

A Day From Hell

The day man first landed on the moon was also the day Phil Baxter earned his Military Medal. We cover that horrifying day in this, the first of our features on the five Tunnel Rats awarded the Military Medal in Vietnam

Apart from being a story of great courage, this story also reveals how successful the Army was at converting civilians to soldiers via the National Service system. Usually within nine months of joining up, the National Servicemen were in Vietnam and in the field. For the Tunnel Rats, once in-country, they were faced with a range of tasks, including mine and booby trap clearing, tunnel and bunker searching, demolitions and unexploded bombs. The most harrowing of our tasks however, was clearing safe lanes to wounded comrades after a mine incident. That someone so recently wrenched from civilian comfort could cope so admirably with this "Day From Hell" is a credit not only to Phil, but also to the Army that brought him to that point.

On July 21st 1969, Sapper Phil Baxter was the "No.1" of a two-man splinter team attached to 6RAR on Operation Mundingburra. His "No.2" was Sapper Dave Sturmer, who had been in-country less than four months. Both men were National Servicemen posted to 1 Troop 1 Field Squadron and they were about to experience a day they would never forget.

It was the role of each of the three Field Troops to support one of the Infantry Battalions operating in Vietnam, providing Splinter Teams of two Tunnel Rats for each Company of the Battalion – or for each Platoon if the area of operations was high-risk in terms of mines and booby traps.

Operation Mundingburra was in the approaches to the mine-infested Long Hai Mountains, so Splinter Teams were attached to each Platoon, with Phil and Dave being attached to 3 Platoon, commanded by Lt Peter Hines.

Phil takes up the story: "We were into the 8th day of the Operation and had started early that morning in our westerly push towards the Long Hai's. We'd experienced several minor incidents during the first week of the search and destroy operation, and this area was known to be heavily mined, so we'd been pushing through the bush, or "scrub-bashing" rather than walking on trails.

"Added to the mix was the fact that we'd been advised that the Long Hai's were going to be bombed by B-52s at 10am on that day.

"Just before 10am, after crossing a north-south track, the forward scout spotted a



Out on Operations with 6RAR, Sapper Phil Baxter takes a break for "smoko" and a brew

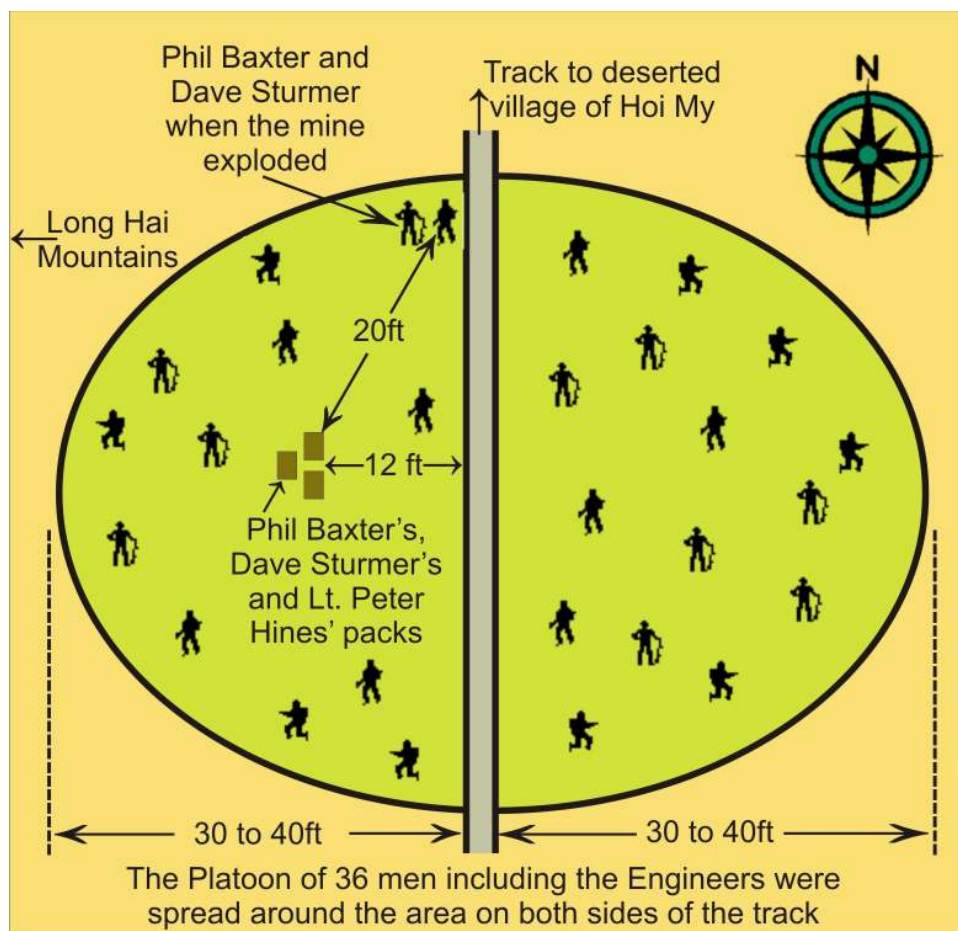
warning sign indicating a minefield, but there was no way of telling where or even in which direction it might have been.

