

IAN GEDDES OFFICER, GENTLEMAN AND EDUCATOR (from Tony Sonneveld, 1/70)

The last Australian Commander in Vietnam, Ian Geddes, recalled the day in December 1972, after the Whitlam government took power that the Australian commitment to the Vietnam War ended. Geddes had headed a team of 128 members of what was then the Australian Army Assistance Group, to help instruct South Vietnamese and Cambodian troops.

The McMahon government had intended that the Australians remain in Vietnam until ceasefire negotiations between the US and its allies and North Vietnam were complete. Geddes was realistic about his role, seeing himself as a diplomat as well as a soldier, taking bottles of Ned Kelly whisky with him when he visited South Vietnamese and US forces.

The Whitlam government, however, was intent on getting out and, on taking office, told the Assistance Group to come home. The decision was announced by Whitlam's deputy, Lance Barnard, on December 22. The Assistance Group was told to pack "in a screaming hurry", Geddes recalled.

Brigadier Ian Aubrey Geddes, who was 86 when he died, was born in Tamworth on 4 February 1921. He attended Sydney Church of England Grammar School (Shore) and, after matriculating, enrolled at the University of Sydney in 1939 to study economics. He was enjoying life, including activities with the Palm Beach Surf Life Saving Club, when war broke out in September. He had enlisted in the CMF (Sydney University Regiment) in early 1939 and, after initial training, was transferred to the Regiment's field battery. Then, in early 1940, he was selected to attend the Royal Military College (RMC), Duntroon, from which he graduated in 1942. He was initially allotted to the Royal Australian Armoured Corps but with little opportunity for the deployment of armoured units in the South West Pacific theatre was then trained as a commando.

Of his commando training on Wilson's Promontory he had little nice to say about the place, which is now so popular with campers and environmentalists. He remembered it as cold, wet and windy – all the time. There is now a monument to those commando units that trained in the area, at Tidal River.

His initial active service was with the AIF's 2/12th Commando Squadron in Borneo. After that he became part of a team assigned to debrief and assist former prisoners of the Japanese. "I met many fine men," he said later, in the kind of understatement common to army folk.

He then served with the Papuan Infantry Battalion and the 66th Australian Infantry Battalion, which was to become the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (2 RAR), with the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan.

After attending the first course of the Army's Staff College to be conducted at Queenscliff, after its post-war relocation from Sydney, he was attached to the British Army for two years, in both the UK and Germany, and was later to serve on attachment with the UK's 1st Royal Tank Regiment in the Korean War. At one point the jeep in which he was travelling was overturned by a white phosphorus shell that landed directly in front. Geddes and his passenger, a South African, survived. To their delight, Geddes discovered that several bottles of brandy the passenger had with him - the result of a bet on a rugby test between the Wallabies and the Springboks - had also survived.

Between serving in the UK and Germany and his stint in Korea, Geddes married 20-year-old Sydney girl Janet Olga Solomon at St Marks, Darling Point, on 8 October 1952. Jan and Ian were to have three sons. Tim was born on 11 November 1953; Dougal on 4 January 1956 and Fergus on 21 August 1963.

Geddes again saw active service during the Malayan Emergency on the staff of the Commonwealth HQ Far East Land Force (FARELF) and as OC Support Company, 2 RAR. Later, in 1958-59, he attended Course 20 of the United Kingdom's Joint Services Staff College at Latimer. Subsequent appointments included Senior Instructor, Tactics Wing, at the Jungle Training Centre, Canungra; Army Member of Joint Planning Staff, Department of Defence; and Commanding Officer and Chief Instructor (CO/CI) of the Armoured Centre, Puckapunyal.

In 1965, National Service was reintroduced to expand the Army to meet commitments in Malaysia and (later) Vietnam. These commitments had resulted in a need to rapidly create a pool of competent junior regimental officers. The then Colonel Geddes was tasked with raising a unit to take national servicemen and some regular army soldiers with the potential to become such officers and train them. The site selected was a disused World War II Army, and later, refugee/migrant camp, at Scheyville, near Windsor in NSW. During its existence, the Officer Training Unit (OTU, as it was named, produced 1881 officers, 354 of whom served in Vietnam. A significant number also made careers in the regular army and reached high rank.

