

Lieutenant General Henry John Coates, AC, MBE



Lieutenant-General John Coates served in the Australian Army for forty years, retiring as Chief of the General Staff in 1992.

Lieutenant General Coates was born on 28 December 1932 in Adelaide, South Australia.

He lived for most of his life before joining the Army in Queensland.

His mother was deserted by his father just before his birth and she followed him to Queensland, taking the new born baby but leaving his three elder sisters behind in Adelaide. He was then left bereft at the age of three by the suicide of his mother. It was not until he was sixteen years old that he was reunited with his three older sisters whom he had not seen since he was two years old, but they at least were able to provide belatedly a family foundation. After the death of his mother his life and schooling was turbulent for many years as he was cared for variously by his uninterested father and harsh step mother and, by contrast, a range of warm and supportive foster carers. After attending a number of schools early in his life, and struggling academically as a result, he finished his secondary schooling as a boarder for 9 years at Ipswich Grammar School, Queensland where his academic ability showed through. He finished as Senior Prefect and Captain of the school.

As a young man at Ipswich Grammar School, he found sport to be a constant companion, and it remained so during his life. He was talented and participated in a wide range of sports including cricket – probably his greatest love - athletics, tennis and swimming, as well as most others, even venturing into Surf Life Saving with the Palm Beach Surf Club. He was also a keen fisherman. It was early in his life that he learned the value of team activities, being active in the cubs during WW II and in the cadets later in school.

He entered the Royal Military College Duntroon, on 11 February 1952, graduating on 14 December 1955 and being allocated to the Royal Australian Armoured Corps. He returned later as the Company Commander of Gallipoli Company in 1963, the Commanding Officer, Corps of Staff Cadets in 1971 and as its Commandant in 1983.

He was the first Commandant of the College since 1942 to hold a higher degree.¹

As the newly arrived Commandant, he had to deal with a bastardisation scandal which became public – he handled the matter effectively and promptly, albeit that punishments

¹ Coulthard-Clark, Christopher, *Duntroon. The Royal Military College of Australia 1911-1986*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1986. p 233.

that he awarded were lessened on Ministerial direction.² He instituted a number changes for the reception and treatment of new arrivals, for supervision of cadets by staff and to the operation of the class system³. The concurrent furore over who would live in Bridges House was probably the least of his worries! During all three postings to Duntroon he was emphatic about the complementary roles of the military (Sparta) and academic (Athens) disciplines and was a strong advocate of developing both equally.

In 1956 – 57 he served with the 1st Armoured Regiment. On promotion to Captain he was posted as Adjutant, 10th Light Horse in Western Australia.

He has told a tale most Service people will relate to as they “soon discovered a number of domestic hurdles that we had to negotiate. Looking back now, they were not huge, but certainly they seemed so at the time. For a start, although I was still officially an officer in the 1st Armoured Regiment, I had already been posted to Perth, Western Australia as Adjutant 10th Light Horse and, as preparation for that, it had been decreed that I do a one month’s course at the School of Tactics and Administration at Seymour (near Puckapunyal), to prepare me for my duties in Perth. The immediate problem was, as a newly married couple in Seymour, we had no entitlement to a married quarter, and since we would only be there for a month, finding reasonable accommodation was difficult. We ended up renting a small backyard flat in Seymour, owned by a Mrs. Baker. She was a kindly enough soul, and in any case we had no choice. To get to the sole outside toilet, we had to go past her two active bee hives! It was a bracing experience. We weathered the storm.”

Following this appointment he again served in the 1st Armoured Regiment prior to posting in 1963 as an Instructor at the Royal Military College in the rank of Captain, being promoted to Major in that posting in 1964.

In 1965 – 66 he served with the Royal Scots Greys, based at Fallingbommel between Hanover and Hamburg Regiment of the British Army as a tank squadron commander in Germany in 1966-67. In 1968 he attended the Australian Army Staff College, after which he commanded a Cavalry Squadron (Armoured Personnel Carrier) in the 3rd Cavalry Regiment, with which he saw operational service in South Vietnam in 1970-71 for which service he was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE).

