

A Vietnam minefield experience

an address¹ to the Institute on 30 August 2011 by
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Tony White describes treating casualties in a minefield during his deployment to South Vietnam in 1966-67 as regimental medical officer of the 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment.

Key words: Vietnam War; minefield casualties; medical officer; Australian infantry battalion.

During the Vietnam War in the 1960s, I served in South Vietnam as the regimental medical officer (RMO) of an Australian infantry battalion, the 5th Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment (5RAR), for a year in 1966-67. Let me start by placing that year in some chronological and geographical context.

Australia's direct involvement in the war in Vietnam began in 1962 with the posting to South Vietnam of 30 members of the Australian Army Training Team (AATT). In 1964, six Caribou aircraft of No. 35 Transport Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), were deployed. Later that year, conscription for military service was introduced in Australia.

March 1965 saw the arrival in Vietnam of the first American combat troops. In May 1965, the 1st Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR) was sent to the Bien Hoa airbase to operate as part of the United States (US) 173rd Airborne Brigade. Later that year, they were joined by an Australian artillery battery, engineers and army aviation.

1966 was a turbulent year. In January, the Minister for Defence, Senator Shane Paltridge, died in office. He was replaced by Allen Fairhall. One week later, the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, resigned and was succeeded by Harold Holt. On the same day, Malcolm Fraser replaced A. J. Forbes as Minister for the Army.

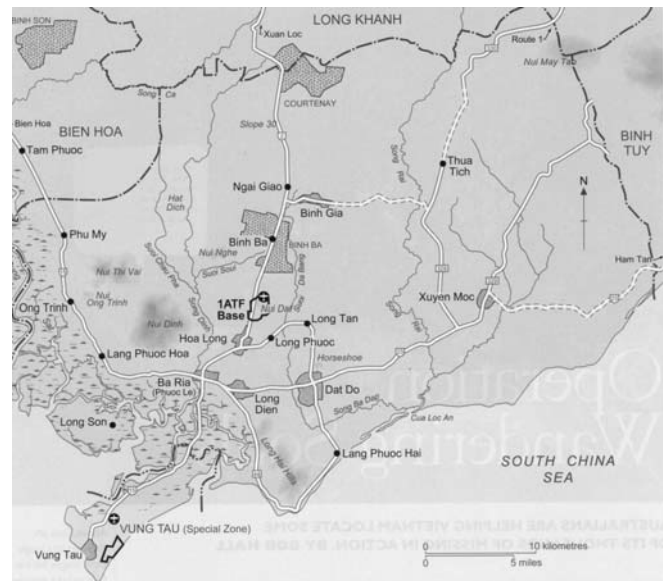
On 2 March 1966, cabinet decided to increase Australia's commitment to a self-contained task force of two infantry battalions, a Special Air Service squadron³, combat and logistic support troops and eight Iroquois helicopters of No. 9 Squadron, RAAF. The task force was to be operational within two months. This decision has to be taken in the context of cabinet's veto of any preparation for just such a force six months previously. Preparations for deployment were therefore rushed and chaotic, accounting for many of the logistic problems later experienced in Vietnam. Both battalions were brand new, having been raised only 12 months previously. Roughly half the personnel were national servicemen (conscripts).

1st Australian Task Force Operations in Phuoc Tuy Province

In April 1966, HMAS *Sydney* transported one company of 5RAR plus stores and vehicles to Vung Tau, a port on the Vietnamese coast south-east of Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam. The rest of the battalion was transported from RAAF Richmond (an airbase near Sydney) to Saigon in a series of Qantas (Australian civilian airline) night flights over two weeks.

The task force, under the command of Brigadier David Jackson, was allotted an area in the centre of Phuoc Tuy (now Baria-Vung Tau) Province for its base. The area was an abandoned rubber plantation close to a small hill called Nui Dat. The base was 30 kilometres inland from the Australian Logistic Support Group (ALSG), which had been set up on the sand dunes outside Vung Tau. The ALSG included stores, workshops and 2nd Field Ambulance, which contained both a casualty treatment section and a casualty evacuation section.

The province had a population of about 104,000. It measured 60 x 40 kilometres and faced onto the South China Sea. Its western border was 40 kilometres east of



Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam, 1966 – the Australian Task Force base was located north of the village of Hoa Long; the Australian Logistic Support Group is indicated by the black box east of the port city of Vung Tau
[Map: Australian War Memorial, *Wartime* Issue 55, p. 26, July 2011]

¹This address is based on an incident recorded in Dr White's 2011 book, *Starlight: An Australian Army Doctor in Vietnam* (Copyright Publishing: Brisbane), which is reviewed on page 35.

