RECOVERY of 7th PAVN DIVISION MARTYRS
3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment Defensive Position Balmoral
Binh Duong Province, Socialist Republic of Vietnam

This report covers the role of Healing Through History (HTH)[1] between 2014 and 2024[1] in the search for, and successful recovery of, twenty sets of human remains belonging to members of the 165th Regiment, PAVN 7th Division at Chòi Dúng Hamlet in southern Bình Dương Province.

BACKGROUND

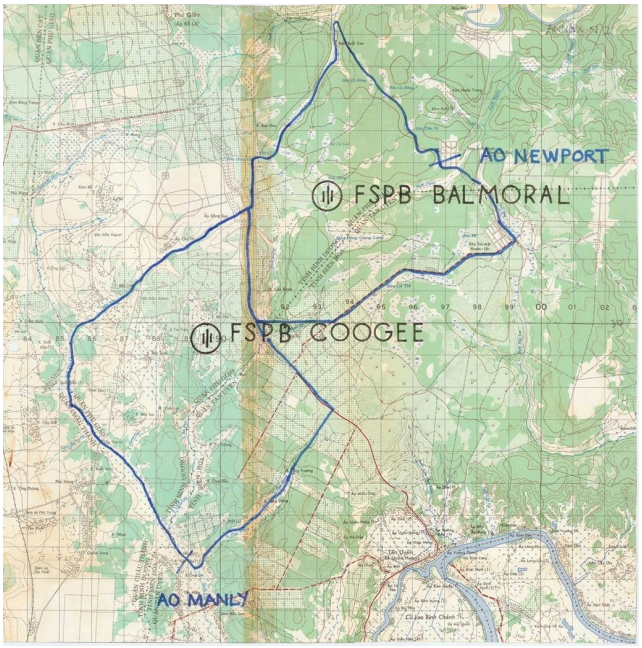
THE BATTLES FOR BALMORAL 26 MAY and 28 MAY 1968

Between May 12th 1968 and June 6th 1968 the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR) participated in Operation Toàn Thắng I (Phase 2) in Area of Operations (AO) Surfers (in the then northern Biên Hòa and southern Bình Dương Provinces). From May 24th to June 6th 1968, 3RAR occupied battalion defensive position Balmoral in AO Newport (part of AO Surfers), Bình Dương Province (Figure 1).

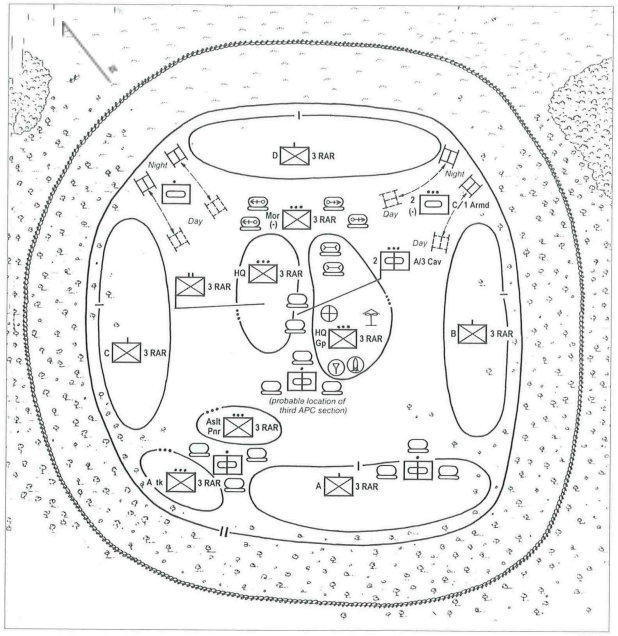
During this period Balmoral was assaulted on two occasions (May 26th, and May 28th 1968) by forces of the 165th Regiment, 7th PAVN Division. The official 3RAR Commanding Officer's Diaries pertaining to that period[1,2] record the total the number of PAVN killed during the first assault as six (by body count), and during the the second assault 42 (by body count), 13 (possible), and one prisoner of war who later died of wounds in custody. Numerous other contacts occurred in the vicinity resulting in further PAVN deaths that are not the subject of this report.

The initial assault on both occasions commenced with a mortar bombardment and and rocket attack, followed by ground assaults directed at A Company 3RAR with A Squadron 3rd Cavalry Regiment on the south-western perimeter of Balmoral; and larger assault on D Company 3RAR with 2 Troop C Squadron 1st Armoured Regiment on the north-eastern perimeter. The south-western assault occurred within dense scrub while the north-eastern assault occurred across the open ground of a dried swamp, towards the scrub-swamp interface where Australian defensive positions were positioned (Figure 1).

[1] *Research and analyses undertaken prior to 2021 were undertaken directly by current directors of Healing Through History (HTH) in a personal professional capacity prior to the creation of HTH as an entity*



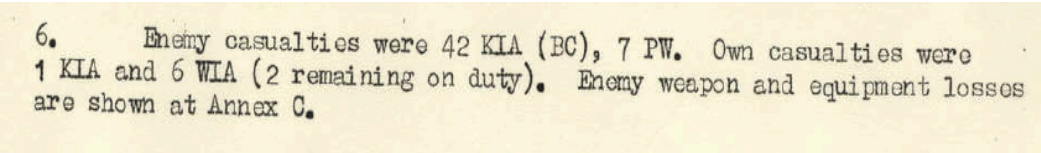
(a)



(b)

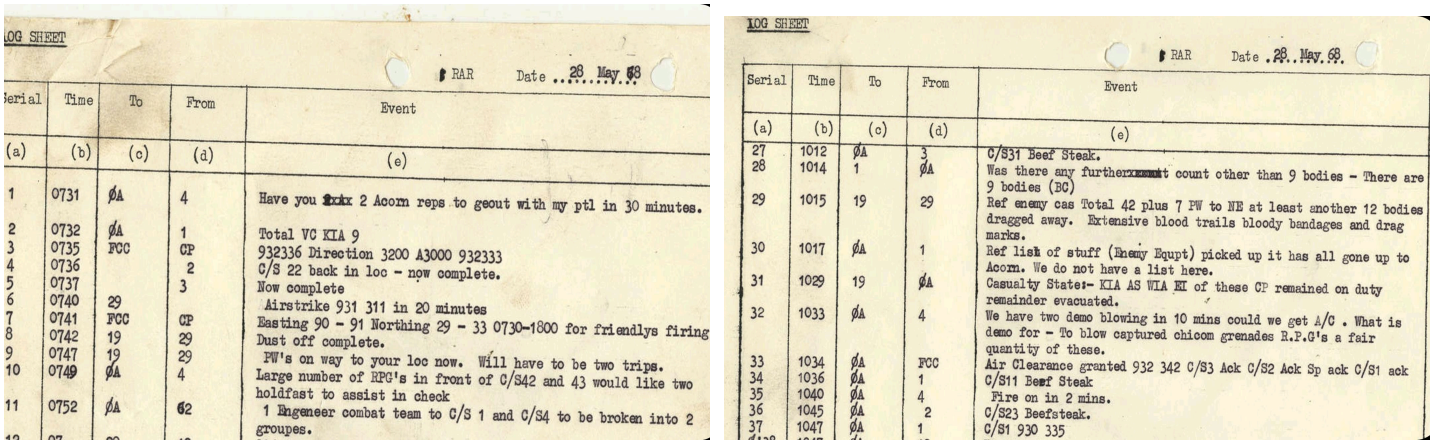
Figure 1: (a) Map of sub-Area of Operations Manly and Newport sourced from 3RAR Commanding Officer's Diaries Annex, May 1968[1] and; **(b)** A stylised diagram of the layout of 3RAR defensive position Balmoral at May 25 1968 sourced from *English, Michael C., Brave Lads, 2008*[3]. We have added an approximation of true north to image (b) based on the result obtained from research described in this report

