

Peter Coats

The Scheyville snapshot was of great interest to the congregation of several hundred mourners. Peter resumed medical studies on his return from SVN and, with his wife Di (also a medical practitioner), conducted a medical practice in Gosford for many years and, obviously, earning great respect in the community despite his rather irreverent approach to life. Peter and Di have five children and one grandchild.

Peter Howard Coats was born on 3 April 1948. He commenced his National Service with Intake 2/69 as 2791661 on 24 April 1969 and commenced Officer Training on 9 May 1969. He graduated 45<sup>th</sup> in his class, Graduate Number 980, and was posted to 2RTB in the RAAOC. On 29 January 1970 he was posted as an Orderly Officer at DOS, AHQ. On 2 July 1970 he was posted to Vietnam with the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Reinforcement Unit as an Admin Officer. Peter extended his time in the Army to complete his tour and returned to Australia on 30 June 1971.

Peter discharged from the Army on completion of his National Service. Peter passed away on 19 June 2012. .

**Mick Hart:** In 1968, Peter Coats lost the lottery (with apologies to Gary McKay in his Preface to "In Good Company")! A few years earlier, the Australian Government had determined that its military forces should be augmented by a National Service Scheme. A plan was developed under which 8% of all Australian males turning 20 in a particular year would be called up for compulsory military service ("National Service"). The years turned out to be 1965 to 1972. Selection would be by a "raffle" of birth dates, ie, there were ceremonial draws of birth dates and, if your birth date was drawn out, you were called up for compulsory military service.

*This is the lottery that Peter lost! His birth date was drawn out! The most salient point of National Service was that, if you didn't turn up, you were put in jail! Hence, it was truly compulsory.*

4% of that 8% called up were selected for officer training at the Officer Training Unit at Scheyville.

Of the 4% selected for officer training, approximately 60% graduated. We were being trained to be 2LTs to lead a Platoon (33 men), or equivalent, in battle.

The Scheyville Officer Training Unit is acknowledged by those who devised and ran it as one of the most exhausting and testing courses – Special Forces apart – conducted by the military over many decades. It was designed to test participants, both physically and mentally. It has been described as "an institution which is now unique in Australia's modern military history" (Gary McKay, MC – "In Good Company").

Peter was a graduate of class 2/69 – graduating in early October 1969. Ten others of us here today graduated in that class. Peter was one of the 15% of OTU graduates who went to Vietnam. Paul Flanagan (who had a 12-month tour of Vietnam followed by a 6-month tour) will talk about that. A significant percentage of Scheyville graduates stayed on in the Army but the rest went back to their pre-Army lives.

For those who went back to their civilian lives, it seemed that no-one wanted to know about their two years in the Army for about 25 years. Most didn't resent it – they just wanted to get on with their lives! Peter finished his Medical Degree and, in doing so, met and fell in love with Di. So deep was the love that it resulted in his "small army" of children – five. However, after about 25 years, we all started getting back together at five yearly reunions – which, in the case of class 2/69, has developed into annual reunions. Such was the intensity of Scheyville, that none of us really had time to become "new friends" there, but we did have time to build *mutual respect for those who could survive the course and graduate and remain relatively balanced human beings*. Upon the commencement of reunions in 1993, the friendships really did develop – because there was an opportunity for that to occur.

It was like Scheyville was yesterday! But yesterday in a way where we had time to talk! And talk we did! But all the talk was founded on humour as well as mutual respect and as well as very high respect for the course and, by and large, for the instructors – *but, I stress, humour has been constant and often challenging!*

I first saw Peter again, and met Di for the first time, at a class reunion in October 1994 at Windsor. Reunions developed into a fairly reliable format of a "hell for leather" formal dinner (semi-formal!) On Friday evening (often with a "hit out at the nets" during the day or even on the previous day), followed by grazing and drinking

during Saturday; a relaxed Saturday evening meal; Sunday breakfast, followed by lunch. In more latter years, it has progressed into Monday.

*But back to the 1994 reunion – my "reconnection" with Peter Coats.* We were all present in the coffee bar/drinks bar of what was the Rum Corp Resort at Windsor (now, I think, the Sebel), recovering and reminiscing. I cannot recall how it started but Peter was offering all of his colleagues scripts for Viagra and had Di (also a Medico) with the script booklet ready to write the scripts. No-one was game to put his hand up! At subsequent reunions, he also concentrated on "men's health issues" - inspired, he said, by the latent interest of the ladies. Staff at the United Service Club are still in shock from his demonstration, in 2009, of the delights and benefits of penile implants – with demonstration equipment.

One of the most beneficial aspects of our reunions, and the glue which keeps us together, has been the friendships built amongst our spouses and partners. The friendship among the ladies is a true friendship! It has survived the passing of some of the blokes. That has been our experience and it will continue to be.

