

AUSTRALIAN GUNNER OBITUARY RESOURCE

Brigadier John Garth Hughes AM

18 January 1935 - 1 December 2017

By Colonel (Retd) Arthur Burke OAM



Retired Brigadier John Garth Hughes AM passed away on 1 December 2017 as he had lived, and as he will be remembered—stoically, quietly, without any fuss and a gentleman to the end. It was his wish that there be no public funeral and no memorial service, but a large gathering of his friends two weeks later at the Royal Canberra Golf Club ensured that his peaceful passing was not forgotten.

Garth entered this world in Brisbane on 18 January 1935. A conscientious student and keen sportsman, his talent as a rugby centre saw him at the top of his game whilst at Brisbane's Anglican Church Grammar School (Churchie). The influence of Army Cadets at this institution led to his applying for and being accepted into the Royal Military College, Duntroon.

Garth entered the hallowed cloisters just after his eighteenth birthday in 1953.

This was the beginning of a lifetime of camaraderie with a very erudite class including later Gunners: Jock Jenvey, Norm Thomson, Jim Macfarlane, Gordon Fitzgerald, Don Quinn, Cliff Dodds, Ron Morris, Nick Marshall and John Gates; and other notables: Peter Day, Frank Cross, Blue Keldie, Brian Wade, John Sheldrick, Barry Phillips, Neville Smethurst, John Healy, Graeme Loughton, Bob Hagerty, Peter Douglas and New Zealanders John Gatley, Ken Gordon and Peter Hotop—just to name a few.

Staff Cadet Hughes carried his rugby talents to Duntroon as a valuable centre in the Firsts. He also played in the Cricket and Hockey Firsts, all of which earned him College colours— full Silver Boomerangs for rugby and cricket and a half for hockey. Lieutenant Hughes graduated in 1956 and was allocated to the Royal Australian Artillery (RAA). He attended the first post-war Regular Army Regimental Officers Gunnery (Air Defence) Course at the School of Artillery with classmates Gates, Macfarlane and Peter Roberts (RAEME). This was a precursor to raising the independent 111th Light Anti-Aircraft (LAA) Battery at Middle Head. However, the fresh RMC graduates had first to undertake regimental service at a National Service Training Battalion and Garth was posted to the 20th at Puckapunyal, Victoria.

It was late 1958 when Lieutenant Hughes reported to 111 LAA Battery, just in time for its move to a new home at Holsworthy west of Sydney. At last he was able to put his Gunner knowledge into practice and he threw himself into the training, administration, and of course the sports in his new unit. It was here that Garth developed a true passion for ack-ack, one which was to last for the rest of his life.

Two years later, by then Captain Hughes was appointed adjutant of 18 LAA Regiment at Kogarah, Sydney. This was a fully manned new 18-gun Number 12 electric 40 mm

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Bofors unit which had been placed on active strength standby for the 1956 Suez Crisis. As such, though originally raised as a Citizen Military Force (CMF) continuation training unit for National Servicemen, the 18th had a Regular Army outlook in which its new adjutant revelled. National Service was at its zenith at this time and the challenge of practice shoots from Jervis Bay to Newcastle's Fort Wallace kept Garth's life fully occupied—and most professionally satisfying.

In May 1961, Garth married Margaret and reached new levels of happiness, harmony and living style. The experience gained training National Service recruits and working with Regular and CMF soldiers admirably credentialed Captain Hughes for his late 1961 posting to the Officer Cadet School, Portsea as an instructor. For two years he enjoyed moulding citizens and young soldiers into officers and found this task not only enjoyable, but most satisfying. On the family side, Sallianne arrived in 1962 and Mandy a year later. Now, life in the Hughes's house was never dull!

The year 1964 welcomed Garth to a change of RAA genre—locating. Posted to the integrated (ARA and CMF) 131st Divisional Locating Battery, he found a unit spread over Sydney's West Pymble, Manly and North Head. Also, at this time, the Confrontation with Indonesia led to four new United States AN/KPQ-1 mortar locating radars being issued to the 131st. Konfrontasi also provided Garth with a brief interlude back with ack-ack when he was detached to the 121st LAA Battery in Darwin to assist with its raising, lest there be an air attack in that area.

Appreciating Captain Hughes's passion for ack-ack, the system posted him to the School of Artillery for four months to sharpen up his skills before promoting and appointing Major Hughes to raise and command 110 LAA Battery on 10 May 1965. As a fresh challenge, Garth was to prepare this unit for active service in Malaysia from June 1966. A boy child, Douglas was born in 1965 to balance the gender in the Hughes family. Margaret now faced the significant task of handling three youngsters, but like all good Army wives, she quickly became an expert in time management.

On 15 June 1966, Major Hughes and the first group of 110th Battery personnel arrived at Butterworth, Malaysia and commenced the take-over of guns and equipment from 111th Light Anti-Aircraft Battery. The formal handover by Major BR (Bruce) Topfer was a parade on 20 July and by the 22nd, all members of the 110th had arrived in Butterworth.