The 3RAR Commanding Officer's Diary of May 1968[1] recorded six PAVN bodies (by body count) after the first assault. Eyewitness accounts provided to HTH (Mr Paul Donnelly, Mr John Bryant) suggest these bodies were buried immediately in front of 12 Platoon 3RAR on the right flank of the north-eastern perimeter of Balmoral. Following the second assault, the 3RAR Commanding Officer's Diary for May 1968 recorded a total of 42 PAVN bodies (by body count)[1,2] overall at Balmoral (Figure 2). Of these, nine were reported and confirmed by A Company[1] (Figure 3), and 33 bodies were reported within the 2 Troop C Squadron 1 Armoured Regiment area of engagement (the north-eastern battlefield fronting D Company)[4] (Figure 4).



6. Enemy casualties were 42 KIA (BC), 7 PW. Own casualties were 1 KIA and 6 WIA (2 remaining on duty). Enemy weapon and equipment losses are shown at Annex C.

Figure 2: The number of PAVN casualties for all of 3RAR and supporting arms following the second assault on Balmoral is stated as 42 (by body count) in Section 6 of Appendix 2 to Annex B to 3RAR R569-1-26 'Battle for Balmoral No 2 - 28 May 1968 (Operation Toan Thang - Operational Analysis 21 April - 5 June 1968). AWM95 Item number: 7/3/62 Australian War Memorial[2]



LOG SHEET

RAR Date 28 May 68

Serial	Time	To	From	Event
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
1	0731	ØA	4	Have you ~~xxx~~ 2 Acorn reps to geout with my ptl in 30 minutes.
2	0732	ØA	1	Total VC KIA 9
3	0735	FCC	CP	932336 Direction 3200 A3000 932333
4	0736		2	C/S 22 back in loc - now complete.
5	0737		3	Now complete
6	0740	29		Airstrike 931 311 in 20 minutes
7	0741	FCC	CP	Easting 90 - 91 Northing 29 - 33 0730-1800 for friendlys firing
8	0742	19	29	Dust off complete.
9	0747	19	29	PW's on way to your loc now. Will have to be two trips.
10	0749	ØA	4	Large number of RPG's in front of C/S42 and 43 would like two holdfast to assist in check
11	0752	ØA	62	1 Engeneer combat team to C/S 1 and C/S4 to be broken into 2 groupes.

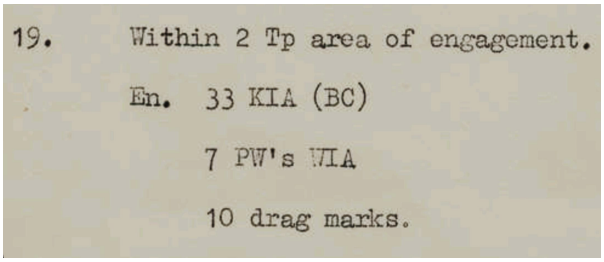
LOG SHEET

RAR Date 28 May 68

Serial	Time	To	From	Event
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
27	1012	ØA	3	C/S31 Beef Steak.
28	1014	1	ØA	Was there any further ~~xxxxx~~ count other than 9 bodies - There are 9 bodies (BC)
29	1015	19	29	Ref enemy cas Total 42 plus 7 PW to NE at least another 12 bodies dragged away. Extensive blood trails bloody bandages and drag marks.
30	1017	ØA	1	Ref list of stuff (Enemy Equpt) picked up it has all gone up to Acorn. We do not have a list here.
31	1029	19	ØA	Casualty State:- KIA AS WIA NI of these CP remained on duty remainder evacuated.
32	1033	ØA	4	We have two demo blowing in 10 mins could we get A/C . What is demo for - To blow captured chicom grenades R.F.C's a fair quantity of these.
33	1034	ØA	FCC	Air Clearance granted 932 342 C/S3 Ack C/S2 Ack Sp ack C/S1 ack
34	1036	ØA	1	C/S11 Beef Steak
35	1040	ØA	4	Fire on in 2 mins.
36	1045	ØA	2	C/S23 Beefsteak.
37	1047	ØA	1	C/S1 930 335

(a) **(b)**

Figure 3: 3RAR Commanding Officer Diaries Duty Officer's Log May 28th 1968 AWM95 Item number: 7/3/61[1] **(a)** 0732 radio message from A Company (Callsign 1) to Battalion Headquarters (0A) reporting nine PAVN killed in action (at Serial 2). **(b)** 1014 radio message from Battalion Headquarters (0A) to A Company (Callsign 1) requesting confirmation of total PAVN killed in action (response given by A Company in same line confirming nine PAVN killed (by body count) (at Serial 28)



19. Within 2 Tp area of engagement.

En. 33 KIA (BC)

7 PW's WIA

10 drag marks.

Figure 4: Part 1, Item 19 of the C Squadron 1 Armoured Regiment After Action Report Series: AWM95 Item number: 2/3/9. Australian War Memorial[4] which records 33 PAVN bodies by body count on the north-eastern battlefield

HEALING THROUGH HISTORY ENGAGEMENT IN THE SEARCH

On 27th September 2014, current Healing Through History (HTH) Director-at-Large Mr Luke Johnston, established written contact with a veteran of the two battles, Mr Brian Cleaver. Mr Cleaver had been a rifleman with the rank of Private at the time of the battles. As we understand it, Mr Cleaver returned to the 3RAR defensive position site sometime in the early 2000's in an attempt to determine the site of a mass burial pit on the north-eastern perimeter. He believed that following the second assault on Balmoral (May 28, 1968), 42 PAVN bodies were placed in a single B52 crater that was then backfilled with soil by a bulldozer. Mr Cleaver reportedly engaged Vietnamese authorities and the Australian Embassy in Việt Nam to support a number of excavations based on information he had collated.

Records of the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam (SRVN)[6] indicate that Vietnamese authorities conducted three searches for a mass burial pit between March 2005 and February 2007 in an area unrelated to Mr Cleaver's information. Between April 2009 and March 2014 a further four separate search efforts were conducted utilising information provided by Mr Cleaver. According to Mr Cleaver, the latter four search efforts yielded remains of only one fallen PAVN soldier. In 2018 an additional search was conducted independently by the Vietnamese authorities unrelated to Mr Cleaver. Although not included in the spatial information that we viewed[6] we are aware of an additional search effort conducted in 2019 based on information supplied by Mr Cleaver that yielded no result.

