

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Brigadier Brien Chopin FORWARD, OBE

(1929-1975)

Brien Forward was born on 21 May 1929 in Cessnock, the son of a professional musician. The family moved to Lane Cove, NSW, in 1935 where he later attended North Sydney Boy's High School and became a sergeant in the cadet corps and a prefect prior to his entry to the Royal Military College in 1946.

It would have surprised his colleagues that he was ranked 28th in priority for acceptance from the NSW candidates. And, in his early years he was often disciplined for leaving his quarters in some disarray. However, he was also practical, determined and conscientious and had a gift for rapid and sound assessment of problems and deriving sensible solutions and he was a good rugby footballer. Although he was the youngest member of his class, he was appointed Battalion Sergeant Major of the Corps of Staff Cadets in his final year. At graduation, Forward was also awarded the Sword of Honour and his RMC final report stated that he: 'should make a sound and determined leader'.

He graduated eighth, of his RMC class of 43, in December 1948, and was allocated to Artillery. After graduation, he followed the usual Regimental path until February 1951 when he started flying training at RAAF Base Fairbairn, ACT, with another Gunner officer, Brian Luscombe, an RMC classmate. His future wife, Rosemary Enfield, was present to see them presented with their 'wings' on 10 September. The Korean War was in progress and there was only one posting for an Australian pilot with 1903 Air OP Flight RAF in Korea. His fellow trainee, Luscombe, won the toss. He was killed on what was to be his last day in Korea. Forward replaced him on 26 June 1952 and logged 250 hours flying and conducted 120 shoots.

After Korea he was sent to a flying instructor's course at RAF Central Flying School at South Cerney, Gloucestershire, UK. His wedding to Rosemary had been planned for Sydney but now took place in Cirencester on 24 January 1953. A posting at the Army Flying School at Middle Wallop followed before he returned in August to become the Army Flying Instructor with 16th Air OP Flight, RAAF, at Fairbairn for the next two years.

In September 1955, he returned to the UK and gained a second endorsement on his pilot's licence for helicopters with No.705 Squadron, Royal Navy, at Lee-on-Solent. He had the opportunity to demonstrate his flying skills in rescuing a seriously ill lighthouse keeper during a violent storm, a newsworthy event at the time. He had not wished to take on this helicopter training being of the view that his future lay with the guns.

His request was answered in early 1956 with successive postings as adjutant, 21st and later 23rd Field Regiments, CMF, both based in Sydney. During those three years Forward made

an indelible impression with his commanding personality and profound intellect on many young enthusiastic CMF gunners. Biennial TEWTs, hitherto rather benign affairs, became weekends of challenging intellectual rigour in all aspects of field gunnery. He made it quite clear that only high standards were acceptable.

In 1959, he was promoted to major and became a student at the Australian Staff College. Thereafter, he served with 1st and 4th Field Regiments and HQRAA 1st Division from 1959 to 1963 when he was appointed to command the 102nd Field Battery.

The battery was allotted to 45th Light Regiment, RA, at Terendak Camp, Malacca. His battery saw action briefly at the Merlimau Swamps south of Malacca against an Indonesian raiding party. Soon after, the battery was to deploy in Sarawak, Borneo, for about four months from April 1965 to support action against Indonesian incursions along the border. Forward was very proud of his Gunners and what they had done. He confided to his wife that 'he felt sure it would always be the highlight of his career, in that he knew every man in the battery and felt a kinship that he would not have the privilege to experience again'.

On return to Australia he was promoted lieutenant colonel as GSO 1 Western Command before becoming a member of the Directing Staff at the Army Staff College at Queenscliff for two years. Then back to the guns and command of 4th Field Regiment at Lavarack Barracks, Townsville, to train it for deployment to Vietnam in March 1970. He was coordinator of all fire support agencies for 1st Australian Task Force in Phouc Tuy province.

Assets were drawn from the US Army and Air Force, Royal New Zealand Artillery and the RAAF. He exercised his role with firmness, tact and patience. He would later publically and vigorously defend his Kiwi gunners when a senator impugned their reputation. When the need for fire support in remote areas became apparent, Forward organised mobile artillery detachments to ensure that every operational unit in the field could receive supporting fire. There is no doubt that his sound advice, his broad tactical sense, his firmness, determination, sound leadership and humour during periods of stress, enabled the Task Force to have the benefit of prompt, effective, coordinated fire support throughout his period in Vietnam. His performance was recognised by the award of the OBE.

On return to Australia he was promoted as Colonel (Operations) in the Directorate of Operations and Plans at AHQ Canberra where he was to stay until he took over the directorate as a brigadier in May 1974. It was a period of much organisational turbulence involving fundamental organisational and staff changes, and the demands of contingency planning and training. Sadly his full potential was not realised for he died of a sudden heart attack on 27 July 1975. He was to have been the next Australian student at the RCDS, London, and was expected to rise to the highest ranks before his untimely death intervened.

Brien Forward was interred at Woden Cemetery, ACT. He left a widow Rosemary (now Mrs R. Boyden) and two children, Lisa Forward and Jennie Lovell. In 1997, Mrs Boyden, representing her family, presented the bell of the former troopship *MV Duntroon* to RMC in Brien's memory. Placed close to the flagpole it is rung when the flag is raised and lowered every day.

Sources: *Forward Dossier*, RMC Archives; Alexander M. Palmer, *Military Minded*, p. 91; D. Horner, *The Gunners*, pp. 434-6, 464-5, 492, 495; Army Lists (various); Mrs R. Boyden, Letters 2 April 2003, 11 November 2006; ABC News *Transcript 13 Dec 1955*; Alan H. Smith, *Gunners in Borneo*, pp. 169-171; J. Whitelaw.

