bunker.*

*On my return to 3 Troop I was informed of the Engineers standing patrol and the loss of our four mates. In mourning our loss we attempted to rationalize the outcome, the situation was horrific but also surreal, and an issue that has haunted all of us since. Unanswered was that FSB Commanders were aware that VC and regular troops were in the vicinity of Anderson, yet small observation standing patrols consisting of inexperienced 3 Troop Sappers were sent out on the nights of 16/17 and 17/18 February.*

\* Note: Sapper Macdonald was deployed again after Andersen as a Combat Engineer attached to 3RAR on Operation Pinaroo in the Long Hai Mountains where, after a number of booby trap incidents involving Infantry, it was decided to use the Engineers in their role front of the Infantry to locate bobby traps and mines as the battle group advanced. The Combat Engineer role in these circumstances is to not only locate and deal with mines and booby traps while pushing forward, but also to act as an Infantry forward scout.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> March 1968, shortly after assuming the 'Follow the Sapper' position, Sapper Macdonald was caught in a VC ambush and suffered a severe gunshot wound to his right arm, after which he was 'dusted off' in a "hot extraction" by a US Army gunship to the Australian Hospital at Vung Tau. His wounds were so severe that he had to be medically evacuated home to Perth, Australia.

In losing Sapper MacDonald, the Engineer Squadron lost not only a good Combat Engineer but also a good photographer; His camera tumbled out of one of his extra rifle magazine pouches during a contact and was probably recovered by the VC and sent to Hanoi.



Sapper Peter Macdonald 3 Troop works on reconstruction at Trang Bom (AWM)

**Peter Macdonald** was kept alive by the expertise of the 3RAR medic, **Corporal Jack Davis** and the Australian Hospital at Vung Tau. His situation might have been serious, but his thoughts were with two very close and special friends who had lost their lives. Close mates, **Sappers Geoff Coombs and Vince Tobin**, who went through the horrors of the standing patrol at Andersen, were both killed when they came into contact with a M16 mine in the Long Hais.

*Peter Macdonald: I first met Geoff and Vince at SME during our Corps training and later in our 3 month stay in Holding Troop prior to being posted to 3 Troop 1 Field Squadron Vietnam. We became close friends and arriving in Vietnam we all shared the same tent and worked together.*

*After the decimation at Andersen, Geoff, Vince and myself discussed the issues. Understandably they were both traumatised and considered that they were lucky to be alive, but might not be so fortunate next time. After considering their families and friends back home, they approached Captain Viv Morgan for a transfer to the much safer 21 Engineer Support Troop, and this was granted. Unfortunately the transfer could not be completed until their replacements had qualified through the mines training room at 1 Field Squadron Headquarters, and, in the meantime all of 3 Troop, including Geoff and Vince, were deployed again in Combat Engineer roles detecting and disarming mines and booby traps on Operation Pinaroo.*

*Geoff and Vince were working together when they responded to a call for help from an Infantry patrol that had walked into enemy land mines a short distance from their position. Selflessly and courageously in their haste to respond to the calls for their assistance, they themselves came into contact with a freshly laid M16 mine on the edge of a new bomb crater, and they died instantly.*

*My memory of my two great mates has been with me ever since.*

**Sapper Norm Cairns:** *The Boss, Major Kemp, flew out to Andersen from Nui Dat that morning to see his sappers. I'll never forget his opening words: "Tough night boys!"*

**Ian McGibbon:** *When a Light Fire Team of Huey Cobra Gunships arrived, it initially misjudged the position and fired on 3RAR, amazingly causing no casualties in spite of 12,000 rounds a minute being unleashed on the Australians. The gunships then engaged the enemy's mortars and forming-up place. Air support was also provided by a DC3 equipped with mini-guns, code named spooky but generally known to the troops as 'puff the magic dragon'. It dropped flares to illuminate the position as well as using its firepower to lethal effect.*

*An extra infantry company was brought in, the communications were improved with extra radios, additional defensive fire support was installed and civilians were prevented from approaching the base. The work stood the defenders in good stead when, three nights later, the enemy attacked again, this time without mortar support. They were halted short of the wire in a two hour firefight. Yet another attack was forestalled on 27 February when quick work by the mortars and artillery broke up the attacking force before it reached the base.*

