

# The Minefield: An Australian Tragedy in America's Vietnam War

**Greg Lockhart**

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*Blinded by imperial hubris, the author vividly shows how Australian and American forces received a bitter lesson in guerrilla warfare and the uses of technology from the NLF.*

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In 1967 the commander of First Australian Task Force (1ATF), Brigadier Stuart Graham ordered the construction of an 11 kilometre 'barrier fence and minefield' in Phuoc Tuy Province, southern Vietnam. This 'barrier', which ran for some 11 kilometres through the southern Phuoc Tuy, would constitute the biggest blunder in Australian military history since the Second World War. It would also constitute a story of strategic self-destruction that epitomised both Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War and the wider Australian imperial tradition of sending expeditions to far-flung wars.



Brigadier Stuart Graham

In Vietnam, the purpose of Graham's 'barrier' was to separate and to shield Phuoc Tuy's most densely populated villages in the southwestern

District of Long Dat from his enemy's regular units in the north and east. These were the regular units of the National Liberation Front (or NLF) for the southern region of Vietnam and/or the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). The problem, however, was that Graham did not know his enemy. He did not realise that the people in Long Dat were also largely hostile to 1ATF's presence in Phuoc Tuy. He did not realise that, led by the NLF, the people in Long Dat would lift thousands of the mines and turn them back against 1ATF with horrendous, far-reaching results. Amplifying the conceptual travesty of building a 'barrier' with his enemy on both sides of it, Graham built it with over 20,000 powerful M16 'Jumping Jack' landmines.

The M16 mine was about the size of a large jam tin, about 10 centimetres in diameter and 12 centimetres high, or 19 centimetres with the M605 fuze installed. With steel inner and outer casings, the mine weighed over three and a half kilograms including about half a kilogram of TNT. To prime it, an M605 fuze (or striker) with three prongs at the top was screwed into a well in the centre of the mine. The safety pin, which prevented the fuze from being driven home in the fuze assembly, had to be withdrawn from a hole in the neck of the fuze. The mine was detonated when a small downward force was applied to the prongs---or there is a similar pull on a trip wire attached to the release pin located below the safety pin in the neck of the fuze.

With detonation either way, a plate moves across the igniter mechanism and frees the firing pin through a hole in the plate. Driven

downwards by a spring, the freed firing pin strikes a cap which ignites a two-second delay fuse. This delay fuse ignites a flash cap, which further ignites a bag of black powder, which throws the mine out of the ground with great force, simultaneously igniting a two millisecond delay fuse. This fuse detonates the half-kilogram of TNT when the mine is knee to waist height out of the ground---hence 'Jumping Jacks'. The cast iron fragmentation body inside the inner steel casing fragments with the force of the blast. The mine was usually lethal within a 25-metre radius, was known to have killed at 75, and was dangerous to 200 metres.



(Right) The M16 'Jumping Jack' Mine primed with an M106 fuze, and (left) an anti-lift device consisting of an M26 grenade and an M5 pressure release switch. The ensemble awaits installation in the mine hole to the right of the shadow at the base of the mine in May 1967. The anti-lift device would be placed in the hole first, the mine sat on top of it, and the spoil packed back in the hole around the ordnance. The prongs on the fuze would be just below the surface and camouflaged with a light sprinkling of dirt. The M16 mine was a descendent of the German 'S' mine, which had already been built to jump in the Second World War. Improvements on the 'S' mine led to the new generation of M16 mines initially designed and mass produced in the US for use in Europe against Warsaw Pact countries in the former Soviet bloc. (Photo: courtesy Dick Beck).

As work on the laying of the minefield went on through May 1967, 13 Australian sappers were killed and dismembered as a result of detonations caused by the stress of the job. This stress included fierce heat, fear, faulty ordnance, and enemy action that usually

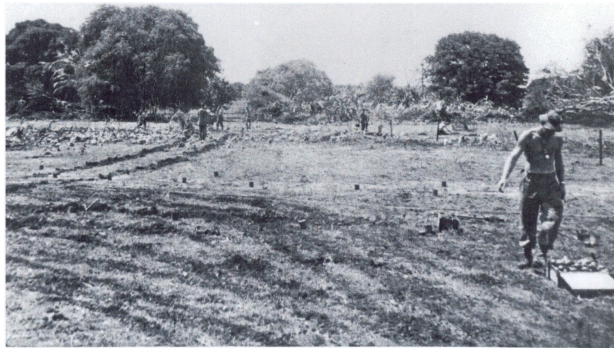
involved children pushing buffaloes and dogs into the field to distract the mine laying teams. One sapper, Jethro Thompson, who seems to have trod accidentally on an M16 mine during the laying, survived at the epicenter of the blast and later catalogued his shocking injuries. There was a tremendous explosion, and

