

ARMI WANTOKS JOURNAL

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The Journal of the Queensland teachers who served in Papua New Guinea in the Royal Australian Army Education Corps from 1966 to 1973.

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Welcome to the second Armi Wantoks for this year. In many ways this has been a successful year for our informal group. New contacts have been made and this has added to the richness of our understanding of the PNG experience.

As well, we have set off on another journey to more fully tell the story of our time in PNG. This is the Chalkies Digital Project whereby the photographic record that we made in PNG will be recorded in digital form. We are expecting to distribute this among our group and also to places like the AWM, the RAAEC headquarters library and our connections in PNG itself.

We began the project at our annual get together where most of the material was presented. The Chalkies involved were: Ed Diery, Phil Adam (Murray Barracks), Norm Hunter, Terry Edwinsmith, Kev Horton and John Gibson (Taurama Barracks), Greg Ivey and Kevin Smith (Moem Barracks) and Ian Ogston (Goldie River). See the photo below:



We were privileged again to have with us George Kearney (back left) who was at the heart of the decision making on the PNG Chalkies scheme.

The project is well under way with Goldie River and Murray Barracks completed. The anticipated finish time is April next year. I will keep you up to date on progress with this task.

The main part of our Journal has been contributed by Norm Hunter. This is an important article because it considers the long term effects of our time in the Army and in PNG in particular. Many thanks to Norm for this. I trust you will enjoy reading this piece.

Ian and Greg

40 YEARS ON: SOME REFLECTIONS ON LEADERSHIP AND POWER

Norm Hunter

It's 42 years since I arrived in Port Moresby in June 1967 as a Sergeant in the Royal Australian Army Education Corps. I'd completed three months of recruit training and three months of infantry training. On the eve of being sent to a battalion before going to Vietnam, I was informed I was going to Papua-New Guinea in the Education Corps.

To say I was overjoyed would be an understatement. I'd been interviewed, along with other teachers in the intake, and thought I'd missed out. I have to admit I wasn't looking forward to Vietnam. I hadn't picked up the enthusiasm for it that many of my fellow Nashos had, and somehow, I sensed that despite what we were being told, the war wasn't going well, and was going to get worse. That was in June 1967, and in 1968, when I would have been there the Tet offensive took place. So in June 1967, the cards fell my way, and as it turned out, I was presented with an opportunity that few young people could expect to experience.

Responsibility and Respect

Along with Roger Howard, Bob Foster and John Gibson, I was placed at Taurama Barracks, about 30 kilometres out of Port Moresby. It seems that the cards fell my way again, because I soon learnt that Taurama was regarded as the "plum" posting in PNG, with its elite status in the Pacific Islands Regiment and an attractive garden setting in the foothills just in from the sea.

The four "Chalkies" we were replacing were part of the first "Chalkies" to be posted to PNG, and they had paved the way for us to be welcomed into the Sergeant's Mess. They had established themselves as good teachers and team players so we immediately set about slotting into the same mould.

The Chalkies were expected to take on the same responsibilities that the Regulars took on including the role of Duty Sergeant, which entailed a 24-hour battalion responsibility along with the Duty Officer, starting with the

changing of the guard in the morning. I was the first of the four of us to be rostered and I was pretty nervous about it. That multiplied considerably on the morning when the CO, Colonel Hearn, arrived and sat down to watch the ceremony just before we marched on to the parade ground. I must admit to feeling quite proud when I'd negotiated my way through the changing of the guard without mishap that morning.

Norm's Bio

Norm served as a 'Chalkie' in PNG in 1967/68. He recently retired from the principalship of Hillbrook Anglican School after 21 years during which he was a founding co-principal and then principal. Norm's work has been recognised by the awards of the ACER's Biennial Queensland Medal and the Medal of the Order of Australia.

In his spare time, Norm enjoys time with his family, reading, sport, music and theatre. He plays keyboards in two big bands and in a '50s and '60s rock 'n' roll band.

Looking back, the responsibility we were given in the Education Corps was stunning. There were documented Australian Army education courses for our reference, but this was Papua New Guinea, and our role was not just to teach English and Maths, but also a Social Science course that explained the concept of a nation as opposed to a conglomeration of racial and cultural groups. As if that wasn't challenging enough, a related theme was the role of army in a democracy: in particular its subservient role to the government of the day. This was a major political agenda of course, due to the disturbing pattern already occurring in countries that had been colonised by European powers: a democratic system was put in place, the colonial power left and within a few years, the army launched a coup and set up a dictatorship. (Just as regularly occurred in Fiji). Papua-New Guinea was a protectorate under the UN rather than a colony but with its vast cultural differences, the danger was still there as the army and police were the only organised cross-cultural institutions. At the same time, the UN - with its own political agenda - was pushing Australia to hasten independence, so there was an urgency about all of this.

It's hard to know how successful we were at that particular responsibility, but to date, there hasn't been a coup in Papua New Guinea and though at times it has been a fragile country politically, perhaps surprisingly, a

democratic system has prevailed.

At the age of 21, to be given the responsibility to develop courses and assess them, especially when there were political and educational imperatives, was astonishing and I know we certainly took it very seriously and gave it our best. Woven into this was a theme that I've brought with me through my life: setting high expectations for people is highly motivating, and in most cases people will rise to meet them if they're given genuine responsibility along with support and encouragement.

I had further responsibility placed upon me when I was appointed captain of the Army rugby team in 1968. There were a number of officers in the team and I was a Sergeant, but that seemed irrelevant, and the officers gave me great support, with our team ultimately winning the premiership.