"With the Platoon spread out on both sides of the track, Lt. Hines called for a "smoko" while we waited out the B-52 strike. He then asked us to check the track in a northerly direction for mines.

"Lt. Hines then spoke to HQ on the radio, and had obviously been told that the Americans had just landed on the moon. He walked amongst his men, quietly telling them of this historic achievement.

"While walking back to his pack and gear, he stepped over Dave and my packs onto an M-16 mine. It's all a matter of fate. The forward scout and 12 other men had walked over that same area just minutes earlier.

"My first thought on hearing and feeling the massive explosion was that the B-52's had dropped



Lt. Peter Hines (KIA) set off the first mine and bravely continued giving orders despite his mortal wounds

a bomb short of target – but this wasn't the case. After the initial shock and the realization that we were in a mine incident, we yelled out to everyone to remain still. Not to move.”

At this stage there were 18 casualties, including the two Sappers of the Splinter Team, Phil and Dave. Despite their wounds, all of a sudden it was their responsibility to take control in the midst of the mayhem caused by the mine.

“Dave and I attended to each others wounds, then I sent Dave prodding with his bayonet to clear a safe lane towards Lt. Hines, while I prodded towards the radio to call in assistance,” recalled Phil.

Dave Sturmer still remembers the moment vividly:

“The first I knew of it was the thick smoke that passed me, and Phil pulling me to the ground telling me I was bleeding from the back of my legs. As my headphones were removed the

screams of pain from all the injured men ripped through my ears. You couldn't imagine what we were about to witness. Phil who had been covering me had been hit all up the back and legs, if not for him I would have worn the lot.

“Phil was quick to react, and we both started clearing from where we had started - back through the devastation and the path which we knew was safe.

“Our first stop was the gunner, a piece of shrapnel had pierced a smoke grenade and was burning into his back, and to add to his problems the smoke grenade was flanked by two fragment grenades. By removing the smoke grenade he calmed down and we moved on to a sight that I could not believe possible.

“The Lieutenant had been really terribly wounded by the mine but was still alive. To our amazement the Lieutenant was

still in control. This brave man not only bought calm to the wounded to his immediate front, he passed on command to a young Corporal to his rear,” recalled Dave.

Despite his own wounds, Phil's role as “No.1” kicked in like he was born to it. Phil continues the story:

“Dave and I then set about clearing safe paths to all the wounded, and then to the others. We were assisted tremendously in this task by one of the “Grunts”, Corporal John Needs who was on his second tour of Vietnam with 6RAR. John was on the easterly side of the track and set about clearing safe paths to the wounded in his area.

