

Vale

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JON COLE

Dear Member / Friend

It is my privilege to say a few words about the late Jon Cole in celebration of the 20 year military part of his early career, which started when he was 18.

During his post matric year at St Andrews in 1954, following an ad in the newspaper for young men to become potential officers, Jon joined the then Federal Army. After passing an Officer Selection Board, he was sent to the UK as an Officer Cadet in November 1954 (together with 4 other young Federal Army Officer Cadets, including Ian Bales-Smith and the late Rob Southey). There he first attended a British Army National Service Officer Training course, at Eaton Hall in Chester - before reporting to The Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst from where he graduated in July 1956 as a 20 year old 2nd Lieutenant.

After completing a Young Officer's Weapons Course at the British Army School of Infantry at Hythe; plus a Platoon Commander's Course at Warminster, he returned home to 2nd Battalion The King's African Rifles ("2KAR") in January 1957. He started out as a platoon commander, later becoming a company commander there.

Jon held various appointments during his career but one of the highlights was his time as a Major, commanding No 2 Commando of the 1st Battalion the Rhodesian Light Infantry ("RLI").

That is where I met Major Jon Cole for the first time, having been commissioned into his commando, together with among others, Peter Mincher, who is here today. John was single at the time, was later engaged and then married to Mary while we served with him.

My wife Mary attended Mary's and John's wedding, as a schoolgirl on the back of her parent's invitation (her Dad soldiered with Jon). And she told me recently that Mary was the most beautiful bride she had ever seen and that she reminded her of Julie Andrews in the Sound of Music musical!

It is at this point that I wish to touch on Jon the soldier and army officer.

It was great fun working under Jon's command. While he was a strict commander he had a massive heart - of "pure gold". He cared deeply about the officers and men under his command. And he contributed greatly to the development of us young officers in our formative years. He led the commando admirably in the field.

Jon was a natural leader who ran his commando as if it was a big family. He didn't suffer fools, and his men adored and respected him. He was a humble, cheerful and upstanding man with the highest integrity and standards and a wonderful, sharp sense of humour.

He was always calm and clear-headed when the heat was on. He had a natural ability to relate to his men, right down to the most junior soldier. As Kipling says in his poem "IF"; Jon could: "Talk with crowds - and keep his virtue, and walk with Kings - nor lose the common touch", a most important and special quality for a good leader. With Jon, no matter who you were - what you saw was what you got. Jon was a leader who understood completely the vital importance of that "touchy-feely human relationship stuff - in handling soldiers. And he taught us that real, no-nonsense guys, who led real hard men into battle needed to take that touchy feely "stuff" very seriously indeed (often wrongly neglected in business as being a "soft issue").

There were no frills with this straight-talking, big and striking man with a great presence, who one couldn't help loving. It seems strange to say this about a so called steely-eyed soldier. But it is true. Just look again at the wonderful picture of him on the hymn sheet which - to me - captures what I am trying to say. And I've been privy to some of Jon's memoirs that he was writing - where he reflects about, when a young officer in 2KAR, being nicknamed "Cuddles Cole" by the officers' wives - because of the way he danced at mess dances! His Commando 2IC, then Captain Pat Hill who is here today; lovingly nicknamed him: "the great big furry Major from the north of Kathmandu". We called him that after a few beers in the mess - where he could also be a great participant, holding his own with the best.

Jon had one serious problem though. Soldiers spend a lot of time in close proximity and Jon was a deafening and relentless snorer. But Pat Hill - who - as Jon's 2IC had the unenviable job of sharing a tent with him on operations - had the solution. As the story goes, on retiring to their tent, often after a few beers in the mess tent, Pat would assemble a collection of missiles near his stretcher; including boots, takkies, mess tins, mugs, water bottles, and such like. These were piled up and then used to let fly at Jon who slept in the other corner of the tent - to wake him, every time he started snoring. And as the story goes - the next morning the Major's pillow was weighed down by this assortment of missiles launched at him throughout the night.

Jon graduated from the Rhodesian Army Staff College in 1970 and after spending some time as the second in command of the School of Infantry, he then also graduated from the South African Military Staff College, by then definitely attaining what could be called the "Military version of the business MBA - and bar"! His final military job was that of a Lt Col as the senior Army Director of Planning at what was to later become the Combined Forces Operations Headquarters.

It was after this that Jon elected to retire from the military in 1975 after 20 years of service; to then graduate as an MBA at the Graduate School of Business, at Cape Town University. This was followed by an extremely successful career as an executive and independent consultant in business management.

So - from his many ex military friends and colleagues, it has been a great privilege to have been part of Jon's journey in a life, which holds so many happy memories and it is time to say "au revoir" to an old friend! And we extend our heartfelt condolences on the loss of the great man (in every sense of the word) - to you - Mary, Fiona, Judi, Hugh and your families.

Pat Armstrong

Then the march to end all marches
As the warriors of old give it their all
As if their youth had revisited them
And the streets are lined with the grateful
And those who came for their own reasons
And the waves follow them
Lapping gently at their heels
Until every space is filled outside the place of Royalty
And then the beast of war awakens
And flies over as it did in the days of need
Red petals cascade upon the watchers
And a nations heart opens
Filling the air
And says thank you

Ann-Marie Spittle 2006