

# *Gunner of Renown*



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

## **Lieutenant Colonel Eric Wilson NOWILL, OBE**

**(1916-2008)**

Eric Nowill was born at Punchbowl, in Sydney's inner west on 13 January 1919, the son of a Taxation Officer. He attended Canterbury Public and Summer Hill Intermediate High School before completing an Electrical Trades course at the Sydney Technical College. He also gained a radio service qualification from the Australian Radio College, Sydney. In 1937, he joined 15th Heavy Battery (Militia) as a Recruit Gunner at South Head and joined the Permanent Military Forces in October 1939.

In August 1939, he was on full time duty and remained so until the war's end. Nowill was commissioned in January 1942. Before he was despatched to command the Bowen Island Battery, off Jervis Bay, in April, he served at Middle Head with 114th Battery, part of Sydney Fortress. He returned to Sydney to command the Shelley Beach Battery of a 12 pounder QF. At this time he was seconded to the AIF. His next posting was Endeavour Battery Commander in Torres Strait in April 1943 with three 60 pounder BL Mk1 ordnance in an anti-torpedo boat role. The guns were outdated and on his initiative a battery of 6 inch Mark 7 guns on P3 mountings were installed. After a District Officer and Master Gunners course at the School of Artillery he was for a time District Officer of the Sydney Fortress.

In the post-war Interim Army, the Regiment set about training permanent officers and other ranks in the neglected branches of coast and locating artillery. After attending a Searchlight course Eric found himself on a Radar course, which he passed with distinction. He was then appointed an Instructor in Radar and a few months later promoted captain. His expertise and ideas in this field did not go unnoticed and he was selected to join Captain Don Willett's group of six to attend the Royal School of Artillery at Larkhill for the Long Observation Course. Eric considered this 18 months one of his career high points. After the course he was seconded to the 94th Observation Regiment, RA, at Luneberg Heath with British Army of the Rhine. The regiment patrolled the inner Germany border in armoured cars and Jeeps along the River Elbe during the 'Cold War'. In freezing winter Nowill would doss down in his sleeping bag, oblivious to other creature comforts, to the amazement of his British colleagues.

Nowill returned in May 1949 and was appointed Instructor Gunnery of the Anti-Aircraft Wing of the School of Artillery and then SORA2 in the Directorate of Artillery. He had hardly settled in the role when in September 1952 he was ordered to Korea. Here he was Assistant Counter Bombardment Officer at HQRA 1st Commonwealth Division until December. In this short period Nowill was also Assistant Counter Bombardment Officer of 28th Brigade and Troop Commander of the SR Troop of 16th Light Regiment, RA. Nowill's Korean experience was another high point in his career.

He resumed his Melbourne posting in December 1952 and was promoted major in July 1953. He was appointed Battery Commander 104th Divisional Locating Battery and in 1956 he was instructing on the Regiment's mortar locating radar, the FA No. 3 Mk VII, a converted anti-aircraft radar, at the School. He was a key figure in the combined Regular Army/CMF exercise in July 1965 at Holsworthy to practice Locaters destined for Vietnam with Detachment 131st Division Locating Battery. It was the first time since WWII that artillery from all three army divisions had exercised together.

He returned to Canungra Jungle Training Centre in 1962 as Instructor in Artillery Tactics. In between, he was OC Coast Artillery at Manly at the time of its disbandment. His last four years of service were as Corps Counter Bombardment Officer HQRAA I Corps in 1962, HQRAA 2nd Division and then back at the School. Of his many instructional roles, which he enjoyed, he claimed that there was hardly a serving Gunner officer or senior NCO he did not know. In 1966, he retired with the rank of lieutenant colonel after 29 years of service.

Retirement, after service with Qantas as Senior Buyer, Training and Simulators, led to Nowill's opportunity to contribute more to our regimental history. He was a founding member of the RAA Historical Society in 1981 and an active restorer where his practical skills in wood and metal work were fully utilised. His technical knowledge of artillery was second to none. If you were having a problem with an equipment all you needed to do was ask Eric. Ill health curtailed further valuable contributions in 2001.

He married June in 1941, and they had three children. They lived at Hurlstone Park, Sydney. He was active in service rifle shooting competition, held a radio 'Ham' licence, read widely and solved cryptic crossword puzzles for recreation.

Nowill was the right man at the right place at the right time in his army career – coast artillery, locating artillery and the preservation of our artillery heritage. He enjoyed the respect of all Gunners with whom he came in contact – as a colleague, commander and instructor whose contribution to the Regiment will endure.

He died on 10 February 2008 and his funeral service was held at the Chapel of Cardinal Freeman Village, Ashfield and cremation at Rookwood on 15 February 2008. He was survived by his wife June and three children.

Source: Alan H. Smith, 'Cannonball', Journal of the RAA Historical Company, No.41, pp.25-7; Cannonball, No.68, p.12.