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**NOT-SO FRIENDLY FIRE:
AN AUSTRALIAN TAXONOMY FOR
FRATRICIDE**

by

Lieutenant Colonel Robert C Stevenson

March 2006

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Lieutenant Colonel Stevenson is a graduate of the Australian Army Command and Staff College, he holds a Master of Defence Studies (UNSW) and is currently finalising a Doctorate of Philosophy (UNSW). This paper is the first in a series of three that explores the phenomenon of military fratricide from a contemporary Australian perspective. The other two papers are to be published by the Land Warfare Studies Centre later in 2006.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ABS	Able Seaman
APC	Armoured Personnel Carrier
1ATF	1st Australian Task Force, Vietnam
AWM	Australian War Memorial
CAS	Close Air Support
CSM	Command Sergeant Major
DOW	Died of Wounds
FAC	Forward Air Controller
FO	Forward Observer
FSB	Fire Support Base
HNA	Hardened and Networked Army
HQ	Headquarters
IFF	Identification Friend or Foe
KIA	Killed in Action
MC	Military Cross
NCO	Non-commissioned Officer
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
NZ	New Zealand
OC	Officer Commanding
OP	Observation Post
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
1RAR	1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment
SASR	Special Air Service Regiment
SOP	Standing Operating Procedures
UD	Unauthorised Discharge
US	United States
USAF	United States Army Force
USMC	United States Marine Corps
VC	Viet Cong
WIA	Wounded in Action

ABSTRACT

During the Vietnam War (1959–75), the euphemistic term ‘friendly fire’ was first used to describe the infliction of casualties by the military’s own forces. This paper explores this phenomenon by focusing on the Australian Army’s decade-long involvement in Vietnam (1962–72). When examined historically, evidence suggests that the problem of fratricide was more prevalent than is usually acknowledged. Part of the reason that fratricide lies hidden is obvious: no military organisation readily admits that it inflicts physical harm, even death, on its own troops. Moreover, the media and public find the concept of killing one’s own both unfathomable and unacceptable. Military organisations have thus hidden or disguised the incidence of fratricide and adopted an excessively narrow definition—one that obscures the extent and causes of the problem.

The paper contends that, based on Australia’s Vietnam experience, there are at least three different categories of fratricide. The first is accidental fratricide, which involves the active intent to kill the enemy but instead results in unforeseen and unintentional death or injury to friendly personnel. The second is military–industrial fratricide, which involves no enemy, but where the actions of friendly personnel result in death or injury to other friendly personnel. The third is calculated fratricide, which involves the active intent to kill the enemy or destroy their equipment or facilities but in a manner that consciously endangers friendly personnel. By seeing this problem as multidimensional, it is possible to demonstrate that, far from being an aberration, the infliction of fratricidal casualties by friendly fire is a constant and inevitable feature of military training and operations. As the Australian Army charts its course into the 21st century, it will have to relearn how it will deal with this thorny and enduring problem.

**Not-so Friendly Fire:
An Australian Taxonomy for Fratricide**

Lieutenant Colonel Robert C Stevenson
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There is, perhaps, no battle in modern warfare where such episodes have not occurred, for their avoidance is a problem which has so far proved insoluble.

General Sir Ian Hamilton,
Gallipoli, 1915
(on the subject of ‘friendly fire’)¹

INTRODUCTION

Unintentional slaying of soldiers by their comrades is as old as war itself. In ancient warfare, the infliction of injuries on one’s comrades usually came about as a result of the close-order formations that armies habitually adopted and the sharp hand-held weapons with which soldiers were equipped.² In Western Medieval armies, the danger from missile-throwing

¹ General Sir Ian Hamilton (General Officer Commanding the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force), letter to Vice Admiral John M de Robeck (Commanding Eastern Mediterranean Squadron), 11 September 1915, Australian War Memorial (AWM) File 45, item 2/10.

² Richard Townshend Bickers, *Friendly Fire: Accidents in Battle from Ancient Greece to the Gulf War*, Leo Cooper, London, 1994, p. 3; Geoffery Regan, *Backfire: A History of Friendly Fire from Ancient Warfare to the Present Day*, Robson Books, London, 2002, p. 3; and Geoffrey Regan, *Blue on Blue: A History of Friendly Fire*, Avon Books, New York, 1995, pp. 22–31.

longbows and crossbows added a further dimension, until gunpowder firearms gradually superseded these weapons. As combat ranges increased, opportunities for mistakes also expanded.³ By the 19th century, one French general could claim that up to 25 per cent of the French soldiers who died during the Napoleonic Wars (1805–1815) were killed in battle by friendly fire.⁴ Across the field at Waterloo, the British Army and its German allies were also subjected to a range of friendly fire incidents, including fatal accidental discharges and engagements between friendly troops mistaken for the enemy in the confusion of a smoke-shrouded battlefield.⁵ When the American states mobilised mass, civilian armies to fight their civil war, lack of control and poor coordination of forces were significant problems. This led to the accidental deaths of countless soldiers, as well as a number of key commanders shot by their own side.⁶

From the end of the 19th century, greater weapon ranges, brought about by the widespread adoption of the magazine-fed rifle, machinegun and quick-firing artillery, constituted a Revolution in Military Affairs.⁷ Paradoxically, more

³ Bickers, *Friendly Fire*, pp. 15–20; and Regan, *Blue on Blue*, pp. 32–55.

⁴ Regan, *Blue on Blue*, p. 51.

⁵ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1976, pp. 192–4 and 311–13.

⁶ The Confederacy was particularly hard hit by the death of ‘Stonewall’ Jackson, falling to a Confederate piquet line in 1863, and the severe wounding of Lee’s ‘Old War Horse’ James Longstreet in 1864. Regan, *Blue on Blue*, pp. 60–2.

⁷ ‘A military revolution typically occurs when the application of new technologies into a significant number of military systems combines with innovative operational concepts and organisational adaptation in a way that dramatically increases military effectiveness and fundamentally alters the character and conduct of military competitions’: Dr Andrew Krepinevich, ‘Introduction’,

advanced technology also provided greater opportunities for killing one's own troops in the world wars of the 20th century. Nor has the Australian Army been immune to these developments.

At Gallipoli, Australian soldiers were killed in a variety of accidents involving unauthorised discharges (UD) or by the mishandling or poor manufacture of munitions. Others were killed in patrol clashes or accidentally shot by sentries.⁸ On the Western Front, Australian infantry were constantly plagued by 'short-shooting' artillery, and their indirect-fire support was often so inaccurate that 'friendly fire' simply referred to any distant fire, 'whether "ours" or "theirs"'.⁹ During World War Two a similar range of problems occurred. Indirect-fire continued to plague the supported arms, while the widespread use of close air support (CAS) added another dimension to the problem.¹⁰ These incidents

Australian Defence Force Journal, no. 144, September/October 2000, p. 3.

⁸ See for example Charles Edwin Woodrow Bean, *The History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918, Volume I: The Story of Anzac*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 11th edition, 1941, p. 599 footnote 32.

⁹ Charles Edwin Woodrow Bean, *The History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918, Volume III: The AIF in France 1916*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, NSW, 12th edition, 1941, pp. 217, 357, 378, 380, 400–1 and 660; and John Brophy and Eric Partridge, *The Long Trial: What the British Soldier Sang and Said in The Great War*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1965, p. 124.

¹⁰ See for example Dudley McCarthy, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Series 1 (Army), Volume V: South-West Pacific Area — First Year, Kokoda to Wau*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, ACT, 1959, pp. 398 and 432; and Lex McAulay, *To the Bitter End: The Japanese Defeat at Buna and Gona 1942–43*, Random House, Milsons Point, NSW, 1992, p. 52.

continued to occur in all post-World War Two conflicts and have persisted to the present day.¹¹

The Australian Army has recognised that the character of war at the beginning of the 21st century is changing. Its keynote doctrine on complex warfighting describes an environment that is shaped by ambiguity, danger and complexity.¹² Indeed the Chief of Army's initiative to 'Harden and Network the Army' (HNA), when realised, will provide the Army with many of the means to meet these challenges.¹³ Any understanding of the future, however, can only be built upon a sound understanding of the past. In its analysis of the changes being wrought in the new century, the Army must understand what is unlikely to change. War will continue to be a contest of wills, characterised by danger, uncertainty and unpredictability. Friction and the 'fog of war' will still lead to mistakes of identity based on an incomplete understanding of

¹¹ For problems in the Korean War (1950–1953) see Robert O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War, Volume II: Combat Operations*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, ACT, 1985, pp. 98, 153 and 302. For problems in Malaya and Borneo see Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation: Australian Military Operations in Malaysia and Borneo 1950–1966*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1996, pp. 98–9, 129 and 337–8. For problems in Somalia see Bob Breen, *A Little Bit of Hope: Australian Force — Somalia*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1998, pp. 342–3.

¹² Australian Army, *Complex Warfighting*, endorsed by the Chief of Army's Senior Advisory Committee on 7 May 2004.