The March 2014 search based on Mr Cleaver's information was the subject of a documentary film directed by David Bradbury entitled 'The Crater'. After that search was deemed unsuccessful, Mr Johnston established contact with Mr Cleaver to offer assistance with reviewing his research material. Between 2014 and 2017 Mr Cleaver provided to Mr Johnston his collection of battlefield photographs, a sketch map of the battlefield from the C Squadron, 1 Armoured Regiment Commanding Officer's Diary[4] and a generalised Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) scan denoting the bomb craters in which Mr Cleaver deemed the burial have taken place. Among these photographs was an image of a bulldozer reportedly backfilling the mass grave that was the target of this search. HTH Executive Director Mr Glenn Hines conducted preliminary desktop analysis on that material, with particular attention to certain oblique aerial photographs and ground-based battlefield photographs. We then generated a spatial overlay of Mr Cleaver's GPR scan in Google Earth in order to eliminate that area from further investigation (Figure 9).

In the sections below we detail the steps that HTH took to analyse available material and define a new search area, the rationale behind a new search chord that we defined, the process involved in obtaining support to act on new information we provided, the result, and a discussion regarding the result with options for further search efforts at Balmoral.

HEALING THROUGH HISTORY'S GEOSPATIAL ANALYSIS AND GROUND SURVEYS

The detailed geospatial analysis of all available data and imagery by Mr Glenn Hines resulted in the definition of a new spatial search chord as detailed in our research summary report, *Battle of Balmoral 24th to 31st May 1968. Martyrs of the 165th PAVN Regiment*[6]. In summary, the analysis involved inspection and cross-referencing landmark features within two oblique aerial photographs taken of the battlefield following the second assault on Balmoral, and a subset of ground-based battlefield photographs (Figure 5). Several geographic reference points common across multiple photographs allowed us to determine bearings between identifiable features such as characteristic bomb craters and vegetation, armoured vehicles and armoured vehicle tracks, a unique damaged star picket on the defensive wire and a bulldozer reportedly backfilling the target mass burial pit. Distances between features were estimated using objects of known dimensions within the photographs, including a Centurion tank and an M113A1 Armoured Personnel Carrier. This allowed us to define not only bearings but also distances between the features and an approximate search chord for the burial location.

On December 3rd 2019 a site visit was conducted to Balmoral by Mr Luke Johnston, with three veterans of the battles who had witnessed the mass burial; Mr Brian Cleaver, Mr John Bryant and Mr Paul Donnelly. No new information was gleaned from the exercise but Mr Bryant confirmed our existing assumption that the target burial location would likely be west of Mr Cleaver's search area. As we had already defined an approximate search chord, the problem at that stage was not that of the general location of the target burial site, but locating a defined control point from which to spatially tie our search chord to. This was solved by the generation and collation of two critical pieces of information.

1. Between December 6th and December 11th 2019, Mr Johnston conducted three days of ground survey for evidence of the 3RAR Balmoral base in the area west of Mr Cleaver's previous search area. Two full days were dedicated to a survey that spatially defined every ground anomaly and metallic object detected within the immediate topsoil. This yielded little result other than bomb fragments and a piece of a military sandbag. The third day entailed spatially defining every major ground anomaly (predominantly extant bomb craters) around the western perimeter of the dried swamp. This also involved a series of soil transects to accurately define the scrub-swamp interface. Precise definition of that linear boundary was seen as valuable as it had formed the north-eastern perimeter of the Australian defensive position in front of which the mass burial took place that was the focus of this search effort.

2. In 2022 we acquired declassified National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) period satellite imagery from the United States Geological Survey agency, initially including a 1968 CORONA image and a 1972 HEXAGON image. The 1968 image was of limited use due to being too low resolution for accurate analysis. However the 1972 image was high enough resolution to readily assess the target area. The HEXAGON image was georeferenced and overlaid onto Google Earth allowing geospatial correlations of several features identified via previous battlefield imagery analysis (Figures 5 and 6).

3. Importantly the scrub-swamp interface could be readily matched to the spatial data from the 2019 ground survey. A single bomb crater on that boundary believed to have been the location of the 4 Section, 11 Platoon, 3RAR machine gun pit (hereafter referred to as the 4 Section gun pit) was also identified along this boundary. This feature was important due to the fact that three ground-based battlefield photographs that Mr Hines had used to define our approximate search chord were taken from that position (Figure 5). If that position proved to be the 4 Section gun pit we would then we would have a spatial control point from which to tie our search chord. The position of this crater matched an extant bomb crater we had recorded during our December 2019 ground survey.

On June 2nd 2022 HTH conducted a targeted ground survey of the bomb crater believed to be the position in which the 4 Section gun pit had been placed. Using a metal detector within the floor of the crater, approximately 30 square centimetres of highly degraded (rusted) corrugated iron was located. The 4 section gun pit had been manned during the battles by Mr Paul Donnelly

and Mr Ian Robertshaw. Following the discovery of the corrugated iron we advised Mr Donnelly of its presence and he suggested that he had possibly used such material in the overhead protection of his machine gun pit. Post-war soil slumping of the crater walls had removed any visible trace of a potential gun pit itself, which Mr Donnelly advised had been placed in the rear right-hand side wall of the crater that he occupied. Two spent 7.62mm shell casings were recovered from immediately outside the rim of the crater, adjacent to where Mr Donnelly had described placing his gun pit. Both bore the head stamp text 'WRA 1964', indicating production by the Winchester Repeating Arms Company four years prior to the 1968 battles. Further metal detecting laterally away from the crater along the scrub-swamp interface yielded no result. However a subtle ground anomaly was observed at a distance of approximately 8 metres to the left-rear of the crater. This anomaly was an elongated sub-semicircular bund of soil, approximately three metres in length, with a distinct area of depressed ground within its convex side (away from the scrub-swamp interface).