I said earlier that Paul Flanagan would help fill in the gaps between our graduating at Scheyville and a getting back together in the early 1990's.

**Paul Flanagan:** I first met Peter in January '69, and our subsequent friendship spanned 43 years. In reflecting on the times we shared over those years, I'd like to illustrate some of the characteristics that made him, uniquely, Peter. We met on our first day in the army, and struck up an instant friendship. Among other things, we shared a common sense of humour. And humour was certainly one of Peter's defining characteristics. He was a bit of a larrikin too. After dinner on that first day, we consummated our friendship by hopping the fence and going AWOL on our first night in the army, languishing in the Watson's Bay pub until closing time. The next day, bright and early, they gave us a haircut (I think the style's called a No. 1 these days) and put us on a bus to Wagga. Imagine our surprise then, when a couple of days later, we were ordered to have another haircut. This order, which defied all logic, really got to Peter, and he let his views be known in no uncertain terms. This was another of his characteristics – he was quick to form an opinion and wasn't backward in expressing it.

During our 10 weeks of recruit training (unlike the vast majority of NS Scheyvillians who did 14 days at RTBs), we shared what little leave we had, often propping up the bar at Romano's Hotel in Wagga. At the end of recruit training, along with a couple of others, we were held back for a few weeks to see an Officer Selection Board. During the day, we performed mindless tasks, but our nights were free, giving us time to further cement our friendship. In due course, we went before the Board, were selected for officer training, and shipped off to Scheyville.

Mick's already spoken of Scheyville and I won't dwell on it, other than to say that Peter's approach was casual – another of his strong characteristics. He always seemed to find time to have a smoke, or part of one. On one occasion, he'd just managed to have a few puffs when we had to march off somewhere, so he stubbed out his fag (or so he thought) and put it in his pocket where, a few minutes later, it set fire to a polish-soaked shoe rag, that was also in the pocket. That was the only time I ever saw Peter dance, apart from at our graduation ball. Yes, he did manage to graduate, due in no small measure to his intellect, which was another of his defining characteristics.

During the five months at Scheyville, we continued to spend much of our leave, such as it was, together, and although we were sent separate ways after graduation, we kept in touch by mail. (As one did the 60s). I went off to Vietnam relatively quickly and Peter followed a few months later.

The day he arrived in Vietnam, I met his plane in a borrowed American Navy jeep, and gave him an unauthorised tour of Saigon, before his departure to Nui Dat, where he was posted to the 1st Australian Reinforcement Unit. The unit comprised about 150 soldiers, en route to the three infantry Battalions. In the meantime, those soldiers had to be trained and kept busy. One of their tasks was to patrol the countryside around the base at Nui Dat, and as a junior officer, Peter often went on these patrols. He also put a lot of effort into organising sport for the diggers - Aussie Rules, Rugby and, on at least one occasion, an endurance event that involved extreme physical exertion, drinking beer and eating delicacies such as raw eggs. The aim was to keep it all down.

During our time in Vietnam, we still managed to catch up every couple of months, sometimes by design, and once by chance, when we met in an inter-unit rugby match, played with the utmost vigour, on a patch of dirt with barely a blade of grass, in 30 degree heat. After Vietnam, we still caught up occasionally, but that gradually waned as we returned to our different universities to resume our previous lives.

I didn't see Peter for about 20 years and then, out of the blue, one of our Scheyville classmates, who was organising a reunion, rang me and asked if I knew where Peter was. I didn't, but a quick phone call to his mother soon fixed that, and he and Di came along to the reunion. This turned out to be the first of many get togethers and Peter and Di have attended most of them. It's was great to catch up after so many years, and it was also great to find that he hadn't changed. He was still:

Peter the larrikin;

Peter the man of humour;

Peter the intelligent;

Peter the definite;

Peter the down to earth; and

Peter the casual;

And most recently, he became Peter the fighter. He fought a diabolical illness over several years, always in good spirit and with an almost scientific detachment - it was as though he saw himself as being another patient, with a problem to be dealt with.

We're sad to see you go, old mate. We'll miss you, but we're pleased the pain's gone. And a part of you will live on in the valued memories we'll carry always.

***Mick Hart (again):*** Despite all of the warnings and expectations of Peter's future, the news of Peter's passing was still a jolt. In Peter's own words, a few weeks ago, he indicated that "it" might be days or weeks but certainly wouldn't extend to our next reunion in October. In this unique group of blokes, the loss of one of our colleagues is felt deeply – as it is with all of you.

We made a promise to Peter – and Di's view on this doesn't matter – that we will compel Di to attend our reunion in Melbourne and the reunions thereafter. She will have no say in this! As Bill Watson (our class co-ordinator) says "We will look after our own". Farewell Pete!

PS: This was the 'Scheyville Contribution' to Peter's Eulogies. No correspondence will be entered into in relation to the 'Scheyville Facts'.