¹³ The Chief of Army's intent under HNA is to transition the Army from a light infantry force to a light armoured force which is better protected, more mobile, networked, harder hitting and hence more capable of undertaking the types of missions that are likely in the 21st century. See Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, 'A Land Force in the Early 21st Century', *Australian Army Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, June 2003, pp. 19–28.

the situation. Fratricide will still lurk on the future battlefield and the best armour against this threat is a realistic understanding of the problem. This can only occur through the systematic analysis of what has happened in the past.

This paper explores the Australian Army's experience of fratricide during its decade-long commitment in Vietnam. The Vietnam War was selected as a vehicle to examine this phenomenon for three reasons.

Firstly, the Vietnam conflict is the only Australian conflict where the incidence of fratricide has been studied in any systematic way. Using the analysis of Andrew Ross and Robert Hall¹⁴ and other primary and anecdotal evidence, it is possible to make an assessment as to the prevalence of the fratricide problem in its various guises.

Secondly, Australia's experience in the Vietnam War displays many of the characteristics that contemporary analysts suggest have come to dominate the battlespace of the 21st century. Vietnam was a conflict fought by a 'coalition of the willing' where the 'Free World Forces' were pitted against a domestic insurgency as well as foreign-supported and externally-based conventional foes. Operations in Vietnam were often joint and they extended from one end of the conflict spectrum to the other, from mid-intensity conventional operations through to low-intensity counter-insurgency. The battlefields of South-East Asia were characterised by low troop-to-space ratios in complex terrain; battles were often fought by combined arms teams, and

¹⁴ Robert Hall and Andrew Ross, 'Lessons From Vietnam — Friendly Fire in Low Level Warfare', in Vinod Puri, Despina Filippidis and Brigadier Steve Quinn (eds), *Land Warfare Conference 2002 Proceedings*, Defence Science & Technology Organisation, Edinburgh, South Australia, October 2002.

enemy forces sought to minimise their opponent's superior firepower by hiding among non-combatants or 'hugging' enemy forces. The media played an increasingly intrusive role, not simply as an observer, but rather as a shaper of public opinion about the war effort.

Thirdly, Australia's war in Vietnam extended over a decade from 1962–1972, and as operations were often joint or combined, this also provides the opportunity to compare and contrast events.

These factors suggest that the lessons from Vietnam may serve as a useful predictor for the contemporary Australian Army as it explores how to deal with fratricide in the future.¹⁵

The purpose of this paper is to examine the Australian Army's experience of fratricide during the Vietnam War, and to use this experience to suggest a taxonomy for fratricide that assists the HNA effort. To achieve the aim, the paper is structured in three sections. The first defines what is meant by the terms 'fratricide' and 'friendly fire'. This provides the foundations for the second section, which explores the various types of fratricide incidents as they occurred in

¹⁵ While ground forces have most often been the victims and perpetrators of friendly fire in the recent past, it should be noted that naval and air forces have also been the subject of fratricide. Incidents of friendly fire at sea and in the air have been declining over the past 50 years due to the introduction of electronic Identification Friend or Foe (IFF) systems, but these systems have not eradicated fratricide and (more tellingly) Western air and maritime forces have rarely been challenged by a similar force since World War Two. For the extensive problem of maritime fratricide during World War Two see Paul Kemp, *Friend or Foe: Friendly Fire at Sea 1939–1945*, Leo Cooper, London, 1995.

Vietnam. The final section summarises this experience and analysis it to suggest a possible Australian taxonomy for the fratricide phenomenon.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

The Vietnam War was Australia's longest and most costly post-World War Two conflict. However, the Australian Army continued to build upon its reputation for professionalism. It would come as a surprise to many that the problem of fratricide was a significant issue during this war and, according to one study, it 'was an endemic part of the 1ATF's [1st Australian Task Force, Vietnam] approach to Counter Revolutionary (or Low Level) warfare in South Vietnam, despite well designed, and well practiced, training to avoid such incidents'.¹⁶ The problem was so pervasive that the second volume of the Australian official history of combat operations in Vietnam includes an eight-page section dedicated to fratricide incidents during just two years of the conflict.¹⁷ In another study of one battalion's 12-month tour, a complete chapter is dedicated to the problem of friendly fire.¹⁸ Clearly, fratricide was just as significant an issue in Vietnam as it was in earlier and subsequent conflicts, but to discover just how significant, we must define the issue. At this juncture we need to ask, 'What type of incident should be classified as friendly fire?'

¹⁶ Hall and Ross, 'Lessons From Vietnam — Friendly Fire in Low Level Warfare', p. 107.

¹⁷ Ian McNeill and Ashley Ekins, *The Official History of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948–1975, On the Offensive: The Australian Army in the Vietnam War 1967–1968*, Allen and Unwin in association with the AWM, Crows Nest, NSW, 2003, pp. 80–8. Hereafter referred to as *On the Offensive*.

¹⁸ Robert A Hall, *Combat Battalion: The Eighth Battalion in Vietnam*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 2000, pp. 174–96.

A significant part of the problem of ‘friendly fire’ and ‘fratricide’ is a matter of terminology. ‘Friendly fire’ is the most common term for the accidental infliction of casualties on one’s own side, but it is a term that achieved widespread usage only following the Vietnam War and with the publication in 1976 of Courtlandt Bryan’s book of that name.¹⁹ The incidence of friendly fire in Vietnam also led to the facetious term ‘incontinent ordnance delivery’. Veterans of this conflict could be forgiven for thinking that this was something of a new phenomenon.²⁰ To describe the effects of friendly fire, Western armies also adopted another term of even older origin: ‘fratricide’. Fratricide refers literally to ‘the act of killing one’s brother’.²¹ This term may have been appropriate when armies were the exclusive domains of males, but all contemporary Western armies have significant proportions of female personnel. Women are being killed in combat. More recently, additional terms have been coined in

¹⁹ Bryan’s book describes the death of an American soldier from an accidental US artillery strike on an infantry night defensive position. The dead soldier’s parents were advised by telegram that their son had been killed when ‘artillery fire from friendly forces landed on the area’. Courtlandt Bryan, *Friendly Fire*, GP Putnam’s Sons, New York, 1976, p. 51.

²⁰ The term ‘friendly wounds’, however, was used to describe the ‘accidental wounding of an American or allied soldier from friendly fire’ or any ‘wounds not inflicted by enemy operated weapons’. Gregory R Clark, *Words of the Vietnam War: The Slang, Jargon, Abbreviations, Acronyms, Nomenclature, Nicknames, Pseudonyms, Slogans, Specs, Euphemisms, Double-talk, Chants, and Names and Places of the Era of the United States Involvement in Vietnam*, McFarland, Jefferson, North Carolina, 1990, p. 190. Also see Linda Reinberg, *In the Field: The Language of the Vietnam War*, Facts on File, New York, 1991, p. 89.

²¹ *The Macquarie Concise Dictionary*, Macquarie Library, St Leonards, NSW, 2nd edition, 1988, p. 380.

the attempt to overcome any ambiguity in describing the problem and its effects.

The term ‘friendly fire’ is in many respects an oxymoron since the effects are neither ‘friendly’ nor from an ‘enemy’. In absolute terms, friendly fire is deadly and careless. It can have the same effect as carefully considered enemy fire. To refine the problem, the more recent term ‘blue on blue’ has gained some acceptance within Western militaries to describe ‘an incident where friendly forces fire on their own troops or vehicles by mistake’.²² To describe the effects of such incidents, Charles Shrader devised the neologism ‘amicicide’, to refer to the killing of one’s friends.²³ This term, however, has not achieved wide acceptance. For the purposes of this paper, ‘fratricide’ will be used to describe all friendly military fatalities, male and female, which result from what will still be termed ‘friendly fire’. Even so, ‘fratricide’ remains a rather imprecise term since it can cover a broad range of circumstances. Accordingly, the Australian Army must decide what specific casualties are to be considered fratricide and the circumstances in which they are to be considered the result of friendly fire.

Perhaps because of this definitional ambiguity, the Australian Army does not have an authorised definition for fratricide. The US Army, however, defines fratricide as ‘the employment of friendly weapons and munitions with intent to kill the enemy or destroy his equipment or facilities that results in the unforeseen and unintentional death or injury to

²² Richard Bowyer, *Dictionary of Military Terms*, Peter Collin Publishing, Teddington, 1999, p. 23.

²³ Charles R Shrader, *Amicide: The Problem of Friendly Fire in Modern War*, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1982, p. viii; and Bowyer, *Dictionary of Military Terms*, p. 85.

friendly personnel'.²⁴ This definition provides an adequate starting point, but its inherent restriction excludes other forms of fratricide, thus disguising the extent of the problem. If one accepts that fratricide is the killing of one's own troops with friendly fire, it is possible, without stretching this definition too far, to include all unintentional friendly casualties caused by friendly forces weapon's effects. This would include fatal incidents resulting from faulty munitions, training accidents, or the careless handling of weapons, even if these do not occur in the presence of the enemy. The other limitation of the current United States Army definition is that it only considers incidents involving the 'accidental' killing or injuring of our own troops. If taken literally, fratricide could also include more 'calculated' acts. This would then encompass those events where the likelihood of fratricide might have been foreseen, but military necessity demanded the risk be accepted. This may appear to be stretching the definition, but including these types of occurrences helps to focus attention on the wider problem of military force, weapons and the inherent danger of all military activity.

