

AUSTRALIAN GUNNER OBITUARY RESOURCE

Colonel Alfred David (Alf) Watt, OBE (Retd)

(9 April 1917 – 30 December 2013)

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First Published in The Sydney Morning Herald 3rd April 2014

Subsequently Published in Cannonball No 87 March 2014

Additions by Peter Bruce



Alfred David Watt was born in Sydney on April 9, 1917, one of six children of William and Elizabeth Watt. He grew up in Belmore. He saw his family struggle through the Depression but he described his boyhood as: *"For me, they were years of almost indescribable joy. It was my very good fortune to have perfect health and a totally uncomplicated attitude to life, which engendered a continuous sense of well-being, confidence and optimism."* This remained his attitude for life.

He was educated at Canterbury Boys High School, and much of his social life revolved around the Moorefields Methodist Church. He became a local preacher, and his strong Methodist values, along with those of his working-class family, formed the bedrock of his life.

Alf Watt joined the Royal Australian Artillery in the late 1930s. Shortly after officer training, he was posted to Darwin as commander of a 9.2 inch battery. It was literally a baptism by fire into a stellar career as an artillery commander.

Towards the end of World War II, he was given the opportunity to join an expanding regular army and to attend the Australian Military Staff College. His course assessment read: *"The*

outstanding officer on the course, keen, energetic and capable with a logical approach to all problems. A delightful personality and at ease in any company."

This led to his being selected to undertake two years of advanced artillery training at the Royal School of Artillery in Larkhill near Salisbury. In 1943 he had married Norma Bell, and he sailed for London with her and two young daughters. After the course, Watt was posted to Germany and spent time with the Occupation Army. His next major posting was with the New Zealand Army in Korea as commander of the 163 Field Battery with 25-pounder guns. These Batteries had two troops of 4 x 25 Pounders each. His Battery was part of 16 Field Regiment. The regiment was part of a Division consisting of Canadian and British field artillery regiment. He proved to be an innovative commander, and his speeds for deployment of a field battery were significantly better than those achieved by the US forces (who were suffering heavy losses). This, and much more, is described in his book *Memoirs of a Temporary Kiwi in Korea*, written when he was 90.

Watt had enormous respect for the Kiwis who fought under him. He was mentioned in despatches and, on his return to Australia, became commanding officer and chief instructor of the School of Artillery at North Head, a role in which he excelled. He was an advocate of maintain the 9.2inch guns at North Head. David Horner in his book *"The Gunners"*, quotes a then Lieutenant Colonel Alf Watt as saying *"I was at Army Headquarters at that time (late 50s /early 60s) and tried very hard to have North Battery retained – the employment of a NCO and one man to maintain the battery in A1 order was just the most cost-effective work in the entire Army. (Staff Officers) were*

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bemused by air power, they sneered at coast artillery and seemed unable to see any value in retaining such a marvellous asset at virtually no cost."

He then took a series of senior and important postings with the army around Australia. He was also Australia's representative in liaison exercises with the US Army in Hawaii. In preparation for a post-military career, Watt had studied for a Bachelor of Arts. He received an OBE in 1964 and retired from the army with the rank of colonel.

After the army, in 1967, Watt began a career in the Australian Public Service. After several years he returned to London to an assistant secretary post at Australia House. He was accompanied on this posting by his wife Norma and their two sons. While he was in London, he was vice-chairman of the International Squash Racquets Association, president of London Legacy and the Australian representative on the International War Graves Commission. London Legacy was founded in 1947 and remains a sister club to the 49 Legacy Clubs in Australia.

Through Australia House, Watt met many leading sportsmen and women and politicians. A formidable squash player, he organised the squash game in which the diplomat Richard Woolcott hit William McMahon across the bridge of the nose, then had to organise the prime minister's facial repairs.

Back in Canberra, Watt took a senior position as head of the information branch in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, a position that had many interesting moments, especially in the dying days of the Whitlam government.

He retired at 60 and returned to study, achieving outstanding results in philosophy. In their later years, Alf and Norma travelled in Australia and overseas. He took up bushwalking and continued his tireless service with Legacy. He had been a Legatee and senior Legacy office-bearer for some 38 years when he finally resigned as chairman of the Western Suburbs Division of Sydney Legacy in 2001. When Norma's health declined, Alf became her full-time carer until her death in 2012.

Alf Watt is survived by two children, Lynette and Ian, eight grandchildren and six great-grandchildren and a brother and sister.

Acknowledgements:

- Lynette and Ron Sandland.
- Cannonball – The Journal of the Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company.
- David Horner, author of 'The Gunners'.