

John Fraser

1945 - 1968

Vietnam, Killed in action

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Vietnam. No victory. No glory. Even the pride of having done your duty lost in the hostility of political debate and the growing public perception that, far from being a righteous or necessary war, Vietnam was a shameful war, a needless waste of young Australian lives. A story of sacrifice.

John Fraser was always a leader. A brilliant student, rugby player and cricketer, his business career was taking shape when his number came out of the barrel in the first Vietnam call-up. He did his boot training at Holdsworthy, and then went to Officer Training School where he impressed his superiors with his leadership qualities. Because he was able to get the best from his men, he was sent to Canungra Jungle Training Camp as an instructor. Real combat, however, still seemed a long way off. Then, with discharge only weeks away, he discovered that his battalion was being posted to Vietnam, so he re-enlisted.

24 March 1968. Hill 323, Phuoc Tuy Province. Pat Burgess, war correspondent, was on patrol with Lieutenant John Fraser and his platoon. He sent this story back to the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

"The gully between the two granite hills was a hundred yards wide. Both hills had the bleakness of a World War I landscape. The trees, shorn off by blast and shrapnel, were dead or dying. The grey granite boulders were weathered and covered by a grey-green dry moss ...

"With two platoons of Three Battalion we were edging our way along one ridge while the battalion's Charlie Company cleared the other. The hills have been seeded with land mines, and booby traps by the Vietcong. For a platoon to move at all, riflemen give cover to two sappers with mine detectors who clear a narrow safe path. The path is marked with plastic tape and the whole platoon follows. Even then a mine can be detonated by remote control by Viet Cong hiding in caves ...

"Johnny Fraser's platoon was getting close to the dark cave entrance, no more than a triangular crevice and a small black oval.

"When the mine exploded everyone on the two hills and in the gully froze. This is now the established drill in the parched, slashed hills of Long Hai. As the dust of the exploding land began to settle, a voice echoed in the gully above the cries of the other wounded: "Don't come in for me, don't come in. There's more there."

Fraser, leading his men, had put his foot down on a 'jump-up' mine – so-called because it could spring into the air, killing everyone around it. Hearing the device arm itself, Fraser put both feet together, directly on top of it.

The explosion knocked his men to the ground but they were safe. Fraser had stopped the mine from doing its real job.

The rescue helicopter arrived quickly and the winch came down with the basket. Fraser was lifted up and carried away. Shortly afterwards, the message came through on the radio handset: Johnny Fraser was dead.

They brought the former star athlete home to Surfers Paradise, gave him a big parade, and buried him with full military honours. There were better places for a young man of twenty-three to be. ❀