FRATRICIDE IN NON-LINEAR, COMPLEX WARFIGHTING

Charles Shrader's 1982 study of amicicide in modern conflicts was one of the first serious explorations of the problem of fratricide.²⁵ By his calculations friendly fire, on

²⁴ General Officer Steering Committee, 17 December 1991, quoted in Colonel Dwight B Dickson and Captain Elrin L Hundley, 'Avoiding Not-so Friendly Fire', *Military Review*, vol. LXXII, no. 7, July 1992, p. 57.

²⁵ More recent studies include Ralph D Nichols, 'Avoid the Blues', Center for Army Lessons Learned, <http://www.defesanet.com.br/docs/AvoidtheBlues.pdf> (cited 23

average, has accounted for only about two per cent of casualties in most modern conflicts.²⁶ This appears to be supported by official United States figures for fratricide in Vietnam, which classified as fratricide only 1326 deaths out of a total of 46 397 Americans killed in action (KIA)—in other words just under three per cent.²⁷ There is, however, evidence to suggest that the number of casualties attributed to fratricide in Vietnam may have been significantly under-reported. Those identified as killed or wounded by friendly fire were officially excluded from the definition of KIA or wounded in action (WIA). However, some fratricide may have been reported this way.²⁸ In fact, veteran David Hackworth estimated that between fifteen to twenty per cent of American deaths in Vietnam were due to fratricide.²⁹ So, if accidental fratricide was such a common problem, why is

August 2005); and United States Congress, Office of Technology Assessment — Information Systems Command 537, ‘Who Goes There: Friend or Foe?’, US Government Printing Service, Washington, DC, June 1993.

²⁶ Shrader, *Amicide*, pp. xi–xii.

²⁷ Captain Floyd J Usry, ‘Stop Killing Each Other!’, *Marine Corps Gazette*, vol. 76, no. 9, September 1992, pp. 39–40. Other sources quote slightly different casualty figures, for example Richard Holmes states: ‘In Vietnam 41 853 Americans were killed in ground actions, but another 5540 died from non-battle injuries. Just over a thousand of these died in vehicle crashes, and almost as many were drowned or suffocated. Negligent discharges and accidental engagements contributed 846 deaths from “accidental self-destruction” and another 939 “accidental homicides”.’ Richard Holmes, *Firing Line*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1985, p. 191.

²⁸ All US casualties from friendly fire were supposed to be considered the result of non-hostile action so that they should not have been included in the KIA and WIA figures but it is commonly accepted that friendly fire incidents were ‘not uncommon’. Clark, *Words of the Vietnam War*, pp. 190, 264 and 562–3.

²⁹ David H Hackworth, *About Face*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1989, p. 594.

there such a large discrepancy between official figures and those held by veterans to be closer to the truth? Aside from the issue of definition, one reason for the discrepancy may lie with the difficulty of identifying specific friendly fire casualties where contacts often occurred at close range and involved both discriminate and indiscriminate direct and indirect fire, including CAS. A second reason is the recurring tendency of the military and civil authorities to disguise friendly fire casualties in order to protect the relatives of the soldiers involved, the reputation of the military, and to avoid political embarrassment for the government.

Five hundred Australian service personnel died as a result of the nation's involvement in the Vietnam conflict, the overwhelming majority of these were soldiers.³⁰ Of the Army's 478 fatalities, 414 were classified as fatal battle casualties, while 64 (13 per cent) were classified as non-battle fatal casualties. This does not help to identify those who were victims of fratricide. Of the 414 deaths in battle, 385 were classified as a result of enemy action, while 28 were accidentally killed or died of injuries or illness, and one drowned.³¹ On these calculations, nearly seven per cent of Australian Army deaths in Vietnam were some form of fratricide, although this must be considered an under-representation because a proportion of the KIA and died of

³⁰ The 500 Australian fatalities were: Royal Australian Navy (RAN) 8, Army 478, and Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) 14. Non-fatal casualties were: RAN 48, Army 3025, and RAAF 56. Ian McNeill, *The Official History of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948–1975, To Long Tan: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War 1950–1966*, Allen and Unwin in association with the AWM, Crows Nest, NSW, 1993, Appendix F, p. 480. Hereafter referred to as *To Long Tan*.

³¹ McNeill, *To Long Tan*, Appendix F, p. 480; and McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, Appendix F, p. 477.

wounds (DOW) were undoubtedly fratricide cases despite not being recorded as such.³² Of the 2348 non-fatal battle casualties, 322 (13.7 per cent) were accidentally wounded or injured in action. Based on these broad, albeit imprecise, calculations, a reasonable estimate would place accidental friendly fire casualties for the Australian Army in Vietnam at around 10 per cent of total casualties.³³ Of the non-battle casualties, including 64 fatalities and 677 non-fatal casualties, a proportion must also have been the result of friendly fire. A number of the fatalities are known to have been fratricide, but with the limited evidence available, a more accurate estimate is not possible. What is clear, however, is that fratricide in Vietnam was a significant issue. This prompts the question, ‘What types of incidents led to these friendly fire casualties?’³⁴

³² Robert Hall identifies at least two soldiers of 8RAR who were deemed KIA but who were probably the victims of friendly fire. It is highly probable that other units had similar occurrences. Hall, *Combat Battalion*, p. 193.

³³ This estimate tentatively supports Hall and Ross who identified at least 200 casualties suffered by the 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF) could be attributed to accidental friendly fire. Based on their research at least 7.2 per cent of Australian battle casualties can be attributed to friendly fire, but their research does not cover non-battle friendly fire casualties and there is also the problem of those casualties classified as KIA or DOW, who are ‘hidden’ fratricide victims. Hall and Ross, ‘Lessons From Vietnam — Friendly Fire in Low Level Warfare’, p. 108.

³⁴ Although this study deals primarily with Army fratricide, the RAN and RAAF both suffered friendly fire casualties. Fratricide in the RAAF was significantly higher than that in the Army. Of the 14 fatalities suffered by the RAAF in Vietnam two were due to accidental shooting. One RAAF wing commander admitted that ‘The closest I came to actually being shot was in the crew room. I was just going flying and a crew had come back and one bloke was cleaning his 9mm pistol and it went bang beside me on the floor. He went white and stammered, “I’m sorry Sir”, and then another

FRATRICIDE AS AN ACCIDENT

Robert Hall and Andrew Ross have undertaken a study into 91 identifiable Australian accidental fratricide incidents during the Vietnam conflict. Their research reveals that the majority (58 per cent) involved clashes between infantrymen, and these incidents accounted for just under half of the 200 identified casualties, both killed and wounded. The average loss rate in each of these incidents was less than two casualties per incident.³⁵ The second most common cause of friendly fire casualties was artillery, which was involved in nearly one third (29.7 per cent) of all incidents and contributed over a third of the casualties with an average of

went off next to my foot.’ Wing Commander David Evans quoted in Gary McKay, *Vietnam Fragments: An Oral History of Australians at War*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1992, p. 167. In the RAN, one Able Seaman (ABS) recalled how one young member of his ship’s crew had obtained a grenade as a souvenir and had attempted to dismantle it only to be killed. ABS Neil McInnes quoted in *Vietnam Fragments*, p. 195. It should also be remembered that the USS *Boston* and HMAS *Hobart* were mistakenly attacked by F-4 Phantom aircraft in June 1967 and Australian losses in this attack amounted to two fatalities and seven wounded. Jeffrey Grey, *The Official History of Australia’s Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948–1975, Up Top: The Royal Australian Navy and Southeast Asian Conflicts 1955–1972*, Allen and Unwin in association with the AWM, St Leonards, NSW, 1998, pp. 175–9.

³⁵ Hall and Ross in ‘Lessons From Vietnam — Friendly Fire in Low Level Warfare’, p. 108, identified that the main cause in 53 out of 91 incidents were infantry clashes and the total number of casualties in these incidents was 87 out of a total of 200 friendly fire casualties. This provided an average of 1.6 casualties per incident.

nearly three casualties per incident.³⁶ Armour and aircraft were both involved in far fewer incidents (armour 6.6 per cent and aircraft 5.5 per cent) and they each only contributed about 10 per cent to the friendly fire casualty total. Each, however, had a higher average casualty rate per incident, with armour on par with the artillery while aircraft offered the greatest opportunity for multiple casualties.³⁷ This analysis confirms historical trends whereby dismounted troops are more likely to be the prime cause of friendly fire incidents and more vulnerable to its effects. Artillery, because it provides intimate support to dismounted troops, still remains a significant contributor. Armour and aircraft are responsible for fewer incidents, but when they are involved, the loss rate is likely to be significantly higher and so these incidents are more likely to attract attention.

