

Recognition after 40 years

On Wednesday a 40th anniversary remembrance service at the Royal Australian Artillery national memorial on Mt Pleasant was held where the honour title Coral was awarded to 102 Field Battery, Royal Regiment of Australian Artillery, in recognition of its actions during the Battle of Coral/Balmoral in South Vietnam against North Vietnamese troops between May 12 and June 6, 1968.

At the ceremony the Governor-General said, 'It is a particular privilege and pleasure to see put to right another part of our gallant historical Vietnam record by recognising the professionalism, the valour and the indomitable spirit of all members of 102 Field Battery. Essentially it is because in all the battles and clashes that took place in that three weeks of sustained and heavy fighting, the guns were always there, invariably providing close, accurate and immediate support to their infantry, armoured, engineer and cavalry colleagues in need,' he said.

'Secondly, we honour the battery because itself was assaulted and bombarded and temporarily lost a gun, yet in these hectic and very tough battle conditions, the gun crews stuck brilliantly and bravely to their task of supporting their infantry, armour and cavalry comrades, even though at times they were firing over open sights at a determined enemy assault force closing on their own gun lines.'

During the ceremony, two M2A2 minute guns were fired for Gunner Christopher Sawtell and Gunner Ian Scott, members of the Headquarter Battery of the 12th Field Regiment who were killed during the first battle, on May 13, 1968.

The veterans' address was given by Colonel Ian Ahearn (retired), who said the gunners would stay true to their creed to 'always fight together, drink together, laugh together and mourn together'.

Colonel Ahearn said, 'This is our day. This is the gunner day. You should be filled

with pride and melancholy. The melancholy is for those who can't be here, for those that we lost and for those who have passed away since. But this is also a day of pride.'

'Forty years ago, on the first night that the NVA rolled into our position, heralded by a whole bunch of rocket-propelled grenades and too much machine gun fire to think about, we started to show how obstinate we were,' he said.

The president of the 12th Field Regiment (Vietnam) Association, Rob Costello, said the formal recognition of their efforts had been a long time coming.

'It should have happened 40 years ago and I'm just so proud,' he said.

The ceremony also featured a UH1H 'Huey' helicopter fly-over on a perfect morning in Canberra.

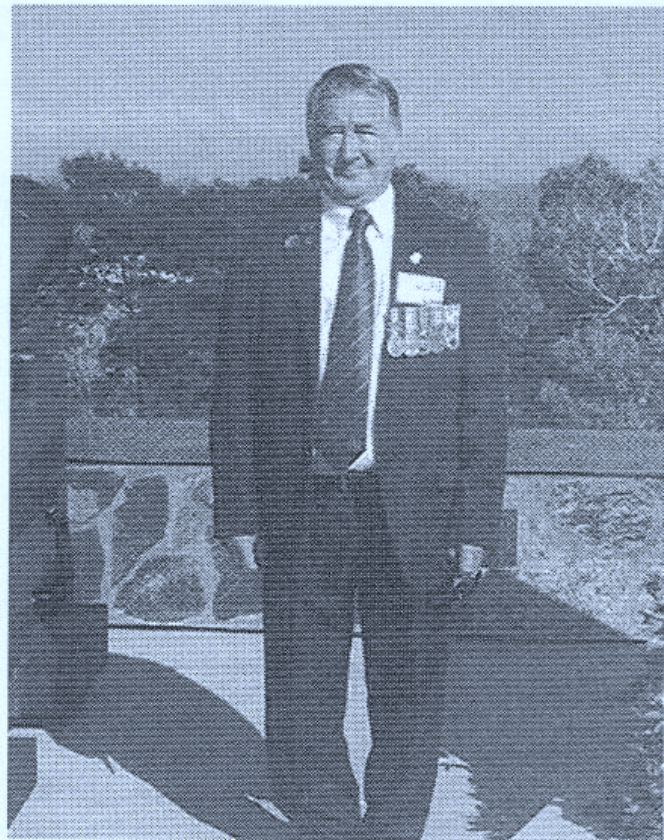
Local returned serviceman, Doug Arnold attended the ceremony as part of the 102 Field Battery. His wife Gaye, sent us this description...

'Doug and I went to Canberra for the 40th Anniversary of the Battle of Fire Support Base Coral.

'Our second son Simon, his wife Angela, and their children Jarah and Kiarna, and our youngest son Matt and his partner Ayla also attended. Our eldest son Tim and family were unable to attend.

'Other than on Anzac Days, our family has never seen the comradeship and closeness that men in their sixties can have within their group after 40 years apart. These men instantly returned to being the 19-20 year olds they once were, with many stories evolving.

'This event was quite an eye opener for the children, and they will treasure having



Local returned serviceman, Doug Arnold attended the ceremony as part of the 102 Field Battery.

been able to be a part of it.

'The Monday evening we attended a reception at Parliament House (over 2,000 ex-veterans and their partners) to which Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and the Leader of the Opposition Mr Nelson both gave heartfelt speeches to honour these men for the participation in the Battle that has at long last been recognised for the significance it had in the overall War in Vietnam.

'Tuesday morning was a Memorial Service held at the Vietnam Memorial in Anzac Parade, Canberra, where, once again Mr. Rudd attended along with Mrs Bronwyn Bishop and the Governor General Mr Jeffrey. There was an unveiling of a plaque honouring the 102 Field Artillery Regiment.

'Then on Wednesday we attended the 40th anniversary remembrance service at the Royal Australian Artillery national memorial on Mt Pleasant.'