I thought, 'O shit!' And that's the last thing I remember before I was flying through the air. All the dust and crap seemed to float down covering me in very slow motion. My hands were spewing blood and I could not feel my left leg ... I got hit from left to right, shreds at the high thigh only attached my leg. My dick is longer than my left leg and I'm not boasting. My left hand was a mess. Lost all but the thumb and index finger. My right wrist had been badly gouged. My buttocks and right leg was badly lacerated. Left eardrum was perforated. I took a penetrating abdominal wound at the base of the flak jacket. This opened me up exposing my intestines. I heard someone yelling out to put the pins back in the mines near us. Then one bloke said, 'we can't, Jethro's got them.' [Sergeant] Brett Nolen was hovering over me trying to stop the flow of blood. I was hot and looking into the sun.

Ten days later in hospital, Jethro also had his right hand amputated.

As the Australian sappers were being killed and mutilated laying the mines, some 30 NLF lifters were blown to pieces during suicidal experiments to lift them. Especially as they operated at night, their biggest problem was finding out what caused many of the mines to detonate as they were being lifted. This was an anti-lift device, which the Australians had fitted

beneath about half the mines in an attempt to deter their enemy. Each device consisted of an M5 pressure release switch about the size of a matchbox that is fitted with a detonator adaptor and screwed into the top of an M26 fragmentation grenade. If someone attempts to lift the mine and the anti-lift device is functioning properly, the lid flies open releasing the firing pin and detonating the grenade.



A sapper in a carrying team at work in the Australian minefield in May 1967. The mines were laid in clusters of three. The pattern of three mine clusters is visible. The clusters were arranged in rows, with two rows in a strip and three strips in the field. There were mine-hole digging teams as well as separate mine arming and mine carrying teams. The work of the three kinds of teams had to be conducted like clockwork and with great concentration, especially in the arming phase, which was particularly dangerous when anti-lift devices were employed. Some 13 sappers were killed and wounded in the laying. (Photo: courtesy Graham Moon).

The histories of Long Dat District thus recount the story of how a combat engineer named Hung Manh had an unexpected reprieve after being ceremoniously sent off (with drinks) on a likely suicide mission to the minefield. The crucial detail: 'the grenade beneath the mine did not detonate because the detonator was damp.' The mechanism of the anti-lift device was studied. Mine lifting training was soon devised for local guerillas and many others in the villages. The mine lifting had begun by the night of 28-9 May when Australian records show that M16 mines, some of them with anti-lift devices, were lifted from the southern part of minefield.

From then on, *The Minefield* shows how the indigent, lightly armed NLF guerillas in the south-western villages had an inexhaustible supply of M16 mines to turn back against the Australian task force. The far-reaching fact would be that, by inflicting hundreds of casualties on 1ATF and its allies with M16 mines from the 1ATF minefield, the NLF guerillas would defend their strategically vital southwestern area in Phuoc Tuy against Australian incursions.

How did Brigadier Graham so badly misread his enemy? Under great pressure he personally faltered: he failed to heed warnings from his subordinates that anti-lift devices would not be enough to secure the mines in the ground from a determined enemy and made an irrational decision. Yet the book explains that the pressures bearing down on him were a function of fundamental flaws in Australian government policy. Graham's decision was accommodated and, even, incited by the institutionalized ignorance about Vietnam that was an essential requirement for the government to prosecute the war. Conditioned by the Australian imperial view of the world and its far-flung expeditionary tradition, neither Graham nor his superiors in Canberra could ever comprehend that the people living in Long Dat would perceive them to be invaders.

From the 1950s, the Australian government oratory instinctively followed the US government's emphasis on the 'domino theory', according to which the downward thrust of Asian communism threatened the countries of South-East Asia and Australia. But *The Minefield* demonstrates how, in Australia, such strident official rhetoric about the communists 'coming down' was a surrogate assertion of the fear generated by the process of decolonisation that Japanese expansion in Asia had stimulated in 1941-42.

