

A Testing Two Days For Sapper Miller

Our second story on the five Tunnel Rats awarded the Military Medal in Vietnam covers Sapper Gary Miller and the two incidents which led to his award.

Gary Miller was a Sapper working as a Tunnel Rat with 3 Troop 1 Field Squadron in Vietnam from 27th August 1969 to 20th August 1970. His bravery in two incidents in March 1970 while attached to B Company 8th Battalion RAR was recognised with the awarding of the Military Medal. Again these incidents involved perhaps the most harrowing of the tasks that Sappers faced in Vietnam – that of clearing safe lanes to comrades wounded by mines.

It's difficult to imagine a more stressful situation in which to find yourself. You're surrounded by mates who've been very badly wounded. They need first aid immediately and they need urgent evacuation to medical facilities that could save their lives or limbs. This needs to happen fast, but your training and your experience in-country tells you that the enemy has placed other mines to catch those trying to aid and evacuate the men wounded by the first mine.

The Sapper needs to keep everyone under control (including himself) while he clears safe paths to all of the wounded so that first aid can begin. The Sapper must then clear a path to a suitable landing zone for the "dustoff" medical evacuation helicopter, and ensure the landing zone itself is clear of mines. More often than not, the landing zone had to be rapidly created by the Sappers blowing down a few trees and clearing underbrush.

The young Sappers who took on these awesome responsibilities in mine incidents throughout the Vietnam War were invariably in their early 20's and were usually working in a team of just two men. The "No.2" of the team had probably been in-country less than four months. When these mine incidents took place and the "proverbial hit the fan" these young Sappers were virtually "taking control" over a platoon or even a company until they had removed the threat of mines. That they handled this so well – every time, without fail – is a credit to the indomitable spirit of the Sappers and to their training received both at SME and in-country from team-leaders in the two-man team system.

The first of Gary's incidents happened on 6th March 1970 when Gary was No.1 of a Splinter Team attached to B Company 8RAR. His No. 2 in the Splinter Team was Sapper Paul Scott who had been in country a little over three months.

They had been patrolling for some time on



ABOVE: Sapper Gary Miller enjoys a beer back at the Nui Dat base camp. RIGHT: Sapper Paul Scott was the No.2 of the Splinter Team on both Operations



that day, when Gary was called to the front of the patrol because the Forward Scout had seen something suspicious. Gary investigated and found a partly buried M-16 mine near a log.

The patrol was quite spread out and Gary wanted everyone nearby to remain still while he looked more closely at the device and then at the surrounding area.

"I told everyone in the vicinity not to move until I checked it out", recalls Gary.

"The Gunner from the FO party and a couple of Diggers stayed behind us for protection. While I was checking the mine out, there was a massive



Private Stephen O'Dal of 5 Platoon, B Company 5RAR died of wounds on the day of the mine incident, 6th March 1970

explosion off to my right, followed by a lot of screaming from the same direction.

"I knew straight away somebody had stood on a mine, so I immediately started clearing a safe lane by hand in the direction of the screaming, so that a medic could get to the wounded for first aid."

When Gary reached the site of the mine incident, it was at the edges of a bunker system that elements of the patrol had decided to sweep through while Gary investigated the first mine found near the log.

The mine had been set off by Private John Bressington who was killed by the blast. In all there were seven casualties, including Private Stephen O'Dal who would die from his wounds in hospital later that day. Of the five surviving casualties, by far the worst hit was Private Graham Harris.

"As I reached the edges of the bunker system I came across Private Graham Harris. He was lying on his back, and both his legs had been blown off," recalls Gary.

Casualty list from March 6th mine incident

Surname	Initials	Rank	Number	Unit	Coy/PI	Age	Corp	CAT
Bressington	J.	Pte	218583	8RAR	B/5	23	RAINF	KIA
Glover	W.F.	Pte	4720549	8RAR	B/5	22	RAINF	WIA
Harris	G.J.	Pte	4720765	8RAR	B/5	22	RAINF	WIA#
Lade	W.G.	Pte	3795480	8RAR	B/5	22	RAINF	WIA
Mills	B.J.	Cpl	1201929	8RAR	B/5	33	RAINF	WIA
O'Dal	S.J.	Pte	39016	8RAR	B/5	20	RAINF	DOW
Thompson	P.N.	Lt	17150	8RAR	B/5	24	RAINF	WIA

Casualty list from March 15th mine incident

Surname	Initials	Rank	Number	Unit	Coy/PI	Age	Corp	CAT
Danyluk	J.	LCpl	217739	8RAR	B/6	20	RAINF	WIA#
Hazell	D.M.	Pte	218589	8RAR	B/6	22	RAINF	WIA#
McEffer	T.R.	Pte	1734652	8RAR	B/6	21	RAINF	WIA
Rock	P.J.	Pte	2791851	8RAR	B/6	23	RAINF	WIA

Evacuated back to Australia due to wounds



Private Joseph Danyluk of 6 Platoon, B Company 5RAR was injured in the mine incident of 15th March 1970

Sappers Miller and Scott cleared paths to each of the wounded, then concentrated on clearing to and creating an area from which the wounded could be winched out by helicopter.

In part, the citation which accompanies Gary's Military Medal reads: "Despite the danger to himself, Sapper Miller immediately set about the hazardous task of clearing safe

lanes by hand to allow access to the casualties from the incident. Undaunted by the knowledge that the enemy normally lays mines in lots of two or more in an area, Sapper Miller meticulously cleared the necessary avenues of approach to the wounded and then proceeded to clear an area from which the casualties could be winched out of the area by helicopter. His complete lack of fear was an inspiration to those who were present."