Two aspects of his service in Vietnam are noteworthy. Firstly, the highly successful technique of ambushes by armoured personnel carriers was expanded by B Squadron to even greater effect⁴. Secondly, he led a composite reaction force to the rescue of Xuyen Moc, which was being attacked by a considerable part of the Viet Cong’s D 445 battalion. This was, in the words of Major General R’L Hopkins ‘ a highly unexpected surprise for the enemy who broke off the attack and disappeared into the night as soon as the tanks and carriers came on the scene.’⁵

² Moore, Darren, DUNTROON. The Royal Military College of Australia 1911-2011. Ligare Pty Ltd, Riverwood, 2001, p. 392.

³ Op Cit, p 257.

Ibid

⁴ Hopkins. Major-General R.N.L, *Australian Armour. A history of the Royal Australian Armoured Corps 1927-1972*. Australian war Memorial and AGPS, Canberra, 1993. p 284.

⁵ Op Cit, p 288.

In the second-half of his tour he moved from commanding the cavalry squadron to become the G2 (Operations) of the Task Force – in effect the principal operations staff officer to the Brigadier commanding 1ATF.

A significant event occurred at this time: ‘a piece of equipment that arrived seemingly out of the blue, helped enormously to form a better picture of the Viet Cong's operations and what they might be planning. By today's standards it was a physically very large computer that needed a whole room for its accommodation. It was devoted to collecting and handling intelligence. This ...was just about the start of the computer age as it affected the battlefield.’

On his return to Australia in June 1971 he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and posted as the Commanding Officer of the Corps of Staff Cadets at the Royal Military College until December 1973. He left there on a sabbatical period of six months in the first half of 1974, to complete the thesis on the Malayan ‘Emergency’ that he had begun several years before, but had been forced to keep in suspended animation until he could get hold of a number of key documents and attended the Joint Services Staff College from mid-1974.

He served on exchange with the United States Army at Fort Hood, Texas during 1975-76.

No Australian had been to Fort Hood on such a posting before, so he was breaking new ground. His job was within TRADOC's Combined Arms Test Activity leading a small cell of officers, civilians and senior NCOs, who examined developments in training. There was no clear idea of how they were to do it: they were tucked away in an out of sight place, with only a tenuous link through TRADOC with the rest of the army. The Combined Arms Test Activity was tasked with developing and testing the training that the US Army was embarking on, to turn it away from the failed legacies of Vietnam and face up to a potential fight with the Soviets. His role in this became known by its acronym TRADEV, short for Training Developments. One innovation he did make was to introduce Major-General George S. Patton IVth, who commanded the Second Armored Division – the same formation as his father – to the TEWT. Despite a very successful activity, he was never sure if the idea stuck.

After promotion to Colonel in January 1977 he was posted as Colonel Operations at Headquarters Field Force Command in 1977 and 1978 before being appointed as Director of Operations and Plans in Operations Branch of Army Office. In June 1979 he was promoted to Brigadier and was appointed Director General of Operations and Plans. In August 1980 he was promoted as Deputy Chief of Operations. In 1981 he attended the Royal College of Defence Studies in London and on his return to Australia in February 1982 he resumed his appointment as Deputy Chief of Operations.

He was promoted to the rank of Major General on 1 February 1983 and took up the position of Commandant of the Royal Military College. In January 1984 he assumed the appointment as Head of the Australian Defence Staff in Washington, returning to Australia in May 1987 to become the Assistant Chief of Defence Force (Policy). He was appointed as an Officer of the Order of Australia in 1987. After a stint as a Military Fellow at the Australian Defence Force Academy from 13 March 1989, he was promoted to Lieutenant General and became the Chief of Army on 16 April 1990, and retired from

the Army on 30 April 1992. He was made a Companion of the Order of Australia (AC) in 1992.

After retiring from the Army, John Coates pursued his other passions, as an author and a Visiting Fellow at the Australian Defence Force Academy studying and researching Australia's military history. In recognition of his services to scholarship, and particularly to military history, the University of New South Wales awarded Lieutenant-General Coates in 2011 one of its highest honours: an Honorary Doctorate.