As the British and other European empires disintegrated in Asia post-1941, conservative

Australian governments sought to reestablish the Western imperium in a new form. The resulting policy from 1955, but not announced until 1964, was the barrier strategy of 'forward defence'---against the technicolor nightmare of the 'red' and 'yellow' perils. In the conduct of this strategy, the Australian government sought generally to encourage and support the expansion of US power in the Asia-Pacific region. In particular, the Australian government encouraged and supported the escalation of US forces in Vietnam in order to suppress independent Asian nationalism. Yet at a time of decolonisation the government was unable to inform its military commanders that this was their role in Vietnam. Such an announcement would have invited widespread condemnation at home and abroad. Communism was said to be the enemy, not the real threat, which was nationalism.

1ATF's operational assumptions would then make no strategic sense. Fixated on the imperial view that gangs of 'communist cadres' from the north had imposed their will on the southern population, Australian commanders in Phuoc Tuy had little idea of the widespread, pre-existing support for the war of national liberation among the villagers in Long Dat District. In fact, they did not even know that this southwestern district was strategically vital in the battle for Phuoc Tuy. Blithely assuming that the local Saigon government authorities 'controlled' Long Dat, they overlooked the fact that it contained 54 per cent of the provincial population, which very largely supported the NLF and the NLF/PAVN regular main force units and was concentrated around the best rice fields in the province. They also missed the strategic significance of the Long Hai Mountains as a secure guerilla base area on the southwestern edge of those fields.

Graham did not understand that the people he was attempting to protect were the source of the local resistance to 1ATF's presence in the province and the basis for the links between

this resistance and the regular forces that were both in and entering the province. Unaware that the villagers of Long Dat had different political and historical views from them, Graham and his superiors were unable to comprehend that the population, which the minefield was designed to protect from the plunder of those regular forces, would in fact plunder the minefield. Staring at their own imperial reflections, they made the stunning strategic error of attempting to defend their enemy.

During 1ATF's five-year tenure in Phuoc Tuy it suffered horrendous casualties on M16 mines from the 1ATF minefield without making any long-term political or military gains in Phuoc Tuy Province. As NLF 'mine-lifting emulation movements' began to sweep the villages of Long Dat in mid-1967, as many as 2000 M16s had reached the People's District Committee by August/September. In 1968 and 1969 the NLF used its abundance of M16s with great effectiveness 'to defend the Minh Dam base' in the Long Hai Mountains and 'to attack the Australians and the [Saigon government] puppets' around the villages on the plains of Long Dat.

A rare 1ATF operation to destroy NLF base facilities in the Long Hai Mountains in March/April 1968 may be taken to illustrate the NLF's defensive use of the M16s. During the week before the 19 March assault on the central massif by the Third Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR), B52 air strikes and naval gunfire pounded the objective. These bombardments had virtually no impact on the countless caves in which the NLF had long established base installations, but only recently defended them with M16 mines. But still, it was into a shattered moonscape of fine dust and granite boulders that Second-Lieutenant Lawrence Appelbee led 7 Platoon, 3RAR on the morning of 22 March. Prodding every inch of the track for mines and marking cleared areas with white tape, the patrol had only moved a



total of 400 metres from its base when, at around 12.30 p.m., Private John Richardson stepped over a log and detonated an M16 mine.

The mine failed to jump. It went off in the ground causing Richardson to lose his left leg below the knee and the front of his right foot. A very painful burst eardrum and compound fractures of both arms added to his injuries. Corporal Graham Fox, who was some metres behind Richardson, suffered wounds that later resulted in the loss of a leg. Appelbee told his riflemen to get onto rocks and watch their arcs of fire. Sapper Murray Walker, who was allocated to 7 Platoon that day, began to prod across the saddle with a bayonet to clear a path to get to Richardson and Fox. Appelbee also prodded. At some point Private Kevin Coles moved off his rock. Perhaps he intended to cover Appelbee and Walker in the saddle. But Coles stepped on an M16 that jumped, instantly killed him, lightly wounded Appelbee, and blew Walker to the ground.