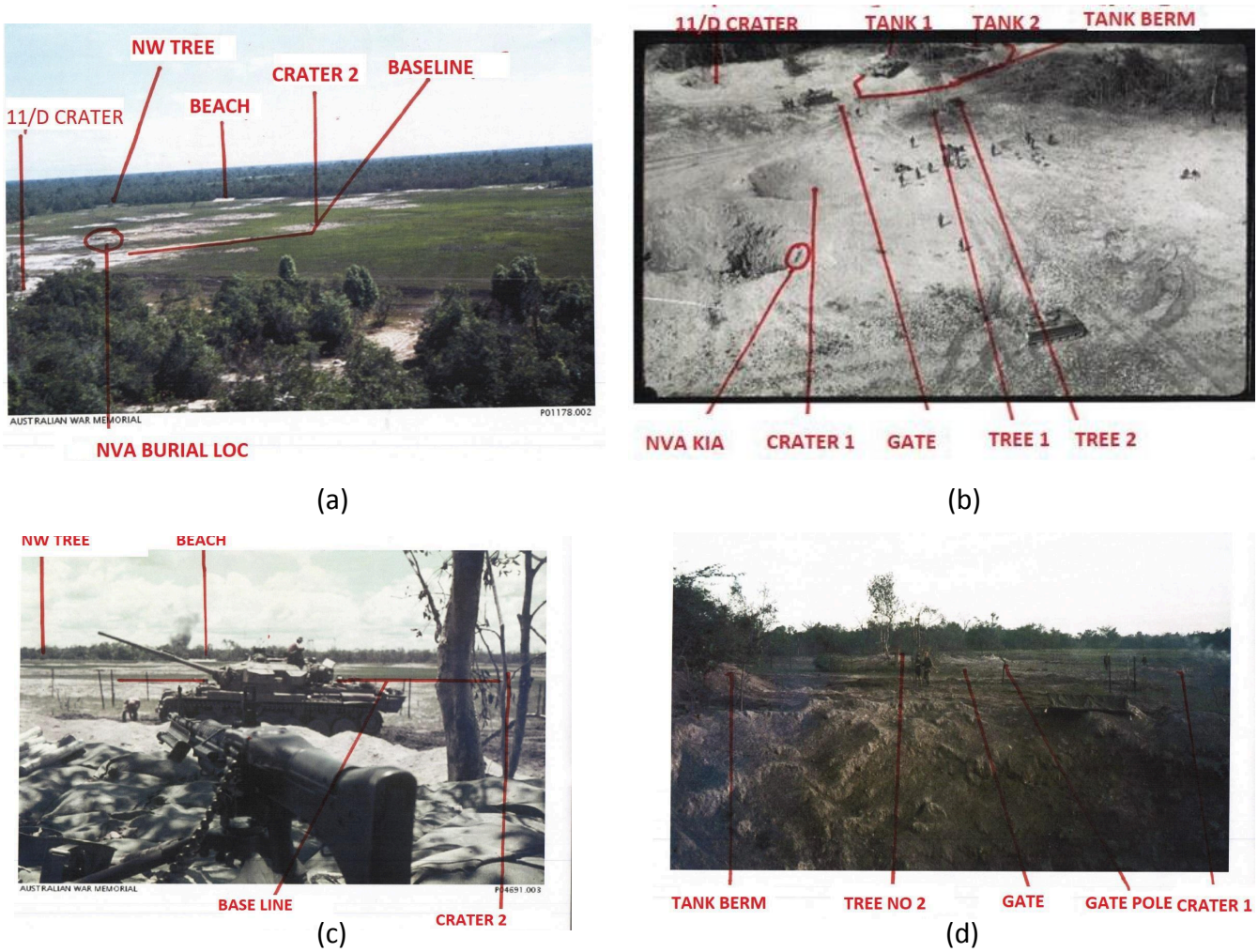


Figure 5: Four annotated battlefield photographs used in the initial image analysis[6,7]. Two aerial images **(a)** Australian War Memorial (AWM) accession number P01178.002, **(b)** AWM accession number P04729.006 and two ground-based images photographed from the 4 Section, 11 Platoon 3 RAR gun pit position **(c)** AWM accession number P0469.003, **(d)** AWM accession number P04691.005.

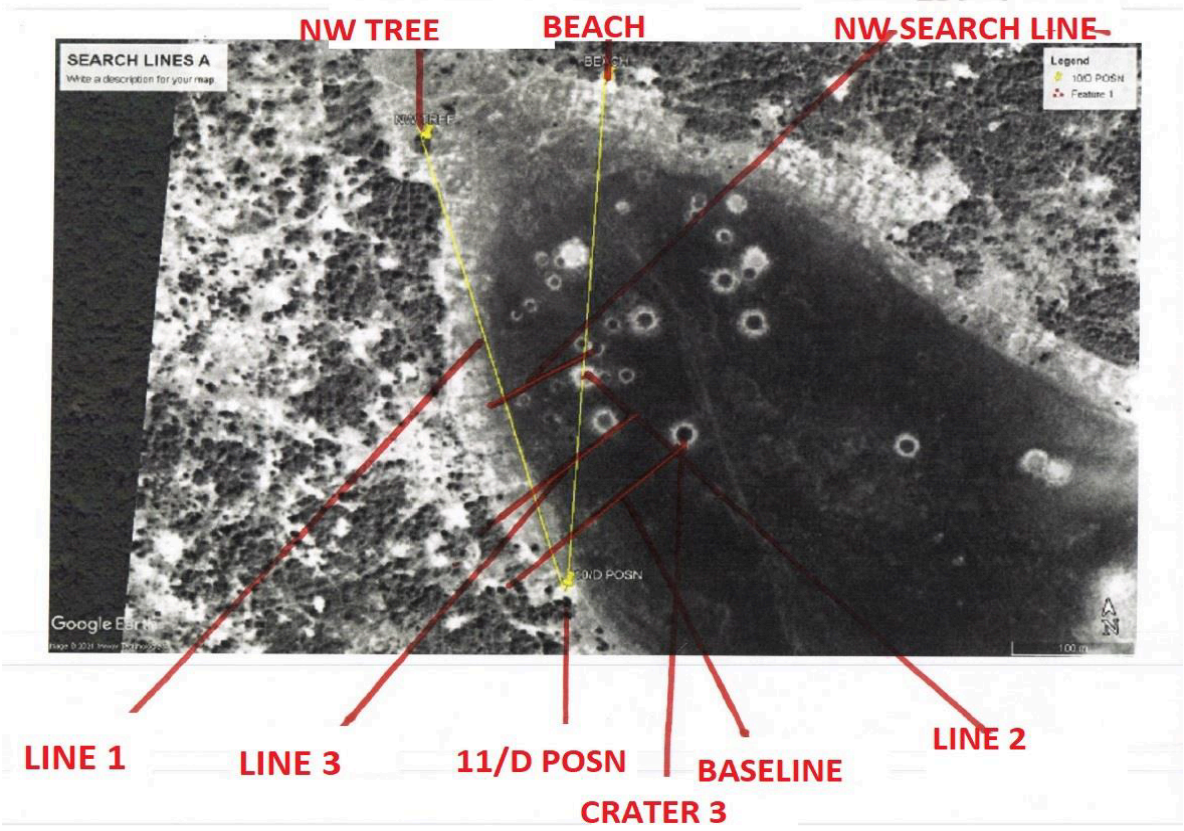


Figure 6: 1972 HEXAGON satellite image of the target burial location overlaid by HTH on Google Earth[6,7]. Features correlating to the battlefield photographs (Figure 5) during geospatial analysis are annotated. Our control point to define the search chord was a bomb crater in which the 4 Section gun pit occurred (labeled above '10/D').

Assuming the extant crater we had surveyed (Figure 6) was that in which the 4 Section gun pit had been located in 1968, the bearing and distance to this bund and associated depression was consistent with the feature being the protective berm of Centurion tank belonging to 2 Troop C Squadron 1st Armoured Regiment (labeled at Figure 5b and 5d). These features satisfied us that we had likely identified the position of the 4 Section gun pit and one of the C Squadron fighting positions. The identification of the 4 Section machine gun position was critical to determining the burial location. We had previously estimated a bearing and distance from the 4 Section gun pit to the target burial pit via geospatial imagery analysis. Therefore identifying this position on the ground gave us a suitable geographic control point to which we could spatially tie our predetermined search chord containing the target burial site.

