

Major Peter Gustafson (Retd)

Major Bernie Gaynor, RFD

Major Peter Gustafson was born in Takoradi, Ghana, West Africa on 29 Oct 1955, the son of British parents. His father fought with the Northumberland Fusiliers during World War Two, including at El Alamein. The Gustafson family eventually included three sons of whom Peter was the eldest, and migrated to Australia in 1965, settling at Boronia in Melbourne. He grew up in a close and happy family under the guidance of marvellous parents.

Peter joined the Army in 1974 and, after completing initial training at Kapooka, joined the Royal Australian Engineers as a Sapper at 3rd Field Engineer Regiment. In 1975, he attended officer training at Officer Cadet School Portsea where he graduated at the end of that year as a second lieutenant and was posted to 16th Air Defence Regiment (Light) at Woodside, SA – a Regiment that quickly became as much a part of him as he became of it.

Peter's subsequent connection to 16th Air Defence Regiment over the next 30 years was multi-faceted and enduring: 16 was his Regiment. His deep regard for it can probably be understood only by someone else from a military background, of long service and close Regimental connection. He had numerous postings there – at least ten, according to his service record - including troop officer and troop commander within the missile batteries, as well as Quartermaster, Battery Commander 110th Air Defence Battery and Second In Command. Peter knew all of the 16th Air Defence Regiment characters of all ranks between 1975 and about 2005 and they knew him. His legacy within the new Officers Mess was the construction of 'The Bungalow' which continues to be enjoyed by Mess members at Woodside today. He commanded a contingent to RAAF Base Butterworth, Malaysia, in 1998. In all, he served his country for over 32 years.

Peter also spent many years in Ground Liaison where his invariable good humour, positive attitude and military proficiency endeared him to a large number of RAAF personnel. Indeed, one letter of condolence that his wife, Val, received after his death was from the Vice Chief of the Defence Force, Air Marshall Mark Binskin, AO, who had nothing but happy memories of Peter's service as a Ground Liaison Officer at Williamstown and who was saddened by Pete's passing.

The last ten years were very difficult for Pete. In 2002, his two brothers, to whom he was very close, each collapsed and died within a couple of months of each other, quite suddenly and with an effect that devastated both Peter and his parents. Peter left the Army in 2007, specifically to be near his parents at Rosebud, in order to care for them – very much in keeping with an inherent, instinctive generosity that was quite remarkable. The staggering impact of these events notably contributed to Pete's very early death. It is with the greatest sadness that I note that Pete's parents, both still alive, have been predeceased by all of their children.

Peter Gustafson was one of the finest people I have ever known and the greatest mate I will ever have. Not only was he a confident and competent officer and a proud Air Defender, he was possessed of an invariably full reservoir of good humour and optimism that was very much his trademark and a great boon to those around him. All of us who were Pete's mates have got story after story – fond, happy stories – of things we did as young officers, with Pete front and centre in whatever was happening and usually integral to the humour erupting all about us. The Mess, when Pete was there, was always a brighter and happier place. I remember with a great deal of affection the trips Pete and I made in his indefatigable yellow Celica to Melbourne or into Adelaide – including one famous instance where, after a long military exercise, Pete and I decided to go to the drive-ins where we both promptly fell asleep watching a really boring movie, to be woken at about 2 am by a number of grumpy drive-in employees who dourly wondered, as they

humourlessly peered into our totally fogged-up car, if we had finished so they could all go home. Our aggrieved protestations of innocence cut no ice whatsoever. And I was with Pete the night he met Val, who became the love of his life, his wife for over 32 years and mother to their four children.

Peter was buried at the Rye Cemetery on the Mornington Peninsula on the morning of Monday 18th July 2011. He is with his brothers. In addition to his wife, Val, their children Leonie, Sarah, Matthew and Sam and Pete's parents, it was my very great but sad honour to be there with Colonel Ross Parrott, Colonel Paul Appleton, Squadron Leader Roger McKay, Warrant Officer Class Two 'Drac' Flitton, former Bombardiers Darren Manser and Mark Robinson. Together, we represented all his Air Defence and Royal Australian Air Force mates and colleagues. Val farewelled her husband; the kids their father; his parents their final son. The rest of us said goodbye to a marvellous Air Defender who gave much more to those around him than he ever asked for himself. To my great mate – to our great mate – Peter Gustafson: Vale.

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