

1st Armoured Regiment

The 1st Armoured Regiment was raised on 7 July 1949, as part of the new Australian Regular Army. The regiment's nucleus consisted of personnel from the 1st Australian Armoured Car Squadron, which had returned from Japan several months earlier as part of the occupation force. 1st Armoured Regiment was based at Puckapunyal, Victoria, where it was initially equipped with the British-built Churchill tanks. This was only a temporary measure and in 1952 the Churchills were replaced with another British tank, the Centurion.

Australian armoured personnel carrier (APC) units served in Vietnam from 1965. As Australia's contribution to the war increased, so too did the deployment of Australian armour. In October 1967 the government announced it would increase the size of the 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF) at Nui Dat in Phuoc Tuy province, from two to three infantry battalions and with the addition of a tank squadron.

The first tanks from the regiment's C Squadron arrived in Vietnam in February 1968. The squadron initially comprised two troops, each of four tanks, and two tanks of the squadron headquarters, as well as two dozer tanks and two bridgelayer tanks. A third troop was created by placing the two headquarters' tanks together with the two dozer tanks. This number constituted only half of the squadron and it was not until August the rest of the squadron arrived from Australia. This brought the squadron up to its full strength of 20 tanks (another six tanks were held by the Detachment 1 Forward Delivery Troops).

Before their dispatch to Vietnam the Centurions received a number of modifications: a large external fuel tank was fitted on the back of each vehicle to increase its range; the main gun system was upgraded; a ranging machine-gun was fitted; and an infra-red illumination system was also installed for improved night vision. However, once operations began the external fuel tank was found to be potentially hazardous as they could catch fire if hit by a shell or bullet. The modifications continued "in country" once the squadron began operating in Vietnam: The tank's side skirts were removed, as they caused mud and debris to build around the tracks behind them, the track guards were replaced with heavy gauge steel plate; and storage racks were welded to the back of the turret so ammunition and other equipment could be carried, such as an additional radio to allow communication between tank and infantry soldiers.

The squadron's first major operation was Operation Pinnaroo (27 February to 15 April 1968), also involving an APC troop from 3rd Cavalry Regiment, and artillery, as well as engineers who supported the 2nd Battalion/NZ (ANZAC) and the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment [2RAR/NZ (ANZAC) and 3RAR] for a "reconnaissance-in-force" mission to destroy the Viet Cong (VC) base installations in the Long Hai mountains. The area had long been a centre of Vietnamese resistance and was "riddled" with mines. C Squadron's tank dozers were used to help clear some of the mines and from 18 March the squadron's Centurions worked closely with the infantry and they cleared the low ground east of the mountains.

For the next three years, until 1971, the 1st Armoured Regiment's tanks worked closely with the Australian infantry and the APCs of 3rd Cavalry Regiment, on operations throughout Phuoc Tuy

and neighbouring provinces. The Centurions provided fire support for infantry operations, were used to directly attack enemy positions, and helped defend the Fire Support Bases.

The tanks played a significant role during the battles of Coral–Balmoral in May 1968. North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regimental-sized forces made determined attacks against two Australian fire support bases and the firepower support of the Centurions proved crucial at Fire Support Base Balmoral. On 30 May two infantry platoons patrolling from Fire Support Base Coral became pinned down very close to enemy bunkers. APCs were able to extract some of the troops but were unable to reach one platoon. Two Centurions were sent forward through heavy jungle, reaching the Australians and the VC bunkers. The Centurion crews fired everything they had: canister, solid shot and high explosive shells, and machine-guns. Each shell cleared more jungle and opened up further targets. The platoon was able to be withdrawn, and with APCs providing machine-gun support, the tanks destroyed a series of bunkers.

C Squadron's performance in the battles of Coral–Balmoral demonstrated the advantage of using armour in Vietnam. Offensively, the tanks were able to destroy enemy bunkers without air support and reduced infantry casualties. Defensively, the tanks' fire was able to break up an enemy attack. The Centurions were able to move through the countryside more easily than expected. Although they were vulnerable to enemy anti-tank weapons and mines, their firepower and shock action had a decisive effect on the battlefield.

Before Coral–Balmoral, some infantry had doubted the usefulness or necessity of the Centurion tanks; after the battle, the infantry did not like working without them. Indeed, the tanks were considered to be “worth their weight in gold”.

In February 1969 C Squadron was relieved by B Squadron, the latter remaining in Vietnam for the rest of the year. On 6 and 7 June B Squadron was involved in the fierce action fought at Binh Ba, a village five kilometres north of 1ATF base. The attack began on the morning of 6 June when tanks and APCs advanced with D Company, 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (5RAR) towards the village which was occupied by Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops. As the fight continued, 5RAR's B Company took up a blocking position around some of the village to prevent the enemy escaping.

The fighting was hard and savage. The infantry had to clear each house of enemy, who shot at them before retreating into tunnels as the Australians passed. Each time the Australians were fired on, the tanks would blast a hole in the wall of the building, through which small teams could enter to silence any opposition. This work continued through the afternoon and resumed the next day.

In December 1969 B Squadron was redesignated A Squadron. A year later in December 1970 A Squadron was in turn redesignated C Squadron. By late 1970 Australia was beginning to reduce its commitment to the war and the size of 1ATF was reduced from three infantry battalions to two. The tanks, however, continued to be engaged in operations in 1971, providing decisive armoured firepower in many actions, notably during Operations Overlord (5-14 June), Hermit Park (14 June-27 July), and Iron Fox (28 July-5 August). In these and many other engagements the Centurions were credited with preserving the lives of Australian infantry soldiers.

During 1971 troops were progressively withdrawn from Vietnam, as the government reduced Australia's commitment to the war. In June and July the tanks of C Squadron were progressively phased out of operations and the squadron returned home in September.

Glossary

Puckapunyal

Equipment

- **N113 Armoured Personnel Carrier**
- **Centurion Tanks**

Battle Honours

- **Vietnam (1968-72)**
- **Hat Dich**
- **Bien Ba**

Commanding Officers

- **Badman, Peter Richard**
- **Bourke, Peter William**
- **Chipman, John Alfred**
- **Smith, Alexander Henry**
- **Vickers, Alan Lindsay**

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1st Armoured Regiment Mark V Centurion tank - South Vietnam - circa 1968.

MK V Centurion Tank .This was Australia's battle tank During the Vietnam War. Weighing 50 tons it was initially thought the tank would be too heavy for the jungles in the Republic of South Vietnam, but the tank stood the test and the men of 1st Armoured Regiment fought many courageous battles and supported 5RAR on many occasions and during the Battle of Binh Ba ...



**Two Australian infantrymen make their way through dense jungle during Operation Surfside.
In the background a Centurion tanks follows in support. Vietnam**



A Centurion tank awaits assistance as it sits bogged in the muddy ground near the May Tao Mountains near Fire Support Base Picton, Vietnam



Armed with an M60 machine gun, an Australian soldier sits on top of an Armoured Recovery Vehicle (ARV). Behind the ARV, a Centurion tank follows. The vehicles were taking part in Operation Overlord. Vietnam