**Sapper Peter Macdonald:** *Following the tragedy of the standing patrol, military commanders (or someone) acknowledged the decision to use combat sappers as Infantry was a blunder and immediately increased the force on FSB Anderson with a further full Company from 3RAR deployed to the knoll site.*



3 TROOP SAPPERS TAKE SHOWERS AT FSB ANDERSEN, MAL PAYNE SUPERVISING  
Troop

Photo: SPR Peter Macdonald 3





AMERICAN 155mm HOWITZER at FSB ANDERSEN

Photo: SPR Brian Hopkins 3 Troop



A SMALL TIME FOR MOURNING LOST MATES L to R Corporal Merv Dodd, Sapper Chuck Bonzas, Sapper John Hoskin, Sapper Lyndon Stutley, Sapper Barry McKay on the morning of 18<sup>th</sup> February. Photo: Peter Macdonald 3 Troop

**Former FO, now Colonel Mike Harvey RNZ Artillery (retired),** recalls (2016) *During the night of the attack I deployed a Douglas AC47 (DC3) Spooky known as Puff the Magic Dragon ... which had three 7.62mm miniguns and flares. I would indicate the target (mortar base plates) and Spooky would engage its guns. Even with the tracers spaced apart, the fire looked like a stream of red water from a hose. The aircraft also assisted by dropping a flare which lit up the battlefield like day. Spooky would then circle the FSB, firing at the designated targets and when it reached the starting point, drop another flare.*



*The FSB was a bulldozed rise and well dug in – the CP and our sleeping quarters being significant holes in the ground presumably dug by the engineers. I must confess I don't recall any deficiencies (at Andersen) as such.*

*My main problem as FSB FO was the inability to engage artillery during the 18 February attack because we had lost communications with the engineer standing patrol. Without communications we did not know if the patrol was moving across the battlefield in front of the FSB in an attempt to get back in and if*

*they were, in what direction. In retrospect, it does seem strange that the engineers provided the standing patrol. I would have thought this would normally have come from the company providing defence for the FSB.*

*The other problem was the US gunship that strafed the FSB. No one knew who it was or how it came about but there were no casualties and it happened only once.*

**Sapper Chuck Bonzas:** *When the American Huey gunship fired on 3 RAR, it flew across our position on the base perimeter and showered us with thousands of red hot cartridge cases, so hot that they burned holes in our packs. Perhaps the Yank pilots thought that the VC were inside the wire and had taken the 3RAR position, or perhaps they were just bad at finding the correct target.*



HUEY COBRA AT ANDERSEN WITH ITS TAIL ROTOR KNOCKED OFF BY AN EMPTY PLASTIC DRUM BLOWING ABOUT IN THE MAIN ROTOR WASH Photo: Sapper Brian Hopkins 3 Troop



FSB ANDERSEN 19 February 1968. AN AMERICAN HUEY GUNSHIP PILOT TAKES A NAP IN THE SHADE OF HIS MACHINE, ANOTHER PILOT INSIDE Photo: Sapper Peter Macdonald 3 Troop





BURNT OUT US ARMY TRUCK HIT BY MORTARS DURING 1<sup>st</sup> ENEMY ASSAULT. L to R CPL Merv Dodd (back to camera) Standing Patrol survivor SPR Murray Walker and SPR Vic Underwood, with (in flak jackets) two US Army Field Artillery Gunners. Photo: Sapper Peter Macdonald 3 Troop



FSB ANDERSEN: THE GRIM SAPPER TASK OF SEARCHING ENEMY BODIES PRIOR TO BURIAL, 18<sup>th</sup> FEBRUARY 1968  
Photo: SPR Peter Macdonald 3 Troop

As a result of the first attack and the growing threat to *Andersen*, the decision was made to reinforce the base with C Company, 3 RAR flown in by the time of the second attack two nights later. The APCs had also been redeployed to cover the south-east ridge and the southern approach from Trang Bom. **The second NVA/VC assault commenced just before midnight on 19 February**, this time focusing on the south-east, and was preceded by heavy machine-gun fire. The attack was stopped short of the wire, regardless the forward pits were hit by rifle grenades, while the Assault Pioneer positions were attacked with satchel charges. The only casualties were four Viet Cong killed.