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³Essentially, highly-trained infantry that specialise in intelligence gathering and surveillance behind enemy lines.

Saigon. The main industries were fishing, rice-growing, rubber plantations and charcoal. The only areas under government control before arrival of the Australian task force were the provincial capital, Baria, and the corridor from Baria to the port of Vung Tau. There were government outposts in towns around the province, but these were isolated and effectively under siege by the National Liberation Front (NLF), a communist political organisation which sought the overthrow of the southern government and the re-unification of south and north Vietnam. Its military arm was the Viet Cong, the communist guerrilla forces of South Vietnam. The NLF and the Viet Cong were strongly supported by North Vietnam.

After three weeks of preparation on the beach at Vung Tau, 5RAR was ferried up to the Nui Dat area in four waves of 30 Iroquois helicopters of the US 68th Aviation Company. It was an unopposed insertion – the US 173rd Airborne Brigade, at some cost, had cleared the area prior to our arrival. One month later we were joined by 6RAR. The next 12 months saw an unending programme of patrolling and operations from one end of the province to the other. The Nui Dat base was slowly transformed from a muddy rubber plantation into a small town.

The most notable event of 1966, indeed of Australia's 10-year involvement in Vietnam, was D Company 6RAR's battle of Long Tan on 18 August 1966. February 1967, however, was the worst month for task force casualties up to that point and that record stood for some time. 5RAR fell victim to two mine incidents a week apart with a total of nine killed-in-action and 24 wounded. In the days between these two incidents, 6RAR was mauled in Operation Bribie with eight killed-in-action and 27 wounded.

Cordon-and-Search Operations

The two 5RAR mine incidents were linked with cordon-and-search operations. In these operations, the battalion would creep up on a village overnight so as to have a cordon in place before first light to prevent villagers leaving. The village would then be searched, house to house, usually by Vietnamese government troops. 5RAR carried out nine such operations during the year and they proved very useful in terms of the numbers of Viet Cong suspects captured, and the quantity of weapons and documents seized.

The village of Phuoc Hai, just east of the Long Hai hills, was chosen for the next cordon-and-search. This had a population of 8000 and was a very productive fishing village, supplying the Saigon market as well as the province. The Viet Cong had infiltrated a large cadre into the village and undertook a lot of recruiting there. The Long Hai hills had been a guerrilla haven since French colonial times. They were the centrepiece of a 30 square kilometre area named after two Viet Minh⁴ martyrs as the Minh Dam Secret Zone. Rising to 330

metres, they were riddled with caves containing extensive Viet Cong facilities.

Earlier in the month during Tet, the Lunar New Year festival, a Viet Cong flag, spot-lit at night, flew defiantly from a flagpole at the southern end of the hills. Eight months previously, the US 173rd Airborne Brigade had done a sweep through the area, suffering heavy casualties.

Most of the cordon-and-searches had been single battalion operations. Phuoc Hai would need both Australian battalions. 6RAR would be helicoptered in at first light from Nui Dat to block the eastern side of the village. 5RAR, approaching by land, would be responsible for the western side.

As with all these cordon-and-search operations, a deception plan was required to get the battalion into position without arousing suspicion. The plan was for 5RAR to carry out a search-and-destroy operation over the eastern approaches and side of the Long Hai hills. Moving from north to south over a week, the battalion would end up at the south-eastern corner of the hills the afternoon before the Phuoc Hai operation and only two kilometres to the west of the village. We could then be in place on the edge of the village by first light.

Operation Bribie

Events turned out very differently from the way they were planned. As mentioned earlier, this one week in mid February 1967 proved a very expensive one for the Australian Task Force. The Long Hai operation itself was preceded by a cordon-and-search of the village of An Nhut on 14 February. Shortly after the An Nhut search got under way, the headquarters of 5RAR's C Company was gathered on the fence line when an explosive device detonated, killing three officers and wounding five soldiers. Those killed included the company commander, Major Don Bourne, his second-in-command, Captain Bob Milligan and Captain Peter Williams, the New Zealand artillery forward observer.

Major Bourne had just taken over command of the company and this was his first operation. He was the father of four young children and it was his 35th birthday. Captain Milligan was due to return to Australia shortly and this was to be his last operation. He was a popular officer who had been dux of his year at the Officer Cadet School and had won the Governor General's Medal. The nature of the An Nhut explosion was never clarified.