Training, exercises and various states of readiness fully occupied Garth and his battery till 11 August when all air defence units in the theatre were ordered a 'Complete Stand Down'. British air defence units then began returning to the UK as part of a reduction of forces in the theatre. Nevertheless, training, individual courses and exercises continued and there were always administrative aspects to keep Garth busy. December saw an advantageous move to a former British LAA unit's lines. During 1967, the Hughes's last child, Lucy arrived and Margaret was just so relieved to have an amah to assist her with the four children. This also allowed time for some decent social life in the delightful tropical environment of Penang.

Major Hughes enjoyed a change of scenery when he was selected to attend a SEATO Course in Thailand in March 1967. Sport also played an important part in Malaysia soldiering as did ceremonial parades. The 110th won the Grand Final of the Butterworth Basketball Competition in April and then on 10 May, the battery celebrated its second birthday—a parade, sport and families' barbecue. Meanwhile, practice camps were held

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at Asahan Range near the Melaka-Johore border and at China Rock in Johore, whilst two trips to the Cameron Highlands were yet another challenge.

Sadly, the life of the Raj was coming to an end as the peace agreement between Malaysia and Indonesia began to be negotiated at this time. This was signed on 11 August 1967 but Garth just missed the momentous event, having handed over to Major WJ (Warren) Murray and departed for the United Kingdom on 24 July.

The UK brought a change of pace for Major Hughes. As a student at the Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham, England, he lost his freedom of command enjoyed as a battery commander on active service and became one of a number of Australian students undertaking tertiary level courses at the College. However, though the Brits were hard task masters in the classroom, they played equally hard. The social life involved all the family and tennis and cricket were welcome options for Garth. The opportunities to travel around the British Isles and across Europe were also pleasant interludes from the routine of study.

Being a glutton for punishment, Major Hughes returned to Australia in January 1969 and again became a student, now at the Army Staff College, Queenscliff, Victoria. Nevertheless, with 15 months of study in the UK already under his belt, the culture shock of the classroom made less of a difference to Garth's life than it did to his fellow students. He enjoyed the 12 months at Queenscliff, as did the family. A 'home at the seaside', discovering the beautiful Bellarine Peninsula, the regular social activities of the Staff College, cricket, tennis and the odd fun game of rugby all combined for a happy year.

But it was then payback time and Major Hughes was not surprised when he was next posted to Canberra. However, he snared a good job as the air defence staff officer in the Directorate of Royal Artillery. The opportunity to put into practice the equipment lessons of Shrivenham and the staff experience of Staff College meshed together perfectly and provided Garth with immense job satisfaction. Canberra also was a bit of a reunion with old friends since many of his peers were being posted there at this time. Hence, there was no lack of social life.

Because of Garth's overseas sojourns, his courses and Canberra over the last five years, he had so far missed a posting to the Vietnam War. In February 1971, Major Hughes deployed to Vietnam as the senior adviser in the Delta with the Australian Army Training Team. The next 12 months in the field guiding Vietnamese forces was a combination of elation and satisfaction on one hand, and frustration and irritation on the other. Garth's tour ended with the cessation of all Australian training activities in December 1971 and the movement of IV Corps advisers to Vung Tau. The farewells and heartfelt thanks from US and South Vietnamese hierarchy had a tinge of sadness at the Team's departure. Nevertheless, with his inherent dedication, professionalism and a dash of the laconic, Garth had made the best of this time and came home safely and satisfied that he had 'done his job'.

Back in Army Headquarters in 1972, now Lieutenant Colonel Hughes found himself again in the technical stream but with the Office of the Superintendent Army Scientific Services. This was an interesting posting and fitted Garth well for his next challenge—returning to the Royal Military College of Science on the directing staff in mid-1973. This was a homecoming at a different level to 1968, but the social and sporting life combined

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with new friends amongst the staff, and the role of 'Godfather' to the 20 plus Australian students certainly filled in the hours when he was not in the classroom. The family was happy to be overseas again and it was a most enjoyable two years. His tour concluded attending the Queen's Birthday Parade in London in 1975 with fellow Gunner, then Major AG (Alan) and his wife Beth Hutchinson who were in the student body at Shrivenham.

Return to Australia saw a return to the technical stream as the lieutenant colonel in Trials Branch, Central Office, Canberra. This was a diverse and challenging three years with the decisions on new equipment for the post-Vietnam continental defence Army. Then, continuing on in the materiel cycle, Garth, on promotion to colonel at the end of 1978, became the Director of Operational Requirements, Army Office, Canberra. Though this was a demanding appointment with Major General RA [Ron] Grey AO DSO as Chief of Operations, Garth had the knowledge and experience to power through the job, and was respected by both the customers of Field Force Command and the producers in Materiel Branch Army. Best of all, his time in Defence Central had opened many doors to useful contacts for this job. Finally, the icing on the cake was Margaret and the family's delight at the stability of residence for another three years.

Garth joined the revered Molonglo Cricket Club, Canberra in 1976 and played conscientiously for three seasons. Retired Colonel CH (Chris) Hunter said the records show he played in 18 matches taking 9 wickets at an average of 24 and made 208 runs with a highest score of 36. With his very effusive nature, he was also a leading light at the Club's social functions.

