



A story from the history of Australian Artillery:
Commemorating 150 years – 1871-2021

Captain John Robert Salmon, CBE
Attached 16th Field Regiment, RNZA
'Fire "Capstan", Over'



A graduate of the Royal Military College Duntroon's Class of 1946, John Salmon was a brilliant artillery officer. Salmon was posted initially to 'A' Field Battery, deployed on post-war duties in Japan, as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces. Following several staff postings, Salmon was attached to 16th Field Regiment, Royal New Zealand Artillery as a Troop Commander, for active service in Korea.

In December 1952, Salmon was a Forward Observation Officer, attached to B Company, 1 RAR for an upcoming assault dubbed 'Operation Fauna'. Its purpose was to capture prisoners for unit identification and to destroy enemy bunkers, to prevent the enemy defensive line advancing.

Surprise was all-important, and artillery fire was only authorised if surprised was compromised and Fire Plan 'Capstan' implemented, to cover the company's withdrawal. Negotiating an Allied minefield through a pre-arranged lane, the company approached the Chinese position through the snow and ice.

Suddenly shouts and shots from the trenches indicated that the company had been compromised and on order, Salmon initiated 'Capstan' to have rounds fall on pre-adjusted targets. Hitting the deck, Salmon felt a hard hit to the chest, being a live grenade. Rolling away, he felt something like a 'cat of nine tails' thrash into both upper arms, shoulders, lower back and buttocks, whilst his flak jacket slammed into his lower spine. Unable to get to his feet, Salmon was hauled up by the Company Commander. Then another grenade exploded a mere five metres away, punching shrapnel into Salmon's right thigh. Unbeknown, they were lying on an underground bunker.

With his signaller and assistant under each shoulder, Salmon guided the company back to the minefield lane, under cover from the effective 'Capstan' fire plan.

Making it back to safety, Salmon was evacuated to a field hospital. Ultimately, 17 grenade fragments were removed, but five remained. Salmon returned to Australia and continued his 38-year stellar gunner and staff officer career, before retiring as a Brigadier with a Companion Order of the Bath (CBE).

Sources:

RAAHC, *Gunners Past and Present*, '[Brigadier John Robert Salmon, CBE](#)', accessed 18 Aug 2021

Breen, A.E. 'Gus', *Korea Remembered*, '[Operation Fauna December 1952](#)', accessed 24 August 2021

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