

## AUSTRALIAN GUNNER OBITUARY RESOURCE

### William Alfred (Bill) Ritchie

15 September 1943 – 31 March 2016

By Colonel A. R. Burke, OAM (Retd)



Sadly, another of the true characters of the Royal Regiment of Australian Artillery, Big Bill Ritchie succumbed to motor neuron disease on 31 March 2016.

Bill was born in Perth, WA on 15 September 1943. He was the first born of 'the gang of four' which were always very close. To listen to Bill describing his youth as 'digging ditches and punching nails', one could believe that his childhood was one of hard labour. However, those memories led to his being very lenient with his own children in later years.

Young Bill attended Aquinas College, a Catholic school for boys of all ages at Salter Point, Perth where he excelled at rugby and rowing and completed his secondary education in 1959. Bill always placed an enormous value on being an Aquinian and formulated some lifelong friendships with his school mates.

He commenced paid employment with the Shell Company as a finance trainee and joined the Citizen Military Force 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Regiment RAA as a hobby. He quickly rose to commissioned rank in 1964 before deciding to make the Army his fulltime career.

Selected for the Officer Cadet School at Portsea, the young cadet met Captain Jock Jenvey, his Artillery instructor and probably the most persuasive influence in Second Lieutenant Ritchie graduating into the RAA. Six months later, his old school mate, Dick Lawler also arrived as an officer cadet at Portsea and no doubt Bill was a determining factor with Dick also joining the Royal Regiment.

Following Young Officer training at the School of Artillery, Bill was posted to 4<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment RAA at Wacol, Brisbane where, to his delight, he found his battery commander was now Major Jock Jenvey. This was March 1966 and the 108<sup>th</sup> Field Battery was just being raised to go to Vietnam in June next year. As the first two officers in the 108<sup>th</sup>, Bill and Jock developed a very close camaraderie. Better still, his mate Dick Lawler also joined the battery.

By April 1967, they were at war establishment and Bill and his battery arrived in Vietnam on 9 June 1967. In Major Jenvey's words, 'Bill was the best GPO [gun position officer] I have ever met and the only GPO to serve a full year in [that job] in SVN (South Vietnam). It was incredibly demanding to be a GPO in SVN where the slightest miscalculation would result in friendly casualties.'

With the changeover to M2A2 howitzers, 'Bill showed great innovation in using pressed steel plate (PSP) to allow the guns to have an arc of 360 degrees.' 'In addition he used the PSP for overhead cover for personal weapon pits. This innovation saved many lives.' 'Bill [also] assumed responsibility for the defence of the gun position,' concluded his battery commander.

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Michele had come on the scene in 1961 though his (match making?) mother for whom she worked. Bill was fingered to tutor Michele in maths so she could sit her nursing exams. Although Bill conscientiously met Michele each lunch time, his son in law, Kevin remarks that 'to this day Michele is not great with maths problems'.

Romance certainly blossomed and stood the test of time when Bill went to Portsea then Brisbane then Vietnam. Kevin tells how the lad returned from Vietnam on a Tuesday, the couple became engaged the following Monday and married two weeks later. Bill's new posting was with the 110<sup>th</sup> Light Anti Aircraft Battery in Singapore and Malaysia and the newlyweds flew off to Penang only a matter of days after their wedding. What a grand way to begin married life—living in a tropical paradise in a government provided married quarter with house help.

On return to Australia in late 1969, Lieutenant Ritchie was posted to the 8<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment RAA, Holsworthy and promoted captain. With the exception of a Long Gunnery Staff Course in the UK in 1973-74 and the Australian Staff College at Queenscliff, Victoria in 1979, Bill was to spend the remainder of his Army career in the Sydney area.

As battery captain of the 103<sup>rd</sup> Medium Battery, Bill reapplied his field gunnery skills and was a great steadying influence on a sub unit which spent most of its time supporting the School of Artillery's courses on Holsworthy Range. Bill and I attended the Regimental Officers' Gunnery Course at North Head in early 1970 and then returned to 8<sup>th</sup> Medium—he back to the 103<sup>rd</sup> and I to adjutant of the unit. When I went off to the UK twelve months later, Bill took over as adjutant.

These was also the years when Bill became a father for the first time. Michele tells how Danielle was 'the apple of his eye and the spitting image of her doting Dad'. Meanwhile, Captain Ritchie was a strong, firm but fair adjutant and his reward was to follow me to the UK for a Long Gunnery Staff Course in 1973.

Idyllic English countryside, the work hard, play hard ethic of the Brits and then the piercing cold of the UK winter produced more than happy times for the Ritchies—a son, Michael with a father who was so thrilled to have his baby boy. This overseas posting concluded with Bill being attached to the British Army of the Rhine, Germany as an instructor for three months.