Visual inspection of 1972 HEXAGON satellite imagery revealed no observable extant craters within the target area burial site, but several beyond the distance of our defined search chord. This was consistent with reports that all bomb craters on the north-eastern battlefield immediately in front of D Company 3 RAR and 2 Troop C Squadron 1 Armoured Regiment had been backfilled with surface spoil by a bulldozer following the second assault on Balmoral. It was reportedly in this process of backfilling bomb craters that the mass burial took place. One notable circular depression was evident in the vicinity of the search chord that was also clearly

discernible during subsequent onsite inspections. Historic Google Earth satellite imagery from 2003 onwards revealed that the depression was of a depth that it was seasonally inundated with ponded surface water. A local rubber plantation worker that we met on site told us that he fished in that ponded water during the monsoonal wet season. We estimated that it was this depression in which the burial may have taken place.

On November 21st 2022 we escorted Balmoral veteran, Mr Paul Donnelly, to our defined search area. Mr Donnelly told us that the relative position of the bomb crater on the scrub-swamp interface, and the feature representing the position of the possible Centurion tank bund give him a high degree of confidence in our research.

GARNERING SUPPORT FOR A NEW SEARCH

On August 17th 2022 Mr Glenn Hines received a request to discuss our research on Balmoral with the then Vietnamese ambassador to Australia, Mr Nguyễn Tất Thành. The following day we supplied a copy of our research document describing the analysis and future search recommendations[6] to Ambassador Nguyễn, who advised us that he then forwarded it to the Vietnamese Ministry of National Defence with his endorsement. A copy of our report[6] was also supplied to the chairperson of the US MIA-POW League of Families, Ms Anne Mills-Griffith. In a November 2022 meeting with then Minister of Public Security, and current President of, the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam, Tô Lâm, Ms Mills-Griffith alerted him to our research findings.

On July 6th 2023 Mr Luke Johnston sent an introductory email to the current serving Defence Attache, Group Captain Michael Jansen outlining what had transpired to date and requested the Australian Embassy Defence Section to write a letter of support of our research report[6] to Vietnamese authorities in Military Region 7. We supplied GPCAPT Jansen both English[6] and Vietnamese[7] language versions of our report. On July 30 2023 GPCAPT Jansen told us that he'd been advised by Vietnamese authorities that the appropriate course of action would be for the Defence Section at the Australian Embassy to send a letter to the Foreign Relations Department (FRD) of the Ministry of National Defence (MND). The FRD would pass the letter on to the Welfare Department, where the MND National Steering Committee 515 (SC515) resides. SC515 is the national inter-agency body in charge of search and repatriation of Vietnamese martyrs. Once our research information was validated and the search approved by MND, the FRD and Welfare Department would help coordinate with Military Region 7, the unit of SC515 at provincial level, the Provincial People's Committee, Provincial Department of Public Security and the land owner(s) where the dig was proposed to be undertaken. GPCAPT Jansen advised that his team would generate a letter to begin the process and that in the past, once previous searches were approved by the MND, all agencies involved were typically very supportive and had covered all search costs including excavators and labour. He also advised that it was likely that the MND would convene a planning meeting with Australian Embassy Defence Section and HTH, with all related agencies to discuss detailed steps to undertake the search.

On November 23rd 2023 GPCAPT Jansen advised that the Vietnamese authorities had accepted our research reports[6,7] and would act upon our recommendations in early 2024. On February 26th 2024 GPCAPT Jansen advised us that the authorities in Bình Dương Province intended to conduct the search at Balmoral in March 2024. Due to prior commitments he would not be available at that time and we were introduced to the assistant Defence Attache, Lieutenant Commander David Ngothanh. He also noted that the Vietnamese authorities sought nomination for representatives to accompany the Australian Embassy staff on site. We nominated our Director-at-Large Mr Johnston who had conducted the 2019 on-ground research at Balmoral, was based in Việt Nam and was highly capable of discussing our research with the military search team and relevant authorities in Vietnamese language. LCDR David Ngothanh subsequently advised us that the search would commence on March 13th 2024 with a possible coordination meeting one day prior. On March 6th 2023 LCDR Ngothanh advised us that we'd been granted permission to attend the search planning meeting for coordination purposes prior to the official commencement date. However, on March 8th our approval appeared to be revoked or delayed, with a new expected approval date approximately one week after the commencement of the search.

The day prior to the search coordination meeting we were engaged by an independent (non-government) researcher, Mr Nguyễn Xuân Thắng. The engagement was an in-depth technical exchange regarding details of our spatial analysis, and additional analysis of our data that Mr Nguyễn had undertaken. Mr Nguyễn had defined a new target search area at a distance from our control point (4 Section gun pit) exceeding the recommendations our research reports[6,7]. Mr Nguyễn subsequently attended the March 12th 2024 search coordination meeting where we believe he presented his own analysis to the military search team. Mr Nguyễn advised us that during the meeting he'd discussed our access to the search site with the on-site commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Lê Hà. Lt Col Lê reportedly empathised that Mr Johnston was unable to directly provide technical input to the search planning process or access the active search site, but that he and accompanying 3RAR Balmoral veteran, Mr Bryant, could instead visit the site out of working hours in the capacity of tourism.

THE RECOVERY OF TWENTY MISSING PAVN SOLDIERS

On March 13th 2024 Vietnamese authorities conducted an official ground-breaking ceremony and excavation commenced. That evening Mr Johnston attended the site after hours, accompanied by Mr Nguyễn and Mr Bryant. Mr Johnston observed that Mr Nguyễn's independent analysis (not that of HTH) was being utilised as the basis of the excavation. The first trench that was excavated commenced at a distance of approximately 125 metres from the 4 Section gun pit position, extending to a distance of approximately 175 metres. HTH's geospatial analysis suggested the target burial location was at less than 100 metres. Eyewitnesses to the burial had previously concurred with this. That evening we advised Mr Nguyễn that the target area should remain within our search chord, below 100 metres from the control point and

focussed on an area at approximately 70 metres. This information was not acted upon. Trenching beyond the range recommended by HTH continued for two weeks and produced no result.

Mr Johnston observed that the excavation process involved digging slit trenches with either one or two mechanical excavators (Figure 7) . The slit trenches were approximately two metres wide and to a depth of approximately one and a half metres in close proximity to commercial rubber trees. Little damage to tree limbs was observed and no damage occurred to the central vascular system of any tree. The only trees removed were those at the final recovery site and other suspected historic bomb craters suspected of containing remains. Topsoil was typically dark, fine-grained semi-organic silt, typical of shallow lacustrine deposition (Figure 7). This material typically extended to a depth of between ten and thirty centimetres over a deposit of much deeper unconsolidated off-white marine sand and/or mud. The lowest horizon observed appeared to be pure kaolinite clay (Figure 8).

The main excavator operator was a contracted civilian working under direction of the military search team led by Lt Col Lê, and direct supervision of Major Trần Chí Dũng. The team were extremely knowledgeable and highly experienced. The excavator operator was highly attuned to the type of material/s that could indicate human remains or other items of interest. Mr Johnston described the process as extremely methodical and undertaken with great care to inspect any potential items of significance. At any point the excavator operator sighted an item of value he immediately ceased mechanical excavation and, along with members of the local militia or military search team personnel, he would investigate any item and surrounding soil by hand.

