

Lieutenant Colonel John Aylmer Leaver AO, RFD, ED, RL

9 August 1930 - 15 May 2018

A Gunners Chaplain

Brigadier D.I. Perry OAM RFD ED (Retd)



John Leaver was born on 9th August 1930. He was educated at Ivanhoe Grammar where he was a Prefect, Captain of the Boarding House and the Debating Team.

After a short period, in a range of civilian occupations, he decided to follow his Father into the Church.

Again after a number of appointments in inner city and close country appointments, in which time he married the love of his life Wendy Tonks, he became the Vicar at Seymour where his Father had also served as Vicar.

It is no secret that John's life achievements would not have been so successful without the dedicated and untiring support of Wendy.

Whilst at Seymour, John decided to join the Army Reserve as a Chaplain. It is not clear who persuaded him to this role, however from subsequent discussion and events it appears that Bishop Shand¹ may have played a part.

John was enlisted on 22nd July 1959 as a Chaplain and was discharged on 28th August 1985 having reached the then retirement age as a Chaplain Class Two and the worn rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

Whilst 1959 was not a particularly taxing period for a Chaplain, the introduction of the NS scheme of 1964 significantly increased the population at Puckapunyal and the work of Chaplains was proportionately increased.

In 1967 John had been moved closer to Melbourne and, after a few brief encounters with Infantry and Melbourne University Regiment, was posted to 2nd Field Regiment. It was here that John realised that Gunners did not waste a lot of time walking up and down hills or live from tinned rations and were otherwise good company, who provided their Chaplain with a vehicle and driver to better minister their flock.

I first met John in 1966 when 15th Field Regiment provided the introduction of Artillery fire support to 7th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment prior to their first deployment to South Vietnam².

Subsequently John was attached to various units of 3rd Division and particularly to Artillery units and he came under my command on at least four occasions and I believe he served 21 RAA unit commanders during his service and beyond.

In addition to the Army Reserve members of RAA, John will be well remembered by the Australian Regular Army members who served in support of the Reserve in the 3rd Military District.

In 1974 John arrived at Peninsula Grammar School³ as Chaplain, appointed by the Headmaster and long-time mentor Harry Macdonald. At this time John was an accomplished and effective networker and that Christmas, I arrived home from work to find the children of the street had transformed my garden and pool into a candle lit fairyland for the first communion service of the Parish of Mt Eliza North which had just been established by John. At that time I was Officer Commanding 132nd Divisional Locating Battery and would later become Commanding Officer 2nd/15th Field Regiment and Colonel Artillery 3rd Division and progress to Chairman of the Board at Peninsula Grammar all in direct involvement with John on both fronts.

¹ Bishop Shand took holy order following his service during WW2 as an Officer in 53 Bty of 2nd/3rd Fd Regt RAA in SWPA and was discharged with the rank of Major.

² There is an embarrassing sequel to this exercise.

³ Previously known as The Peninsula School Mt Eliza

At his memorial service I was honoured to be asked to provide the military component of his eulogy and I made the following points:

- John was a dedicated and effective Christian.
- John's idea of retirement was ceasing to be paid, not ceasing to minister.
- John was a commensurate networker.
- He served his flock, both civil and military, beyond his technical retirements.
- All of his projects utilised the interface between his faith, his community and his military service.

A following address from Stephen Higgs of Victorian Ecumenical System of Schools Ltd, outlined the following achievements which led to the award of AO and specifically included his establishment of the Ecumenical Schools System, his pastoral care within his community and his Army Reserve service:

- John founded 14 low fee schools in the ecumenical system.
- 12 additional schools benefited from the introduction of his ecumenical system.
- John was instrumental in the construction and subsequent consecration of the Peninsula Grammar School Chapel.
- John, in the face of diminishing congregations, established the new parish of Mount Eliza North.
- In addition to his works in main stream schooling John was instrumental in the establishment of the Abacus learning Centre for children with autism spectrum disorders.
- In this arena John was publicly described as "having the obvious ability to make the impossible happen".

The register at the memorial service showed 1000 entries, of which some were apologies and other condolences. There were 750 seats in the hall and some were standing in the foyer. I called for a show of hands from those married or baptised by him or whose children were baptised by him. In subsequent discussion with the Principal of the school, we agreed that there were more than 800 present and the show of hands was in the vicinity of 400.

When preparing this Vale, I initially considered a photograph of John in his full regalia of habit, decorations and awards. On further consideration I have used a photograph of John at his last "parade" with the Gunners, at the annual lunch held at RACV Club, on 7th March 2018 where he blessed the gathering, accompanied by one of my guests, Lieutenant Victoria Roadknight of 8th/12th Regiment, a student of 12 years at Peninsula Grammar, a member of the congregation of the Parish of Mount Eliza North and a recipient of the Urquart Trophy. A fitting image that reflected his network relationships and support of 'The Regiment'.

In conclusion I said "The Gunners have a euphemism for heaven. "The Great Gun Park in the Sky" I imagine John is now in a reception area where he is sizing up the facilities and he will soon find the Gun Park and the Gunners who have preceded him. If improvements or modifications are needed, I sure he will arrange for the change".