Eleven years straight in the technical stream, the last six of which were in Canberra, deserved a change of diet. The Army recognised this and rewarded Colonel Hughes with another 'overseas' posting—to Tasmania as the Commander of the 6th Military District—and, in the 1982 Queen's Birthday Honours, the appointment of Member of the Order of Australia for his service to the Australian Army. This was a very interesting, varied and enjoyable time as the senior Defence person on the Apple Isle. The Hughes were on all the prominent 'cocktail' lists, were in attendance for important visitors, and had frequent trips around the state. It was such a relaxing and most pleasant change of pace after the 'nose to the grindstone' era in Canberra.

After three glorious years, Garth was appointed Colonel Administration, Headquarters Field Force Command in Sydney. But, six months later, he returned to Canberra in July 1985, was promoted brigadier and appointed President of the Australian Ordnance Council in the Defence Science and Technology Organisation. With the onset of his cancer, however, this was to be Garth's final posting. Nevertheless, right to the end on 23 December 1986, he maintained his signature dedication to the job before hanging up his spurs.

In remission by 1988, retired Brigadier Hughes accepted a position with Avio Consulting as their Military Systems Manager. For the next five years he enjoyed the challenge of assisting clients to define their vision and deliver innovative projects. The company motto, 'Do it right the first time' was very much up Garth's alley.

Garth loved meeting with people over a meal and was a great organiser. His Air Defence Luncheons in Canberra were legendary and old salts like retired Majors JM (Jack) Quantrill and SN (Sid) Penhaligon MBE would wax lyrical with compliments for his endeavours. Further, in the late 1990s, Garth took over and most successfully continued

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the very popular annual Retired Army Officers, Wives and Widows' Dinner each October/November.

Then there were the RMC Class of 56 reunions. Garth had been the class orderly for an astonishing 60 years. Retired Brigadier GJ (Graeme) Loughton AM cites class cohesiveness being due in no small way to Garth's 'assiduous ... attention to detail in organising the Canberra reunions', in sending out photos afterwards, and in maintaining the Class website. The Hughes's lovely home was the venue for many of these memorable celebrations. Though struggling with his cancer in December 2016, the 60th anniversary Class Reunion demonstrated Garth's most creditable and tremendous final effort for his mates and their partners.

Graeme Loughton also acknowledges Garth's 'dedicated and no doubt arduous service to the Duntroon Society over many years, attending meetings to represent the Queensland and South Australian Councillors regularly, and others from time to time.'

Retired Brigadier JA (John) Sheldrick OAM and Lieutenant Colonel PL (Peter) Tilley LVO (Retd) write fondly about the superb Garth-organised fishing expeditions at South Durras, north of Bateman's Bay. In the early 1990s 'somewhat as a means of recuperation after his first cancer [he] was instrumental in getting together a group of civilian and military friends from Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne and New Zealand' to go fishing twice each year. The group thrived on bonhomie and Garth's expertise in collecting worms, oysters, prawns and nippers for bait and food. He excelled in beach fishing and kept the camp in fresh seafood throughout their stay. Known as the MSB (Men's Secret Business) group, the organisation, most equipment and efficient camp routine were all due to Garth.

Last but by no means least, there was the Duntroon and Club Coupland Forrest tennis group. President Ted Crook writes of how Garth had hand painted net measuring sticks and brightly coloured bench seats, and would always 'arrive early to sweep the lines, set the net, oil the winder and sometimes do a bit of creeper pruning'. Garth's Aunty Joyce Tennis Etiquette Rules covered all from only wearing white to not using racquets to hit frustrating opponents. His enthusiasm, organising skills and story-telling after a couple of glasses of red wine over dinner all contributed to a highly respected and loveable power behind the tennis club.

In amongst all these pursuits and with the children leaving the nest, Garth purchased a rural property at Murrumbateman between Canberra and Yass. John Sheldrick saluted 'his studious work which was manually very hard' as he laboured with love in his escape retreat. Next, he sold up and purchased at Michelago between Canberra and Cooma. Here, Garth's weed killing, tree planting and shed building became legendary and was a popular venue for his entertaining overseas and local friends.

Brigadier Hughes's last formal military function was with his men and their families from the Butterworth posting. On 7 May 2015 at the Torrens Parade Ground, Adelaide, Garth hosted the 50th anniversary of the raising of 110th Battery. Some 180 former members and their partners attended this parade and the reunion dinner held that evening at the Westward Ho Golf Club, Adelaide Shores. Garth and Margaret were feted by their service comrades at this memorable occasion, a fitting, final tribute to a great air defence Gunner.

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Pancreatic cancer and its spread is not the most pleasant way to end one's days, but Garth Hughes lived through the pain, frustration and debility, continually organising and helping people to the end. He may have wanted to fade away quietly, but his legacies of camaraderie, mateship and friendship will live on forever in the minds of the many for whom he worked so tirelessly throughout his life.

Vale Brigadier Garth Hughes AM—dedicated professional soldier, keen and competitive sportsman, generous host and wonderful friend to many, rural farmer, loving family man, and always a gentleman Gunner. Gone to the Great Gun Park up above just before completing his 83rd mortal year.