Aircraft

The most widely reported fratricide incidents in Vietnam were those involving aircraft. When the Australian Army committed its first combat troops to Vietnam in 1965, it had already been continuously committed to counterinsurgency operations in Malaya and Borneo for most of the 1950s and early 1960s. However, it had been more than a decade since

³⁶ There were 27 out of 91 incidents attributed to artillery and these resulted in 76 out of 200 friendly fire casualties, giving an average casualty rate of 2.8 per incident. Hall and Ross, 'Lessons From Vietnam — Friendly Fire in Low Level Warfare', p. 108.

³⁷ Armour accounted for six of the 91 incidents while aircraft were involved in five of 91. The total casualties caused in the aircraft incidents was 20 (10 per cent of friendly fire casualties), while armour incidents accounted for 17 casualties (8.5 per cent of friendly fire casualties). This results in an average loss rate per incident for aircraft of four casualties while armour incidents suffered an average of 2.8 casualties. Hall and Ross, 'Lessons From Vietnam — Friendly Fire in Low Level Warfare', p. 108.

the Australian Army had fought its last conventional conflict in Korea and 20 years since it had engaged in large-scale joint operations at the end of World War Two. Although there were some initial problems, the techniques for coordinating air support with ground forces were highly advanced. Forward Air Controllers (FACs)—in slow, light aircraft, especially equipped with radios for communicating with the supported arm and the pilots of the attacking aircraft and smoke rockets for marking targets—coordinated and controlled the attacking aircraft and directed them onto the targets.³⁸ The supported troops helped by marking their positions with coloured smoke. Even with these specialised organisations and procedures, the supported troops could still be at risk.

Three years into the Australian commitment, in September 1968, C Company 4RAR was involved in one of the more serious air-to-ground friendly fire incidents concerning Australian troops. This accident occurred when a pair of 7th United States Air Force (USAF) F-100 jets—being directed by an FAC—were cleared to expend their ordnance on a Viet Cong (VC) base camp. Although the FAC and F-100 pilots were experienced in CAS procedures, the attacking aircraft failed to positively identify their target and its position in relation to the closest Australian troops. The use of smoke to mark both the target and the friendly positions also led to some confusion. Furthermore, the FAC directing the strike was not in communication with the

³⁸ See Chris Coulthard-Clark, *Hit My Smoke!: Targeting the Enemy in Vietnam*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1997; and Chris Coulthard-Clark, *The Official History of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948–1975, The RAAF in Vietnam: Australian Air Involvement in the Vietnam War 1962–1975*, Allen and Unwin in association with the AWM, St Leonards, NSW, 1995. Hereafter referred to as *The RAAF in Vietnam*.

Australian ground commander. Although the nearest Australian troops were more than a kilometre from the target, a change in the direction of approach by the aircraft resulted in the aircraft accidentally engaging the Australians with 20 mm cannon fire, causing 14 casualties, including one seriously wounded (fortunately there were no fatalities).³⁹ Nor was it only 'fast-movers' that had difficulty in differentiating between friendly and enemy positions in close country.

In June 1969, a Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) helicopter light fire team was called in to support V Company, a New Zealand (NZ) sub-unit of 6RAR, which was in heavy contact just north of the border between the Phuoc Tuy and Long Khanh provinces. After supporting the New Zealanders, a 'Bushranger' gunship spotted a group of seven men about 850 metres from the identified friendly troops. Not realising that there were other friendlies in the area, the behaviour of the figures made it appear to one of the door gunners that they were 'fleeing' and so he concluded that they must be the enemy. The helicopter engaged the fleeing troops, wounding three Australian soldiers before it could be ordered to cease-fire. Although the gunship crew had failed to obtain positive identification before firing, as required by the Rules of Engagement, they were not completely to blame. The ground commander should have advised the aircraft that there were other friendlies in the

³⁹ As a result of this incident the 7th USAF recommended a number of changes to their procedures when providing CAS. In particular, the use of smoke was to be used only as a secondary method of marking friendly ground troops. The ground commander in the immediate area of an airstrike was to maintain direct communications with the FAC controlling the strike and it was his responsibility to give the final clearance to strike the target. AWM305, R723/1/111.

area, but failed to do so.⁴⁰ In the ensuing investigation, the commanding officer of the squadron offered suggestions on how to avoid similar incidents in the future. In his opinion, the friendly troops on the ground should avoid giving the impression that they were trying to flee or hide and:

They should, if possible, face the oncoming helicopter, remove and hold their headgear at arms length with the other arm also extended. Where it is necessary that they go to ground for fear of enemy fire a suitable posture to adopt could be to lie completely spread-eagled.⁴¹

While this officer recognised that these suggestions had ‘tactical disadvantages’, they were hardly practical. Helicopter gunship support, for example, was usually requested when infantry units were in contact. As most contacts occurred at a range of less than 20 metres, facing the helicopter or laying ‘spread-eagled’ on the ground was not a realistic option. These incidents demonstrate that, for all of the doctrine and joint procedures, there remains the significant difference of perception between those flying above the ground and those fighting over it.⁴² More

⁴⁰ Coulthard-Clark, *The RAAF in Vietnam*, pp. 172–3.

⁴¹ Wing Commander RW Hibben (CO 9 Squadron), ‘Statement by Commanding Officer No 9 Squadron RAAF’ included in Brigadier CMI Pearson, Investigation ‘Engagement of 2 Pl A Coy 6RAR by Light Fire Team (RAAF) on 17 Jun 69’, 28 June 1969, AWM103, R478-1-47.

⁴² In the case of 8RAR, the majority of its engagements were completed in 10 minutes or less and at ranges of less than 20 metres. Hall, *Combat Battalion*, p. 105. Similarly, most contacts in bunker systems occurred at particularly close ranges, mostly between two and 20 metres. Australian Army, ‘Infantry Battalion Lessons from Vietnam’, Infantry Centre, Singleton, NSW, 1972, p. 36.

constructively, this incident did lead to a number of changes to the 1ATF Standard Operating Procedures.⁴³

Artillery

The second most dangerous form of friendly fire in Vietnam was indirect-fire support. Incidents of accidental fratricide involving artillery occurred from the first deployment of combat troops in 1965, when 1RAR and 161 Field Battery (NZ) joined the US 173rd Airborne Brigade. In one of the earliest incidents, in January 1966, two rounds from the NZ battery inexplicably fell among a US company, killing three paratroopers and wounding seven. After the matter was investigated, it was concluded that the two erratic rounds from the eight-round mission had malfunctioned because of ‘damp powder, cold tube or climatic conditions’.⁴⁴ In another incident, in July 1966, an errant artillery round landed among an Australian company approximately one kilometre from the target and not in the line of fire. Fortunately, there were no fatalities and only four Australian wounded, but these casualties included the officer commanding (OC) and three of his headquarters (HQ) signallers.⁴⁵ Whatever the cause, the loss of comrades to friendly fire came at a high physical and psychological cost, especially when a coalition partner caused it.

One of the worst single cases of indirect accidental fratricide during Vietnam left four dead and 13 wounded. This incident occurred in February 1967, when NZ artillery was supporting Australian infantry, and a defective plotter led to a number of

⁴³ Brigadier CMI Pearson, ‘1 ATF SOP Amendment No 11’, 10 July 1969, AWM103, R478-1-47.

⁴⁴ Bob Breen, *First to Fight: Australian Diggers, NZ Kiwis and US Paratroopers in Vietnam, 1965–66*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1988, p. 173.

⁴⁵ McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p. 281.

rounds impacting among the Australians. Killed in this incident was Warrant Officer Class 2 'Jack' Kirby, who had been awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his conduct during the Battle of Long Tan just six months earlier.⁴⁶ Three years later, on 3 July 1970, the Army announced that 41 Australians had been accidentally killed and 238 wounded in Vietnam over the previous four years.⁴⁷ Tragically, within three weeks NZ field guns accidentally shelled an Australian platoon, killing two and wounding another four soldiers. Similar accidents also occurred with Australian artillery, and on 4 November 1968, an Australian battery accidentally wounded four Australian soldiers.⁴⁸ While artillery and aircraft may have been responsible for a number of the major incidents of fratricide, there was also a steady stream of direct-fire fratricide cases.

Clashing patrols

In the jungles of Vietnam it was more often the case that the infantry were the instrument of their own fratricide. Movement in close country or at night was always very difficult and tiring, and when troops became disorientated, the results were often tragic. In one typical incident, a soldier with the 1ATF Logistic Company was undertaking the relatively simple task of moving from one flank of his section to the opposite flank, but at night and in rain he lost his way. He accidentally moved outside the perimeter and attempted to re-enter the position from in front of the sentry group. Although challenged, he apparently failed to hear this. He

⁴⁶ Ashley Ekins, 'Death Due to Friendly Fire: The Life and Death of WO Jack Kirby', *Wartime*, Issue 21, p. 37.

⁴⁷ W Max Chamberlain, 'The Digger in Asia', *Sabretache: The Journal and Proceedings of the Military Historical Society of Australia*, vol. 33, no. 4, October–December 1992, p. 41.

⁴⁸ Chamberlain, 'The Digger in Asia', p. 37.

was shot at close range and killed.⁴⁹ Nor was it only relatively inexperienced service corps soldiers who were vulnerable.

