



EULOGY FOR GENERAL JOHN BAKER, AC, DSM
by
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As he was approaching his retirement as Chief of the Defence Force in 1998, General John Baker expressed his astonishment at soldiers planning on spending only 10 years or so in the Defence Force. He couldn't understand why on earth they would ever want to leave. He cited his own career as an example of the opportunities provided to you if you devoted your life to serving your nation in uniform. As he said back then: "I was a university student on full pay. I was a young engineer on the frontiers of civilisation, I then had the pleasure of living in Hawaii for 12 months. I've been a teacher, a policy officer, the head of an intelligence organisation, a commander of men. I might even claim to have been a diplomat, then a logistician. I've been a manager of big business...". Of course, when John said this his intention was to express his great delight at the opportunities the Australian Army had offered him. We all hear this quote and realize that it was not what the Army gave to John Baker, but what John Baker gave to the Army—a lifetime of exceptional service that went far above and beyond what could reasonably be expected of any one man.

For General John Baker was a commanding, professional, dedicated, determined and courageous military officer. He was humble, he was kind and he was exceedingly intelligent. He possessed a great ability to inspire others. He was a fresh and innovative thinker. He challenged the status quo. He set the bar high and made no apologies for doing so. Though he had high expectations of others, he wasn't averse to offering second chances. It was no surprise to those who saw his rise through the ranks, that he eventually held the highest military office in the nation.

John's military career began when he joined the Royal Military College Duntroon in 1954. His high school headmaster, in recommending John for a position at Duntroon, said he had "excellent moral character, was industrious, thoroughly reliable and well respected by school fellows". These were traits John carried throughout his time at Duntroon, and indeed, throughout his entire career.

It will be no surprise to those aware of John's formidable intellect that he was a good student, proving exceptional at pure mathematics and excelling at the rest of the terribly difficult subjects of physics, chemistry, military law and military engineering.

Early on he demonstrated a great affinity for military life. Major General Campbell, then Commandant of the Royal Military College, said of John, "Hard working cadet in all phases of life at the College. His military work is well above the average. Still rather shy and retiring in his manner. Shows great determination and physical courage".

Of Duntroon, John later remarked that the best thing he got from his time there was his friends. He took great pride in the fact that after 50 years that circle of friends was still intact. And he took even greater pride in reminding people that his class produced six generals—quite a remarkable feat. John was also greatly astonished that after 44 years he was the last serving officer of the great class of 1957.

After graduating John was commissioned into the Royal Australian Engineers. He then completed a degree in Civil Engineering at Melbourne University. John attributed engineering as providing him with intellectual discipline that would serve him well his entire career.

John won early regimental experience in a number of Royal Australian Engineer Units. During this time he spent one year in Papua New Guinea. John described his time here as a fantastic opportunity. John and his men worked in the jungle, built roads and extended airfields. For a young man it was an exciting adventure, and this was followed by an exchange posting with the United States Army in Hawaii.

In 1970 he served in Vietnam as a member of the Battle Analysis Team—an arduous appointment, though John was never known to shy away from hard work. Later that year and into 1971 he was project officer in the 1st Australian Civil Affairs Unit, where John was responsible for construction activities in Phuoc Tuy Province.

In recognition of his work on this project, Major Baker was mentioned in dispatches. His citation reads that "Despite the short planning time, an extended supply system, a mixed workforce and, subsequently, a curtailed completion time, Major Baker—by his technical ability and dedication—brought the project near to successful completion before his departure from Vietnam. Throughout his management of the complex and difficult task, Major Baker displayed devotion to duty, professional skill and leadership qualities of the highest order which reflected great credit upon himself, his Corps and the Australian Army".

Over the next decade John fulfilled a number of staff and command appointments, consistently excelling at his many and varied tasks and garnering great respect from those in which he came into contact.

In November 1987 the then Brigadier Baker produced the influential internal review 'Report of the Study into ADF Command Arrangements', more commonly known as 'The Baker Report'. John took great pride in this ground-breaking report which initiated the journey to create leading edge command and control arrangements for the ADF. John's most profound recommendations were to create the integrated joint headquarters at NORCOM and the three Joint Environmental Headquarters of Maritime, Land and Air in Sydney.