The excavation process continued in this manner in straight lines until such time that the surface lacustrine deposits extended to a significantly greater depth. Greater depth of this dark material indicated the likely presence of an historic bomb crater. The bomb craters had historically been backfilled by a bulldozer after the second assault of Balmoral. The bulldozer blade pushed surrounding surface soil into the craters, hence the ex-situ fill material was primarily composed of the dark lacustrine material. At each historic bomb crater detected during the search all ex-situ material was mechanically removed down to undisturbed subsurface marine sand or kaolinite (Figure 8).

Despite Mr Johnston not yet having received official permission to access the site within hours of operation, Mr Nguyễn facilitated this on March 14th 2024 for the purpose of on-site interviews with State broadcaster VTV1. This provided Mr Johnston exposure to the military search personnel with whom he developed positive relations through open conversation. This led to his presence, and that of accompanying veteran Mr Bryant, being tolerated on-site during active search hours. We were advised that if official permission was not received by such time that any human remains were discovered Mr Johnston would not be given further access to the site.

Figure 7: A typical slit trench during the search showing the clear distinction between the dark semi-organic surface deposit and subsurface materials. Note the close proximity to commercial rubber trees. Image HTH

Figure 8: A mechanical excavator removing ex-situ spoil down to undisturbed substratum within an historic bomb crater at the Balmoral search area. Image HTH

On May 24th, 2024, despite still not yet having received diplomatic approval to access the site, Mr Johnston had developed relations with members of the search team to the point of being in a position to provide direct input to future search activity. He suggested to Lt Col Lê that given the lack of result in the area advised by Mr Nguyễn, an exploratory trench in the area of the large circular depression approximately seventy metres distance from our control point (4 Section gun pit crater) may produce a result. The following day Mr Johnston had further discussions with Lt Col Lê and Maj Trần Chí Dũng about the proposed search area that we had recommended, including visual inspection of satellite and battlefield imagery that was used in our desktop analyses. Had Mr Johnston previously been granted permission to attend the pre-search coordination meeting this is the input we would have provided.

On March 28th the excavation of a new trench was commenced within our advised search area. An historic bomb crater was detected within a few hours. The following day a number of war era PAVN personal items were recovered from that crater. These included a rubber ‘Hồ Chí Minh’ sandal, an entrenching tool in immaculate condition, a water canteen, a buckle, parachute

material, a poncho and a bandage still in original packaging. A large dense piece of metal was also recovered, believed to have been part of an allied jerrycan. No remains had been recovered by 5pm and the search team advised that they would cease excavations over the following two days due standard weekend stand down. Mr Johnston advised the Australian Defence Attache, GPCAPT Jansen, of the discovery. GPCPT Jansen then advised us that he, or representatives of his office, would attend the site following week. The following day Mr Johnston and veteran Mr Bryant were granted diplomatic permission to be on site during active search hours. This meant that if remains were recovered Mr Johnston would be permitted to remain in attendance. Mr Bryant was no longer present at the search having already returned to Australia.

Shortly after mechanical excavation recommenced on Monday April 1st 2024 the first human remains were detected at a crater depth of approximately five to six metres. A skull with intact hair and teeth, other skeletal bones, fatty tissue and clothing material was recovered. Excavation immediately switched to careful searching by hand. Additional personal items were found including an ink writing pen, a spoon, a bayonet blade, partial magazine for an AK47 and a plastic water canteen. The writing pen was well preserved still with viable ink and had names etched onto its side. The water canteen also contained one those same names etched onto it (Từng).

Over the following two days (April 2nd and 3rd, 2024) a further nineteen bodies were recovered, along with copious other personal PAVN and allied material. The majority of remains and material excavated were recovered at or near the base of the one historic bomb crater at the lower horizon of the marine sand/mud deposit, and a deeper band of kaolinite clay. This soil horizon occurred at a depth of approximately seven metres. The combination of depth and soil composition led to excellent preservation of remains and associated items. During the recovery Mr Johnston inspected a battlefield photograph displaying a subset of the bodies in the target mass burial pit. The relative position of a number of skeletal remains being exhumed matched precisely those in the war era photograph of the mass burial pit. The remains were collected by hand, cleaned, sorted and documented by the military search team with great professionalism and respect. All other non-organic items were collected and sorted based on their origin as PAVN or allied material.

Numerous government and Vietnamese military officials visited the site during the recovery phase, including the General Secretary of the Bình Dương Province Communist Party, Nguyễn Văn Lợi who personally expressed his gratitude to us for the result. On April 2 and April 3, 2024 the Australian Embassy Defence Section Administrative Assistant, Warrant Officer Class 2 (WO2) Duncan Reid, attended the site with the Manager Attache Coordination Ms Lê Ngọc Anh. Mr Johnston facilitated a walk through of the recovery site and nearby historic Australian defensive position with WO2 Reid and Ms Lê. WO2 Reid was interviewed by State media. Various provincial and State media outlets also interviewed Mr Johnston over the week commencing April 1st 2024 which are detailed in our Discussion section below.

At the conclusion of the third day of recovery, April 3rd 2024, the search team requested Mr Johnston's perspective on why less than half the anticipated 42 bodies were found within the bomb crater. Their expectation of this number of remains being found in one crater had been influenced by the misinterpretation of information by veteran Mr Brian Cleaver throughout the period of his search efforts. We alerted the search team that after the second assault on Balmoral 3RAR recorded a total of 42 PAVN combatants killed in action by body count, and that the attack on Balmoral occurred in two phases on opposite sides of the defensive base. Mr Johnston advised the search team that the figure of 42 bodies represented the total number recorded by 3RAR overall, rather than that of just the target burial pit. After the search team learned that a proportion of the 42 PAVN combatants were killed on the south-western perimeter of Balmoral in front of A Company 3RAR, they requested Mr Johnston to interview veterans of A Company to glean any information on the method or location of burial. The A Company veterans from whom we received information from at the time, Mr Peter Fraser and Mr Robert Dabinet, recalled that a PAVN headquarters element had been killed but could not recall the mode or position of burial relative to the A Company defensive position.

Mr Hines utilised a 1981 HEXAGON satellite image to analyse the area of probable burial beyond the A Company defensive wire. Mr Johnston subsequently conducted a walk through of the A Company lines and estimated the defensive perimeter with Major Trần Chí Dũng who at that time was assessing the feasibility of exploratory trenching there. Despite this, the lack of precise knowledge as to the burial site precluded this. Instead the focus became trenching the entire area to the front of the D Company 3RAR and 2 Troop C Squadron 1st Armoured Regiment defensive position, to a range of approximately eighty metres. No further results were obtained other than the recovery of a single rubber sandal and an intact AK47 in a crater adjacent to the mass burial pit. A discussion of options for exploration of the A Company battlefield is made in the Discussion section at the end of this document.

