
BRITAIN IN VIETNAM: A MYTH RE-EXAMINED

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Abstract: Hitherto (as this article will demonstrate) there has been a number of excellent studies concerning Britain's brief but controversial involvement in the origins of the Vietnam War. Yet despite a number of sophisticated Anglo-centric accounts concerning Britain's involvement in Vietnam in 1945, historians have been content to follow like sheep the doyens of the past. The result has been to either prosecute or defend the actions of the British commanding officer in Saigon – Major-General Sir Douglas Gracey. But in doing so, little attention has been given to either the context (the Burma Campaign 1942-5) of Gracey's deployment in Vietnam or the consequence (Kashmir 1947-8) of this first British brush with post-war Asian nationalism. This article therefore argues for a reappraisal of Gracey's actions outside of the narrow confines of the Vietnam War in order to more broadly understand early attempts at peace enforcement vis-à-vis the decline of empire.

Keywords: General Gracey; Britain; Vietnam; Cambodia; Kashmir; Admiral Mountbatten

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Gracey, after brilliantly commanding his division, carried out in an outstanding manner a most difficult military-political task in Indo-China.¹
Field Marshal Viscount Slim.

At the time of his death in 1964, General Sir Douglas David Gracey had enjoyed thirteen years of a modest and tranquil retirement from military life. During this time he lived in the affluent British county of Surrey and indulged in his passion for the gentleman's game of cricket with membership of the Marylebone Cricket Club – otherwise known as the MCC or Lord's. Even in this idyllic environment Gracey displayed a deep-seated paternalistic concern for the common soldiery – an intense duty of care that had been exhibited throughout his military career. Therefore it was only natural in retirement that he should serve as the chairman of the Royal Hospital for the

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¹ W.J. Slim, *Defeat into Victory: Field Marshal Viscount Slim* (London: Papermac, 1986), 146.