

## EULOGY - CAPTAIN ROGER JOHN WICKHAM – RA INF/ AUST INT

My name is Garry Swan. Roger Wickham and I were classmates at the Army Officer Cadet School Portsea from July 1962 to June 1963. We were to be trained as Infantry Platoon Commanders and mentored in the development of our leadership potential. I am pleased to be here today to speak on the life of Roger, to describe his time at OCS, his subsequent army career and give an insight into his life post the army. While the passage of time makes the voice a little shaky, my sentiment is timeless.

We first met at the OCS Selection Board held at Enoggera Barracks in March 1962. I had recently turned 21 and Roger a 20-year-old. Unwittingly Roger helped me during one of the assessed group discussions. During the selection process, the Board President, Colonel Coleman, who was the current school Commandant, asked us to openly discuss 'euthanasia'. In my young naivety I heard not one but three words in that request, 'youth in Asia' and instantly thought I would enlighten everyone by offering a few thought-provoking words on the discipline and integrity of Japanese teenagers. Thankfully Roger was the more politically aware among the candidates, quickly jumping in to talk about voluntary assisted dying, thereby opening the discussion and saving me from much embarrassment. I instantly recognized him as a successful applicant.

During the lunch break we chatted, and I learnt a little about Roger's background. He advised he had recently married his fiancée Elaine Colborne, the daughter of a Surfers Paradise dentist and spoke of a scholarship he had been offered to a prestigious American university due to his swimming talent and that he was a keen surf club member. He also advised that should he not gain entry to OCS he would accept the scholarship to America. Thankfully both our applications were successful.

During the two-day train trip to Melbourne, we had plenty of time to talk and become friends. In discussion Roger advised he was born in Mt Isa in June 1941 and that his father was a very successful businessman as Company Secretary of Mt Isa Mines. In January 1949 Roger moved to Brisbane at the age of seven where he was enrolled into the prestigious Nudgee College Junior School as a boarder, so he had a very sound educational history. He spent eight years of intense academic study at the college becoming a straight A student.

On the sporting field he played Rugby Union and learnt to swim freestyle competitively. However, in late 1956 his mother, a lady of strong personality and who Roger called Mim, wanted him to remain with St Joseph's Colleges, but transfer to the Gregory Terrace Senior School in Spring Hill, due to Nudgee College not allowing Roger time off to attend the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne with his father. He remained at 'Terrace' for the years 1957, 1958 and 1959 where he successfully completed his Senior education qualification.

While at 'Terrace' Roger further developed his swimming talent to represent the school in the annual GPS swimming championships where each year Roger was at the school, 'Terrace' won the title three years running. In his free time, he joined the Kirra Surf lifesaving Club. While I realized he must be a talented swimmer, I was not to know how well he swam until months later.

Roger accepted the rigorous routine at OCS and quickly adapted, indeed with much self-confidence. So much so that our more expressive assistant instructor Warrant Officer Jock Richardson during drill instruction one morning, following a bit of to and fro, in exasperation exclaimed "you're so smug Wickham".

He was a good student, showing excellent leadership potential and adaptability to military service. He well understood the army's need for teamwork, no doubt due to his time as a boarder, his excellent long-term private schooling and membership of the Kirra Surf Lifesaving Club.

His prior school rugby matches ensured he became a member of the OCS Rugby Union Team playing in the Melbourne competition.

For the first fifty days we were not permitted to leave the school grounds for any reason, so Elaine remained in Brisbane. Then on day fifty-one Elaine flew down to Sorrento to live near Roger while he attended OCS. However, Roger was only able to visit her on Sundays and sometimes Saturday afternoons after our sporting commitments.

It was during a swimming carnival in the 50-metre pool at Flinders Naval Depot HMAS Cerberus during our senior term, that we were amazed to see Roger show his swimming talent. He won every freestyle event he entered and set records for the pool each time, impressing us all with his tumble-turns each lap of the pool.

We were then alerted to the fact that he was an Australian champion freestyle swimmer, having won the individual Australian Junior Surf Belt Championship in 1959. As well he excelled in swimming team events. In the same 1959 Australian titles, his team came third in a junior surf belt event and in the 1961 titles, second in a senior surf belt team event.

As well as training to become a surf belt champion, Roger also learnt some rather unusual activities whilst in his club. Following the swimming carnival at Cerberus, I was rinsing off under one of the few cold showers, when I felt a warm stream on my legs. On turning, I saw Roger urinating on my legs. I jumped out of the shower voicing a few expletives, when I noticed who was in the next shower. Little wonder he chose me, as it was our lucky Commandant with a quizzical look on his face but not a word. Laughing, Roger explained it was an old surf club trick to move others out of the few available showers.

