

AUSTRALIAN GUNNER OBITUARY RESOURCE

Lieutenant Colonel Mick Ekman AM

26 November 1936 – 30 June 2017

By Colonel (Retd) Arthur Burke OAM



Retired Lieutenant Colonel Michael Francis Gerard Ekman AM passed away peacefully at his home in Eastwood, NSW on 30 June 2017, surrounded by his family.

Mick was born on 26 November 1936 to Frank and Lillian Ekman in Sydney's northern suburb of Hornsby. His early life was spent with family and friends around the Thornleigh and Pennant Hills areas. Tragically, his father was killed in a car accident when Michael was only nine years old. It fell to his Uncle Jack, Aunt Gladys, cousins Pauline and Robert and his good mate John Bainey and his family to take Lilly and the young Ekman into their folds and treat them as their own.

On completion of his schooling at Marist Brothers Eastwood and typical of all male 18-year olds of the time, Mick was called up for compulsory National Service Training in 1956. After basic training with 12th NS Training Battalion, he became a member of the Citizen Military Forces' 9th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment. Deciding to make the Army a career, he entered the Officer Cadet School at Portsea, Victoria in 1957. Second Lieutenant Ekman graduated on 13 December that year with fellow Gunner officers Norm Uniacke, Pat Marshall-Cormack and Terry Sedgwick.

Following a Young Officers' Course at the School of Artillery, Manly, NSW, Mick was posted to the 13th National Service Training Battalion at Ingleburn in Sydney's western suburbs. After two years he was an accomplished platoon commander who was delighted to be posted to 1st Field Regiment RAA at Holsworthy so that he could get his teeth into the gunnery side of his career. Retired Lieutenant Colonel BJ (Brian) Armour believes Mick served some of this time as the Regimental Signals Officer where he was 'very laid back and always a gentleman as par for the course'.

This was the era of the Pentropic Division with major exercises being held to trial the new organisations. As such, young Lieutenant Ekman spent the next four years honing up his technical and tactical skills in field gunnery under experienced commanding officers RK (Ken) Fullford and DH (David) Crompton. It was during this time he met Valerie and they married in December 1962.

Proudly wearing captain's pips, Mick moved to Headquarters 1st Division, Sydney in 1964 just after the arrival of the Ekmans' first son, Paul. Michael began as a divisional liaison officer to the Task Force Headquarters and then became a staff officer grade three on Headquarters RAA 1st Division.

This staff experience fitted Mick well for his next posting in 1965 to

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Headquarters Papua New Guinea Command as a general staff officer grade three. This was a grand tropical life for the family and joyfully, second son Carl arrived in 1966.

By now, Australia had committed to the Vietnam War and the expansion of the Army through selective National Service had seen the 12th Field Regiment RAA re-raised at Holsworthy to provide a third artillery unit for the rotations required. Captain Ekman returned to Australia from PNG in late 1967 and was appointed adjutant of Lieutenant Colonel JD (Jack) Kelly's fledgling unit. It was at this time that Joe, the third Ekman son was born.

Mick went to Vietnam with his unit in April 1968 and remained as adjutant till November. At Fire Support Base Coral in May 1968, he was deployed early with the regimental reconnaissance party and established a regimental command post (RCP) behind 102nd Battery and a battalion mortar platoon. Two machine gun positions were set up forward of the RCP to protect it. During the battle on the night 12/13 May, one machine gun jammed, one of its crew was killed, another wounded, ammunition was expended and the position was about to be overrun. The NCO in charge sought advice and then ordered a withdrawal, but the wounded soldier was unable to follow due to his spine injury, and gunfire and a grenade knocked out the two withdrawing soldiers. When Mick in the RCP learnt of this, he crawled forward under enemy fire, rescued the wounded soldier and retrieved the disabled machine gun. He then had the gun repaired and a group of soldiers returned to the machine gun post.

