

Colonel Gerard Maurice (Gerry) Salom

8 November 1931 – 6 April 2015

By Colonel (Retd) Arthur Burke OAM



‘Soldier, warrior, officer, farmer, gentleman, husband, father, supporter, role model’ were the family’s words below a photograph on the ‘thank you’ card. These words aptly summed up a remarkable man, Gerard Maurice (Gerry) Salom who passed away peacefully on 6 April 2015 at his lovely country mansion in Valla, just south of Coffs Harbour on the NSW north coast.

The first of three sons to Maurice and Peg Salom of South Perth, Gerry came into this world on 8 November 1931 and began his formal education at the South Perth State School. The family was fragmented in 1942 when his mother died and Gerry was sent to boarding school at Wesley College in South Perth. He spent his school holidays during the war years on an aunt and uncle’s property south-west of Perth. Daughter Caroline surmises that this probably explained Gerry’s keenness to return to the land after he left the Army.

After the Second World War, Maurice built a home for the family in South Perth but no sooner had the Saloms all been reunited than Gerry went off to the Royal Military College at Duntroon on the other side of Australia in 1949. His classmate, retired Brigadier Ray Sunderland AO recalls that, having been obliged to repeat his first year at RMC,

‘he was a great help to all the new [first year] cadets including me. I remember him as a gentle, modest and helpful person who did not rock the boat and made no waves.’

Lieutenant Salom graduated on 9 December 1953 and was posted to 1st Field Regiment RAA at Georges Heights in Sydney. After taking out three months for a Young Officers’ Course at the School of Artillery at North Head, his feet barely touched the ground in his unit before he was transferred to the 14th National Service Training Battalion as a platoon commander of the 18 year old recruits undergoing their compulsory service. Puckapunyal was not the most hospitable part of Australia, particularly in winter, but after seven months of diligent service, Gerry returned to Georges Heights because a new ‘M’ Battery was being raised for service in the Malaya Emergency.

105th Field Battery was officially raised on 1 July 1955 and Lieutenant Salom was appointed the A Troop Commander. The battery moved to Old Holsworthy on the other side of Sydney and began training in earnest—command post exercises, field exercises digging gun pits, live firing, and being issued with clothing and equipment to bring the battery up to a wartime establishment. It seemed strange to Gerry wearing a serge battle dress uniform in which to train for a tropical deployment, but his promotion to captain and the excitement of active service overcame all such minor dilemmas.

The MV *Georgic* had a streamer farewell from Sydney as it sailed for Penang, Malaya on 6 October 1955 and Captain Salom was filled with pride as he passed through Sydney Heads on his way to overseas service. The battery disembarked on 19 October and proceeded to new (tent) lines at Butterworth. Gerry appreciated being under British command when the first lines and mess to be built were those for the officers. Nevertheless, by 1 January 1956, the guns were deployed on operations and the first Royal Australian Artillery rounds were fired in anger since the end of the Second World War.

Whilst married and accompanied soldiers were granted two days leave with their families each fortnight, Gerry and the other single men remained continually in their operational

area and looked so forward to their two weeks' leave each six months. Everyone returned to base during Christmas 1956, but there was plenty of hard work as the battery prepared for the annual administrative inspection by the brigade commander and his staff. 'Only the Brits could do this in an operational area,' Gerry once reminisced. Not to lose face, the battery rose to the challenge and received a glowing report from the brigadier.

An iconic photo of Gerry with a cigarette and glass of beer in his left hand whilst his right shook hands with the British Chief of the Imperial General Staff (complete with cravat) showed that it was not all an operational life. Another memorable event towards the end of Gerry's tour of duty was the precision perfect 101 gun salute fired by his troop at Penang to mark Malaya's independence from British rule (Merdeka Day) on 31 August 1957.

Malaya was not without its humorous moments like when Gunner Lofty Ruddock and his mates pushed a car quietly passed Gerry's office sneaking out of the barracks. But Captain Salom saw this event and next day had the car put up on blocks so that the deed could not be repeated.

By 31 October 1957, Gerry and his battery were back in Australia and under command of 1st Field Regiment again at Holsworthy. Captain Salom was posted as the adjutant of the Citizens Military Force 14th Field Regiment at Marrickville, NSW for the next two years in a training role which admirably qualified him for selection to the Royal Canadian School of Artillery for a long gunnery course and an attachment as an instructor. This was an overseas posting so different from Malaya in temperature, friendliness and culture. Gerry did very well on his course and enjoyed the attachment afterwards as an instructor immensely.