Three days later (the day before the planned start of the Long Hai operation), the enemy attacked the fishing village of Phuoc Hai, the object of our next cordon-and-search. 6RAR responded and their ensuing engagement, Operation Bribie, turned into a ferocious 5-hour fire-fight, with numerous casualties. Disaster was only narrowly averted.

Operation Renmark

A B52 strike had been arranged for early on the morning of 18 February to coincide with the start of

⁴The communist guerrillas of North Vietnam

5RAR's next phase, Operation Renmark, searching the foothills of the Long Hai hills. Because of Operation Bribie, the start was delayed and the element of a surprise strike was lost. Nevertheless, the search got under way and the first two days were relatively uneventful.

On the third day, the companies moved south to position themselves for the next phase of the operation. At 1330 hours on 21 February, 5RAR's B Company, mounted on armoured personnel carriers (APCs), set forth towards the Long Hai hills. Battalion headquarters was to follow after half an hour. Shortly after 1400 hours, there was the sound of a large explosion from their line of travel and the sight of a black mushroom rising above the tree line. Four minutes later there was a second smaller explosion and a cloud of dust. After a delay, there was a radio call notifying headquarters of casualties, but with no details.

We in battalion headquarters were only two or three kilometres away. There happened to be an army aviation reconnaissance helicopter parked with us at that time and I was soon on my way to the site of the explosions. Circling to find a spot to land, we were astonished by the sight of an APC lying on its side.

Soldiers and equipment lay scattered over an area the size of a tennis court.

After landing, I found that one of the stretcher-bearers had been killed. All the others, and the company medical assistant, Corporal Ron Nichols, were wounded. Most of the troops, even those not physically injured, were stunned.

The first group of casualties I encountered was the B Company headquarters group. The company commander, Major Bruce McQualter, had a head wound. He was conscious, struggling to get up on his feet, but unable to respond to questions or commands. Stretched out next to him, also with a head wound and unconscious was the 4th Platoon commander, Lieutenant Jack Carruthers. The Platoon Sergeant, Tassie Wass, was the most urgent casualty with both elbows shattered and wounds to the back. After dressing his wounds and giving morphine, I moved on towards the upended APC.

Near the rear of the APC there was a pyramid of what at first glance appeared to be discarded equipment and uniforms. It was a dark grey colour. On closer inspection, it proved to be a pile of dead and wounded soldiers blown out of the back of the vehicle.

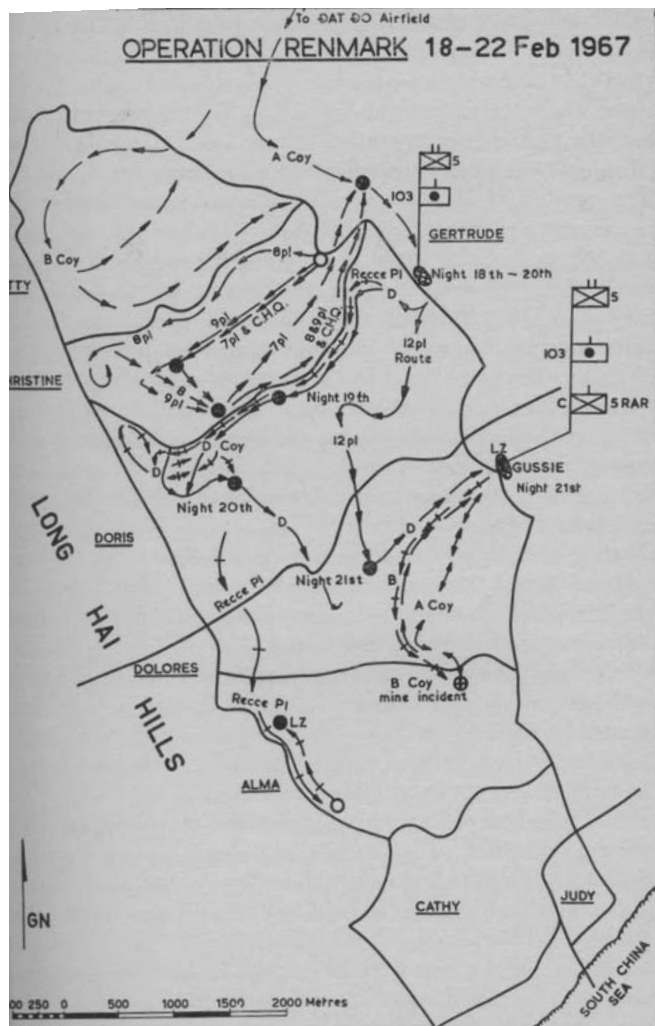
It was not until 30 years later that I discovered the cause of the blackened skin and uniforms. As protection against mines, two layers of sandbags had been laid on the floor of the APCs. The sand used was very fine and black; the boys had literally been sand-blasted by the explosion.