Just after this report was published, John was promoted to Major General and took up the duties of Chief of Logistics - Army. A young LTCOL Peter Cosgrove, then Military Advisor to the Chief of Army, fondly recalls witnessing John's great joy and surprise at being told of his promotion to the rank of two star. Ever humble and unassuming John was duly delighted at his elevated rank.

In 1989 John commenced another of his important roles, as Director of Defence's Intelligence Organisation. During his time as Director, John was instrumental in changing the direction of the Organisation.

This appointment coincided with the first Gulf War and as Director, John was required to brief Prime Minister Hawke on a regular basis. John won much admiration for his incisive and insightful assessments and his complete grasp of the tactical and strategic aspects of the Coalition Campaign. I remember being dragged into Admiral Taylor's office to explain to a very determined Major General Baker exactly why we were developing plans that he deemed to be 'high risk' to our people. The strength of his conviction was most impressive.

John was promoted to Lieutenant General in October 1992 and assumed the appointment of Vice Chief of the Defence Force. He was promoted to Companion in the Military Division of the Order of Australia in the 1995 Australia Day Honours List.

Then on 20 April 1995 General Baker assumed the duties of Chief of the Defence Force and was subsequently promoted General. Early in his tenure as CDF John faced one of his most challenging times, with the crash of the Blackhawks in 1996, which resulted in the death of 18 of our servicemen. John was greatly affected by this accident, and flew straight up to Townsville to be with the families that had lost loved ones. John remarked that 'it was as though it was your own family', such was his compassionate and caring nature.

John achieved a great deal during his time as CDF. He developed a vision and a concept for fixing the operational level of command and control. This was implemented with the creation of the Australian Theatre with a joint commander and a joint staff. We now had clear separation of the raise and train functions from the command and control of operations functions. As we were to see shortly thereafter, this joint approach dramatically enhanced the ability of the ADF to respond to the challenges of the strategic environment. John had great insight about how our future force would need to operate.

Indeed, John must have foreseen what was coming. With one sole joint operational commander in the Australian Theatre Headquarters our operational tempo immediately took off. Within a few days of its creation Major General Jim Connolly was working closely with John on dealing with the Sandline crisis and its consequences in Papua New Guinea. As Chief of Staff to Jim Connolly, I recall this time very well. John had remarkable clarity as to how the situation should be handled. He fully grasped the whole strategic problem and this allowed him to provide the government with solutions that enhanced Australia's strategic posture.

In the last eighteen months of John's tenure, we undertook, or prepared to undertake, 20 operations. He took great satisfaction in this, commenting, "There is an excitement and a commitment now in the Defence Force. The members understand that they have a real job to do, and are eager to get on with it". During this time, of particular significance for its slick execution, was the deployment of our C130's to Cambodia on Operation Vista in 1998. The C-130s were used to evacuate Australians from Phnom Pehn.

John and Departmental Secretary Tony Ayers were also responsible for implementing the Defence Reform Program. This program was part of the Government's strategy to transfer support positions to the sharp end. This reform was a necessary change to allow the ADF to position itself for the challenges of the future. John was a great proponent of the need to minimize that part of the force not directly related to combat or combat support roles. However, he once jokingly commented that there would soon be more people watching the North Melbourne versus Carlton game at the MCG on Sunday than defending Australia!

John was well liked and trusted by the Government of the day. Minister Robert Ray had a close relationship with John. And with the change of Government in 1996 John then impressed Prime Minister Howard and Minister Ian McLachlan with his intellect and insight. He was a wise and kind colleague and developed a close friendship with Ian and his wife Janet.

It was also during this time that John was picked up on one of his more intriguing habits. In preparing for speeches John would kick everyone out of his office, shut the door—locking it—and then not emerge for quite a period of time. Now John was renowned for being a particularly good public speaker. He was engaging, meticulous in his delivery, and he never got caught out by an unexpected question. Eventually his staff got curious about just how John was able to perform so well each and every time he spoke. So they decided to do a bit of recon. Even though they were locked out, the door to CDF's office used to have a peephole in which you could see in. Imagine the staff's great surprise when the General's secret weapon was found to be an affinity for talking to plants! The General would stand in his office, pretending each plant was a different member of his audience. He would speak to them, gesture to them, and get quite worked up and passionate in these practice sessions. But it obviously worked for him—General Baker was inspirational when he was speaking in public. In particular, I recall his moving and beautiful eulogy, delivered without notes, for his great friend and colleague Alan Beaumont.