The payment for this enjoyment was, of course, on return to Australia Captain Salom was posted to the School of Artillery as an instructor. He was one of the most experienced officers on the staff and most diligent in his techniques. There are many who passed through the School during this time who recall the quietly spoken, thoroughly professional mentor who went out of his way to assist them through their courses.

Gerry was appointed the honorary aide-de-camp to the Governor of New South Wales, His Excellency Lieutenant General Sir Eric Woodward KCMG KCVO CB CBE DSO whilst at the School. Gerry had always been an immaculate, dapper dresser and with his erect bearing and neatly clipped moustache, fitted seamlessly into the world of vice regal representation. It was during this time that he was introduced to Llynne Morgan who was the secretary/lady in waiting to Lady Woodward. There was a fairy tale courtship and they were married in November 1962.

All good things must come to an end and by December 1963 now Major Salom was a student at the Australian Staff College at Queenscliff, Victoria. He worked hard, socialised well (and who wouldn't after two years as an ADC?) and at the end of 1964 was requested by the Commander Royal Artillery 1st Division, Colonel Paddy O'Hare to be his Brigade Major in Sydney. At this time the divisional headquarters was predominantly a major exercise planning and conducting organisation. Nevertheless, Gerry's experience and staff abilities allowed him to contribute significantly to this role. Robert Freebairn wrote that when he joined the divisional headquarters as a very young newly promoted captain, 'Gerry ... was most welcoming. I valued his help and his friendship. He allowed me to grow into the job. He was a fine officer and above all a gentleman.'

It was at this time that Australia committed its first combat troops to Vietnam, selective National Service began and the Army expanded to sustain a task force (brigade) group operating overseas. Major Salom was appointed second in command of 4th Field Regiment which was being readied to replace the 1st in Vietnam. Commanding officer Reg Gardner was a seasoned Second World War and Korea veteran who was Gunnery Staff trained in the UK and whose last appointment had been Military Assistant to the Chief of the General Staff. Gerry struggled with a very under manned gun end to meet

the expectations of his CO. The fledgling National Service system was partly the cause of strength fluctuations and it took much of Gerry's time to achieve a 'steady state' with manpower prior to deployment.

When 4th's Regimental Headquarters and 106th Field Battery took over from those of 1st Field in Vietnam, Major Salom found himself in the unusual situation of working under 1st's CO for the first two months as Don Begg had only served four of his six months in country at that time. Fortunately, Gerry knew Begg well and was comfortable and loyal to him until Gardner took command in June 1967. The stores accounting system left something to be desired but Gerry's implementation measures not only sorted this out, but impressed the staff at Headquarters Australian Force Vietnam when they conducted an investigation into this matter.

Gerry demonstrated his resourcefulness when his unit needed a heavy truck for duties at Nui Dat. He approached the American battery commander and swapped 15 Australian canvas bucket showers for one 2.5 ton GMC truck. This was all duly recorded at the Q store and passed administrative inspection. Major Salom further showed his flexibility as a most capable local defence commander of deployed fire support bases, especially during TET 1968 when he also had an infantry company under command for patrolling in depth.

On return to Australia, the Army decided Gerry needed some non corps staff experience and sent him to Army Headquarters in Canberra for a smattering of operations and plans and then, promoted lieutenant colonel, three years in personnel administration.

On 4 August 1971, Lieutenant Colonel Salom took command of 4th Field Regiment RAA from a caretaker Major Ken Mackenzie in Townsville. Gerry hit the ground running as he was tasked with preparing 106th Battery for service in Singapore in December following by settling back the replaced 108th Battery. Then, on Christmas Eve 1971, Cyclone Althea struck Townsville and the CO recalled some 102 members of the unit from leave for relief operations. Gerry's area was Townsville and with meticulous planning and execution of his task, he raised the rather poor reputation of soldiers from a Vietnam staging garrison to titles such as 'green angels'.

The unit exercise at High Range in 1972 almost ended in disaster when a large bush fire caused a helicopter-guided hasty withdrawal. However, Gerry's challenging the two gun batteries each to haul a gun up Mount Stuart soon took soldiers' minds off that anticlimactic affair. The year concluded with two significant battery exercises—one under command of 1st Field Regiment at Shoalwater Bay on their assessment exercise before departing for Vietnam; and the other in the Lae-Finschhafen area of Papua New Guinea with the 1 RAR Group.

Lieutenant Colonel Salom's plans for a restful Christmas leave disappeared when the Labor Government came to power in December and directed that all National Servicemen were to be discharged immediately. Gerry's personnel administration experience was now taxed to the limit, but he developed a model system for the quick and efficient discharge of about half the unit's strength by the end of the leave period.