In late November 1962 the whole school attended a mandatory two-week tactical camp training exercise in the Black Spur State Forest northeast of Melbourne, near Healesville. I was on night sentry duty in a weapon pit after being roused by Roger to replace him, when at 2.30 am I was approached by an officer of the Directing Staff asking where Wickham was sleeping, as a radio message for him had been received. Roger was awakened to receive news that Elaine had given birth to a baby girl in Rosebud Hospital. Regrettably Roger was not able to be with Elaine for the birth of their first child. The baby was named Tracey.

Roger often claimed that he was the only officer cadet in the history of the school who, while being a cadet, was also an instructor on the course. Being qualified in the subject of Logic at Queensland Senior education level, he volunteered to teach Logic to certain cadets with every one of them passing their Victorian exam. He would be pleased I mention it today, as he was very proud of his achievement.

Swimming, Rugby and Logic were not his only talents. His private schooling must have taught him to dance as well. When we were short of local young ladies to be partners during dancing classes some Friday nights, Roger and a few others would assist the Quartermaster's wife in dance instruction by acting as partners for us awkward ones. He taught me the Foxtrot and Quickstep.

Roger's officer training was comprehensive and fast-paced. During the course he studied much army administration, practiced fieldcraft, learnt the basics of infantry minor tactics in the field, developed his leadership potential, achieved individual proficiency with the array of infantry weapons available and learnt to act instinctively in the face of the enemy.

We graduated from OCS on Friday the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1963, with Roger electing to become an Infantry Officer. Following the Graduation Parade, we attended our Graduation Ball with Elaine pinning on Roger's 'pips' at midnight. The next day he was off to Brisbane for leave with his family.

Following his leave period in July 1963, Roger reported to his new unit the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, then located at Enoggera Barracks in Brisbane. His posting was temporary as the battalion was preparing to depart for duty in Malaya, soon to be Malaysia. So, in January 1964 he was posted into the newly formed 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Australian Regiment then located at Woodside in South Australia.

Many intensive battalion training exercises based on jungle warfare followed over the ensuing twenty months, including interstate locations, as South Australia was hardly a tropical environment in which to train for the Australian Army's commitment to jungle warfare. Such training prepared him for his expected tour of operational service.

In September 1965 the battalion embarked on a two-year family accompanied deployment to Malaysia, replacing 3 RAR in support of the Malaysian Military fighting communist terrorist activity in the country. Here the battalion developed and tested their training in jungle warfare in the South-East Asian environment and became very effective in the conduct of Operations against the terrorists.

During February 1966 a request was made to Australia by the United States fighting a war in South Vietnam, for an officer trained in the tactics of jungle warfare, to be attached to the US 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division at Da Nang to assist with their training for the type of operations expected in Vietnam. For all their might and firepower, the US Military had little training or expertise in the tactics of jungle warfare, the very training they needed to prosecute a war in that type of country.

To his credit, Roger was selected from his battalion in Malaysia for this task, arriving in South Vietnam in March 1966. During an operation against a well-trained regiment of North Vietnamese Army and a Viet Cong Battalion at a place called Tam Ky, northwest of Da Nang, Roger, in a forward position with his US troops, was seriously wounded by shrapnel from an enemy mortar shell, resulting in him being Medevaced back to Malaysia in April 1966. The US Marines consequently awarded Roger a Purple Heart Medal for being wounded by enemy fire whilst in operational service with US troops. Receipt of this medal was a rare occasion for an Australian army officer during the Vietnam War.

In April 1966 the battalion deployed overseas to Malaysian Sarawak Borneo, replacing 3 RAR, to confront offensive insurgent action by Indonesia against Malaysia, termed 'Konfrontasi'. These operations were conducted under the code name 'Claret' and were kept highly secret for many years, as our patrols moved over the border into Indonesian Kalimantan territory, to contact and deter enemy incursions.

After recovering from wounds sustained in Vietnam, Roger's platoon took an active part in the 'Claret' operations and achieved much success conducting patrols and ambushes. However, following a four-month deployment, in August 1966, due to a political settlement between Malaysia and Indonesia which ended 'Konfrontasi', the battalion returned to its base in mainland Malaysia.

On return to Australia in September 1967, then a Lieutenant, Roger was posted to HQ 6 Task Force at Enoggera Barracks. In July 1969, following a language course in Vietnamese, conducted at the Army Intelligence Centre at Woodside, as a Captain, he was posted as the Staff Officer Intelligence to HQ 1 Australian Task Force at Nui Dat in South Vietnam. This was his second deployment to the country, serving there until July 1970 when he returned to Australia.

