

# **AUSTRALIAN GUNNER OBITUARY RESOURCE**

## **Warrant Officer Class Two Raymond Thomas McGrath, GM**

**(31 August 1940 – 19 September 2006)**

**Reproduced from an article by Ross Eastgate  
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On January 25, 1969, Temporary Sergeant Ray McGrath was instructing on the notoriously tough battle efficiency course at the Jungle Training Centre at Canungra. The course was a prerequisite for service with the Australian Army in South Vietnam and emphasised physical fitness, weapon proficiency and jungle tactics. The instructors were all professional soldiers with operational service, in Sergeant McGrath's case as an Air Defence gunner in Butterworth, Malaysia during the Confrontation with Indonesia.

Many of the students attending the Battle Efficiency (BE) course were National Servicemen, including Private Graham Moss, a rifleman en route to the reinforcement unit at the Australian Task Force at Nui Dat in Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam. Sergeant McGrath's role on this particular morning was to supervise students as they move to and throw grenades from a revetted slit trench. When Private Moss pulled the pin from his grenade he accidentally dropped the grenade into the trench and momentarily froze.

Typically, training grenades were fitted with a seven second fuse and Sergeant McGrath without hesitation threw Private Moss from the trench and then attempted to get clear himself. He had not completely exited the trench when the grenade exploded, inflicting multiple shrapnel wounds to his left leg. Sergeant McGrath was subsequently awarded the George Medal for gallantry, the second highest award for bravery in such circumstances after the George Cross. The citation remarked upon his 'unselfish act of courage, together with his stoical indifference to pain during his subsequent evacuation'.

Raymond Thomas McGrath was born in Victoria's Gippsland although it was a family legend that the birth was registered in nearby Bunyip, a place which few believed existed. He was one of five children of dairy farmers Les and Molly. The small family farm could not support all the children so Ray began his working life in a general store, then later at Nestles milk factory at Dennington.

When his parents decided to sell up and move to a larger property in Western Australia, he decided that dairying was not for him and enlisted in the Army in 1963. After service in Malaysia with 111 Air Defence Battery he was posted to Canungra and then to Townsville in 1969 with 4<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment, Royal Australian Artillery which was preparing to deploy to Vietnam.

He was now 29, single and living in the Sergeants' mess with a couple of equally unattached mates, a combination who, their Battery Commander Keith Hall recalled, was every Battery Sergeant Major's worst nightmare. Fond of a drink and a party, they were of that ilk and that time in the life of the Australian Army when everyone worked hard and equally played hard and there was a war to be fought.

Ray McGrath had one other notable trait. In whichever mess he lived, chilli bushes would mysteriously sprout in the decorative plant pots, and he was even reputed to have had chilli bushes growing by his tent in Vietnam.

After Vietnam his career path followed the usual Army progression of training and regimental appointments including as a Warrant Officer on the training cadre of 7 Field Regiment, an Army Reserve unit in Newcastle in 1979. Here he met Beverly Cameron and

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at the age of 42, Ray McGrath surrendered his bachelor status, marrying Beverly in Townsville in 1982 and acquiring in the process an instant adult family of two sons and a daughter.

Ray left the Army in 1985 after 22 years service and the couple settled at Deception Bay where he found employment in the security industry.

A keen fisherman, he indulged in fishing and camping with his children and grandchildren, keeping in touch with his Army mates and never losing his love of a good party. When he once suffered a back injury while camping he had to be evacuated by helicopter telling the crew the last time he had been in a chopper people were shooting at him.

In June 2003 Ray had returned to Malaysia with fellow air defenders to receive the Pingat Jasa Malaysia medal from the Malaysian Chief of the Defence Force for his service during the confrontation. The citation read in part, 'for distinguished chivalry, gallantry and sacrifice', ideals which Ray McGrath lived up to even in death, donating his kidneys and corneas for transplant.

Ray died on September 19 2006 of complications following heart surgery. He was survived by Beverly, their children, eight grandchildren and one great grandchild.

### **Post script by Peter Bruce**

Raymond T was one of the unique characters of the RAA and there are numerous stories that could be written about him however most are best left to reunions when mates get together and remember departed comrades. A couple of stories do however come to mind. Who could forget the orange bar stool in the Sergeants' Mess at North Head where Ray would sit and read his books of an evening. Was that a bottle of water beside him? When last drinks were called, Ray would close the book and say "goodnight all" and make his way back to his room. Always a keen golfer, his golfing partners on Saturday at Long Reef Golf Club tell many tales of Ray on the 1<sup>st</sup> tee at their usual hit off time of 1.06pm with Ray occasionally not at his best but perhaps the large cigar he sometimes smoked may have helped.

On operations in South Vietnam as the Regimental Police Sergeant of 4<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment, Ray had several RP diggers working with him and one was a light heavyweight golden gloves boxer of some renown. On one occasion, Ray had locked up a villain in the Regiments lock up and the villain was not happy. "Let me out and I'll flatten the lot of you" he screamed. The boxer RP begged Ray to let him out but luckily for the villain, Ray did not.

As was mentioned, Ray met his perfect match in Bev. They rode bikes together; they went camping on the Noosa River together often with the grandchildren and they travelled together. Wonderful hosts, they both certainly enjoyed a beer or two together. Although Ray has been gone a few years now, the wonderful memories of his life linger on. Cheers Raymond T McGrath.