In June 1998, John was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal. He then retired from the ADF in July 1998.

Following his retirement John continued to serve our community, though he was not well. John was the Vice President of *Australia Day in the National Capital* Committee, a member of the Strategic Defence Studies Centre at ANU, the Chairman of the Australian Defence College and a member of the Board of Directors for Australian Submarine Corporation and the Minister's Defence Council.

General John Baker was, and will remain, greatly respected and admired throughout the entire Australian Defence Force. The presence of so many in uniform here today is testament to the great respect he commanded through his compassion, determination, skill and intellect. He was a giant in the Defence community, and today we mourn one of our greatest Generals, one of our greatest friends.

Just a few short days ago I experienced one of those times I will remember forever. I found John in hospital, alert and ready to engage in conversation. I told him about Reserve Forces Day, which I had just attended in Melbourne. He responded by cajoling me never to forget the importance of our reserves. Not satisfied with that, he then went on to tell me that we simply had to set aside at least an hour to talk about the Army. I enquired about what we might cover, and he responded abruptly, "Angus, I want to give you my views about the Army". As the current serving CDF, I knew exactly where he was coming from! I will treasure the time I was able to spend with John so late in his life. Of course, it was not only his professional life in which John Baker was to be admired. John was a family man who revelled in his role as a husband to Margaret, father to Janine, John and Noël, grandfather to Matt, James, Nick, Elizabeth, Lauren and John and brother to Margaret, Jean and David.

As a team, John and Margaret were renowned as welcoming, kind and thoughtful. Over the last few years many of us recall their warm hospitality at their annual Christmas drinks. An impressive pair and ideally suited, you could not find two more genuine people. When John was still serving, if you were a member of their staff you were considered family. And it was who you were as a person, rather than your rank, that gained their respect. Thoroughly self sufficient, and without airs and graces, John and Margaret were widely admired. Of course, Margaret could also be relied upon to offer John the kind of advice that a junior officer could not. If Margaret was in attendance when John was giving a speech, she would quietly pull on John's jacket when she thought it was well past time for him to sit back down.

John was also a wonderful and loving, father and grandfather. John's family fondly recall how he stayed up all night when his young grandson James was sick with croup. Not surprisingly, he went off to his work as CDF the next morning. His children and grandchildren were also the beneficiaries of his marvellous engineering skills with what they call 'thoroughly over-engineered cubby houses and Lego towers'. He shared a

wonderful relationship with his grandchildren. They delighted in dobbing him into Margaret when he did something wrong!

Upon his retirement, John continued to enjoy his gardening and golf. I often partnered him at the 3 Star and 4 Star Golf Day. Despite his fragile health he usually won the highly sought after clock trophy made of shells! Though I am not sure Margaret allowed it to go on display!

He also continued to support the team he described as 'the perennial losers'—his beloved North Melbourne Football Club. It is fitting that the North Melbourne Kangaroos are renowned for their 'Shinboner Spirit', a reference to their ability to fight back hard with their backs against the wall. This is a wonderful description of the tenacity with which John fought his long illness. I recall a recent Australia Day in Canberra. John had just left hospital and the effect of his treatment was obvious. He was frail and fatigued, but rather than go home and rest, John was determined to fulfill his responsibility to the Australia Day in the National Capital Committee.

Sadly, eventually he could fight his illness no longer, though we were not ready to say goodbye.

I conclude by returning to where I began. John Baker was sincere and humble. He was always professional, loyal and dedicated. He was exceedingly intelligent. His capacity for hard work was unrivalled, as was his steely resolve. Loving, caring, compassionate and so very close to his wife Margaret and their family, John was a remarkable man. His example is an inspiration to us all.

John: I salute your inspirational leadership; your long and dedicated service to your nation; your unwavering friendship and your devotion to Margaret and your family.

General John Stuart Baker, you were a great Australian.

May you rest in peace.

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