**Chuck Bonzas** also remembers the ‘Turkey Shoot’ one night probably after the second assault. Everybody at the base was edgy and, when the Americans opened up at something they thought they saw beyond the wire, all units on the whole perimeter joined in. The number of rounds expended was massive.

**The third and final attack on 28 February** also began with a mortar attack, but the communist assault wave was broken up by mortar fire, and was forced to withdraw to the east. Three Americans were wounded. A clearing patrol later revealed that the Viet Cong had inserted a mortar team to the edge of the rubber trees by night in a Lambretta scooter and a cart and had then manhandled the tubes into position.

3 RAR's defence of FSB Andersen was the first occasion in the history of operations in Vietnam that an Australian fire support base had been subjected to a ground assault, while during all three attacks the cavalry and artillery in support had played a key role in the defence. Throughout the later part of the operation the patrolling rifle companies had systematically searched the AO and although contact was infrequent the patrols had been effective in denying the subsequent use of the area to launch rocket attacks.

Peter Macdonald: *After the month at Andersen, we were all exhausted. Our Troop Commander Captain Viv Morgan was an exceptional leader and, more than anyone, appreciated what we had experienced at Andersen. His philosophy was simple, keep us busy to stop us languishing around and stop us re-living our experiences, which would have a detrimental effect on future operations. “so what could we do to keep their minds occupied for a week until the next Op ....Let’s re-build Trang Bom!” .... And we did.*



HOUSES BUILT BY 3 TROOP IN TRANG BOM —Photo: Sapper Peter Macdonald 3 Troop

## **CONCLUSION OF OPERATION COBURG**

Operation Coburg ended on 1 March 1968 with 3 RAR redeploying to Nui Dat by air, while the Kiwi Artillery and the 3 Troop Sappers trekked back on top of the 3 Cav Armoured Personnel Carriers. The fighting had cost the Australians 17 killed and 61 wounded, while allied casualties included two New Zealanders and one American killed, and eight New Zealanders and six Americans wounded. Communist casualties included at least 145 killed, 110 wounded and 5 captured, with many more removed from the battlefield. Large quantities of weapons and equipment were also captured by the Australians. Overall, Coburg was considered a success by both the Australian and American Commands. Although they had been inserted too late to prevent the attacks during Tet, 1 ATF had disrupted enemy lines of communication, limiting their freedom of maneuver to attack the Long Binh–Bien Hoa complex, while the Australians had also successfully interdicted the Viet Cong withdrawal, causing heavy casualties.

In reality, the NVA and VC forces were not finished by a long chalk: Next up they would meet the 1ATF forces again on Operation Pinaroo, then launch more FSB assaults during the battle of Coral-Balmoral 12<sup>th</sup> May – 6<sup>th</sup> June 1968.

Former 3RAR CO **Brigadier Jim Shelton** (Retired) in 2016: *3RAR had a very high regard for the Engineer support during our tour of duty in Vietnam and in particular at Andersen and in the enemy Secret Zone in the Long Hai hills; when I attended Viv Morgan's funeral my thoughts were about FSB Andersen.*

**Major General Hori Howard** (Retired) in 2016: *I have never forgotten the sad incident with the Engineer Section, but it could have been any of us .... I had the privilege of working with Cpl Merv Dodd and his excellent section on several occasions during 1968, and with Capt Viv Morgan and Sgt 'Jonah' Jones of 3 Troop in the Long Hais. I have always had great respect for our Engineer comrades, no matter what role they were performing.*



3 TROOP LEAVING ANDERSEN ON 3CAV APCs FOR THE LONG ROAD TRIP BACK TO NUI DAT. Photo: Sapper Peter MacDonald 3 Troop



## **CONCLUSION - FROM A SAPPER PERSPECTIVE**



*LCPL John Garrett*



*SPR Allan Pattison*



*SPR David Steen*



*SSGT Colin McLaughlin*

The Battle of Fire Support Base Andersen has left a lifetime legacy for all those involved, soldiers from all of the Combat Arms of the Australian, New Zealand and American Armies: Infantry, Artillery, Engineers and Armour. Those who died during the fighting lost their young lives full of promise, and left behind wives, children, girlfriends, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and friends, all of whom had to cope with the tragic loss of their beloved soldiers.