Many of the wounded were suffering from the effects of the explosive blast and were peppered with shrapnel. They required little treatment apart from dressings. On the other hand, there were some horrific sights, including an arm with the attached hand grasping a rifle. This arm was protruding from under the APC, which had crushed the soldier to death. There was also the torso of another soldier separated by some distance from the lower half of his body.

To huge relief, four sappers⁵ with mine detectors were choppered in within half an hour of the explosions. They got to work, laying white tape to indicate clear pathways.

Soon dust-off helicopters⁶ started to arrive. It was a busy time, trying to get casualties away in order of need. The last casualties were evacuated within about 90 minutes of the explosions. Mercifully this proceeded without enemy interference.

4 Platoon B Company bore the brunt of the casualties. Their platoon commander, Lieutenant Jack Carruthers, died of head wounds in hospital three days later. Three others were killed and 13 wounded. One of the wounded was Private Ted Lloyd. He was back in the platoon after three weeks, but was killed in a second mine incident three weeks later. In that same incident, Lieutenant Kerry Rinkin, who had replaced Jack



5RAR's search pattern over the eastern approaches to Long Hai hills on Operation Renmark, February 1967
[Diagram: O'Neill 1968, 219]

⁵Army engineers

⁶Casualty evacuation helicopters

Carruthers as platoon commander, was also killed. Major Bruce McQualter died of his head wounds in hospital after twelve days.

The engineers did a good forensic job of working out what had caused this disaster. The lead APC was hit by what is now described as an improvised explosive device. This was a buried, recycled, 5-inch US naval shell. It was rigged up with a detonator and battery. Pressure from the passing vehicle closed the wire circuit, detonating the explosion. The force was considerable, throwing the 11-tonne APC three metres off to one side and leaving a 2 metre by 1 metre crater.

As Major McQualter and the medics went forward to assist the wounded, one of them stepped on an M16 mine. This "jumping jack", with its half kilogram of TNT and a killing range of 25 metres, caused most of the casualties. Two more M16 mines were detected by the sappers in the immediate area as they carried out their search.

At that time, there were no clear instructions as to how to respond when it becomes evident that a party is stalled in a minefield. Logic declares that there should be no movement until sappers have cleared paths. One soldier, a corporal section commander, swears to this day that he said he would shoot me if I walked any further after stepping out of the helicopter that had dropped me off. I have no recollection of this, but fortunately he did not follow through with his threat.

After this incident, when personnel found themselves in a minefield, it became standard procedure for all personnel to freeze until the area had been cleared by sappers. This must have presented some agonising dilemmas, preventing soldiers from going to the aid of wounded comrades.

My role as RMO was simple first aid, albeit in a very trying situation. Our shell dressings were made in England and date-stamped April 1915. Half-a-century

later they were still perfectly serviceable. Triage was the other important function. This is the process of ranking casualties in order for evacuation to ensure that the severely wounded but salvageable soldiers were evacuated ahead of the mortally wounded or those with non-life threatening wounds.

Conclusion

Mine incidents continued to plague the Australian forces throughout the Vietnam War and at times accounted for over half the casualties. To compound the grief, most of the mines had been lifted skilfully by the enemy from allied minefields and re-laid to the enemy's advantage. The controversy over the use of mines continues to this day.

The Author: Australian born but brought up in Kenya, Dr White graduated in medicine from the University of Sydney and served as a doctor in the Australian Army for five years. This included a year in Vietnam where he was mentioned-in-despatches. Subsequently, he practised privately as a dermatologist in Sydney for 32 years before retiring in 2010. During this time, he was a visiting medical officer at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and a clinical senior lecturer at the University of Sydney. He also served as an Army Reservist in the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps, attaining the rank of colonel and being awarded the Reserve Force Decoration. In 2009, he was appointed a member in the General Division of the Order of Australia for contributions to remote area dermatological practice and education. [Photo of Dr White: Colonel J. M. Hutcheson, MC]

Reference

O'Neill, Robert J. (1968). *Vietnam Task: The 5th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment, 1966/67* (Cassell Australia: Melbourne).