“Incredibly, and to their great credit, every one of the men on the ground, including all the wounded restrained their movement to minimize the chance of detonating another mine. Knowing the men were doing this made our job a lot



Sapper Dave Sturmer, the "no.2" member of the Splinter Team, seen here in 1 Troop's lines at Nui Dat. Dave was wounded in the 21st July 1969 incident, then wounded again in December the same year

easier – one less thing to worry about," said Phil.

Dave Sturmer remembers Phil Baxter helping him through it all, and telling him what to do next:

"Phil guided me as I carved a safe path to the brave Lieutenant who was still very much in command but growing weaker. When I finally reached the Lieutenant I placed my hand on his shoulder to comfort him, we spoke quietly and he passed away. I will always remember this brave man.

"Things developed from a point where time seemed to be standing still, to where everything was happening at a more urgent pace. There were wounded everywhere and everyone did their best to help each other," recalled Dave.

There were 18 casualties caused by the mine set off by Lt. Hines, and realising the wounded would be taken out by chopper, Phil set about the next task:

"Dave and I then started clearing a safe path to an area



Corporal John Needs, who helped by clearing safe lanes on the east side of the track after the first mine exploded, was tragically killed by the second mine

suitable for helicopter evacuation, and began clearing the evacuation area itself, ensuring it was clear of mines.

"With the helicopters now

able to operate, more Sappers could come in to help with the mine clearing. A Combat Engineer Team from 1 Troop led by Sapper David Wright came in, along with the Battalion CO, Lt Col David Butler and the Regimental Medical Officer (RMO) from 6RAR, Captain Robert Anderson who would assist with the seriously wounded.

"Due to the fear of rotor blade downdraft setting off more mines, the helicopters didn't land, but hovered while Dave Wright's team, the CO and the RMO were winched in and the wounded were winched out. This took time, but was the safest way to go about it.

"With Dave Wright's team of Sappers on the ground, Dave Sturmer and I were able to be evacuated to hospital to have our wounds tended to."

Unfortunately for those still on the ground at the scene, the nightmare continued.

In moving about to tend to the wounded, the RMO, Captain Anderson stepped on and detonated another M-16 mine. This mine caused another seven casualties, including the CO, Lt Col David Butler, and one KIA, Corporal John Needs, the man who had helped Baxter and Sturmer so much after the first mine exploded. Captain Anderson lost his sight in both eyes from the incident.

Both Phil Baxter and Dave Sturmer returned to 1 Troop to complete their tours after their hospitalization and recuperation. Incredibly, Dave Sturmer was wounded again, in December 1969 in an APC mine incident and evacuated home by



ABOVE: Lt. Colonel David Butler, CO of 6RAR was winched into the incident to be with his men, but was wounded by the second mine



ABOVE: Captain Robert Anderson, RMO of 6RAR (seen above on an earlier Operation, standing far left) was winched in to assist the badly wounded, but tripped the second mine

medi-vac flight.

Looking back on the July 21st incident now, Phil recalls:

"With so much going on you didn't have time to think of anything other than getting out of there without any further casualties.

"After the incident I didn't feel I'd done anything special – I was just using my skills and training to help my mates.

"I did feel washed out though, and must have looked a wreck. When Sapper Dave Wright was winched down and saw me, he recalled later that I looked mentally and physically stuffed.

"I'm not sure who nominated me for the Military Medal, I think it was either Captain Adrian Black, the Troop

Officer of 1 Troop, or Major Rex Rowe, OC 1 Field Squadron.

"I didn't hear anything about the award until I was back in Australia. The first I heard was when an aunty rang early in the morning to say she'd read about the award in the paper that morning.

"The official notification arrived later that day in the form of a telegram from the Army.

"I'm naturally proud of the award, but very aware that it was a team effort where the circumstances at that point in time enabled me to use my training and skills to direct and assist others. Avoiding panic within the men and minimizing movement were crucial to avoiding further casualties. In achieving this I received great

help from my No.2 Dave Sturmer and Corporal John Needs, who was unfortunately killed after I'd been evacuated."