Now back home, Roger and family, with the addition of daughters Kelly and Julie, decided the army was not providing the family stability they needed due to the many times Roger was absent on army service. So, with the rank of Captain, Roger resigned his appointment to the regular army and in August 1970 entered what was to become a fluctuating civilian career. Initially he worked in the life insurance industry, then took on a real estate agency, followed by other ventures including moving the family to California in 1977, where he opened a successful Australian pie shop.

Sadly, Roger's marriage to Elaine was to end in separation, with Elaine returning to Australia from the USA with the girls. Roger remained in America to make a life there, but it was tough, as he missed his daughters very much. Indeed, he appeared to have a fascination with life in America. However, he did manage to fly home to Brisbane regularly to visit, as daughter Julie worked for Qantas and was able to arrange flights for him.

We are all aware of the world record swimming successes of Tracey and the impressive honours, awards, celebrity and international medals she has won, mostly gold. For while Roger was so proud and often spoke of her youthful successes in the pool and the extraordinary length of time some of her records remained unbeaten, he also spoke lovingly of his pride in Kelly and Julie's personal lifestyle successes, for he loved each of his three daughters very much.

In retrospect, it was unfortunate that Roger decided to resign from the army after only eight years' service. He was a good officer, well suited to army life. However, his family life was severely disrupted by the army's training for war, commitment to the Malaysian Emergency and the Vietnam War. The Australian Army was fully extended during the sixties and particularly so for an Infantry Officer. Many families experienced substantial stress and anxiety during this time, some never to recover. Sadly, Elaine and his daughters suffered these consequences.

Roger was a charismatic leader and team player, beginning with his younger life at St Joseph's Colleges and surf club teams through to heavily promoted teamwork during his eight years in the army. In his later years he said to me "I wouldn't have missed my military service for anything, mates for life". Indeed, while in good health, to chat with his mates, he regularly attended OCS reunions and class lunches usually travelling long distances.

At the exclusive Tattersall's Club in Brisbane where he was a valued member, I enjoyed lunch as his guest. His name now appears on the club's prominently displayed Honour Board recording those members who served their country in wartime.

Roger was well respected by the soldiers of 4 RAR, his officer peers, senior officers, international and local friends and a good mate to his classmates. He had the potential for a much higher rank, perhaps to that of Director of the Corps of Infantry. He only had to serve longer than he did. No doubt he found his civilian career unchallenging. His early years suggested he was best suited to a structured, disciplined environment such as that experienced at boarding school for many years, and which continued in the army. However, it must be said, he did it his way.

Indoctrinated in him was a burning desire to respect and look after the welfare of his soldiers and mates. As a Portsea graduate, I certainly understand this aspect of Roger's character, as from our time as young officer cadets, we were trained to be responsible leaders under all conditions. Subsequent intensive field training, leadership development and responsibility for his men, personally experienced by Roger as an infantry officer in armed conflict with a determined enemy, is the reason behind this characteristic, and military indoctrination at a young age remains with us for the rest of our lives.

This deep sense of responsibility imbued in Roger continued into his senior years. In 2019 he wrote to federal government in support of denied repatriation benefits for national servicemen with whom he served in the Malay Peninsula. Most recently, only six months ago, in August 2024, while not in good health, Roger gave a lasting example of his tenacity and values. He bravely addressed the gathered people of Miles at the Vietnam Veteran's Day commemorative service, just because he felt he had a duty to do so. While suffering a serious fall a little later in October, he advised me his reason; "I am the most bemedalled veteran in Miles". This was 58 years after his first deployment to the country.

As with each of our classmates, in his later years Roger's health deteriorated, and it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the considerable medical care and support afforded him by the Department of Veteran's Affairs during those years. I know Roger appreciated this support very much.

Roger has three beautiful, talented, successful daughters and ten appreciative grandchildren, each of whom he was very proud. Of course they have many reasons to be proud of him; he was the real deal. Among other personal achievements, Roger leaves the sport of Australian swimming with a memorable Wickham family legacy.

In retirement I now live in Kirra, near his surf club and regularly walk to Coolangatta around the esplanade for shopping. Occasionally as I pass the Kirra Surf Club and walk upstairs into the restaurant, I look at their Champions' Board which will remain on the wall for many years to come. Conspicuous in bold, gold lettering, is the name 'Roger Wickham, 1959 Junior Surf Belt Champion'. I am then reminded of a decent, honourable father, grandfather and brother to Vanessa, Paula, Lee and John. Also, a friend to many and importantly, a well experienced soldier who served his country with distinction.

So, farewell Roger. Rest in peace. We, your classmates, both Australian and New Zealand will miss you.

LEST WE FORGET.

6 March 2025.