

# Vale

## Brigadier D. (Don) Willett, AM (Retd)

*Andrew Willett*

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Don Willett was a career Army officer which meant that for much of his life he was part of a hierarchical organisation with a purpose, an ethos, a culture and a discipline. Don was the commander, starting with a section, then a troop, a battery, a training school and finally head of the Army's 4th Military District, effectively being South Australia. He was also an instructor and an assessor. He was a good administrator, he knew the rules and regulations and he had an eye for detail, especially the maintenance of guns. Don took a pride in his unit and its personnel.

Born at Bairnsdale on 22nd April 1925, he soon moved with his parents to Bentleigh where grew up in the Depression. He was involved in youth activities including YMCA and he had after school jobs to earn pocket money; including a paper round. Academically he was a good student and showed leadership, being a prefect at Melbourne Boys High School.

He entered the Royal Military College Duntroon in February 1942, when he was still 16, and developed a passion for rugby union. He was the youngest cadet ever to graduate, gaining his commission in December 1943. As a lieutenant in the Royal Australian Artillery he undertook various Regimental courses before being posted to Headquarters Australian Military Forces on Morotai. While he was still en route the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan so his time in the Pacific was fairly short. Returning to Australia he had a number of junior staff postings before being selected to attend a long gunnery course at the British Army School of Artillery in 1949. He was Adjutant at 2nd Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment in Geelong in 1952. In 1953 he served in Korea on Headquarters 1<sup>st</sup> Commonwealth Division. He always remembered the bitter cold and the miserable conditions of that Korean winter.

He returned in 1954 to be an instructor at the School of Artillery, Manly. He attended Staff College at Queenscliff in 1956 and this was followed with posting as Battery Commander of 111th Light Anti-Aircraft Battery in 1958. Then he was the Commanding Officer and Chief Instructor at the School of Artillery in 1960. From 1961 to 1971 he held staff postings in Army Headquarters and was an instructor at Staff College. In 1972, then Colonel Willett was the first Australian to attend the Indian National Defence College. While on a study tour he took a photograph of the top of Mount Everest from an Indian Air Force aircraft - viewed from the Chinese side of the mountain which means the plane must have been well inside Chinese air space. Back in Australia he was Director of Training Policy before being promoted to Brigadier and appointed Commander 4th Field Force Group and Commandant 4th Military District. He retired in 1977 after 35 years of military service

This marked the start of many more activities in his life. He became State Director of the SA Liberal Party for seven years, including an electoral win for the Liberal Party. He was an elected member of the District Council of Stirling and served as Chairman of the Council in 1987-1988 during devastating bushfires. Don maintained his interest in Defence matters having joined the Royal United Services Institute in 1974, becoming a Life Member in 1995 and he served as president in South Australia, 1987-1988. He was also concerned for the welfare of others: he was a member of the legacy Club of Adelaide and served as vice-president. He was a vice-president of the Victoria League for Commonwealth friendship in South Australia and chaired the Joint Commonwealth Societies Council.