Nearly five years later, in March 1971, during 2RAR's second tour, a veteran infantry non-commissioned officer (NCO) met a similar fate. After an afternoon contact, a platoon from B Company harboured for the night near the banks of the Suoi Soc River. At first light, the platoon sergeant, Tom Birnie, led a small patrol across the stream to reconnoitre to the east of the platoon's night position. It was expected that he and his patrol would rejoin the platoon by returning along the same route. In the course of the patrol, Birnie found signs of the enemy crossing the stream and, after seeking permission from the platoon commander, he followed this track and crossed the stream. After a short distance, he and the patrol came under fire, and the sergeant was seriously wounded. Unbeknown to Birnie, the stream followed a circular path around the platoon's position and the patrol had actually approached their own troops from the opposite direction. One of the sentries, not expecting movement from this direction, assumed that it was enemy and opened fire.⁵⁰

Gary McKay, a platoon commander with D Company 4RAR, on that battalion's second tour of Vietnam, offers another description of typical patrol clash when both parties are moving. In September 1971, McKay was part of a company-size operation in thick jungle in the Phuoc Tuy province.

⁴⁹ 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF), 1ATF signal OPS656 to Aust Force Vietnam, 170145ZJun1966, AWM98, item 682.

⁵⁰ Although Sergeant Birnie was quickly evacuated, he later died. John M Church, *Second to None: 2RAR as the ANZAC Battalion in Vietnam, 1970–71*, Army Doctrine Centre, Mosman, NSW, 1995, p. 131.

While out on patrol, McKay received a warning order from his company HQ that he could expect to encounter enemy troops in force within a kilometre of his position. He issued a verbal warning to his platoon before moving off. The platoon had gone no more than 150 metres when firing broke out at the front of the file. McKay called out 'contact front' to his platoon signaller so he could inform the OC, but was surprised when the signaller replied that their neighbouring platoon (10 Platoon) had already reported that they were also in contact. In McKay's words:

My mouth went dry and my heart skipped a beat as it struck me what was happening. I sprinted forward screaming out for everyone else to cease firing and came up level with my forward scout... One of the 10 Platoon soldiers had been hit with a bullet in the head; the other had been lightly creased in the area of his scrotum ...⁵¹

McKay's example emphasises the problems of coordination between even small, well-trained units in restricted terrain.

Unlike previous conflicts, where there was little public scrutiny or understanding of the problem of fratricide, during the Vietnam War these incidents were often widely reported, highly sensitive and they quickly became a political issue. As early as May 1966, the death of Australia's first national serviceman in Vietnam, Private Errol Noack (5RAR), had caused a sharp but brief reaction in Australia. As the Australian official historian records:

Noack had not been pleased when he had learned that the ballot had selected him for national service but, like most conscripts, he had obeyed the call and gone quietly into the

⁵¹ Gary McKay, *In Good Company: One Man's War in Vietnam*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1987, pp. 142–3.

Army. His uncle said, 'If there's one thing we don't want, it's any political propaganda being made out of Errol's death', but that wish was disregarded in Holt's and Calwell's rush to issue statements. Holt said that the Government had acted in 'Australia's highest national interests'. Calwell asserted that the Liberal and Country Parties and their DLP allies shared a terrible responsibility, but that the ALP was 'free of the blame for any casualties'.⁵²

At the time of his death it was widely believed within 5RAR that his comrades had accidentally shot Noack when a VC unit got between two Australian companies. They believed that Noack was killed either by VC fire or the crossfire between the two Australian sub-units.⁵³ The official historian believed that, on the weight of the evidence, the latter was more probable, noting:

The newly-arrived battalion was finding navigation in the Nui Dat area unexpectedly difficult and the two companies had come closer to each other than they had realised. They were operated under standing instructions to communicate

⁵² Peter Edwards, *The Official History of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948–1975, A Nation at War: Australian Politics, Society and Diplomacy during the Vietnam War 1965–1975*, Allen and Unwin in association with the AWM, St Leonards, NSW, 1997, p. 124. Hereafter referred to as *A Nation at War*.

⁵³ This conclusion is supported by the evidence in the first volume of the official history dealing with combat operations that quotes the after-action report of OC B Company 5RAR, who had deployed a listening post between his company and A Company when: 'The next thing we knew A Company was firing on our listening post ... One member of our listening post, Private Errol Noack, happened to stand up at the time. He was struck by a bullet and was seriously wounded.' Noack died three hours later at the 36th (US) Evacuation Hospital at Vung Tau. McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p. 247.

not with each other directly but with battalion headquarters. Noack was shot at 6.25 pm, at the end of a tense day of extreme, enervating heat when both companies were expecting renewed contact with the enemy.

The battalion's officers were immediately made aware of the high political importance attached to Noack's death, but the pressures now exerted by and on political and military authorities were not conducive to frank and honest assessments. After a flurry of messages between Nui Dat, Saigon and Canberra the task force commander, Brigadier OD Jackson, sent a short signal to Canberra, saying that after visiting the battalion and interviewing officers and non-commissioned officers he was satisfied that Noack had been killed by Viet Cong fire. The strong suspicions to the contrary held by many in the battalion did not become public in Australia until long afterwards.⁵⁴

Errol Noack's death certainly has all of the hallmarks of classic accidental fratricide. The newly arrived troops were operating in complex terrain, which made navigation and command and control difficult, and they were fatigued and expecting to encounter the enemy. When they did see a briefly visible target, they may have either mistaken other Australian troops for the enemy or indeed they may have inadvertently hit one of their own in an exchange with a fleeting VC force. The truth, regardless which version is correct, is that Errol Noack was as much a casualty of war as any other Australian soldier KIA in Vietnam. The problem then, and now, is that the public and press are generally ignorant as to the realities of combat, and, in a time of war, the matter becomes so emotionally and politically charged that the truth inevitably becomes casualty.

⁵⁴ Edwards, *A Nation at War*, p. 125.

Land mines

The Vietnam War also brought to the forefront another persistent agent of modern fratricide: the land mine. Australian losses to mines in Vietnam were significant. A high proportion of these resulted from Australian or other 'friendly' mines, which had either been lifted by the enemy, or whose location had not been correctly marked. In one particular incident, the blast from a mine that was probably laid by South Vietnamese forces devastated C Company, 5RAR, during Operation BEAUMARIS in February 1967. During this operation 5RAR was conducting a cordon-and-search of the village of An Nhut. The battalion had been advised that there was a danger from mines laid around the village in a protective minefield, but the locations of the mines had not been recorded. Therefore, the only guarantee of safety was for the troops to remain outside the perimeter fence until the area was checked. C Company had reached their cordon position and a quick search of the area found no mines or booby-traps. The OC of the company conducted a final orders group around the old village perimeter fence. At the conclusion of the briefing, as the participants were dispersing, a member of the company tripped a mine. The resulting explosion killed three and wounded five.⁵⁵

The laying and maintenance of minefields is a complicated and exacting task. Mistakes by those establishing the minefield can have immediate and long-term consequences for friendly troops. In early 1967, the Australian task force commander made the decision to lay a barrier minefield in

⁵⁵ Among those killed were the OC, the second-in-command and the NZ forward observer (FO). Elizabeth Stewart, 'Tragedy at An Nhut', *Wartime: Official Magazine of the Australian War Memorial*, Issue 27, pp. 38–41; and McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 121.

the southern region of Phuoc Tuy province, designed to prevent VC infiltration into province villages and deny them access to food, medicines and recruits. This minefield eventually held more than 20 000 mines, mostly American designed M-16 'jumping-jack' anti-personnel mines. More than half of the mines were fitted with anti-handling devices to prevent the VC 'lifting' them for re-use. The task of laying the minefield was given to the 1st Field Squadron; the sappers completed the task under trying conditions in less than a month. During this process the squadron suffered five killed and eight wounded.

The laying of the barrier minefield was, and remains, a controversial decision. Many of these Australian-laid mines were later used against Australian troops. The size of the minefield, and the limited resources of 1ATF, made it difficult to keep under observation and patrolled in accordance with established doctrine. In addition, the South Vietnamese forces patrolling one side of the minefield proved unable to do so effectively, and VC sappers re-entered the minefield at night, lifting mines and re-using a large number. It is probable that these mines killed a number of Australians over the next few years. Although the decision to lay the barrier minefield may have been flawed, these Australian deaths cannot be considered as fratricide. In all wars belligerents use and re-use an opponent's weapons and munitions either by choice or necessity. Mines and improvised explosive devices have often been the insurgent's weapons of choice.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ For a detailed discussion of the controversy surrounding the decision to lay the barrier minefield, the problems with laying it, the problems it caused for 1ATF see Brigadier PJ Greville, *The Royal Australian Engineers 1945–1972, Paving the Way*, The Corps Committee of the Royal Australian Engineers, Moorebank,

Statistics

Although Australian histories of the Vietnam War prefer to contrast the professionalism of the smaller Australian commitment with that of its larger American and South Vietnamese allies, it is clear that fratricide was a regular and unfortunate feature of Australian operations. During the 8RAR's tour of South Vietnam during 1969–1970, 21 per cent of its total accidents related to weapons use. Of the battalion's 18 battle fatalities, four were fratricide, more than the number of battalion deaths attributed to enemy small-arms fire.⁵⁷ Even in the Special Air Service Regiment (SASR), the tempo of operations and the stress of patrolling led to a number of cases of fratricide. The SASR only suffered seven fatalities during its involvement in the Vietnam War. Of these deaths, one was KIA, one DOW, two were accidentally shot while on patrol, one died as a result of a grenade accident, one is believed to have died as a result of a fall during the extraction of a patrol, and one died of illness.⁵⁸ Thus, of seven SASR deaths in Vietnam, only two were the result of direct enemy action, while an equal number were the result of accidental friendly fire. In the same period, the SASR earned a reputation for professionalism by providing vital information through their reconnaissance efforts and for attacking enemy targets of opportunity.⁵⁹ What their record suggests is that even the best

NSW, 2002, pp. 762–783; and McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, especially Chapter 4, pp. 127–145.

