

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Major General Timothy Frederick CAPE, CB, CBE, DSO

(1915-2003)

Tim Cape was born at Rose Bay on 5 August 1915, the son of Charles Scarvell Cape, solicitor, who was awarded the DSO during the South African War as a member of the NSW Bushmen's Contingent, and Maude Want Cape. He was educated at Cranbrook School and was appointed senior prefect by Iven Mackay, then Headmaster, in 1933. He sat the Leaving Certificate twice to gain entry into the Royal Military College in 1934. He had been active in the Cadet Corps (cadet lieutenant) and chose a military career so as not to be a financial burden on his recently widowed mother.

He was allotted to Artillery on graduating in 1937 and posted to 1st Heavy Brigade at Georges Heights. While there, the CO, Lieutenant Colonel Gwynne Meredith, nominated him to be Proofing Officer for the recently installed 9.2 inch guns at North Head. Thereafter, he was appointed second-in-command of 13th Battery, then installing a 6 inch Mark II gun battery at Paga Point, near Port Moresby. He was promoted captain and given a dual appointment as Deputy Assistant Adjutant & Quarter Master General 8th Military District. In that capacity, in conjunction with RAN and RAAF officers, he undertook a survey of roads, tracks, ports, and all potential military infrastructure in Papua and New Guinea as the war loomed.

Come WW II he was promoted major and appointed inaugural CO/CI of the Anti-Tank Wing of the School of Artillery at Puckapunyal. Cape was awarded the MBE in 1942 for this work. On 7 February 1942 he was then posted as brigade major of 23 Infantry Brigade ("Sparrow Force" a reinforced battalion group) whose mission was to defend the airfield at Kupang in Dutch Timor, a strategic stepping stone to Singapore. The force was commanded by Brigadier W. D. C. Veale. Cape arrived in early February 1942 and when the Japanese landed on the 20th in overwhelming force the Australian force withdrew into the interior.

In March, after an exhausting battle to clear a road block and with another force closing up behind him, Veale gave the order 'every man for himself' - signifying the end of formal resistance. Cape narrowly escaped with his life when, with others, the craft on which they were escaping to Alor Island was washed back to the coast. Later, remnants of the force came together and Cape and his staff supported 2/2nd Independent Company in guerilla warfare in East Timor. This was a seminal moment for Cape for it gave him the unique status of firstly, gaining priceless experience of Japanese tactical methods, and secondly, being at the genesis of aerial resupply for the now beleaguered remnant of "Sparrow Force". During this period he was mentioned in despatches.

Cape was recalled to Australia and after a brief period was promoted General Staff Officer 1 (Operations) at HQ New Guinea Force, Port Moresby, in October 1942. These were crucial times; the AIF was fighting in an unfamiliar climate and terrain where air support was vital

to the forward troops. When an air support operation he planned was executed poorly, General Blarney 'sacked' him. Cape countered with a proposal to put air support on a proper basis, which Blarney accepted. It was the beginning of what was known as the 'Air Ministry'. Cape was appointed GSOI (Air). The US 5th Air Force added a US Bronze Star to his MBE and after attending Staff College he was appointed GSOI (Air) Advanced LHQ at Morotai, where he was awarded the DSO for his 'efficient and courageous performance throughout the period'.

At wars end, Cape went to Japan with BCOF and then to AHQ in Melbourne before spending the next four years (1950-1953) in the UK at Latimer (Combined Operations), as an instructor at Camberley Staff College and instructor at Joint Services Staff College. This led to sequential appointments on his return as Commandant of the Officer Cadet School (Portsea) and Australian Staff College (Queenscliff) from 1954 to 1956.

In 1957, Cape's career took a new trajectory when he was appointed Deputy Master General of the Ordnance. This appointment brought him into contact with all arms and services directors, the Department of Supply, and the Secretary of the Army, Bruce White, for two years. Thereafter, in 1959 he attended the Imperial Defence College, London, before being appointed Chief of Staff, Northern Command in 1960.

He married Elizabeth, daughter of Brigadier (Retired) Rex Rabett, CMG in 1961. Cape was promoted major general and appointed GOC Northern Command in 1965 where he remained for three years during the Army's build-up for Vietnam and the establishment of brigade bases in Brisbane and Townsville. His terminal appointment was as Master General of Ordnance and fourth member of the Military Board for which he was awarded the CBE. He retired in August 1972 and was made CB for his service to the Army.

In retirement he chaired the National Disasters Relief Committee (1975-85), was National President of the RUSI, and became a representative for several local and overseas companies which necessitated annual overseas trips for 22 years. His penchant for seeing matters at first hand resulted in the sobriquet 'Marco Polo' being bestowed upon him by his intimates.

While Cape only had relatively short service with the Regiment he maintained a passion for its history and that of the inter-war Permanent Force. He became a trustee of the RAA Historical Society in 1986.

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Tim Cape was a gregarious man, urbane and charming in any company, to which he gave a sense of occasion. He had an enormous network of well-placed people wherever it mattered. He was able to get to the nub of a problem and articulate its solution. He was a master of both detail and the broader view. A left-hander taught to write with his right, he never wrote if he could help it. He died in Canberra on 20 December 2003, and is survived by his only child, Lizette and her family.

Sources: Alan H. Smith, *The Life and Times of Major General Timothy Frederick Cape, CB, CBE, DSO*, Fine Impressions, Sydney, 2001; Personal records of T. F. Cape.