On April 12th 2024 the recovered human remains and associated personal items were transported off-site in a military motorcade. They were taken to the Bình Dương Provincial Martyrs Cemetery where they were held pending official burial later in April. Despite the meticulous efforts of the search team to document and keep each set of remains separate for burial and identification purposes, a directive was received that the all sets of remains were to be placed together in a communal sarcophagus. We are unsure if any genetic analysis was conducted. An official commemorative service and burial took place at the same cemetery on April 26th, 2024. Mr Johnston and veteran Mr Bryant (who by that time had returned to Việt Nạm) attended as official guests of the Australian Embassy party led by Ambassador Andrew Goledzinowski. Numerous high ranking Vietnamese government and military officials were present, notably the former President of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam Nguyễn Minh Triết and relatives of one of the identified martyrs. The identification was seemingly done via inscriptions on personal items recovered rather than genetic analysis.

The search team ceased operations over the 30/4 national holiday period but recommenced a new phase of excavation from mid-May until June 16th 2024 within the same north-eastern battlefield without further result. We were present on site from May 20th to 23rd 2024 but maintained voice and electronic communications until cessation of all search activity. By the completion of the search the entire north-eastern battlefront had effectively been trenched. One further bomb crater was found and excavated in front of the position where two Centurion tanks had been positioned without result. An additional crater within the forested area to the historic left-hand historic flank of 2 Troop C Squadron 1st Armoured Regiment was also excavated with no result.

DISCUSSION

FACTORS IN OBTAINING THE RESULT

The process that led to the recovery of remains of fallen PAVN soldiers began with the desire of veteran Mr. Brian Cleaver to locate and return them to their families. Despite his good intentions Mr Cleaver misinterpreted the limited Australian military spatial records and appears to have conducted limited or inaccurate imagery analysis. Like us, Mr Cleaver recognised that the 4 Section gun pit was a useful control point from which to define a search area. Unfortunately the coordinates he selected to represent that position were inaccurate to a direct distance of 325 metres. This led to the formation of an associated erroneous search area Figure 9).

There are several elements that were critical to the successful recovery during this search. Foremost was the accurate analysis of all available battlefield imagery. Cross-referencing critical features between various aerial and ground-based battlefield images allowed us to formulate a search chord based on an as yet undefined control point, namely the position of the 4 Section gun pit. Secondly, ground surveys conducted in the area revealed the presence of a 13 meter extant bomb crater that, through further analysis of HEXAGON satellite imagery and follow-up ground survey did prove to be the position of the 4 Section gun pit. This provided us an accurate control point to spatially define and our search chord. We believe that in any similar geospatial analysis for purposes of identifying historic burial or loss sites all possible period imagery should be obtained prior to any search.

Eyewitnesses to the burial that we subsequently escorted to the site confirmed that they believed our analysis was likely accurate based on their recollections of features that we identified related to the defensive position on the base. This validated our work and gave us great confidence that our research would achieve a positive result. The recollection of features of the battlefield of Mr John Bryant in particular accurately matched our geospatial analysis result. The diplomatic services of the Australian Embassy Defence Section were also timely and greatly facilitated acceptance of our research by the relevant Vietnamese authorities. Finally, the extremely diligent and professional manner in which the Vietnamese military search team conducted the excavation process ultimately led to the final result.

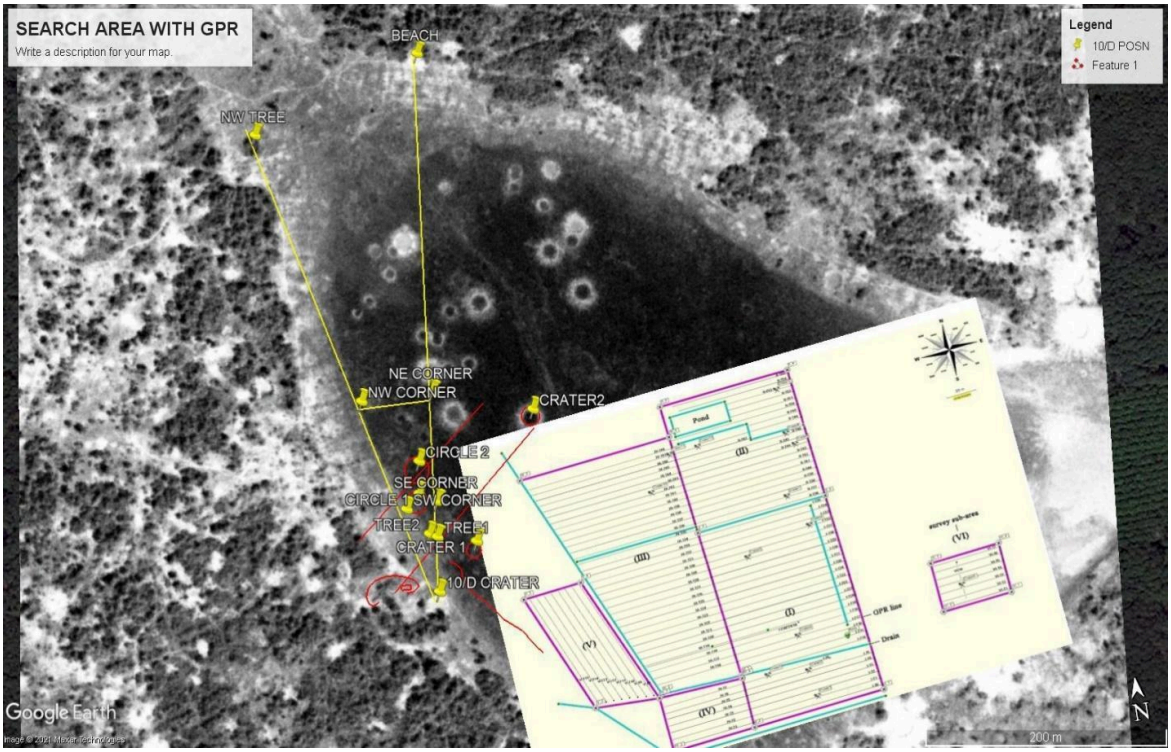


Figure 9: A comparison of the HTH defined search chord and Mr Cleaver's GPR scan applied to us by him. The GPR scan shows that a large area within the open swamp was divided into subsectors. Note that we believe Mr Cleaver's onground searches took place within Sector I (easternmost sector of the main block) of the GPR scan. The HTH imagery analysis overlay is to the left of the GPR scan (yellow vector lines and points)[6,7].

THE RESULT

Twenty sets of remains were recovered between April 1st and April 3rd, 2024. The search team had expected that the target burial pit would contain 42 remains based on information supplied to them earlier by Mr Cleaver. The total number of PAVN combatants recorded killed in the 3RAR Commanding officer's diaries over the period of the two Battles of Balmoral was forty-eight[1,2,4]. Six were reported by body count following the first assault on May 26 1968[1,2] and 42 were reported body count following the second assault[1,2,4]. Mr Cleaver failed to take into account that the figure of 42 represented all PAVN combatants recorded by body count by all elements of 3RAR and supporting arms. This false assumption was reinforced by a caption attached to a photograph of the burial taking place supplied to Mr Cleaver by fellow veteran Mr John Bryant stating that the image showed a bulldozer burying ‘42 N.V.A Soldiers. After the second attack’(sic).

Mr Cleaver failed to take into account that nine of the 42 bodies (by body count) were reported by A Company 3RAR[1], on the opposite side of the battalion defensive position. This alone would lead to a maximum estimate of thirty-three possible bodies within the target burial location.