On return to Sydney, Bill became an instructor in gunnery (IG) at the School of Artillery at North Head. He was a very good trainer and, on completing this two year posting, he was given the opportunity to further his experience on promotion to major at Headquarters Training Command in Sydney. This was the era of the Systems Approach to Training and Bill assisted six Army schools to transit to this revolutionary new method. Though he did a good job, Bill was a hands-on soldier and was gratified after only twelve months to be appointed battery commander of 102<sup>nd</sup> Field Battery at Holsworthy.

Steve Joske, a young subbie in the 102<sup>nd</sup> described Bill as 'quite a figure and certainly larger than life'. Danielle said that 'having a Dad in the Army made Michael and I feel like we had our very own GI Joe, a tough dude that would always protect us.' Michael was always filled with pride to have an Army officer Dad and recalls 'watching him in awe as he led his men around the parade ground, in full dress uniform, sword presented, bellowing out "Eyes Right" with the crisp snap of his arm into a salute position as he marched past the crowd.'

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During this period, Bill's battery supported the School of Artillery, the mechanised trials of the 5<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> Battalion RAR, and carried out general training for demonstrations. He also commanded a contingent of 120 Australian soldiers mixed with American units for exercises in Hawaii.

After two glorious years in command, Major Ritchie was brought back to earth with a year at Khaki Kindergarten, the students of 1979's name for their year at the Australian Staff College, Queenscliff, Victoria. Bill could always be relied upon for a dry and frequently humorous contribution to syndicate discussions and often broke up the quasi professional tone of military solutions. This was a significant change of pace for the family, but they fitted in very well, especially with the extracurricular sporting and social events at the College.

Next, it was back to Sydney and the School again. Bill took up the appointment of the training officer on the headquarters. With Staff College and a year's experience at Headquarters Training Command under his belt, he was ideally suited to this job. When his commanding officer / chief instructor at the time, Lieutenant Colonel George Salmon was asked about his performance, he replied, 'Well Bill was Bill as you know. But he did not take any nonsense from either the instructors or the staff at Training Command. He certainly did the job.'

Meanwhile, Michele was coming out of a battle with melanoma and Bill purchased a sewing machine business to help her get back on her feet. Belle Fabrics thrived under Michele though Kevin said that 'Bill for years afterwards would regale the family with his tales of riding his racing push bike from his North Head Army base to the shop in Belrose every time Michele was faced with a sewing machine demonstration.'

This business also became a passion of Bill's and he and Michele agreed that continuing this in their home town would provide an enjoyable second career. Major Ritchie sought a posting to WA and was appointed the Staff Officer Grade Two Operations on the 5<sup>th</sup> Military District Headquarters in Perth. Two years there took him up to his 20 years of pensionable service and on 15 January 1985, he hung up his uniform and moved to a second career.

Southlands Fabric and Sewing Centre was spawned shortly afterwards and became Bill's passion. Again, Kevin describes him as 'a natural salesperson who was very fortunate to work with the love of his life building a fantastic business together.' Even following selling up this business after some 30 years, Bill the Sewing Machine Man could not relax and was 'always planning trips to obscure corners of the state to run classes and service sewing machines.' Grey Nomads with Purpose he called it.

Between 2006 and 2010, Bill was thrilled to be called back into the part time uniform of the honorary Colonel Commandant RAA (Western Region). This was a heady time again mixing with Gunners from his old unit in Perth. There were also annual trips to the east coast for conferences, including one to Canberra where his beloved 102<sup>nd</sup> Battery was granted the honour title 'Coral' in recognition of its gallant performance during the battle of that name in Vietnam in 1968.

Behind the scenes, Bill had always been a most loving family man. His children described him as their hero and were forever mimicking his sayings, 'So what's the problem?' and 'You will never die of embarrassment'. He was a dedicated Mr Wolf at Danielle's earliest memories of birthday parties and though not an overly religious man, Michael was certain

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he 'provided [my Dad] with many occasions to turn to God.' With grandchildren Bill relished the role of Poppy and adored them all. He saw Jayden and Michael with the same wonderful relationship he had with Michael; he relived his rugby escapades through Oli; saw his own fearless freedom of expression through Sophie and was so proud of Cameron's running and AFL skills.

Danielle tells how the family was 'utterly devastated' when the diagnosis of Motor Neuron Disease came in 2015. Bill's attitude to this insidious condition was to 'fight the fight of all fights' (Kevin), display 'courage, dignity and of course the Ritchie humour (Danielle), but to accept it 'with courage and tenacity' (Michael). Michele's love came strongly to the fore and was inspiring in the care she lavished upon Bill at this time. Michael observed that in return, Bill 'developed Mum into a superhero' to take over as head of the family. His old mate, Dick Lawler describes his battle as 'a mighty struggle right to the end'.

Vale William Alfred (Bill) Ritchie—great practical, no nonsense officer, sewing machine salesman extraordinaire and loving family patriarch. In Dick Lawler's eulogy words, 'No matter what we may have thought of him on his style, we all respected him as a fellow Gunner officer and his contribution to the Royal Regiment.' Posted to the Great Gun Park up above at 72 years young.