

MILITARY EULOGY

LTCOL PETER OVERSTEAD

3 JUNE 2010

May I firstly thank the Overstead family for the honour in inviting me to make this address about our friend Peter Overstead. I am speaking on behalf of his many army friends.

He was a good man.

In his life Peter made friends easily and as I look around today at those of us here, and reflect on the huge number of emails and calls received from all over the country since Tuesday, I am proud to be counted as one of them.

I will talk about his military life. For those of us who have served together in the military, there is an undefined but unique and precious bond. I don't want to over-state it, but I cannot under-state it ... we are and always will be, a 'band of brothers'.

We all came together when we were in our late teens, we were just boys. At Duntroon and at Portsea in the early 1970s, we were thrown together and found that to survive we had to look out for each other. We boys would in time become the men that he would call his friends for the rest of his life. Old friends are good friends!

In those early cadet years, we can recall the little 'smart-arse' who always had the last cheeky comment for the drill sergeant, or the trick hand-shake, or the cockatoo whistle, or was ready for a quick game of cards. It is a surprise that no-one clobbered him back in those days – but then no-one could catch him!

We can recall the outstanding sportsman who could run, throw, catch, hit, tackle or shoot anything. Sport was to be a major part of Peter's military life.

Commencing at Duntroon in 1969 and graduating from Portsea in 1972, Peter was initially selected for Aviation to become a pilot, but with dodgy knees he took a career redirection to the artillery – a fortunate circumstance for us gunners! This was to become his speciality military trade so to speak and over the next 15 years he would continually return to regimental life with appointments from young officer to battery commander, mostly at 1st Field Regiment in Brisbane. These were halcyon days for a young artillery officer, the crash of the guns in the field, the smell of range fuel in the gunpark, the camaraderie of the mess life, learning the technical skills at Gunnery Wing at the School of Artillery, North Head.

Most significantly, regimental life was about leading soldiers. Peter wore leadership like a glove – confident, competent, charismatic – he had a strong bond with his soldiers, he was always very involved in soldier issues, fighting for their individual and collective

causes – sometimes tilting at the windmills in the process. He was very much respected by his soldiers as an officer and as a human being.

But Peter was a competitor and was there to win whether playing golf, running the inter-battery cross-country, or flipping a card. As a collegiate but competing battery commander in 1 Field Regiment in the mid 1980s, I can clearly remember those adrenaline charged fire planning days at Shoalwater Bay with the CDA's ARTEP assessment team breathing down our necks, and Peter, with binoculars in one hand, and a radio handset in the other, coolly taking control of the OP, directing the shoot, and instilling confidence into his young FOs and their ACKs. He was a good man in a tight situation.

Pete breezed through staff college in 1986, finding time to use his sporting skills and competitive nature to raise and lead an indoor cricket team in the local Bellarine competition. So good was this team in winning that competition that year on the back of Overs' cricketing skills that staff college were never invited to play again.

Never mind time for cricket, after staff college, Pete and Bronny were off to see the world with high profile postings in the UK, the Defence Intelligence Organisation, Norforce in Darwin, Lavarack Barracks in Townsville and Washington DC. In several of these postings, Pete found himself working in the international intelligence world, much of which he couldn't, wouldn't and didn't talk about ... often heard to say '... if I told you I would have to kill you!'

Nevertheless, we know that Pete found himself in Iraq in 1991 where there was a bit of a skirmish called 'Desert Storm' going on. His was intelligence work souveniring and collecting war materials for the Australian military in a dangerous environment. Some of these souvenirs, and by that I mean equipments such as armoured vehicles and eight ton howitzers had been destroyed or damaged by depleted uranium munitions. Many of us sense a connection between his duties there in Iraq and the debilitating condition that he subsequently developed.

Of course, the path of life is not always straight and clearly marked. I choose my words carefully. In Washington, Peter made a critical personal decision that changed his life and others forever – family and friends were stunned - perhaps it too was linked to a developing condition.

After Washington, Pete was never the same bloke – we all know that. It was evident that things were seriously amiss, and many of us lost real contact with him as his military career came to a conclusion. He left the Army in May 2005 as a lieutenant colonel after 37 years of dedicated service to his country. In addition to his Australian service medals, he was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal by the US Army.

These last few years were about dealing with the Alzheimer's condition. He was fully aware of what it was all about and what was facing him – he showed a soldier's courage in the face of adversity to the end. He was supported by his family, that 'band of brothers' in Brisbane, and his friendship network across Australia.

Many people couldn't be here because of the short notice. I draw particular attention to a message from Lieutenant General Ken Gillespie, current Chief of Army and Portsea classmate in which he offered his apologies, saying:

"I wish that it were different as I think that one of Pete's legacies will be the bringing together of a great bunch of people who haven't had the opportunity to get together for a long time. MajGen Paul Symon the Deputy Chief will attend in my place. Paul was also friends with Pete and is a Gunner officer. He will ensure that my regards are also passed to Bronny who is one of the world's nicest people."

Numerous emails and messages of support have been received from mates from his 1972 Portsea graduating class, the Duntroon classes of 1972 and 73, and people he influenced through his career.

I draw attention to the contribution by classmate Ron Elms, who for more than 12 months has been our great communicator, coordinator and problem solver on matters relating to Peter here in Brisbane – from all of us, thanks Ron.

In conclusion, I say to the Overstead family, and specifically to our beloved Bronny, our military family is an intangible gift, we look after each other, and we look after each other's families. We loved Peter Overstead as a brother; we will always be there for you too Bronny.

We will remember him

PK