This number is confirmed in records by 2 Troop C Squadron 1st Armoured Regiment[4] who reported the body count for the north-eastern perimeter in front of D Company 3RAR. A battlefield photograph of a separate crater in front of a Centurion tank defensive position at Balmoral shows multiple fragmented body parts that we believe would not have been transported to the target burial crater. However that position was excavated during the search and yielded no result. In fact the entire north-eastern battlefield in front of D Company and 2 Troop was thoroughly trenched between existing rows of rubber trees with only approximately one meter of soil unturned between each trench (to avoid damaging the commercial trees).

The question of why a further thirteen bodies were not recovered on the north-eastern battlefield perimeter remains unanswered. It is possible that following the Australian withdrawal from Balmoral surviving PAVN troops recovered any bodies buried in shallow graves. This is likely true at least for the six reported bodies buried after the May 26th 1968 assault. Eyewitness accounts we've received from multiple veterans indicate that these six were buried in very shallow graves with only a thin veneer of soil covering them, to the point that limbs were protruding. It is unclear where, or in what manner, any of the other thirteen bodies were buried following the May 28th assault, suffice to say that at least some of these were not complete bodies but rather, body parts. Evidence for this includes the C Squadron 1st Armoured Regiment After Action Report[4] for that engagement stating *'Approximately seven of en were smoldering either from HE at close range or from the white phosphorus of the .50 spotter. The majority of the bodies were mangled indicating they were hit with HE, Can and 50 at close range.'*

MEDIA COVERAGE

The successful recovery of twenty remains was the subject of numerous print and television media articles from the time of the recovery, including but not limited to: Vietnamese national broadcasters VTV1 and VTV4; various branches of the Bình Dương provincial broadcaster BTV; and print media outlets Tuổi Trẻ (Youth), VnExpress, Bình Dương News, Military Region 7 News, along with media outlets of the Central Office of the Communist Party of Việt Nam, People's Army of Việt Nam, Ministry of Justice of Việt Nam and the General Confederation of Labour.

Following a social media release by the Australian Ambassador to Vietnam, Mr Andrew Goledzinowski, SBS TV Australia also ran a TV news story on the recovery, containing an extended interview with a veteran US Vietnam War correspondent, Carl Robinson, who was not associated with the search.

Bình Dương provincial media outlet Bình Dương News ran a nine minute video feature story on their general interest program 'I Love Bình Dương' highlighting the role played by HTH Director-at-Large Mr Johnston in the recovery effort.

In May 2024 the Australian Department of Veterans Affairs published an article in 'VetAffairs' highlighting the role that Mr Johnston played in the recovery effort. Mr Johnston was directly approached and interviewed by reporter Stephen Dangaard for this article

In June 2024 a feature length documentary, 'Lối Về' (The Way Back)' was aired on Bình Dương Province broadcaster BTV. This documentary detailing the entire search and recovery was produced by film maker Mr Ngọc Quý and won gold at the national military film awards.

In August 2024 the Melbourne Age and Sydney Morning Herald published a print media story highlighting the efforts of HTH in the successful recovery. Mr Johnston was approached and interviewed by reporter Tony Wright for this article. Australian Broadcasting Corporation also concurrently aired a national TV news report on the successful recovery that included interviews with Balmoral veteran Mr Bryant and Mr Johnston. Footage of the search and recovery used on the news report was filmed by Mr Johnston and supplied by HTH.

Mr Johnston was also interviewed by ABC radio Illawarra and requested to speak on his work with veterans and the veteran community in Vietnam by the Shoalhaven Vietnam Veterans Association on August 18 2024 (Australian Vietnam Veterans Day).

OPTIONS FOR FURTHER RECOVERY

With regards to the south-western battlefield, our identification of the geographic position of A Company 3RAR at Balmoral, and knowledge that 9 bodies were reported by A Company suggests that exploration of that area could potentially yield a further result. The 3RAR Commanding Officer's Diary for May 1968[1] records three significant radio log entries. The first two are messages sent confirming that 9 bodies were recorded after the second assault on Balmoral. The third is a radio message that a burial party from 2 Platoon, A Company was sent out to bury those remains. Unfortunately no veteran of 2 Platoon that we've spoken with to date recall the manner or relative location of the burial. We are continuing to seek A Company veteran's recollections of the battles. Trenching methods employed in this recovery effort could be also employed in the area that we have determined immediately outside the A Company defensive position. However the use of remote sensing technology such as drone-mounted *LiDAR* and/or Ground Penetrating Radar would reduce the area necessary to trench by highlighting a likely burial location prior to excavation.

With regards to the north-eastern battlefield we have no further credible evidence of either military records or eyewitness accounts as to the mode or location of burial of any further bodies. Furthermore, the entire north-eastern battlefield area was thoroughly excavated by the Vietnamese military search team leading to little chance that any further bodies would be within the area.

APPLICATIONS FOR REMOTE SENSING TECHNOLOGY

It is likely that the position of the target burial pit could have been readily identified via the application of remote sensing technology such as LiDAR and Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) without the need for extensive trenching of the soil within the commercial rubber plantation. In particular the use of drone-mounted remote sensing technology is a cost efficient, non-invasive method useful in confirming hypotheses based on geospatial analyses. Used in conjunction with visual interpretation of physical landscape features, collation and interpretation of spatial distribution of subsurface objects and ground surface anomalies, we believe efficacy of searches such as that described herein could be improved.

During the search we were told that official Vietnamese sources indicate that approximately one hundred bodies were missing on the Balmoral battlefield. We believe that the majority of these may have been collected by surviving PAVN troops from the north-eastern battlefield and buried within the forested area on the opposite side of the swampland from the historic 3RAR Balmoral defensive position. Additionally we have records that nine PAVN remains were collected and buried on the south-western battlefield on May 28th 1968_1 which lends itself to the idea that a higher number may have been collected for burial by PAVN troops during the battle there. On both battlefields bloody bandages were found[1]. On the north-eastern battlefield drag marks were detected, while on the south-western battlefield bloody footprints were recorded[1].

Without accurate records of where any further burials occurred on the north-eastern battlefield, and the fact that it is highly likely that a significant number of burials took place by surviving PAVN troops, we believe the application of drone-based remote sensing technology could be the only effective way to know if the recovery of further remains is feasible. In addition, we have mapped the location of A Company's defensive position at Balmoral on the south-western battlefield and therefore have a useful target area for the application of drone-mounted remote sensing technology in the area beyond the base perimeter. Whilst the trenching methods employed during this search could equally be deployed, without a defined search chord this would essentially involve ‘trenching blind’ and would require an extensive area of ground to be covered.

On May 29th 2024 we supplied a proposal to the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in which we detail the practical applications of such technology in the future search efforts at Balmoral, and beyond to other sites in Vietnam. In the report we proposed that Healing Through History would be willing to cooperate with the Ministry of National Defence to bring such technology to Vietnam for the purpose of assisting them with future search efforts. On June 5th 2024, the Director of Southeast Asia and Pacific (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) Mr Nguyễn Tat Thanh supplied us with a copy of an official letter requesting the Ministry of National Defence to consider our proposal. We currently await a response.

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