



Government House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
15 May 2018

UNIT CITATION FOR GALLANTRY

The Governor-General is pleased to announce the following and award of the Unit Citation for Gallantry:

1ST AUSTRALIAN TASK FORCE (FORWARD)
Headquarters 1st Australian Task Force (Forward)
1st Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment
3rd Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment
A Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment
C Squadron, 1st Armoured Regiment
12th Field Regiment, Royal Regiment of Australian Artillery
1st Field Squadron, Royal Australian Engineers
Detachments in direct support of and located with 1st Australian Task Force (Forward)

For extraordinary gallantry in action in the Dinh Duong/Bien Hoa Provinces of South Vietnam from 12 May 1968 to 6 June 1968, during Operation THOAN THANG.

By His Excellency's Command

Mark Fraser LVO OAM
Official Secretary to the Governor-General

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On 12th May 1968, the 1st Australian Task Force (Forward) (1 ATF (Fwd)) deployed into Area of Operations (AO) SURFERS on the border of the Dinh Duong/Bien Hoa Provinces of South Vietnam. Their task was to establish two Fire Support Patrol Bases (FSPB) from which to mount patrols to interdict enemy infiltration and supply routes between War Zone D and Saigon. Intelligence had informed the Task Force that at least five enemy regiments were known to be operating in vicinity of AO SURFERS and preparing to mount attacks against Saigon and the United States military base at Bien Hoa. It was believed that the forces the Australians would operate against were disorganised and withdrawing from Saigon after protracted combat in the Saigon area.

FSPB Coral was occupied late on 12 May by the headquarters and guns from the 12th Field Regiment, mortars and anti-tank crews from the 1st Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (1 RAR), and personnel deployed to set up the Task Force headquarters. Unknown to the commanders, the area chosen for the insertion was the forward staging area of two regiments from the 7th Division of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) which was preparing to advance on Saigon. The Australians had only enough time to prepare basic fighting positions when the PAVN forces launched human wave attacks against the hastily-prepared defences.

At around 1.45am on the morning of 13 May, the enemy launched their first attack with rocket propelled grenades and heavy, accurate mortar fire, followed by a ground assault against the 1 RAR mortar position. With support from the guns of 102 Battery of 12th Field Regiment firing over open sights, the mortar crews held their ground, but elsewhere enemy forces penetrated the position and threatened to capture the guns. In the darkness, gun crews, men from the divisional locating battery and anti-tank platoon, and headquarters personnel on their own initiative mounted repeated counter-attacks to clear the enemy from the position. With the arrival of United States helicopters and 'Spooky' gunships, the defences were held and shortly after first light the enemy withdrew.

The next day the defences were strengthened by troops from 1 RAR and Armoured Personnel Carriers of A Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment. The arrival of the United States' M109 self-propelled artillery from Battery A of the 2nd/25th Artillery Regiment and the M42A1 'Duster' tracked anti-aircraft vehicles from 5th/2nd Air Defence Battery, gave the defenders much needed additional firepower. Engineers from the 1st Field Squadron worked around the clock to harden the defensive position and help establish a Task Force Maintenance Area to provide continuous logistical support to the deployed Task Force.

Over the next two weeks further attacks were mounted against the FSPB, but the arrival of Centurion tanks from C Squadron, 1st Armoured Regiment and direct support from helicopters from 9th Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force and 161 Reconnaissance Flight, added to the defenders ability to repulse repeated regimental size assaults.

FSPB Coogee had been initially established by 3rd Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (3 RAR), with tanks from C Squadron, however the greater threat identified in the north of AO SURFERS saw them redeployed to occupy FSPB Balmoral on 24 May. Two days later FSPB Balmoral was attacked by a suspected regimental sized enemy force. This attack was defeated by the combined firepower of the tanks and infantry fighting from well prepared positions. A further attack mounted on 28 May was also defeated by supporting fire from the tanks, infantry and accurate mortar fire.

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For two more weeks the Australian forces, supported by United States and New Zealand artillery, continuously mounted fighting patrols against the enemy entrenched in bunker systems within AO SURFERS. Operating out of FSPBs Coral and Balmoral, the Australians aggressively sought out and defeated well prepared, highly motivated and well supplied enemy forces in fierce, close-quarter fighting. The aggression shown by the Australian forces and the combat support troops deployed forward working long hours over a long period and under arduous conditions, supported by United States' and New Zealand air assets and artillery, significantly contributed to the failure of the North Vietnamese forces to mount coordinated attacks against Saigon and Bien Hoa.

With limited experience at fighting high intensity combined armour/infantry engagements, the Australians demonstrated extraordinary gallantry in the defence of FSPBs Coral and Balmoral. The exceptional leadership and soldiering skills of all members of 1 ATF (Fwd) and their sustained outstanding performance in the face of overwhelming odds during the largest and most hazardous battle of the Vietnam War were in the finest tradition of the Australian Army and the Australian Defence Forces.