When his desire to become an artillery forward observer saw him move to 104th Field Battery supporting C Company of the ANZAC battalion, 4 RAR. Brian Armour tells of 'a combat sky spot that went fairly wrong [a USAF 750-pound bomb on the company perimeter] with an apocryphal story about Mick arriving in the CP with hootchie draped around him'. Having worked in the regimental command post and the artillery tactical headquarters whilst adjutant, this new posting nicely rounded out his active service experience.

Captain Ekman returned to Australia in March 1969 still with 12th Field Regiment which became domiciled at Ingleburn near Liverpool, NSW. Promoted major, in December he was appointed battery commander of 102nd Field Battery in Lieutenant Colonel WAS (Blue) Whyte MC's newly created 8th Medium Regiment, Holsworthy. Retired Colonel BW (Brian) Cloughley AM had just transferred from the UK and became Mick's battery captain. He remembers him fondly as 'kind and understanding about the new boy ... was a great BC and a wonderful person'. Major Juergen Raasch (Retd) who took over from Brian adds, '[Mick] was one of nature's gentlemen and a good soldier'.

After only 12 months of a unit which predominantly supported School of Artillery activities, and following the arrival of son Victor, Major Ekman was selected to attend the Army Staff College at Queenscliff, Victoria. This was a grand time to catch up with many of his former Portsea classmates and to rub shoulders again with other corps members with whom he had served. There was also a very active social calendar which happily involved Val and the family.

With his 'psc' (passed staff college) qualification under his arm, Mick returned to New Guinea as the general staff officer grade two land operations in the Joint Forces PNG Command. This was the time approaching independence (in 1975) and his job transitioned to the new Headquarters PNG Defence Force in January 1973 then the Australian Defence Assistance Group PNG in November. From a family point of view, the house help was a blessing for Val with the four boys. However, the previous idyllic

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tropical life was changing to a more challenging time for expatriates with the approach of independence.

In April 1975, the Ekmans returned to the family home in Eastwood, Sydney and Mick took up an appointment at Headquarters Field Force Command at Paddington. Promoted lieutenant colonel, he attended Joint Services Staff College in Canberra during 1977 before being posted to Defence Central. These were key education years for the boys so Val and the family remained at Eastwood and Mick came home as often as he was able.

Eventually in 1979, Lieutenant Colonel Ekman returned to Sydney and Headquarters Field Force Command. Posted as the staff officer coordination, Mick was heavily involved in the headquarters' planning and reorganisations as the Army searched for stability in the post-Vietnam era of continental defence. His dedication to these tasks was recognised in the Queen's Birthday Honours List of 1981 when he was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia.

Not wanting to leave his family again, Mick asked to stay in the Sydney area and was posted to Headquarters 2nd Division in 1982. This was to be his final posting as he hung up his spurs on 22 November 1985 after 29 years in uniform and just before his 49th birthday.

Mick then worked in a number of roles and consultancies associated with Defence. The Ekmans purchased a small farm at Colo Heights, north of Windsor, NSW in the late 1980s and they eventually moved there full time. Many happy years were spent at 'Nirvana' growing cut flowers and tending their chooks, cow and orchard. Mick and Val became involved in the local community and were active members of the Bush Fire Brigade, the State Emergency Service and the Progress Association. There were many warm and nostalgic family gatherings at Colo.

In 2011, age and declining physical health made maintaining the property difficult so the Ekmans returned to Eastwood. This was finally retirement for Mick and he revelled in renovating the family home, gardening and particularly growing roses, collecting and reading books, and watching his favourite sports of rugby and cricket. Brian Armour writes that Mick was a regular attendee on the footpath outside the Coronation Pub each ANZAC Day together with other retired Gunner officers Ian Taylor, John Burns and Carl Doermann. Ian recalls that this was always followed by 'a swanky hotel dining room for a slap-up lunch'.

A tumour on the liver followed by chemotherapy took its toll. Michael Ekman's final parade was at St Kevin's Catholic Church at Eastwood on 6 July 2017 followed by a wake at his beloved Eastwood Rugby Club.

Vale Lieutenant Colonel Mick Ekman AM—enthusiastic Nasho, competent and professional officer, loving family man, hobby farmer and always a dedicated gentleman Gunner. Gone to the Great Gun Park up above just before his 81st birthday.