

THE MINEFIELD: Australia's greatest military blunder of the Vietnam War

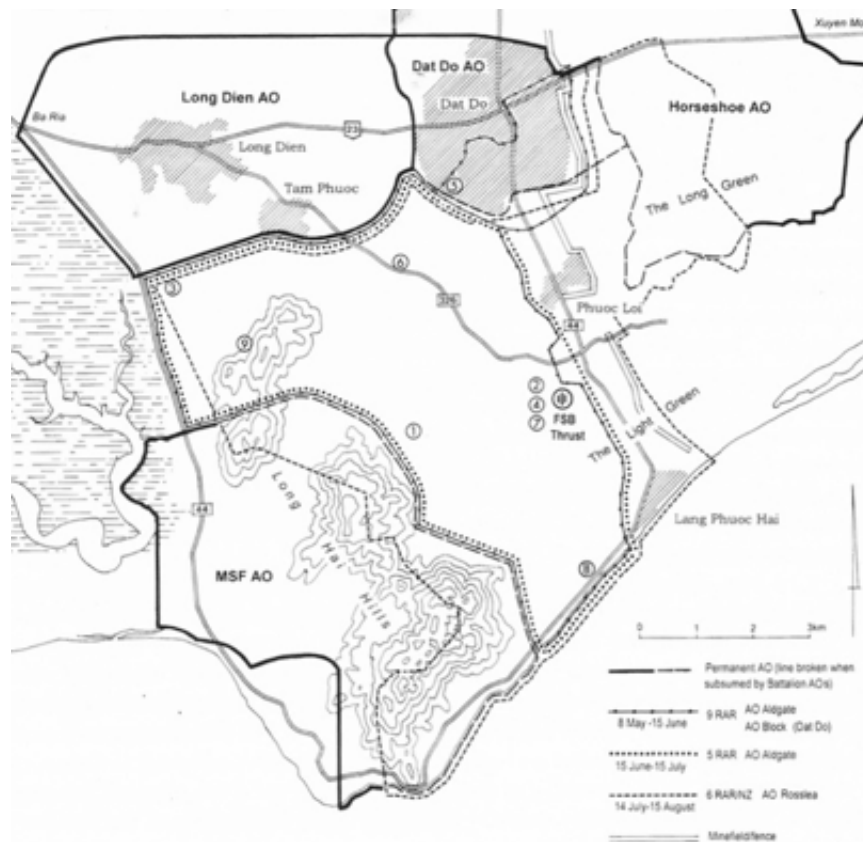
[Donald William Tate](#)

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Australian soldiers in the Vietnam War not only fought in the harshest of conditions, facing an enemy that was cunning, ruthless, and demonstrably courageous, but had to contend with a weapon unleashed upon them by the Australian Army itself — anti-personnel M16 mines, in what was, arguably, the greatest military blunder of the war.



In 1967, the Australian Task Force Commander — Brigadier Stuart Graham OBE MC — had established a minefield that stretched some 11 kilometres, ostensibly from the padi-fields around Dat Do, to the Long Hai hills, and down to Lang Phuoc Hai on the South China Sea.



The dotted line represents the minefield

Designed to be a physical barrier to deny the Viet Cong freedom of movement, the minefield was laid against the advice of the senior task force engineer, Major Brian Florence, and at least one battalion commander prepared to have an opinion—Lt Colonel John Warr of 5RAR who had served in the Korean War and knew first-hand what a two-edged sword anti-personnel mines could be.

On the other hand, Brigadier S. Pearson MC (the Task Force commander two years later) who had earlier declared that Vietnam was a 'unwinnable war' regarded the minefield as a 'sound concept' which detracts from *his* military legacy.

In a three-month period, some 23,000 M16 anti-personnel mines were laid by engineers — an enterprise that resulted in five Australians being killed right at the outset.

The M16 anti-personnel mine

The M16 mine was a devastating weapon. It was capable of killing and maiming within a wide radius of its blast.

In Vietnam, it averaged 6 casualties each explosion, with 27 casualties recorded on just one occasion.

THE DISASTER

There were three reasons for the failure of the minefield:

- South Vietnamese regional forces failed to monitor or guard the western side of the barrier as was initially agreed upon
- nor were the Australians guarding the eastern side, as agreed upon
- and gaps in the wire fences were not being repaired

'The 'Dat Do Mine Store'

Not only did it fail its objective to deny enemy soldiers access to local villages for propaganda purposes, food and recruits, Brigadier Graham's minefield became known as the *'Dat Do mine store'* because the enemy simply removed them and relocated them to areas the Australians were patrolling — an enduring, humiliating tactical failure by Brigadier Graham and the military high brass.