Infantry Sergeant Rod Lees about 30 minutes after standing on an M16 mine during a patrol about a kilometre from the minefield on 15 June 1969. Although seriously wounded Lees was one of perhaps only three Australians who kept both their lives and their legs after standing on a fully functioning M16. The blast, which stripped the ground of vegetation where Lees fell, seems to have blown him above most of the shrapnel. Some say that before hitting the ground, he was blown into the tree he lies beside. (Photo: courtesy Rod Lees.)

Once they had collected themselves and realised that nothing could be done for Coles, whose smouldering body later flickered into flames, Walker and Appelbee reached Richardson and Fox. Meantime, the burning body of Kevin Coles caused some concern that it might generate enough heat to detonate the grenades and ammunition attached to it. At some point, Walker, carrying a fire extinguisher that had been lowered from an Australian Air Force Iroquois helicopter bravely crossed a stretch of uncleared ground to extinguish the

burning body. Appelbee placed a tourniquet on Richardson's torn leg. 3RAR Medical Officer Captain Richard Lippet also lowered himself and his medical kit into the area from a hovering helicopter. The Company Commander, Major Ian Hands, called out from the base 400 metres away that he would send two engineer reinforcements with an infantry escort from 9 Platoon to help Walker. Inexplicably, these four went around the left, uncleared side, rather than the right, cleared side of a big rock on the path down the slope. One of the four detonated another M16 mine. Both of the escorts were seriously wounded and the two engineers were killed. Hands managed the extraction of the four casualties nearest the base. Appelbee, who was 'very pissed off' with a cameraman taking Super Eight footage of the carnage from the medical evacuation helicopter hovering above, organised the winching of Richardson, Fox, and Coles into the aircraft from maximum height. This was because of the danger that the powerful down draught from its rotor blades would detonate more mines. Four hours after Richardson detonated the first mine the platoon got back in the base. And as the survivors ate their field rations that night 'no one spoke.'

The leadership, courage, and staying power with which 1ATF patrols kept up their protracted probing of mined NLF defenses comes into view: Appelbee's platoon went on patrolling the next day. Yet we also have some idea of how, with no heavy weapons and no air power, the guerillas forces of Long Dat District finally achieved the remarkable military feat of defending their key base area against 1ATF with M16 mines from the Australian minefield.

The NLF's offensive use of M16 mines was even more remarkable because it implies the radical use of mines as strike weapons. Landmines are usually 'dumb' weapons; they are victim operated explosive traps. But to use them as strike weapons meant using them with something like the methods of aimed artillery fire. To employ mines offensively the local

guerillas needed to sight a target or at least to anticipate its position before they could hit it. Direct line of sight or wrap-around surveillance of 1ATF's activities by the local population was then essential for NLF guerillas to plant, lift, and re-plant mines prospectively in the paths of Australian patrols. Such a politically grounded mine offensive based on popular support was new to Australians who were accustomed to mining in abstract geometric patterns in fixed fenced and managed fields. Moreover, the NLF mine offensive would drive home to the Australians the shocking realisation that M16 mines from 'the minefield' had provided their lightly armed enemy in Long Dat with its main strike weapons!

Drawing Australian patrols into mined areas was one of the NLF's offensive options. In late June 1969, for example, local guerrilla forces fired on 5RAR patrols in the foothills of the Long Hai Mountains. 5RAR then reacted as their enemy anticipated they would. On 4 July a 7 Platoon night ambush patrol led by Second Lieutenant David Mead was moving to a position about 500 metres from the area of the earlier patrol contacts and at 9.07 p.m., one of its machine gunners placed his gun on an M16 mine. One member of the platoon was killed and many others were wounded, including Mead who suffered serious shrapnel wounds in his back. A second mine was detonated at 10.05 p.m. after someone moved just outside one of the safe lanes that had been cleared from the detonation area to the helicopter-landing zone. Records indicate a total of three were killed and 14 wounded.

Another incident was no less destructive. But it had a more layered history. On 15 July 1969 A Company 6RAR had two contacts with a three-man enemy reconnaissance party some distance to the east of the minefield. In one of the contacts, 3 Platoon, commanded by Lieutenant Peter Hines, killed two of the enemy in a bunker, where an M16 mine and M26 grenade, almost definitely from the minefield,

were found. The third enemy survived and fled west. Six days later, 3 Platoon was cut down by an M16 mine located about ten metres off the track it was also following west.

