

Lieutenant Colonel Peter Louis Overstead

Colonel Arthur Burke, OAM (Retd)



Lieutenant Colonel Peter Louis Overstead passed away peacefully from the terminal effects of Alzheimer's Disease on 1st June 2010.

Peter was born at Stanthorpe on 10th May 1950, the third son of Gordon and Maisie Overstead, the local bakers. The family moved to Warwick where Peter spent the next 17 years and from his earliest age, it was obvious that sport was second nature to him—cricket in the back yard (complete with regular broken windows) and swimming in the local club. At high school, he excelled at both rugby and cricket and had a real passion for the school cadets, becoming an under-officer and receiving a certificate for being top cadet of his year.

Gentle, well spoken and well behaved, Peter served as an altar boy at St Marks Anglican Church two mornings each week and every Sunday. His pastoral faith was so strong that in his final year at school he faced a very real dilemma deciding whether he would enter the priesthood or the Army. His childhood sweetheart was Bronwyn Dowling and, though Peter went off to the Royal Military College Duntroon in Canberra and she went to Brisbane for nursing training, they remained very close and were married at St Marks in 1973.

Peter entered Duntroon in 1969 and graduated from the Officer Cadet School at Portsea, Victoria in 1972, allocated to Aviation to become a pilot. His classmate Peter Keane recalls him as 'the little "smart arse" who always had the last cheeky comment for the drill sergeant, the trick handshake, the cockatoo whistle and the readiness for a quick game of cards.' Above all, however, he was remembered as an outstanding sportsman who could run, throw, catch, hit, tackle or shoot anything.

Unfortunately, Peter's dicky knees ruled him out for aviation and Artillery was his next choice—and the Royal Regiment's good fortune. As a young officer with the 1st Field Regiment in Brisbane, another attribute became apparent. 'Leadership,' said Keane, 'He wore it like a glove—confident, competent and charismatic—he had a strong bond with his soldiers', was always involved with their issues and fought for their causes and thus earned their respect as both an officer and a person. Though the junior captain in 105th Battery in 1976, he was an above average battery captain who championed the battery sports' teams in barracks and led the gun group skilfully in the field.

Captain Overstead was the perfect image of an Army officer—a ‘Robert Redford look-alike’—fit, handsome, always well dressed and very versatile. His postings emphasised these attributes—adjutant School of Artillery, Royal Military College, Headquarters Australian Defence Cooperation Group PNG and 1st Army Recruiting Unit. Back with 1st Field commanding 101st Battery, he was a good man in a tight situation as demonstrated by his calmness at the observation post during the traditional pressures of Commander Divisional Artillery assessments. Keane again compliments him: ‘Binoculars in one hand and a brew mug in the other, coolly taking control ... and instilling confidence into his young officers and their assistants.’

These postings were also a catalyst for Peter and Bronwyn’s love of travel and the outdoors life. His brother, John recalled how they played sport, dived on coral reefs, wandered through jungles, trekked mountains and surfed some of the most magnificent beaches in the world. With no children, they happily found the world as their oyster.

After ‘breezing through Staff College in 1986’ (Keane), Pete and Bronny began a worldwide tour of high profile postings with the Defence Intelligence Organisation—the United Kingdom, Norforce in Darwin and after passing through the Base Administrative Support Centre in Townsville and the Joint Services Staff College in Canberra, the Australian Army Staff in Washington USA. Without prying for ‘if I told you, I’d have to kill you,’ as he told Peter Keane, it was learnt that he’d been involved obtaining military equipments from Operation Desert Storm in 1991—armoured vehicles, eight-ton howitzers and the results of depleted uranium munitions.

These locations fuelled Peter and Bronwyn’s sense of adventure and facilitated further treks to Africa, the Himalayas, the Maldives, the Rocky Mountains and camping and fishing in national parks worldwide. Brother John recalls they even spent one Christmas in a tent in Iceland with just a candle and a few tins of baked beans. At the other end of the thermometer, they also spent a summer in Jamaica when Washington was freezing. Peter became an excellent photographer and faithfully recorded their many happy days together. But life was not always beer and skittles and his hard work for the intelligence community was recognised by the Americans with the award of the US Army’s Meritorious Service Medal.

At this most sensitive part of the military eulogy at Lieutenant Colonel Overstead’s final parade, Peter Keane said, ‘Of course, the path of life is not always straight and clearly marked. I choose my words carefully. In Washington, Peter made a critical personal decision that changed his life and others close to him forever—family and friends were stunned— perhaps [this] was linked to a developing condition’ [of Alzheimer’s Disease]. Peter and Bronwyn separated.

After Washington, Pete was never the same bloke. It was evident that things were seriously amiss with his health and, after 36 years in uniform, his Army career came to an end on 8th May 2005. When the Alzheimer’s reached the stage where he needed a close eye kept on him, Peter moved in with his brother John in Brisbane. From there he progressed to Greenslopes Private Hospital and then to high care at Cazna Gardens.

Throughout this final period, his former Army officer classmates drew up rosters and took Peter on regular outings. When he became too ill for these, they took turns to visit him. Memories of old times often won through and the happiness of these could be seen on his face. Classmate Deacon Gary Stone who assisted Chaplain Ken Hopper at the celebration of Peter’s life described how he would appear regularly in both his Catholic and Ken’s Anglican Church before he went to hospital. His old faith had been reinvigorated and he was quite

aware that his body had reached its 'used-by' date. Gary described Pete's frustration of dealing with a 'worn out body' and how he was 'ready to cross the bar'.

Peter Overstead crossed the bar on 1st June 2010 and, despite the short notice of his farewell on 3rd June at St Mark's Anglican Church at The Gap, Brisbane, there was standing room only for his many family and friends, particularly those from the Army whom he had touched and left tangible memories during his 36 years in uniform. Bronwyn was present. She has remarried to an American and lives in Belgium.

Vale Peter Louis Overstead—Gunner officer, charismatic leader, one who always enjoyed life to the fullest. Called to the Great Gun Park up above at only 60 years young.

RAAHC