The Viet Cong quickly realised what an asset the minefield could be. Just one document alone, captured by 9RAR in May 1969, recorded a resolution by the Viet Cong's Long Dat district committee to *'destroy the Australians fence and remove and collect 1,000 mines'*.

What was meant as a defensive barrier had become one of the enemy's greatest offensive tools.

Two years after it was laid, in 1971, Colonel P. Yonge — the Services and Defence Liaison Officer of Armed Forces Vietnam — noted that the mines *'had become biggest single casualty-producing weapon'* and *'the*

greatest single problem' facing the Australian soldiers in Vietnam.

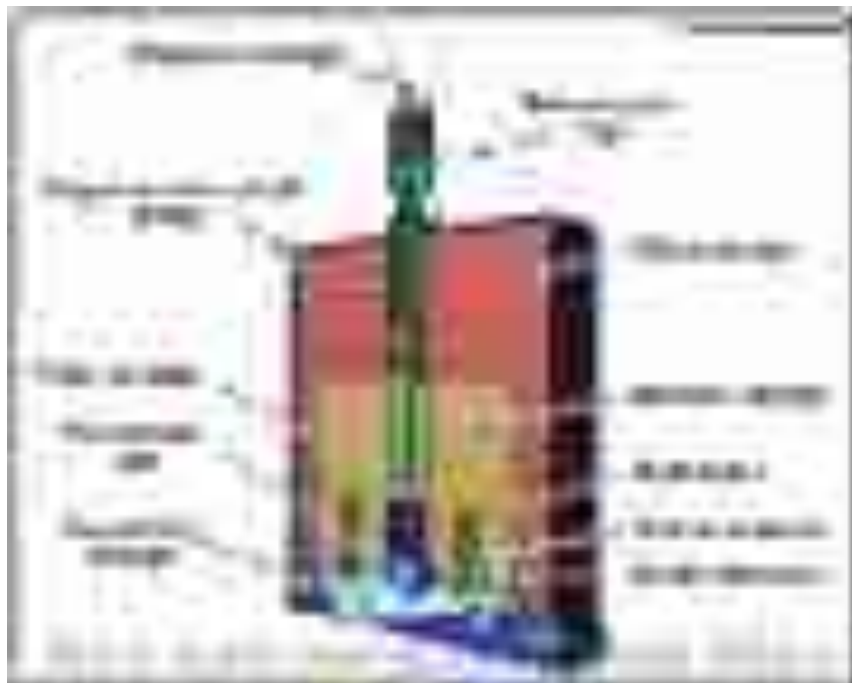
How many mines were actually lifted depends on who's telling the story.

- Task Force Commander Brigadier Hughes believed the enemy had lifted 'about' 5,000 mines
- Task Force Commander Brigadier Weir claimed the enemy had lifted 6,000 mines 'giving them a 'never-ending source of supply'
- and later, AFV Chief of Staff Major General Stretton stated that some '8,000 mines were lifted'

No one really knows how many mines were actually lifted, but the casualty figure was horrifying and tragic and had an untold impact on thousands of Australian families.

LIFTING THE MINES

The Viet Cong used an ingenious procedure to lift the mines — although it cost them many casualties in learning the technique. It says much about the dedication and bravery of the enemy soldier the Australians faced in the war, that they managed to evolve such a procedure.



Three teenage girls who had defected in 1971 showed the Australian hierarchy how the mines were lifted in a display for Brigadier C. Flint, Engineer in Chief at Army Headquarters.

Flint had gone to Vietnam in mid-1969 when casualties from mines had become a constant 41% of all task force casualties.

Three of the girls had worked together, shuffling forward in bare feet 8–10 cms apart with their toes feeling for the protruding prongs of a mine pressure fuse. When they located one, they would get on to their knees, feel underneath it for an M26 grenade, neutralise it with a hairpin if there was one there and put it aside for the 'collector' to pick up, then neutralise the mine itself with more hairpins which the collector also gathered up. From that point, using two hands with their thumbs together, they located other mines easily, because they had been laid in a precise pattern by the Australian Engineers. The collector simply collected the weapons — up to 150 per night. Astonishingly, the teams of lifters and collectors mostly worked at night — demonstrating unbelievable bravery.

