

“Someone was going to have to enter the minefield”

Continuing our series on the five Tunnel Rats awarded the Military Medal in Vietnam, this third story covers Sapper Neil Innes and the incident at The Horseshoe which led to his award

The incident in which Neil Innes won his Military Medal took place on May 2nd 1967 during Operation Leeton – which was the laying of the barrier minefield - but it wasn't mine laying which triggered the incident, it was two men who mistakenly walked into a part of the minefield which had already been laid.

Those two men were American servicemen, serving with A Battery, 2nd Battalion, 35th Artillery Group, a unit supporting the Australians in Phuoc Tuy Province, based both at Nui Dat and at the Horseshoe Fire Support Base with their massive 155mm guns.

The two men, Sergeant Danny Hayes (who would be killed in the incident) and Private Pardo (who survived but lost a leg) were temporarily at the Horseshoe and were helping their comrades set up camp.

Sapper Neil Innes was at the Horseshoe because his Troop (1 troop) was based there while it was engaged in laying the minefield, and A Coy 6 Battalion RAR was tasked with defending the location.

On this operation there were no Mini Teams or Splinter Teams, as the entire troop was involved, with members switching on a revolving basis between the various tasks necessary in laying a minefield.

“The troop had been having problems with faulty detonators for the mines that were going to be laid in the minefield,” recalls Neil. “As a method of relieving the stress from working in the minefield, a small number of Sappers (usually two to four) would remain at the Horseshoe each day. You would spend the day checking and testing the detonators to identify any faulty ones.

“At about 11:30 in the morning a truck from the American Artillery Battery stationed at the Horseshoe, passed by our Troop location, heading towards the entrance to the Horseshoe. A short time later there was an explosion coming from the direction of the entrance - and the next thing an American soldier came running from the direction of the explosion yelling out: 'contact, contact'. Myself and two other sappers in the Troop location (Ron Forsyth and Al Hammond) grabbed our weapons and ran towards the source of the explosion. I don't know what we expected to find or do once we reached the 'contact', but when we reached the location of the explosion, what we



ABOVE: Sapper Neil Innes back in base camp at Nui Dat. RIGHT: Sapper Al “Happy” Hammond” test firing his weapon before going out on operations



found was not a 'contact' but two wounded American Gunners, one lying on the edge of the minefield, the other lying in the minefield.” “When the three of us reached the minefield, we observed one American Gunner was lying on his back in a depression in the ground next to the minefield fence, the other Gunner was in the minefield writhing about and screaming in what was obviously a great deal of pain.

“It didn't take a genius to understand that someone was going to have to enter the minefield to help the wounded guy as there was no way he was



The Horseshoe Fire Support Base, with an arrow indicating where the mine incident in which Neil Innes won his MM took place

going to be able to leave the minefield by his own efforts.”

Of the three sappers on the scene, Ron Forsyth and Al 'Happy' Hammond were, in one case married with kids and the other engaged. As Neil was single and unattached, he was volunteered by a process of elimination to enter the minefield.

“The Gunner, who we now know was Private Pardo had gone about 20 meters into the minefield,” recalls Neil. “I entered the minefield and worked my way towards him. As I didn't have a bayonet with me, I cleared my way forward by running my hands over the ground to feel for the mine prongs. As I found each mine, I marked it with scraps of hessian from sandbags.

“When the medic, David Buckwalter from A Coy 6RAR and I reached Private Pardo we found he was lying between two mines - one was near his head, the other near his waist. He was moaning and thrashing his arms about and I had visions of him setting off the mine near his waist so we stuck his hands down his pants and tightened his belt up to restrict his movements.

“The medic (who was awarded an MID for this action) hit him with an injection while I proceeded to mark a clear lane into the minefield to allow further medical aid to come forward and extract Private Pardo.

“I learnt later that the Gunner who was on

the edge of the minefield (who we now know was Sergeant Danny Hayes), tragically died from his wounds as he was being placed on the dust-off helicopter.

“I don't recall having any particular feeling at the time, I just knew that someone had to get the Gunner out of the minefield, we couldn't leave him there. I didn't think anything special had happened, I'd only done what I had been trained to do.

“If there was any effect on me at the time, it was a compelling need for a smoke and a brew - I was an extremely heavy coffee drinker and smoker back then.

“One image that sticks in my mind, is how the rest of 1 Troop had arrived back at the Horseshoe while the rescue was taking place, and how they, along with the guys from A Coy 6RAR and the American Artillery Battery stood outside the minefield like a footy crowd watching the incident unfold.

“The first I knew about the Military Medal was in Feb 1968, I had completed my National Service and was out of the Army, and one day I came home from work to be confronted by my parents demanding to know what the hell I had been up to in Vietnam as they had been receiving phone calls all afternoon from newspaper reporters and radio and television stations wanting an interview with me.

“The Government had announced to the



ABOVE: "A Battery" of the 2nd Battalion, 35th Artillery Group, had their big mobile guns at both Nui Dat and the Horseshoe. Inset is the distinctive logo of the unit



ABOVE: In the front row on the far left is US Army Sergeant Danny Hayes who was killed in the mine incident at the Horseshoe on 2nd May 1967



ABOVE: In the front row, second from the right, is US Army Private Pardo who was furthest into the minefield and lost a leg in the incident at the Horseshoe on 2nd May 1967

media that I had won the Military Medal.

"My initial reaction at the time was that as no one had raised the matter prior to my discharge in Sept 1967, that it was probably some mates from 1 Troop having a practical joke at my expense. But the phone calls continued and I started to realize that the calls were genuine.

"I had several interviews with newspapers and television and radio reporters, and the Government finally advised me by telegram later that day.

"I only found out in March last year that Lt. Joe Cazey, the Troop Officer of 1 Troop at the time had prepared the submission for the award, on the strong recommendation of Major O'Brien, the then OC of A Coy 6 RAR.

"Today, I'm proud of the award, not for my sake but for the legacy it leaves for my wife and children. My attitude to the award has changed since the Welcome Home Parade in 1987. Because of public attitude to the war in Vietnam and constant disparaging remarks ("you don't deserve the award it wasn't won in a real war" etc) made at my local RSL by old WWII diggers, I finished up throwing the medal in a drawer and forgot all about it for 20 years. I never attended any reunions or kept in contact with the guys I had served with. In that 20 years, I married, divorced and remarried and had 3 children. I just tried to wipe the whole Vietnam experience from my memory.

"When the parade was mentioned my wife convinced me I should, for my children's sake be proud of the award and should take part in the parade. I did just that and met up with some of my mates and we have been getting together on a regular basis ever since.

The written citation accompanying the Military Medal awarded to Sapper Neil Innes reads:

“On the 2nd May, 1967 during Operation LEETON, Sapper Innes was in the 1 Troop forward operational base, at a feature known as the Horseshoe. At approximately 1150 hours Sapper Innes heard an explosion in the vicinity of a minefield approximately 70 metres to the south of his own location. He immediately ran to the edge of the minefield where he saw two American Gunners lying wounded on the ground. One soldier was unconscious just outside the minefield, the other was lying in the minefield and was writhing on the ground approximately six inches from another mine.

Sapper Innes entered the



Sapper Neil Innes

minefield, held the wounded soldier firmly to prevent his movement and quietly reassured him to lie still. He then marked a clear lane into the minefield to allow medical aid to come forward.

Sapper Innes, by his immediate and courageous

action, prevented the detonation of a second mine and his swift marking of a safe lane made possible the quick evacuation of the wounded. His complete disregard for his own safety displayed a high standard of bravery that reflects great credit upon himself and his Squadron.”

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