The second incident which forms a part of Gary's award of the Military Medal took place just nine days later, on 15th March 1970. Gary and his No. 2 Paul Scott were still out on the same Operation with B Company 8RAR, and were with a Platoon they had worked with several times before.

"The patrol had stopped at a clearing where we had an "O Group" and a brew," recalls Gary.

"As we enjoyed the brew, the Lieutenant said he was going to send out a few Diggers to check the surrounding area. I showed him my mine map which

“His response was to say that the mines weren't indicated on his map – and he sent the men out anyway, telling them to stay off the tracks, taking on board the warnings I had given.

“A short time after the small patrol had left our area, there was a loud explosion, followed again by screaming. Once again, realising what had happened, I started to prod, clearing a safe lane to the wounded.”

This time there were four wounded, the worst being Private Douglas Hazell who had stood on the mine while walking across a track junction. Private Hazell eventually lost both legs as a result of his injuries that day.

Sapper Miller continued searching the area and found another M-16 mine.

“I believe, because of the indications on my mine map, that I would have found even more mines if we'd had the time to continue looking,” said Gary.

“But after the medivac of the wounded, we got out the area quickly.”

Again, quoting from Gary's citation for his Military Medal: “Heedless of his own safety, Sapper Miller again undertook hazardous hand clearance of the area. Having cleared safe lanes into the casualties and cleared the remainder of the area for movement, Sapper Miller was not satisfied that he had done all that he could. Bearing in mind the enemy mine practice he relentlessly searched the surrounding area in an effort to find the second or more of the mines. His pursuit of his objective was rewarded when he detected another anti-personnel mine sixty metres from the initial explosion.”

Just a few months before these incidents, on 7th



ABOVE: Sapper Gary Miller uses a mine detector to clear a track for mines while working with the Tanks. Walking behind Gary is the No. 2 of the Mini-Team, Sapper Serge “Eric” Brianski



One of the injured in the March 6th mine incident, Private Bill Glover of 5 Platoon B Company 8RAR is seen here (second from the left) four months later enjoying a break and an ice-cream during a village cordon and search operation

December 1969, Sapper Miller had been wounded himself, by shrapnel from a mortar round. He spent three weeks in hospital recovering from the wound before returning to 3 Troop and the Operations with 8RAR that would lead to his Military Medal.

Gary didn't hear of his

award until he was back in Australia, serving out the last few months of his National Service.

He was eventually presented his medal by Sir Roden Cutler VC, an honour in itself.

The bonds between Sappers and Infantry involved

RIGHT: Gary Miller (left) has an emotional meeting with 8RAR Veteran, Graham Harris who lost both legs in the mine incident on 6th March 1970

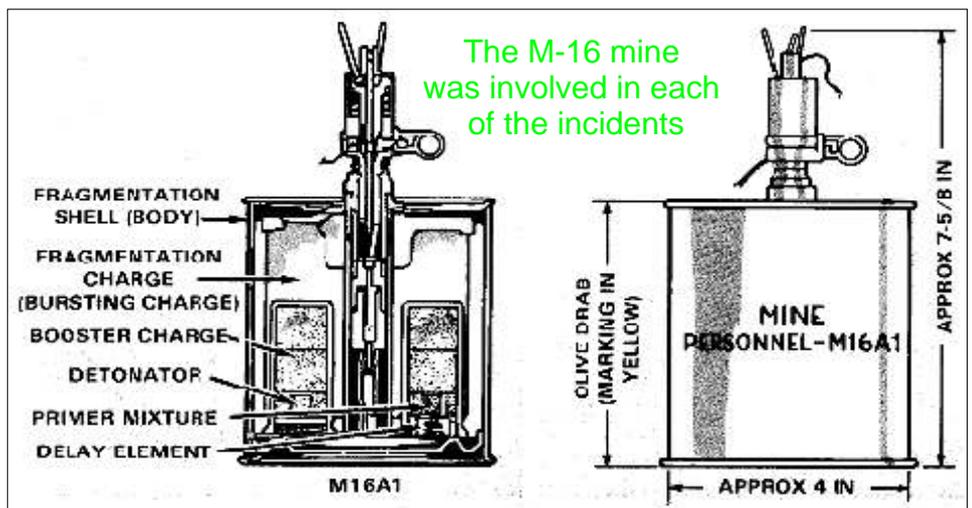


RIGHT: Gary Miller (left) is presented with his Military Medal at an awards ceremony conducted by Sir Roden Cutler VC (right)



together in mine incidents is strong and emotional. In the early 1990's Graham Harris (who had lost both legs in the first of Gary's mine incidents), got up at an Infantry dinner and thanked the "mystery" Sapper who had saved his life and enabled him to go on and have five wonderful children. That Sapper was Gary Miller. The newspapers followed up the story, locating Gary and eventually bringing Gary and Graham together. It was an emotional reunion of two men whose lives had been on the line together.

After the War, Gary needed a distraction from the rather hectic previous twelve months in Vietnam. He renewed his love of surfing and plunged into touring South Africa and many of the world's top spots,



chasing the perfect wave. Eventually reality took hold and Gary returned to Australia to settle down. But behind him always is an incredible story of Sapper courage, recognised not only through his Military Medal award, but also through the comradeship he enjoys from fellow Sappers and from the

Infantry he worked so closely with.

The closing section of Gary's Military Medal citation reads: "In both instances, Sapper Miller's fearless and relentless application to his task was an inspiration to those around him and was a magnificent example to all".