

## AUSTRALIAN GUNNER OBITUARY RESOURCE

### Major Clifford (cliff) Coggins

( 24 July 1963 – 5 August 2014)

By Major Colin Smith



Cliff was born on 24<sup>th</sup> July 1963 in Sunderland, England. His early years were spent growing up in terraced houses with cobbled back streets in the impoverished regions of the North East, left that way from the decline in the coal mining, shipbuilding and steel industries that had previously flourished. Cliff was a bright and intelligent young man who was determined to escape this and make a better life for himself. He chose to do this through a career in the Army and I doubt that even he himself would have thought that it would last for 35 years and with such eminent success in both the enlisted and commissioned ranks.

Cliff had a distinguished career in the British Army where he served the majority of his time, along with friends such as Karl Britten, in 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery: a unit he loved and a unit that loved him. He served on Swingfire Anti Tank Guided Weapon systems, Abbot, M109 and AS90 SP Guns and was considered amongst the elite of Command Post Operators. Because of his leadership, management, organisational and technical skills, Cliff was later selected to serve on the Gunnery Training Team, a highly regarded and much sought after position.

On promotion to Warrant Officer Class One Cliff was selected as RSM of 14 Regiment, a unit that boasted the biggest Sergeants' Mess in the Royal Artillery. Cliff was handpicked for this position due to his ability to apply intellectual reasoning and technical '*nouse*' to bring into line the many other Warrant Officer Class One's who were members of the Gunnery Staff and the combined mess. Cliff made light work of this task and turned an almost dysfunctional establishment into a cohesive institution that members were proud to be part of. Following two highly successful tenures as an RSM and subsequently as GSM, Cliff was selected for commissioning in the Royal Artillery but chose to follow a career in the Royal Australian Artillery and build a better life for himself, Tracy and Gemma in Australia.

I first met Cliff 20 years ago when we were selected to attend Gunnery Career Course 11 at the School of Artillery in Larkhill. I remember the first day well, sat in the common room going through our introductions. I sat opposite Cliff and can recall how his calm demeanour and professional attitude impressed not only me, but everyone in the room. Throughout the year long course Cliff continued to lead, mentor and inspire others, always ready to lend a hand to those in need.

Many of us lived off base during the course and car shared as a means of commuting. Cliff drove and shared a Mini Cooper with a number of friends. Some people would say that a car is a reflection of the character of the driver, and if this is so then one of the UK's biggest and best exports which is loved and cherished by thousands would be a fair summary of Cliff.

Cliff was a far cry from the warrant officers of old. He was not cantankerous or antagonistic and he didn't shout and bawl. He was technically adept, a great leader and

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manager and was always approachable. He was sharp, quick witted and had a fantastic sense of humour that he shared with young and old alike. He could relate to younger generations with contemporary humour that was wasted on others. He would often discuss one of his favourite comedies '*Bo Selecta*' with my sons and whenever I think of his squeaky Michael Jackson impression and tales of the bear in a tree, it will always bring a tear to my eyes.

Cliff was always willing to help our and would always offer before being asked. On our arrival in Australia, six weeks after Cliff himself had arrived, he was the first to knock on the door providing much needed guidance and advice on what, when and how. When setting up home we purchased the same whitegoods, the same cars and even the same investment properties were only two doors away from one another. We were given the nickname of the '*umbilical twins*'. A tag, I was, and always will be, proud of and happy to share. Cliff was commissioned in December 2005 and was posted to 4<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment in Townsville. I remember how envious we were, not of Cliffs much deserved success, but of the fact that he had escaped Puckapunyal before we had.

Cliff was human too and certainly had his moments. Whilst driving across Puckka range in his earlier days in Australia he became geographically embarrassed. The safety net burst into life and all range users were to acknowledge the check firing order and send their locations. Cliff would have had quite a chuckle to himself think that someone had taken a wrong turn somewhere. He had actually driven through a range gate with a red flag. We have all shared a few laughs with Cliff over that one.

Another faux pas of Cliff's was his comprehension of foreign dialects. When Cliff, Tracy and Gemma first arrived in Puckapunyal they were amongst the first of the recent laterals and were very popular. Their positive approach to transition and their enthusiasm to meet and befriend new people often meant they were stopped and questioned about their experiences of their new country, its culture, environment and wildlife. On one occasion, Cliff was asked by a native New Zealander in her best Kiwi accent '*have you seen mini emus?*' To which Cliff replied with a puzzled expression – '*no but I have seen plenty of normal size ones*'.

Cliff was a brave guy who dared to tread where others feared. Tracy, Cliff's lovely wife of 26 years was the daughter of Cliffs Battery Sergeant Major. Cliff at the time was a Bombardier and many would have considered this liaison foolish, but having now known Tracy for a number of wonderful years it is easy to understand Cliff's motives. Cliff and Tracy shared many wonderful and enjoyable years together and were joined in that relationship in 1993 by their lovely daughter Gemma, whose contribution to the Australian community as a teacher is already receiving considerable praise. Cliff was extremely proud of Gemma who shared a special relationship with her Dad. I know she will miss him dearly, as too will Tracy and their two trusty companions Bailey and Bella.

Cliff wasn't a very big man physically, but he had a big heart, which makes the events of the last few weeks before his death even more incomprehensible. I do know that despite his relative size, his passing will leave an enormous hole in our lives. I know I can speak for many when I say we will all miss Cliff terribly. My one regret is that of not having made more of the friendship and relationship that we shared.

Cliff received numerous messages of condolence, each and every one bearing testament to the calibre of officer and gentleman that he was. When retired Generals and Politicians

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send messages of solace it is a mark of the high regard in which he was held throughout his lengthy military career.

There are many who knew Cliff for over 30 years and others who may have known him for a couple of years but regardless of length of time of friendships, the indelible impression left by our experiences with Cliff will remain with us forever. If every man and soldier aspired to be half the man that Cliff was, this world would be a much better place.

### **Acknowledgements:**

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