Following this appointment, he attended the Imperial Defence College (IDC - now the Royal College of Defence Studies) in the UK in 1968. After graduating from the IDC he was to have commanded the 1st Australian Task Force in Vietnam – but a decision had been made to establish an Australian Services Staff College of which a Joint Services Wing (JSW) would initially be formed in Canberra. Following his undoubted success at Scheyville, the now Brigadier Geddes was the obvious choice to be the founding Director of the new institution. The first students (RAN, Army, RAAF and service department officials of Lieutenant Colonel (equivalent) rank) marched-in in January 1970 to attend an intensive course of six months duration. Geddes and his team were again conspicuously successful and, when the first international students other than New Zealanders arrived in July 1972, the JSW changed its name to the Australian Joint Services Staff College (JSSC). While Director of the JSW he established an association of its alumni which survives to this day as the Australian Defence Colleges Association (ADCA).

Within weeks of handing over the JSW to Commodore Ken Shands RAN on 11 February 1972, Geddes proceeded to Vietnam to take command the Australian Army Assistance Group and on his return to Australia was appointed to command of the 1st Task Force. His final appointment, prior to leaving the Army in 1976, was as Chief of Staff of the Army's Training Command.

Geddes was keen to establish and maintain links between himself and the institutions he was associated with and also between those institutions and their graduates. In addition to the ADCA, he also established the Old Scheyvillians. A Geddes Military Skills Prize is now presented to the most deserving student at the RMC, Duntroon. In 1995 (the 25th Anniversary of the founding of the JSW) he presented to the JSSC a prize, to be called the Geddes Gavel, to be awarded to the student who consistently asks of speakers the most incisive and perceptive questions. The Geddes Gavel has since been reinstated under the

auspices of the Australian Defence College and is now presented to a student of the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies (CDSS) who meets those same criteria.

Geddes' contribution to military education was, quite simply, profound. The main lecture theatre at the JSSC was named in his honour at a function marking the 25th Anniversary of the founding of the JSW. After the JSSC was disbanded and its buildings demolished in 1998-99, approval was given for the new building housing the new Australian Command and Staff College (ACSC) to be named in his honour. This was done by the founding Commandant of the ACSC, Air Commodore Peter McDermott, AM, CSC shortly after the official opening of the newly restructured Australian Defence College by the then Governor-General Sir William Deane on 14 March 2001 (in the presence of Brigadier and Mrs Geddes and their family). The wheel had turned full circle as the ACSC was the realisation of the intention in 1970 to create an Australian Services Staff College.

Later the same year the Geddes Family presented a directional plaque which now stands on a plinth between the Shedden Building and the Vane Green Library at ADC giving the direction to, and distance from, the capitals of all countries which had sent students to Weston up to that point.

Sadly, Jan predeceased Ian on 1 May 2005. Ian died on 27 July 2007. They are survived by their three sons, Tim (married to Ilne), Dougal (married to Deborah), and Fergus (married to Michelle), five grandchildren (Annabelle, Henry, Travis, Rowan and William) and one great-grandchild (Isabelle).

Ian's funeral service was held at the Northern Suburbs Crematorium on 31 July. The Australian Defence College (which includes the Australian Defence Force Academy, the ACSC and CDSS) was represented by its Acting Commander, Brigadier Brian Dawson, AM, CSC and the ACSC was represented by its Commandant, Brigadier Chris Appleton, CSC (a former President of ADCA). A large number of Ian's former colleagues and fellow RMC graduates were present including Major General Sandy Pearson. The mourners would also undoubtedly have included many JSW and JSSC graduates and the walls of the Chapel were lined by some 60 Scheyville graduates. That quite clearly demonstrates the high esteem in which this fine gentleman, soldier and educator was held.

(Jerry Bishop, JSSC 29/84 and Malcolm Brown, OTU 3/69. Updated 31 Dec 2019 by Neil Leckie OTU 3/68).

Tony Sonneveld (1/70) added: The OTU Association was initially conceived in 1985 as a loose group that popped up wherever Gary McKay was posted at the time. Around 1988 Alistair Pope and Peter Whitelaw gave the Association more form and structure operating from Melbourne; they instigated the initial photocopied newsletters. Tony Sonneveld took over the Association of 40 financial members in 1990 and grew it to 450 financial members over the next 2.5 years. During that period the Association published 9 printed Scheyvillian Newsletters, hosted a major National Reunion at Windsor/Scheyville (Oct 2003), held a ceremony at Scheyville to dedicate a plaque to the eight Scheyville officers killed in Vietnam (Oct 2004). Ian Geddes participated in both functions in 2003 and 2004. I am unaware of the existence of the "Old Scheyvillians" mentioned above and suggest it is probably the current OTU Association that I have described. Ian Geddes was always very supportive of our Association and participated in many events including another Major reunion I organised in 2003 (650 attendees), local NSW Chapter lunches and annual dinners.