Gerry was immensely proud of his command and described it as 'the best job I ever had in the Army'. One of his battery commanders at the time was retired Colonel Alan Hutchinson who reminisces, 'I still remember Gerry at lunchtime at the Mess, on the veranda; a beer in one hand, a cigarette in the other and a grin on his face. He had a good sense of humour and although he was only short, he certainly punched above his weight, and he was respected by everyone I knew in the unit.'

Now recognised for higher ranks, in 1973 Lieutenant Colonel Salom was both rewarded and educated further with a 12 month posting to the Philippines Command and General Staff College. This was a particularly enjoyable period for the family because it was their first overseas posting together. They revelled in the culture and relaxed environment of the Philippines and were sorry to leave.

Return to Australia was not all that bad for Gerry, however, for he was promoted colonel and appointed Chief of Staff of Headquarters 1st Division in Brisbane. This was an embryo organisation post the Vietnam War when the concept of operations required the headquarters to revert of that of a traditional formation command role. Under the seasoned leadership of Major General Ron Hughes CBE DSO, Colonel Salom immersed himself in the detail required to raise the arms and services headquarters of the division, earning the respect of their commanders in the process.

Eighteen months later, Gerry was back in the high social circles again after taking up the appointment of Honorary Aide-de-Camp to the Governor General, His Excellency the Right Honourable Sir Paul Hasluck KG, GCMG, GCVO. This was also the time in life when many of the Saloms' friends had been posted to Canberra so it was easy to settle back into a social life in the ACT.

The year 1977 saw Colonel Salom return to the 'Great Grey Sponge' (*sic* Defence Headquarters) with postings as Director Reserve Operations, Colonel Military Staff in Strategic and International Policy Division, and Assistant Military Secretary back in Personnel Branch (Army). This was the time at which he was at his career best—his years of military education, practical experience with soldiers, active service and competence all combined to put Gerry on a plinth with his logical thought, quietly spoken but measured and persuasive arguments, and effective writing ability. At 52 years of age, he was literally heading onwards and upwards.

Whilst undergoing an Army Fitness Test running around Lake Burley Griffin in November 1983, Gerry died from a heart attack. But for the quick actions of a fellow jogger applying CPR, that would have been the end of this story. He suffered significant damage during the few short minutes when he was clinically dead. This not only necessitated his learning to walk and talk all over again, but spelt the end of his military career.

But Gerry Salom had always been a fighter and, in the words of his boss at the time, Major General Gordon Fitzgerald AO, 'it was so good to witness his recovery and his successful transition to gentleman farmer'. It took months of rehabilitation, patience and a dogged major life decision to return to the land. Gerry went to an idyllic 40 acres of cattle breeding pastures in the Valla Valley south of Coffs Harbour on which Llyne built her magnificent country mansion. The Saloms happily settled in this area to which many of their old Army mates had already moved.

Gerry, the gentleman farmer saw out his days at whatever pace he decided to move—breeding his cattle, playing golf, socialising with his old mates and together with Llyne becoming even more accomplished hosts to their many visitors. I can still vividly recall peering aghast at a spa pool of red liquid the morning after a night of great camaraderie which concluded with drinking red wine in a hot spa—or perhaps spilling more than we drank!

A rare blood disorder attacked gentleman Gerry in 2012 and it was only by frequent visits to the Coffs Harbour Hospital for hours of treatment that he could be sustained. As he weakened, these pilgrimages became overburdening and stoically Gerry finally said, 'No more, leave me in peace in my home'. I visited the Saloms just after this and though weak, it did not stop Gerry regaling me with humorous stories of a past Army, drinking a whisky and enjoying a good meal with a glass of red. We didn't say 'goodbye' but both of us knew this would be our last handshake and man hug.

An old comrade wrote that from his home he hears Taps at 6pm each evening. 'As the sound comes by tonight, I shall remember [Gerry] for the spin and determination that he radiated into our lives.'

The daughter Ron Kennedy (a subaltern of Gerry's in Malaya) wrote, 'My Dad adored his friendship with Gerry and the witty repartee they shared. Dad would have been at the [Pearly] Gates with a glass of champagne to welcome him.'

Vale Gerald Maurice (Gerry) Salom—officer, warrior, farmer, loved and loving family man, loyal friend, and to the end an honourable, consummate gentleman and Gunner—now in the running for aide-de-camp to his Maker in the Great Gun Park up above.

To Llynne, his dearly beloved through 53 years of marriage, daughter Caroline, son Miles and their extended family, the Royal Regiment of Australian Artillery expresses its deepest condolences on their bereavement.