Looking back, I think that being given all of this responsibility at such a young age was instrumental in encouraging me to think that I might take on leadership roles when I returned to Australia and I think I actively sought out these kinds of roles at least partly due to the confidence that I'd gained from my Papua New Guinea experience.

Leadership and Power

I experienced three Regimental Sergeant Majors in my two years in the Army and their examples had a bigger impact on me than I realised at the time. On reflection, there were some important lessons in the way they used their very significant positional power.

The RSM at Singleton was, outwardly at least, a tough and harsh man. Sergeants in the battalion rugby team conveyed that they both feared him and intensely disliked him. The example I remember most clearly was his handling of "stand fast" evenings when every OR from Sergeant up is required to attend a formal dinner and then stay in the Sergeant's Mess until the RSM decides that they can leave. (I recall it as a very enjoyable experience in the Sergeants' Mess at Taurama.)

Some of the men had families in Singleton, so they did not want to be home late. The RSM knew this but on these evenings he was known to keep them there while he engaged himself in some serious alcohol consumption, finally decreeing that they could leave in the early hours of the morning.

As he strutted around the barracks, often barking orders at soldiers or ORs engaged in various activities, he was an imposing character, yet his use of his institutionalised power was clearly excessive. He was feared and his position as RSM was respected but it was clear that he had no personal respect from the ORs: the opposite in fact. Interestingly, I don't remember his name though I spent six months at Singleton.

The second RSM I encountered was when I arrived at Taurama Barracks. RSM Wilson was also an imposing figure and his presence around the barracks was impressive. He had a fairly dramatic manner and took his responsibilities seriously, though I felt he saw a need to let people know that he was the boss and used the word 'I' often. He treated 'Chalkies' well but I am sure he never knew our names. Months after we had arrived he was still addressing us as 'Sergeant' even in private conversations. Nevertheless, he was a decent person and he had the respect of the men. Tragically, he had a massive heart attack one day about six months after we arrived and died while on duty.

He was replaced by RSM McKay. I still think about McKay's leadership style, as it was so effective, yet not easy to analyse. He was a quiet person: none of the marching around the barracks barking at people and no dramas or histrionics. He quickly knew the names of every person in the Sergeants' Mess, and their wives and girlfriends, and to the 'Chalkies' he used our first names. He often engaged us - and the other ORs - in conversations where he treated us as equals yet I never saw anyone take advantage of this or overstep the mark with him.

At the same time, his word was law. I think one of his 'secrets' was that he attended to the little things, especially the personal relationships, and in doing so he built up a huge reserve of respect and goodwill. A further 'secret' was that he asserted his authority as RSM strategically. There were a few times when he felt he had to lay down the law and when he did he spoke strongly but never 'over the top' and he conveyed strong expectations that what he was wanting would occur. And it invariably did. No-one wanted to disappoint him and I think that had little to do with his position as RSM and much to do with the personal respect in which he was held. In my time at Taurama, I never heard a criticism of him by anyone.

RSM McKay died some years ago, and while I did express my respect for him before I left PNG, I wish I could tell him how influential his approach to leadership has been on me through my professional career. Indeed, when I completed a Master's degree in educational leadership a few years ago. I found him constantly stepping out of the pages of the research and thinking I was reading about.

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So what did I learn from these three RSMs? On reflection, quite a lot. It's probably best summed up by Isabella in Shakespeare's *Measure for a Measure*:

*Oh, it is excellent to have a giant's strength,
But it is tyrannous to use it like a giant.*

1. The RSM at Singleton seemed to have a need to constantly assert his authority and to prove that he was 'the man'. He used the significant positional power of RSM to do it, at times verging on bastardry to emphasise his power. He was obeyed, even feared, but he was not respected. He was wielding power but he was not practising leadership,

That was 1967, but it's surprised me to see that approach being used by some people in leadership positions even today. Indeed, I've seen it from some school principals and every one of them has come to grief. As Peter, Paul and Mary sang back in the 60s, *When will they ever learn?*

2. I'm confident that at least part of the reason for RSM Wilson's early death at Taurama was due to stress. I never saw him relaxed and the role of RSM carries a good deal of stress. In his efforts to always present himself as the RSM and always appear up-beat and authoritative, he almost certainly placed enormous pressures on his personal health.

There's a need for balance in lifestyle, even when you are in a position of significant responsibility. I certainly drew that lesson from RSM Wilson's untimely death, and during my 21 years in the principalship, I tried to keep my family and my love of music in there too, recharging the batteries and having a variety of interests.

3. Perhaps the greatest lesson I drew from my army experiences was how leadership can draw on the power of respect and trust, especially when

placed in the context of high expectations. I think we 'Chalkies' gave the best of what we had to offer, and that the expectations, the trust and the respect we received were the major factors in that. RSM Mckay embodied it. He was a wonderful example of a leader, as opposed to someone in a leadership position wielding power.

I was too young to grasp all this back then, but over the years it's found its way from the sub-conscious to the conscious, and it's served me well in my efforts to understand leadership and act it out.

As I said, the cards fell my way back then and the experience still influences me today. As a school principal, my position gave me a giant's strength. I hope I used it wisely. If I did, at least some of the credit goes to RSM Mckay for his modelling of authentic leadership and to the RSM at Singleton for showing me the difference between a leadership position and a leader and what was his name?!!

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As this Journal is going to reach you in the Festive Season, Greg and I would like to wish you a very Happy Christmas and all the best for the New Year

The name of this Journal, Armi Wantoks (meaning Army Friends in Neo Melanesian), derives its name from a 2004 publication produced by the National Servicemen who served in PNG 1966-73. That book tells the experiences of those Teachers and the close connections they formed with local soldiers on the Army bases.