**For most, the effects of that loss go on to this day. It is the families of the fallen that have borne the greatest cost of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War.**

For the comrades of those who died, the loss and the cost has been no less, for they still see the faces and hear the voices of their lost mates. For the 3 Troop Sappers, the standing patrol tragedy and attacks on *Andersen* forged a bond that is unbreakable. There is a remarkable video about the reunions of 3 Troop Veterans on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fx8-QiNmbA>

**UNANSWERED QUESTIONS** For those Army Engineer veterans who were there in 1968, there are still unanswered questions about the Battle of Fire Support Base Andersen, primarily as to why the battle has received little or no coverage in books or journals compiled by military historians since the Vietnam War?

It seems that military leaders were reluctant to speak about it, and there was a lack of information from early in the piece – even when a lost page of the FSB command Duty Officer's log was located for us by the AWM's Head of Military History Ashley Ekins late in 2016, there is a bewildering gap in entries between 0100hrs when the action began, and 0525hrs when clearing and cleaning up procedures commenced\*.

(\*compared say to the 1RAR Commander's Diary for the key night of the Battle of Fire Support Base Coral several months later on 13 May 1968, which has 19 highly detailed entries between 0010h when the attack started and 0630 when it subsided)

This 'no coverage' question is compounded by the fact that the Battle would seem important from a military and strategic point of view, as it was the first time that an Australian Fire Support Base had come under direct assault from the NVA and VC forces and it was outside of the area of operations allocated to 1ATF in Phouc Tuy Province based on Nui Dat.

Second, why were standing patrols continuing to be sent to the same well used (and well known to the enemy) location outside of the wire of a major Fire Support Base in the known path of a significant enemy force? And why decide to send a section of Combat Engineers to carry out the specialist Infantry task of providing critical intelligence for the defence of that base? Reconnaissance tasks such as this are overwhelmingly carried out by specialist Infantry soldiers highly trained to respond to contacts with the enemy, and sometimes involve the Special Air Service (SAS).

The answer perhaps lies in the third question, perhaps the key question for the sapper veterans of Andersen: Why was the Base so undermanned when it had been deliberately established by 1ATF astride predicted lines of movement for the communist forces? As pointed out by Ian McGibbon, an extra Infantry Company was brought in immediately after the first attack.

**These questions aside, It is hoped that this article may in some way allow the Battle of Fire Support Base Andersen to be better known in the Australian Community, the Australian Army and within our Corps, and will result in the service and sacrifice of all of those who fell becoming well recognised.**

We also have to acknowledge the brave North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong soldiers who fought at Andersen and understand that their pain and loss of comrades has been and is no less than ours. Those of us who have returned to Vietnam in recent times and have engaged in conversation with our former enemy, have found their commemoration and remembrance of their lost comrades quite moving and remarkable.

**THE QUESTION OF BATTLE HONOURS AND RECOGNITION** Subsequent to Operation Coburg, The Royal Australian Regiment and the 3rd Cavalry Regiment were awarded the battle honour "Bien Hoa", one of only five presented to Australian units during the war.

Even though the (virtually entire) Engineer Squadron was under the 1ATF deployment for the whole of Operation Coburg, even though the sapper combat teams and mini teams accompanied infantry and armour's every move, even though sappers were on the perimeter of Andersen throughout all the enemy assaults, and even though the standing patrol was decimated while acting as infantry at the listening post, under the antiquated Imperial Honours system, no formal recognition was extended to the 1st Field Squadron RAE.

This exclusion of Combat Engineer elements on Operation Coburg was, and remains, a travesty of fairness and equity for the Squadron and the sappers who participated, most particularly those members who were killed and wounded in action.

Further, none of the ten sapper casualties were considered eligible for the award of the Infantry Combat badge, even though they fulfilled all of the criteria for that award when it was established in 1970.

It was therefore very pleasing for the members of the Vietnam Tunnel Rats Association to have the (belated) posthumous award of the no lesser Army Combat Badge made available for our fallen brothers from FSB Andersen, and elsewhere, even though three decades late.

