

Joe Hassan

The Ways He Touched My Life

I can't remember my first meeting with Joe when the Class 2/67 arrived at Scheyville in 1967, I also don't understand why we became close, he was from Sydney's northern beaches, loved the surf and also his Rugby; I was from the dry Mallee in SA and loved Aussie Rules. Joe took me under his wing and on our first leave escorted me home to the superb hospitality of his parents, George & Betty. Thus followed a routine that Joe would take me home on each of our brief sessions of leave, through to graduation and beyond, when we were both posted to Singleton.

It was through Joe and his family that I met my wife Wendy, guess I should be eternally grateful to him for that eh!! An alignment of circumstances that follows has always caused me to wonder....if there is a guiding hand somewhere, a specific fate or destiny or just "life's perfect imperfections". Wendy and I decided to marry on my R&R from Vietnam, and Joe was my best man. The day I came out of the field my platoon was involved in a tragic mine incident, 3 killed and 22 wounded and wiping out the platoon headquarters group.....I was just a couple of hours away from that....so Joe, yes mate I do remain eternally grateful and still ponder how fate visits us.

Joe was highly recognised for his Ruby skills, played for Army and Combined Services at a time when the likes of Bobby Fulton (Rugby League) did the same. For a big bloke, Joe had enormous endurance, but more so a depth of courage and guts beyond anyone else I remember during our time at Scheyville. A particular memory is the final 20 mile route march before graduation, we were all sleep deprived and pretty much exhausted (the route march was always scheduled as the last element of an exacting and very tiring "exercise" in the lead up week). The pinnacle aspiration (as I recall) was to complete the course in under 4 hours. Joe was the only bloke I knew who did that. On this occasion it was beyond endurance that I observed in Joe, on beating the 4 hours his socks were a bloodied mess, and he had gone beyond the ability of his bodily controls. I still have deepest admiration for this capacity. Yet for all his "toughness", I never saw Joe express or use any malice, ever.

At Singleton we enjoyed a very happy Mess, very convivial with so many live-in subalterns. While we worked hard we also enjoyed more leave and freedom and the fun, sport and social landscape that it presented. Be it the close camaraderie in the Mess or afternoons at the Newport Arms, life was great and Joe very prominent in the mix of youthful "tearaways". Joe's gregarious nature, his ability to engage and his spontaneous happy disposition made him unique, his manner endeared him to all and was universally liked (warmly) and accepted. Add to this his love for music and performance then you can get a complete picture, to remember Joe without his guitar and a spontaneous song or sing along is to not remember or know him at all. This talent and the joy he got from music journeyed with him throughout his life. Around 2000, I had been paddling a kayak on Narrabeen Lake, on hearing some music my recognition was immediate, yep there was Joe in the local community centre playing his guitar and singing, in his element, instantly recognisable by all who knew him.

After Singleton (1968) I was posted to 5RAR in training for Vietnam, and Joe to JTC Canungra. I saw a bit of Joe there when on the 5RAR Cadre (he had more leave and time down at "Surfers", I think a party or 3). He enlightened me with the definition of a "snail trail" left in the Mess, and also gave me a nickname (Fang) as my appetite was quite astounding, even to Joe. So that's 2 things Joe has given me for life, a wife and a nickname that has followed me throughout my career.

I can only try to imagine how devastating the tragedy of Joe losing his wife Linda (to illness) must have been, and also that their 4 boys lost their Mum while so young. How Joe coped and mustered energy and courage to go forward is an inspiration, he prevailed over this adversity and has kept his family very closely together. I can't express how much inspiration others can derive from him in this regard, or the enormous respect with which he should be remembered.

Although we lived in adjoining suburbs, our paths and directions took different tangents over the years, with an occasional meeting to say "G'Day mate". I am deeply saddened that Joe has passed, from the great shock of his initial illness, to the relief of apparent successful treatment to control the illness, and then when things did such a sharp and violent "U" turn to take this extraordinary bloke. Yet again it does make one question and ponder "the scheme of things", he lead a good life and embraced warmly all those around him throughout his life. While Joe's life had been more than rich in many ways he did endure great tragedy in losing Linda and the road to rear and nurture 4 boys without their Mum a challenge that would buckle most men. Yet he stood tall, strong and cheerful throughout.

As most of us from the Class of 2/67 now see youth more through the eyes of our grandkids (than our variable recollections of back in those Army days), we try to guide and mentor our grandsons, to infuse them with the right values, honesty and integrity and the drive and enthusiasm to strive and make the most from what their life will offer in opportunity and adversity. As I think of my 3 grandsons, I consider the people I have met who impress and inspire me, from Col Geddes and the exceptional DS at Scheyville, the unique and special people who were The Cadets at Scheyville, to the outstanding leadership and bravery I was honoured to experience with Officer and Men of 5RAR in Vietnam, and a handful of business people met during my working career....I can't think of anyone who would be a better person for them to aspire to emulate than Joe Hassan. So perhaps this is my fitting tribute to Joe, that I will be more than proud if they are able to emulate at least some of Joe's character, zest for life and exceptional attributes as a person, when they grow and develop in the years ahead.....Joe was more than a "good bloke".

If there is that "better place", then it is happier and brighter today for the presence of Joe Hassan.