⁵⁷ The majority of 8RAR's battle fatalities were due to mines, as were about a quarter of their non-fatal battle casualties. Hall, *Combat Battalion*, pp. 111 and 174–196.

⁵⁸ David Horner, *SASR: Phantoms of the Jungle, A History of the Special Air Service Regiment*, Allen and Unwin, North Sydney, 1989, p. 390.

⁵⁹ Although offensive operations were not their main role, the SASR was credited with killing nearly 500 enemy soldiers during the

trained, disciplined and well-led teams are susceptible to fratricide.

FRATRICIDE AS AN INDUSTRIAL ACCIDENT

While most of the Australian fratricide incidents in Vietnam occurred during operations, some occurred during in-theatre training and even while units were resting between operations. Since these cases did not occur in the presence of the enemy, they fall outside the current US definition. It is argued, however, that even though the enemy was not present, these incidents should still be regarded as a type of fratricide as they were caused by the misemployment or misuse of the soldier's tools of trade. To differentiate between these types of incidents, cases not involving enemy forces might be considered to be a form of industrial accident, or perhaps more accurately military-industrial fratricide.⁶⁰

As with the other type of inadvertent fratricide, accidental, the worst cases of military-industrial fratricide in Vietnam usually involved CAS or indirect-fire support. One of the worst Vietnam cases involved an American helicopter gunship that was providing fire support for a refresher training exercise at the Nui Dat Base in September 1967. The helicopter accidentally fired a rocket into a group of

conflict. These included 492 kills, 106 possible kills, 47 wounded, 10 possibly wounded and 11 captured as prisoners of war. A bounty was placed on the 'head' of its members. Horner, *SASR: Phantoms of the Jungle, A History of the Special Air Service Regiment*, p. 390.

⁶⁰ I have adapted this term from Robert Hall who used the term 'industrial accidents' to describe some categories of accident that he investigated in his study of the 8RAR. Hall, *Combat Battalion*, p. 174.

Australian soldiers from D Company 2RAR, killing three and wounding 10 others. In this case, the rocket was apparently fired as the gunship was flying in from behind the troops and was aimed at a forward target, but it malfunctioned and ‘sidewinded’ down, exploding among the troops.⁶¹ Artillery could also prove dangerous in training, as evidenced by an incident in July 1970, when a 1st Australian Reinforcement Unit patrol outside the wire at Nui Dat called in an artillery fire mission as a training exercise. There was confusion at the gun position about the fire corrections issued by the inexperienced officer with the patrol. The result was that the round impacted on the patrol, killing two and wounding several others.⁶² Artillery and air support however, were not the most common causes of military-industrial accidents.

Training accidents and unauthorised discharges (UDs) were a problem throughout the Vietnam conflict. UD were a frequent occurrence and newly arrived troops were particularly at risk. The majority of UD did not result in anything more serious than a heavy fine for the offender, but on occasion some inadvertently inflicted wounds on themselves or others.⁶³ When 1RAR first deployed to

⁶¹ McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 251.

⁶² AWM103, R478-1-227; HQ 1ATF, Investigations-general. Unusual incident 1ARU and 161 (NZ) Field Battery, 21 July 1970, cited in Hall, *Combat Battalion*, p. 176.

⁶³ There are numerous cases in Vietnam of soldiers and officers accidentally shooting themselves. One officer accidentally shot himself in the foot with a US .45 calibre pistol while sitting in a vehicle, while another officer was accidentally shot in the foot in an aircraft. In another case a soldier who had accidentally shot himself not only suffered the pain of the wound, which was embarrassing enough, but he was also charged with an act to the prejudice of good order and military discipline. Fortunately for him the charge was dismissed. In another case a less fortunate sapper (military engineer) accidentally shot another engineer in the leg

Vietnam in 1965, some its members were still armed with the aging Owen Machine Carbine of World War Two vintage. This weapon had a poor reputation: it lacked ‘stopping power’ and had a propensity to discharge inadvertently because it fired from an open bolt position. In one incident, a young officer in D Company 1RAR literally shot himself in the foot when he tripped the trigger of his Owen during a company orders group. Fortunately, the otherwise unsatisfactory Army issue leather boots protected his foot from serious injury. In another accident in the same company, another young officer struck the butt of his Owen on the ground, causing it to discharge. It left him with a painful flesh wound across his chest and under his arm. After this second incident, it became standard procedure at the beginning of company orders for the OC to mockingly instruct the Command Sergeant Major (CSM) to disarm the platoon commanders.⁶⁴ In other cases the consequences of UDs were more serious and sometimes fatal.⁶⁵

The repercussions of these events could have serious consequences for those deemed to be negligent in their handling of their weapon. In one of the more tragic military-industrial accidents in Vietnam, an Australian soldier was

with his M16A1 while he was cleaning it. Although the wound was not fatal the offender was charged, found guilty and fined seven days loss of pay and allowances. AWM98, item 682; AWM103, R478/1/91; and AWM284, item R1/3/17.

⁶⁴ Breen, *First to Fight*, pp. 50 and 81.

⁶⁵ In another incident, in July 1966, a trooper from the 1st Armoured Personnel Carrier Squadron was accidentally killed when he jokingly grabbed the barrel of another soldier’s Owen gun to inspect it. He looked down the barrel and pulled the weapon towards him, causing it to discharge and he was killed. HQ Australian Force Vietnam, AUSTFORCE VIETNAM signal ‘A8041’ to ARMY CANBERRA, 080145ZJul66, AWM98, item 682.

charged with manslaughter for accidentally shooting a Vietnamese national. This Vietnamese soldier was employed by the 1ATF as a 'bushman scout', an ex-VC who was also a popular member of the unit.⁶⁶ From the evidence presented at the court-martial, it appears that the soldier in question was cleaning his weapon in his tent when his rifle accidentally discharged after he thought he had cleared it. The round struck the Vietnamese in the neck and killed him as he was standing outside the tent talking to another Australian soldier. This incident had a devastating effect, not only for the victim and his family, but also for the soldier who perpetrated the incident and the other members of his unit.⁶⁷

More commonly, those involved in friendly fire operational and training accidents survived to tell the tale, but in just five months the 1ATF investigated 11 serious incidents of operational and training accidents resulting in 10 soldiers being either wounded or injured.⁶⁸ Unlike the cases involving the Owen gun, most of these incidents were not the result of any technical or mechanical limitation or fault of the weapon, rather they were invariably the result of poor weapon handling or the careless handling of munitions. In most cases

⁶⁶ Bushman scouts were former VC soldiers who had defected to the South Vietnamese Government's cause and were employed by 1ATF as scouts and for in-theatre training in VC methods of operation. The US Army referred to these soldiers as Kit Carson's Scouts.

⁶⁷ The soldier accidentally shot the bushman scout and he was charged with manslaughter but he also faced an alternate charge of 'neglect to the prejudice of good order and military discipline' in that he negligently handled his weapon in a manner that led to the death of the Vietnamese soldier. AWM305, R723/1/4.

⁶⁸ Colonel John R Salmon, 'Operational and Training Accidents', 19 September 1971, AWM103, item 746/1/10 Part 2.

it was not the larger weapons that were involved, but rather the more humble tools of the soldiers' trade.

Another recurring feature of fratricide in Vietnam was the regular appearance of the grenade in military-industrial accidents. Although Australian troops had been using grenades since the early days at Gallipoli, grenade-related accidents were also a significant source of friendly fire casualties for Australian infantry battalions in Vietnam. The single worst incident occurred during 1RAR's first tour in 1965, when a soldier returning from an operation jumped from the back of a truck, displacing the pin of a grenade in his equipment. The explosion resulted in four deaths and eight soldiers wounded.⁶⁹ In fact, most combat units suffered a number of grenade-related accidents, including the SASR.⁷⁰ While Australian soldiers in previous wars faced a significant threat from unexploded bombs and other malfunctioning ordnance, improving technology and better quality control measures had by the time of the Vietnam War improved the reliability of the soldier's weapons and munitions. What technology could not do was remove the threat of misadventure.

⁶⁹ Breen, *First to Fight*, pp. 35–7.