THE HUMAN COST

The actual incidence of mine explosions are generally lost in the day-to-day records of Australia's role in the Vietnam War. But here are three examples

- On the 15th June 1969, 3 infantrymen died and another 24 men were wounded from D Company, 5RAR after Sergeant Rod Lees stood on a mine
- On the 27th February 1970, the 8th Battalion suffered a dark day when a cluster of men from 1 Platoon A Company were standing close together in a relatively enclosed area and had removed their flak jackets. An engineer in a water party triggered a mine and 7 members of the platoon were killed instantly. When a dustoff helicopter was

- lowering another engineer by winch to help clear the area of mines, Corporal Jim Barrett detonated a second mine, and was also killed
- On the 4th July 1969, moving across an open paid-field at the edge of the Long Hais, Private Leslie Pettit of 7 Platoon 5RAR was killed when another soldier (Private Jim Lowry) stood on a mine. Lowry and 9 others were wounded. An hour later, after extricating the wounded men, L/Cpl Paul Smith detonated a second mine which killed him and Private Hans Muller.

The Commanding Officer of 5RAR — Colonel Khan — was later heard to curse the Task Force CO *'for sending his battalion into that area at all'*.

While another battalion commander — Colonel 'Alby' Morrison of 9RAR — threatened to shoot villagers from Dat Do if any more of *his* men became mine casualties.

In just one year alone (1969) this table records the devastating impact of mines on men and their units. In that year alone, 31 Australians were killed by mines, and 181 men wounded:



Mine casualties, 1969

In total, 95 Australian soldiers were killed by mine explosions, and 600 men wounded.

Sometimes, statistics only tell part of the story. The humanity gets lost.

The mines caused horrendous injury — much of it kept from the

Australian public, just as the true, total number of casualties was. Casualties invariably arrived on Air Force bases away from prying eyes, and quickly despatched to hospitals without journalists knowing they had arrived.



A photograph taken in the Field Hospital of a soldier wounded by a M16 mine

One Army nurse — Faye Lewis — who served in the Australian field hospital in Vung Tau dealt with the trauma continuously. She wrote of soldiers *'continuously coming in with their legs off, multiple wounds, and you were sending home, week after week, planes full of young, mutilated people. Most people see amputated limbs as nice rounded stumps. We didn't get that. We got the ragged ends...'*

In the field, soldiers not only had to deal with the constant threat of standing on a mine oneself, but one someone else did, having to extricate

that wounded men at great risk of further explosions and being wounded as well, but witnessing the terrible injuries inflicted.

In 2012, Australia's national historian wrote that 'psychiatric assessments of Australian soldiers found that they feared mines much more than gunshot wounds. Aside from the unpredictability of death and terrible maiming, soldiers were disturbed by the loss of comrades for no apparent gain and frustrated by their inability to retaliate...' (Fighting to the Finish, Ashley Ekins, Allen&Unwin)



Australian tanks and APCs on Operation

The human cost was one aspect. There was also the enormous cost of damage to Australian armour (tanks, APCs) trucks, bulldozers and other vehicles. One research paper blamed mines and RPGs for the 86% of damage done to tanks alone, while 100 APCs (50% of the entire force) were damaged in some respect — and being the greater cause of Armoured Corps casualties.

One Trooper from B Squadron 3 Cav Regiment — Doug Voyzey — drowned on the 14th December when his APC hit a mine and flipped into a stream.

The Politics

Journalist Peter Samuel charged the army and the government of the day with negligence. He wrote, *'No sooner was the minefield laid than it was abandoned to provide the Viet Cong with a wonderful supply of lethal weapons with which to kill Australian soldiers. It is difficult to exoress confidence in the leadership they have been given, either by the Army or the Government.'* (The Task Force Role: A Critique, *Vietnam Digest*, August 1969)

The minefield had become a symbol of the government's failed policy in Vietnam.

Army Secretary Bruce White, preparing answers for impending parliament questioning, had little doubt that increased casualties were being caused by mines, but recomended to the Defence Department Secretary that no mention be made of mines, and to attribute the high casualty rate to 'pacification tasks'.

But Deputy Leader of the Opposition — Lance Barnard — told parliament that the minefield was *'a tragic example of the waste and futility of Australian participation in the Vietnam War.'*

And Brigadier S. Graham, the Task Force Commander in 1967—the architect of this calamity?

Brigadier S. Graham

They gave him a promotion to Major General — and made him Deputy Chief of the General Staff (DVGS) at Army Headquarters in Canberra.

And was rewarded for his service to the nation as an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO).

(This author, Don Tate, is a former infantryman who served in the Vietnam War, a teacher, and historian, and the author of a memoir — *The War Within*)