Hines had stopped the platoon for a morning break. It was carrying a small transistor radio and Hines had been alerted to a momentous event to occur that morning, 21 July 1969. US Armed Forces Radio Vietnam was about to announce that man has landed on the moon. Thus, at 9.40 am, with the distant rumble of the B52 bombers putting in an air strike on the Long Hai Mountains, there may have been some bunching in the area as Hines went around informing his men about the Apollo moon landing. He returned to his headquarters where many feet, including his own had trod that morning. But there, just beside his pack, in a space other feet had tended to avoid, one of his own landed on an M16 mine.

Hines lost his legs and died within five minutes. Eighteen others were wounded, many with heavy leg and stomach injuries. Corporal John Needs was the only unscathed NCO. 'It was horrible, like a charnel house,' observed one of the survivors. But then Needs was killed when a second mine was detonated. This explosion also blinded Medical Officer Captain Trevor Anderson, seriously wounded the CO Lieutenant-Colonel David Butler, and injured a further three soldiers. Within four hours on 21 July yet another platoon had been decimated--two had been killed and 23 wounded, many grievously---without firing a shot.

The impact of such mine incidents was devastating given the small size of the Australian force. There were three twenty-man platoons in a company and a mere thirteen rifle companies in 1ATF at its peak. A single M16 mine could gut a platoon. A conservative estimate is that between May 1967 and November 1971 55 1ATF soldiers were killed and some 250 dismembered and wounded on M16s from the 'barrier minefield'. This

constituted about 10 percent of all Australian casualties in the Vietnam War. Even more telling, however, are the following figures: for the protracted period from May 1969 to May 1970, the M16 mine casualties rose to over 50 per cent of 1ATF's total casualties. At some points, the figures probably spiked at 80 per cent. Furthermore, 1ATF records show that over 200 allied soldiers---very largely Vietnamese but also some Americans---were killed and mutilated by M16 mines.

The strategic suicide built into these casualty figures went with the terrible human cost. As well as defending the NLF's base areas in the Long Hai Mountains, M16 mines from the 1ATF minefield guaranteed the NLF's defence of its vital south-western area against Australian incursions. The book concludes that, supported by his US and Australian superiors, Brigadier Graham unintentionally rendered to his enemy the weapons with which they defended their homeland.

This tragedy of strategic self-destruction stemmed from the willful blindness of a regime that institutionalized ignorance of Vietnamese nationalism and inflated the threat of communism. Strategic myth-making was the essential underpinning of Australia's involvement in the war. But such mystification made it impossible to observe the first rule of war: know your enemy. Brigadier Graham was responsible for his decision. But it was conditioned by an imperial worldview that had shaped Australian strategic thinking for a century before it blinded Australian commanders to the national dynamics of the Vietnam battlefield.

Australia's imperial expeditions have almost always been sent to support British and, post-1942, American forces on far-flung battlefields so that, in return, those big and powerful Anglophone allies would save Australia against some unspecified future threat in the Pacific. Race, if not exactly monolingual fear, has been a major driver of

this impulse to maintain imperial strategic settings.

But then, Vietnam was not the only battlefield on which the far-flung tradition has made it difficult to know what was going on. As at Gallipoli, the Somme, or Singapore, Australian soldiers in Vietnam fought with tenacity and tactical prowess. But repeatedly, as on those battlefields, and now in Iraq, they have been required to fight in the face of impossible odds and/or the strategic futility that has routinely weakened rather than strengthened Australia's position in the world. This is partly because it is difficult to know enemies who are so remote from Australia and almost never posed a threat to Australian national security. But it is also because the expeditionary tradition is based on self-fulfilling anxieties and sentimental self-

deceptions that are generated by an unAustralian sense of Anglo-Australian colonial isolation in the Pacific.

Strategic self-destruction is then a recurring theme in the Australian expeditionary military tradition. The 'Minefield' epitomises Australia's involvement in Vietnam. 'Minefield' is also a metaphor for the military history of a country with little or no independent strategic view.

*Greg Lockhart is a former army officer, turned Vietnam literary scholar and translator. His book, [The Minefield: An Australian Tragedy in Vietnam](#) was published in May 2007 by Allen & Unwin of Australia. He wrote this article, highlighting the book's main findings, for Japan Focus. Posted June 10, 2007.*