After completing his two years of National Service, Phil went back to his civilian job of drafting for steel fabrication. He settled back in to this task reasonable well, but found he could not work in a cooped-up office environment. He was moved to outside tasks and was fine. After some years Phil started his own drafting business in partnership with a mate, which worked well. He is now retired, living in Campbelltown, which is ironically just 20k from SME at Casula.

Phil married a New Zealand girl (must have been all that mixing with the Kiwis in

6RAR, the Anzac Battalion!). They have three kids and four grandchildren, with another grandchild on the way.

In 1999, on the 30th Anniversary of the incident, Phil Baxter and Dave Sturmer met up with Frank Hunt (injured by the first mine that went off) at the Bega RSL for a three-day reunion. It was their first contact with anyone from the incident.

As a result of that first contact, Phil and Dave were invited to a big 6RAR Dinner (held every five years) in Queensland in 2000, where they met up with many of the 3 Platoon members.

And on 21st July 2004, Phil and Dave attended a memorial service for Lt. Peter Hines, held in his home town of Wangi Wangi, NSW. The moving service was held at the local RSL where a plaque was unveiled and Phil and Dave laid a wreath on behalf of 1 Field Squadron.

Incredibly, all surviving members of 3 Platoon, A Company 6 RAR were in attendance, enabling Phil and Dave to not only mix with them again, but to bring a level of closure on that terrible day.

This incident inspired the famous song "I was only 19"

That famous song written by John Schumann was a positive thing to come out of this tragedy.

John Schumann's brother-in-law Mike Storey was a member of 3 Platoon. The "Frankie" who "kicked the mine" was Frank Hunt, the radio operator, but he actually hadn't tripped the mine, it was Lt. Peter Hines, but at the time of writing the song it was felt this was best left unsaid.



ABOVE: Phil Baxter today, with his wife Denise and their grandson Cameron

Casualties from the two mines on 21st July 1969

Rank & Name	Unit	Age	Corp	Casualty
Lt P A Hines	6RAR	27	RAINF	KIA
Tripped the first mine				
Casualties of mine tripped by Lt. Hines				
Cpl P T Baxter	1FDSQN	24	RAE	WIA
Cpl G N Cooper	6RAR	28	RAINF	WIA#
LCpl D W Hall	6RAR	23	RAINF	WIA
Pt P C Hoskin	6RAR	22	RAINF	WIA#
Pte F J Hunt	6RAR	19	RAINF	WIA#
LCpl J Kelly	6RAR	20	RAINF	WIA#
Pte A C Lamb	6RAR	22	RAINF	WIA
Pte D J Lumby	6RAR	21	RAINF	WIA#
Pte B E McDowell	6RAR	21	RAINF	WIA
Pte M W McInnes	6RAR	20	RAINF	WIA#
Pte D J Morrison	6RAR	22	RAINF	WIA
Sgt C H Newbery	6RAR	30	RAINF	WIA
Pte C F Renehan	6RAR	22	RAINF	WIA
Pte M W Storen	6RAR	21	RAINF	WIA
Spr D L Sturmer	1FDSQN	21	RAE	WIA
Pte K C Thomas	6RAR	24	RAINF	WIA
Pte R J Walters	6RAR		RAINF	WIA#
Capt R T Anderson	6RAR	28	RAINF	WIA#
Tripped the second mine. Blinded.				
Casualties from mine tripped by Capt. Anderson				
Pte R J Ballard	6RAR	22	RAINF	WIA#
Lt Col D M Butler	6RAR	41	RAINF	WIA
Pte G C Davis	6RAR	20	RAINF	WIA#
Spr J G Fleming	1FDSQN	23	RAE	WIA
Pt J R Goslett	6RAR	20	RAINF	WIA
Cpl D J Needs	6RAR	22	RAINF	KIA
Spr W R Wilcox	1FDSQN	21	RAE	WIA#
# - Denotes Returned to Australia due to injuries				