

Nic Stuart's Elogy at David Housego's Memorial Service  
Collaroy Golf Club Tuesday, 4 June 2019

I met David Housego as the sun rose. We were forming up before seven on a cold winter morning on Bardia Barracks' bleak parade ground, surrounded by nissen huts.

But no time was too early, no place too dreary, for David not to begin creating fun. The army didn't know what was about to hit it.

His real life at that time was at university, studying accountancy. His vocation, however, was the army reserve. Well, every moment not spent listening to music; engaging with friends; or devouring books.

Oh, and studying; did I forget that?

I don't know how I could have, David was always so keen to hit the books . . .

We became officers together in 33 Course; he decided we'd join armoured reconnaissance so we'd have light armoured vehicles to get around in. He promised we wouldn't have to walk. He was wrong. Again . . .

We were both pushed through 30/50 gunnery; radio; D&S in three months so we could make the next crewies course. It was exhausting. We both ended up failing that year at uni. But we made the crew commanders course, run by Kevin McCarthy, a Vietnam veteran. He was tough, and the course reflected his approach.

He made the mistake of thinking David was just style.

On our crew commanders course he put David under real pressure – 48 hours of constant movement; probing; fighting; ambushes and stress. David responded with his voice issuing quiet assured orders over the radio command net, in total sync with his task, his voice strong, his mission clear. You could feel exactly where each vehicle was as the troop moved from bound to bound.

At the end of an incredibly difficult and strenuous 48 hours, Kevin suspected he'd won. He poked his head into our vehicle to see how we'd coped. Looking up, as if he was fresh, David gave him a big smile and asked;

"When's the exercise going to start, sir?"

His troops, callsigns 17, later 11, loved him; he was in his element. Dusty Whaler, other AFX's, you could see he was thrilled just to be there participating.

David took fun seriously, too.

You remember those big old floor polishers with huge brushes on the bottom, seats on top. We used to have one stashed away in the back of the old officers' mess.

Well, at 0200, after one incredibly boozy dining-in night before the old mess was demolished, David suddenly realised the floor was dirty. Very dirty. So he jumped quickly up onto the floor polisher and rode it, down past the candelabra, through the tables, between the port decanters. People scattered! Then, by 0300, it was time for a new trick. He'd now found a manikin, a store dummy with an old uniform on, so he formed it up and began marching it up and down the parade ground.

Alas, it was a delinquent dummy, it didn't march correctly.

In the morning the RSM stretched and slowly got out of his hammock slung in Bob's Hall. He walked out the door. He looked down the far end of the parade ground. The dummy's head, properly attired with cap and headset on, was sticking out of the Matilda tank.

Its legs, alas, had marched away. They poked upside down, akimbo and naked, out of the Staghound driver's hatch.

Incredible days . . .

Weekends spent listening to music at the Bridge Hotel Balmain where the Hippo's played. This was the time David met his wonderful wife Christine, who many in the Regiment will remember. But his life was transforming.

David was beginning to move beyond the regiment. He passed commando selection then aced command and staff college, still wearing his black beret.

But then he went to England. Unfortunately, he moved inside the army's observe-orientation-decide-and-act loop – papers for an attachment to the Royal Yeomanry were still being drafted up when he found himself in London. But David realised he could join the British Army, so he signed up, as a trooper, with 21 SAS, the Artist's Rifles, the territorial SAS.

He was sent on 'Selection': the toughest physical, mental and intellectual sifting of any army, anywhere in the world. On weekends Christine would have to bind up his back with electric tape, so his back could withstand the burden of carrying the 160kg pack. He passed through the initial weeks as others fell out, one after another. Finally it came to the conclusion, attempting to escape capture and interrogation. Everyone's captured: the only question is can you hold out or will you break. Pushed to exhaustion; brutalised; interrogated again and again; denied sleep; freezing and exhausted, pushed into freezing water on the ground – David didn't crack.

He passed selection and obtained his coveted sandy beret, the emblem that meant so much. It's lying here, now, with his things.

David ate up experience. For him, this was what life was all about.

We were always friends, best men at each others weddings. In the 90s a car crash had written me off in Bangkok.

I was airlifted back to Australia. David spent hours by my bed in hospital. I think he was re-thinking his life at the same time.

By now it was almost as if the military didn't interest him any more. He'd taken all they could throw at him, and more. Now he was ready to turn to bigger challenges. He was a fully-trained, professional, focused strategic killer. Where to apply those skills?

He was ready for corporate Australia.

David worked for Coka-Cola Amatil and obtained an MBA.

Then he left Coka-Cola Amatil and searched for a real opportunity to shine. The engineering contractors, Worley, was getting ready to float. David became their Chief Financial Officer and took the company to its listing at \$1.70 a share. When it launched, he'd told me it was a good buy.

A couple of years later, it hit \$64.00 a share. It came down, of course, but it's now (almost) turning over revenue of \$5 billion a year with 56,000 employees. More than a Division; a long way from A Squadron.

Then he moved to Fairfax, publishers of the Sydney Morning Herald, Age, Financial Review, and even the Canberra Times, where I'm a columnist. David nudded together the crucial deal that merged these mastheads with Nine.

Then, suddenly, he found he had a brain tumour. Six months later, he was dead.

I'm so proud, so enriched, to have had David as my mate.

My best mate.