⁷⁰ Typical of the types of friendly fire incidents involving grenades are the cases of an 8RAR soldier who was slightly wounded by a M26 fragment when his platoon was clearing a bunker complex during Operation ASHGROVE in December 1969; and the junior NCO from 2RAR/NZ (ANZAC) who was severely burned when a trip flare ignited in his webbing and detonated a M67 fragmentation grenade during Operation CUNG-CHUNG in June 1970. AWM103, R478/1/125, and R478/1/229; and Horner, *SASR: Phantoms of the Jungle, A History of the Special Air Service Regiment*, pp. 232 and 390.

FRATRICIDE AS A CALCULATED CHOICE

The Vietnam conflict also saw a small number of incidents of Australian commanders risking fratricide in order to minimise their own casualties. These cases involved the unusual circumstances of commanders requesting fire on their own position or calling in supporting fire so close that friendly casualties were a likely outcome. Casualties under these circumstances were not accidental but resulted from a commander's considered choice, albeit one made with the aim of ensuring the survival of his command, achieving the mission, or in the hope of actually minimising his own casualties.

In 1966, 6RAR, on its first tour of Vietnam, fought a number of actions as 1ATF sought to extend its control over the Phuoc Tuy province. In late July, during these encounters, the VC tried to avoid the worst effects of supporting indirect fire by 'hugging' the Australian positions. These attempts generally failed because of nearness to which Australian commanders were prepared to call in supporting fire and the steadiness of the forward sections in contact. Australian casualties resulted from their own artillery fire—rounds detonated in trees, throwing the splinters forward and down with devastating effect. Although the official history notes that the suddenness of these encounters, difficulties in precise map reading in close country, and inexperience may have all played a part in rounds falling among the Australians, it was also the inevitable price of having to draw indirect fire close enough to break-up the enemy's attack.⁷¹ During one of the major Australian actions fought in Vietnam, such friendly fire due to close contact occurred again.

⁷¹ McNeill, *To Long Tan*, pp. 278–281.

On 18 August 1966, D Company 6RAR fought elements of a VC regiment, which on several occasions during the three-hour battle, threatened to overwhelm the beleaguered Australian force. Artillery support was a key factor in D Company's survival. Casualties had to be risked as the NZ forward observer (FO) continuously directed artillery fire across a battle area covering no more than three football fields, often in heavy rain, when it was not always clear where the Australian platoons were located. Often their communications were cut. Once again, the VC utilised the tactic they described as 'holding the belt with one hand and punching with the other' and the only way to negate it was to bring in the artillery fire 'danger close'.⁷²

Two years later, during the battle around Fire Support Base (FSB) Coral in May 1968, a number of cases involving Australian fire may have wounded and possibly killed some Australian troops. On the northern perimeter of the FSB, Lieutenant Tony Jensen was commanding the 1RAR Mortar Platoon that took the brunt of several North Vietnamese Army (NVA) assaults. When the mortar and artillery fire failed to halt the NVA, Jensen realised that it was now too late to withdraw his men to the gun position of 102 Field Battery, 50 metres to his rear. Jensen held his ground even as it was being overrun. As the attack continued, the 102 Battery gunners were forced to fire into a group of NVA who had taken a number of Jensen's men prisoner. As one gunner recalled:

There was yelling coming from the Mortar section — we could hear one of the Mortar Crew yelling that they were coming in and not to fire — then we heard two Australian voices screaming they have got us but because of the

⁷² McNeill, *To Long Tan*, pp. 315, 319 and 342.

number of VC between us and the Mortars we could not help them — in the end we fired at the VC on the track and we possibly hit the 2 Mortar Men.⁷³

This same artillery party were themselves later forced to withdraw under pressure and they too faced a similar danger. In the confusion of the battle two members of the team were inadvertently wounded by members of their own battery because, in the din, they did not hear, and hence did not respond to, the verbal challenge issued by their own gun line. In the meantime, Jensen and the remnants of the mortar platoon risked annihilation as the NVA swarmed over their position. Jensen initially directed the fire of 90 mm recoilless rifles over his position, ordering his own men to stay below ground as thousands of small darts swept away anything and anyone above ground.⁷⁴ Later, the supporting guns of 102 Battery opened fire over the mortar position with their splintex, and when these ran out they switched to high explosive rounds. They were also supported by the mortar platoon of 3RAR and 161 Field Battery (NZ).⁷⁵ These actions undoubtedly resulted in some Australian fratricide victims, but the gunners' steady fire over open sights certainly 'saved the day' for 1RAR and prevented the rest of the Australian position from being overrun.⁷⁶

On the following night, during a second assault on FSB

⁷³ Bombardier Andy Forsdike, letter, 17 August 1987, AWM: PR87/219, quoted in McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 367.

⁷⁴ McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, pp. 367–8.

⁷⁵ Lex McAulay, *The Fighting First: Combat Operations in Vietnam 1968–69, The First Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment*, Allen and Unwin, North Sydney, 1991, p. 54; and McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, pp. 368–370.

⁷⁶ Major Kim Patterson, quoted in McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 317.

Coral, Lieutenant Neil Weekes was placed in a similar position. The renewed NVA assault penetrated his platoon position and placed a heavy machinegun in one of his forward pits. In his words:

The heavy machine gun commenced to spray the artillery gun position and my platoon headquarters. The overshots were obviously going into the battalion headquarters area because coming up on to the company net the Commanding Officer ... suddenly gave me a call ... He told me that the heavy machine gun ... was causing him some embarrassment and what was I going to do about it ... I didn't have sufficient mobility or men to do a counter-attack and I didn't know how many enemy there were, so I decided I would call down mortar fire onto our position. The CO asked if I was aware that it may cause casualties, to which I said yes. He then asked me if I was prepared to accept casualties, to which I again said yes. Tony Jensen came onto the net and we directed mortar fire onto the enemy ... The mortar fire had some effect but it wounded Private Brendht and Private Mick Dwight ... However, the mortar fire did stop more enemy penetrating my position.⁷⁷

Similar incidents of this type occurred in numerous actions when Australian troops were forced to assault VC bunker systems. Given the complex terrain, the close engagement ranges, and the limitations of the supporting fire from aircraft, artillery and tanks, it is likely that a number of Australians classified as KIA and WIA were the victims of friendly fire. The problem is, without commanders making that calculated choice, Australian casualties in assaulting

⁷⁷ Neil Weekes quoted in McKay, *Vietnam Fragments*, pp. 125–6. Lieutenant (later Brigadier) Weekes was awarded the Military Cross for his leadership and bravery on this and other occasions. McNeill and Ekins, *On the Offensive*, p. 377.

such defences would undoubtedly have been higher.⁷⁸ The decision by commanders to risk fratricide was not taken lightly, but was a deliberate and considered choice and a case of some fratricide being the lesser of two evils.

⁷⁸ For an analysis of the Australian attacks on bunker systems in Vietnam see Robert Hall and Andrew Ross, 'Lessons from Vietnam — Combined Arms Assault against Prepared Defences', in Michael Evans and Alan Ryan (eds), *From Breitenfeld to Baghdad: Perspectives on Combined Arms Warfare*, Land Warfare Studies Centre, Duntroon, ACT, July 2003, pp. 34–52.

CATEGORIES OF FRATRICIDE

Change, of course, is inevitable. But so is continuity. And today's policy debate systematically exaggerates the former and slights the latter.

Stephen Biddle⁷⁹

The review of the Australian Army's experience of friendly fire in Vietnam reveals a number of patterns. The most important of these uncovers several different categories of fratricide, linked by cause and effect, but not intent. Given the circumstances under which these instances occurred in Vietnam, and the similarities between these conditions and the contemporary battlespace, there is little reason to believe that these forms will change in the foreseeable future. The Australian Army should therefore develop its own taxonomy for fratricide, and in doing so approach the problem in a systematic way. This final section suggests one way of defining this multidimensional problem.

The two broad categories of fratricide are 'inadvertent' and 'deliberate'. In general terms, both of these categories may be defined as incidents involving the misemployment or mishandling of weapons and munitions that result in death or injury of friendly personnel. The experience of 1ATF demonstrates both categories. What differentiates the two categories is the motivation behind the act. Inadvertent fratricide involves the employment or misemployment of weapons and munitions by friendly personnel that results in the unforeseen or unintentional death or injury to friendly

⁷⁹ Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. ix.

personnel. Conversely, deliberate fratricide is the employment or misemployment of weapons and munitions by friendly personnel, which results in the foreseen and intentional death or injury to friendly personnel.

This paper focuses on inadvertent fratricide, and within this broad category, it has identified three sub-categories or types.

Accidental fratricide

This first type of inadvertent fratricide will be termed 'accidental fratricide'. This type of fratricide is traditionally understood by the term and is the type described under the current US definition. It may be described as those incidents involving the employment of weapons and munitions with the intent to kill the enemy or destroy their equipment or facilities that result in unforeseen and unintentional death or injury to friendly personnel. This category occurs where there is a mistake by friendly forces and they engage their own troops, thinking they are the enemy. Within this category a range of scenarios reflect the different circumstances under which it can occur. These scenarios include:

- air-to-surface and surface-to-air, involving fire between ground and air forces;
- ship-to-shore, when naval assets are providing support to ground forces; and
- surface-to-surface incidents, involving exchanges between ground forces (which can include indirect-fire weapons, such as mortars and artillery, and direct-fire weapons such as small arms or armoured systems, or a combination of both).