Closing Note. Murray Walker MID has contacted the Vietnam Tunnel Rats Association asking that elements of the story which mentioned Jack Lawson also made the hazardous journey back to FSB Andersen with him be corrected. This matter has been a disputed issue for many years and neither myself nor the Holdfast Newsletter has the knowledge nor the right to sit in judgment on the issue; Our role has been solely to compile information submitted by a wide array of sources nearly 50 years after the event. This note is included out of respect for Murray Walker.

**Postscript:** In November 2016, Vietnam Tunnel Rats Association President Jim Marett was able to secure approval from the Government of Vietnam for a Tunnel Rats tour group to visit Trang Bom and the knoll site of the decimated standing patrol, and to conduct a memorial service there. We thank the Vietnamese people for this great privilege.



20<sup>th</sup> NOVEMBER 2016: 3 Troop Engineers who were at the Battle of Fire Support Base Andersen gather at The Knoll site where their mates were hit by Enemy mortar bombs on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1968. L to R Chuck Bonzas, Glenn Weise, John Hoskin, Norm Cairns and Barry Gilbert.

## HONOUR ROLL - FIRE SUPPORT BASE ANDERSEN, SOUTH VIETNAM, 1968

**"To Honour These Men and Remember Them"**



Outside the Wire: The Standing Patrol, 11 Section, 3 Troop, 1<sup>st</sup> Field Squadron, Royal Australian Engineers.

**Staff Sergeant CW McLaughlin KIA 18<sup>th</sup> February 1968**

**Lance Corporal JE Garrett KIA 18<sup>th</sup> February 1968**

**Sapper AG Pattison KIA 18<sup>th</sup> February 1968**

**Sapper DJ Steen KIA 18<sup>th</sup> February 1968**

**Sapper GJ Coombs KIA 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1968 (on Operation Pinaroo)**

**Sapper VJ Tobin KIA 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1968 (on Operation Pinaroo)**

Inside the Wire:



**Private TJ De Vries Van Leeuwen 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment KIA 18<sup>th</sup> February 1968**

**Private JA Doherty 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment KIA 18<sup>th</sup> February 1968**

**Lance Bombardier JL Menz Detachment, 131 Divisional Locating Battery, Royal Regiment of Australian Artillery KIA 18<sup>th</sup> February 1968**

**Specialist 4 Orville W 'Buddy' Heightland Jr. B Battery, 2nd Battalion, 35<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery, US Army KIA 18<sup>th</sup> February 1968 \***

\*The following note of June 19, 2009 was found on US Army Veterans Website

<https://army.togetherweserved.com/army/servlet/tws.webapp.WebApp?cmd=ShadowBoxProfile&type=Person&ID=5235>

" by Alan Ward, Comrade, 709 NW 138th Edmond OK 73013 USA

Valor Under Fire

I was there the night that Spc. Heightland was killed. Of all the medals that were awarded for the action that took place that night only Spc. Heightland was deserving. He gave his life turning on the rescue helicopter landing lights so that wounded comrades could be evacuated to safety. His action was taken without hesitation and without thought to his own safety. While many of the men who were awarded medals of bravery sat in heavily fortified bunkers, Spc. Heightland exposed himself to the brunt of the attacking forces to save others. There can be no award given by man high enough to reflect Spc. Heightland's actions."



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Former Commanders: Australia – Colonel John Kemp AM (Retd), Brigadier JJ 'Jim' Shelton DSO MC (Retd), Major General Brian 'Hori' Howard AO MC ESM (Retd), LT Harry Clarsen AM (Retd). New Zealand – Colonel Mike Harvey RNZ Artillery (Retd)

Former 3RAR Infantrymen: Bob Dabinett OAM, Barry Swain.

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This material was compiled and written by former sapper Peter Scott\* for the Vietnam Tunnel Rats Association Inc. as background for the article published in the Association's *Holdfast Newsletter* No. 30  
<http://tunnelrats.com.au/pdfs/newsletters/Holdfast-30.pdf>

\*served with 2 Troop 1 Field Squadron RAE 1969/70 attached on Operations to 5RAR, 7RAR, 1 Armoured Regiment RAAC and 3 Cavalry Regiment RAAC. Email contact for Peter Scott [holdfast279@yahoo.com.au](mailto:holdfast279@yahoo.com.au)