As weapon ranges have increased, the differentiation between the two becomes blurred, as nominally direct-fire weapons are capable of being fired well beyond the operator's visual range.

Military-industrial fratricide

The second type of inadvertent fratricide will be termed 'military-industrial fratricide'. This type of fratricide may be defined as incidents involving the employment of weapons and munitions, not in the presence of the enemy, whereby the actions of friendly personnel result in the unforeseen and unintentional death or injury to friendly personnel. These incidents are what we might truly term 'accidents' because they occur during individual or collective training or as a form of industrial accident through the mishandling of friendly or even enemy weapons or munitions, where there is no enemy threat or at least the perception of an enemy threat. So-called 'unauthorised discharges', the mishandling of weapons and munitions, and live-fire training accidents, would fit under this category.

Calculated fratricide

The third type of fratricide will be termed 'calculated fratricide'. This type of fratricide is defined as those incidents involving the employment of weapons and munitions with the intent to kill the enemy or destroy their equipment or facilities, but in a manner that consciously endangers friendly forces and results in the foreseen but unintentional death or injury of friendly personnel. Under this category of fratricide events can be classified as:

- 'aggressive', such as the decision to manoeuvre close to friendly supporting fire in order to defeat the enemy; or

- ‘passive’, such as purposely drawing friendly fire close to or upon friendly forces in order to defeat an enemy attack or prevent the friendly forces from being over-run.

Deliberate fratricide

What this taxonomy does not cover is the other category of fratricide, which may be classified as ‘deliberate fratricide’. What can be included within this category are those rare cases where friendly troops are deliberately engaged by other friendly troops. This category covers occurrences that include capital punishment for serious military or civil crimes or the murder of commanders or unpopular comrades. Other occurrences include:

- events where fatal military force has to be applied to control rioting troops;
- rare occurrences when friendly forces become disassociated from other friendly troops and fire on one another not by mistake but out of fear, anger, retribution or a lack of control; or
- where comrades are killed for humanitarian reasons, so-called ‘mercy killings’.

The casualties caused by these incidents are not accidental but deliberate. Because of the different motivation behind the act and the different measures required to counter-act these rare events, they are not considered under this suggested taxonomy.

SOLUTIONS

The solution to fratricide, if there can ever be a solution to the inevitable, lies in exploring and implementing a series of small, incremental short-term improvements based on a long-

term strategy. The long-term strategy has to be based on technology, doctrine, training and education.

In Vietnam, the Australian Army sought a number of ways of reducing the incidence of fratricide. Firstly, they defined the problem: by seeing fratricide as a multifaceted phenomenon, the Vietnam-era Army was able to more effectively address the issue. Some measures were based on technology—such as improving communications equipment. Other means involved improving and standardising doctrine and training. During the Army's decade-long commitment in Vietnam, doctrine was continually refined in the light of experience. This doctrine was then practised through training. In particular, it is worth noting that, because of the prevalence of friendly fire incidents, 1ATF introduced a dedicated training exercise, Exercise LIFESAVER, designed specifically to address common problems that often led to fratricide. In this way, although never completely eradicating the problem, the Army was able to minimise its occurrence and impact.

Technology

Technology will help with Identification Friend or Foe (IFF) systems. Ground force combat identification has the potential to improve situational awareness while addressing the problems of mis-identification of targets. The emergence of ground-based combat identification, and the development of networked Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Reconnaissance, Surveillance and Intelligence systems, will assist in decreasing fratricide. These take time to field and, with any technological advance, a competent enemy will be constantly seeking to counter it or find a means of exploiting it as a new vulnerability.

No matter what technological solution is developed, the Army, its political leaders and public will have to maintain realistic expectations. There can be ‘no silver bullet’ and no guarantees in war. It is probable that the Army will continue to commit fratricide, just as it is inevitable that chaos, confusion, uncertainty and danger will always accompany war. The HNA solution to fratricide will have to be a whole-of-Army approach.

Doctrine

When the broader implications of technological change are more thoroughly understood, they will have to be harnessed within a framework of doctrine, the results of which can increase the fighting power of HNA while minimising its losses to fratricide. Doctrine provides the essential mental framework for how HNA will deal with incidents and manage the repercussions.

Training and education

Linked closely with doctrine is the conduct of training, which can better prepare commanders and soldiers to deal with the unexpected, to minimise the occurrence of catastrophic events, and to deal effectively with those fratricidal incidents that do occur. Education on this subject, both for HNA and the broader population, is essential if the defence organisation, the public and the media are to begin to understand the inherent dangers of military service and the employment of state-authorised violence.

The HNA will offer considerable, tangible advantages in the fight against fratricide. Better informed and protected commanders and troops will be able to better discriminate between friendly, enemy and non-combatants on the future battlefield. The Army should, however, be wary of the allure of the ‘100 per cent guaranteed’ solution.

In the Hardened and Networked Army, human-centric factors must not be underrated. Continuous, high-tempo operations provide the opportunity to get inside the opposition's decision cycle, but they also quickly fatigue commanders and soldiers, increasing the opportunities for fratricide.

Developing targeted doctrine, hard, realistic training, and appropriate safety procedures can also play a role in minimising friendly fire incidents. However, unless the technology is underpinned by high-quality education and training, the Army will be left with a mismatch between its human and equipment capabilities. This will be the real challenge of HNA, to harness the synergistic effects of combined arms and joint operations without exponentially increasing the danger of large-scale fratricide incidents. This, unfortunately, can only be achieved by accepting some risk in peacetime training. Otherwise, the whole risk will simply be transferred to operations, where the threat is higher, the loss of life potentially greater, and the implications more severe.

Herein lies the greatest challenge facing the HNA project: the reluctance to acknowledge a persistent and uncomfortable phenomenon. This is understandable, given the natural reticence to admit to killing one's own troops. Calculating the size of the problem is equally problematic, given the difficulty of differentiating between one casualty and another on the battlefield. There is, however, sufficient evidence to suggest that while the overall battle casualty rate for Western armies appears to be declining, the proportion of those casualties caused by friendly fire appears to be at least steady and perhaps rising. Recognising fratricide as one of the inevitable causes of friendly casualties in warlike or peacekeeping operations must also be a part of any HNA

solution to the complex warfighting of the 21st century. If there is a single lesson from this study, it is that the Army must avoid collective amnesia on this issue.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the Australian experience of fratricide during the Vietnam War and what this might mean for the Hardened and Networked Army of the 21st century. In the three decades since the end of Australia's involvement in Vietnam, there have been some dramatic developments in the global security environment. Technological advances have ushered in the era of information-age warfare. In Vietnam, munitions and weapons systems were industrial-age and, hence, they were deadly but not always accurate. Since Vietnam, new generations of precision weapon systems have been deployed that are both deadly and unerringly accurate. The problem in the past was with margins of error and making allowance for inherent inaccuracy; today, the problem is almost the opposite. If an enemy, a neutral or friendly is targeted, even mistakenly, they will most likely be hit. Given the power of these systems, the results will, most likely, be lethal.

Fratricide is an ever-present threat in both training and operations. It is larger in scope and frequency than is generally acknowledged. Part of the problem revolves around the choice of terminology. Rather than using one narrowly defined type of fratricide terminology, this study suggests that the Hardened and Networked Army adopt three broad conditions to define what is and is not fratricide. Firstly, the incident has to involve friendly casualties. Secondly, the casualties have to be caused by friendly fire. Thirdly, the casualties should occur unintentionally. It is suggested that there are actually three types of unintentional fratricide. The

first type is the classic form of ‘accidental fratricide’, where friendly forces are engaged in the mistaken belief that they are the enemy. The second type is the soldier’s industrial accident, ‘military-industrial fratricide’, which, unlike accidental fratricide, does not need an enemy presence. The third type is ‘calculated fratricide’, which commanders must on occasions risk to avoid potentially greater harm to those in their charge.

Today, the narrowness of the Australian Army’s recent operational experience may blind it and the public to the realities of war. When the Army looks to the future, it has to look to the type of war it may have to fight, rather than the one it would prefer to fight. This demands that the Army thinks realistically about the political and military conditions under which it will operate and the asymmetric threats of its potential opponents. It has to envisage how one level of warfare will shape or direct the other levels of war. The alternative, too often preferred by civilian policy analysts, as well as some military officers, is a dangerously misleading and sterile operational study, uninformed by political conditions and divorced from the hard-earned experience of the past. Fratricide is and will remain a political issue, and it will have to be dealt with across the levels of war, from the tactical management of an incident through to the political and military interface at the strategic level. The Army must do all it can to minimise the various categories of fratricide, but it will not be able to stop it as long as war remains an essentially human activity, and that it will remain for the foreseeable future.

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