Lieutenant General Coates was awarded the following decorations and medals:

Companion of the Order of Australia (1992) upgraded from Officer of the Order of Australia (1987)

Member of the Order of the British Empire (1971)

Australian Active Service Medal 1945-75 with Clasp Vietnam

Vietnam Medal

Centenary Medal (2001)

National Medal with First Clasp

Defence Force Service Medal with First, Second and Third Clasps

Australian Defence Medal

National Medal with First Clasp

Vietnamese Campaign Medal

He is a graduate of the University of Western Australia and has a post-graduate degree in history from the Australian National University. His book, *Suppressing Insurgency* was published in 1993. *Bravery Above Blunder: the 9th Division in New Guinea in 1943-44* was published in the Australian Army History Series in 1999, and his *Atlas of Australia's Wars* was published in 2001 as part of the Australian Centenary History of Defence and republished in a second edition in 2006. He also co-authored *Review of the Ready Reserve* scheme with Hugh Smith in 1995 and was a co-editor of *The Australian centenary history of defence* in 2001.

Lieutenant General Coates married Diana Begg at St. Saviour's Church, Glen Osmond on 23 November 1957. They were second cousins, twice removed, sharing a common great-grandfather on the Begg side of their respective families; his mother's maiden name was Gwentyth Begg, Diana's father was Dr Raymond Begg, a world authority on the theory and practice of orthodontics.

Throughout his career, and notwithstanding his achievements and rewards, he considered that the greatest event in his life was to have Diana as his life's partner. He wrote that it gave him 'at once a staunch, loyal and lovely companion.' She was even a career asset, as one Confidential Report noted that 'Coates has many attributes including a very pleasant wife'. His family life, in stark contrast to his childhood, was fundamental to his own achievement in reaching the top of the Australian Army. Like most Service families, at regular intervals the three children – (Christina) Tina, Peter and Michael- had to adjust to new surroundings, new schools, new sets of friends, and most of all, to different education syllabuses and methods of teaching. During the time the children grew up, the family lived in sixteen different houses; there were twenty-six houses in all for Diana and John, and they were never in one place for more than two or three years at

most. Perhaps the flexibility had a positive influence: all three children gained university degrees, and went on to pursue professions of their own choosing.

The life of John Henry Coates is inspiring. His start in life was inauspicious but he made good because people who were perceptive helped him through his formative years and during his career as an Army Officer and academic. Even at Duntroon, he survived the “Gin incident” because the Regimental Medical Officer, Major ‘Doc’ Nimmo spoke up in his defence apparently saying, ‘this cadet has got something, he should stay’. Very perceptive! Because these mentors recognised Coates’ potential he went on to become a confident commander of men in the theatre of war, an astute tactician, a highly accomplished military historian, and a man who represented his country with honour.

Lieutenant General H.J. Coates, AC, MBE, (Retd)

Name: Henry John COATES
Date of Birth: 28 December 1932
Place of Birth: Adelaide

Service Number: 17023

Categories of Service:

Royal Military College: 11 February 1952 – 13 December 1955
Australian Regular Army: 14 December 1955 – 30 April 1992

Promotions:

Lieutenant: 14 December 1955
Temporary Captain: 22 May 1958
Captain: 17 December 1959
Temporary Major: 13 January 1964
Major: 14 December 1965
Temporary
Lieutenant Colonel: 7 June 1971
Lieutenant Colonel: 21 September 1971
Temporary Colonel: 17 January 1977
Colonel: 12 May 1977
Temporary Brigadier: 4 June 1979
Brigadier: 9 July 1979
Major General: 1 February 1983
Lieutenant General: 16 April 1990

Overseas Service:

Singapore: 15 May – 14 June 1965
Singapore: 18 August – 30 August 1965
London: 31 August – 2 October 1965
Singapore: 4 – 6 October 1965
Genoa: 7 March 1966
United Kingdom: 8 March 1966 – 3 January 1968
Vietnam: 9–16 July 1969
Vietnam: 30 April 1970 – 12 May 1971
(for Special Service Southern Zone)
Washington: 16-21 March 1975
San Francisco: 17-23 January 1977
Irian Jaya: 26-30 July 1978
Washington: 13 February 1984 – 9 March 1987
Singapore, Bangkok: 4-21 July 1990
Singapore, Tonga: 8-22 September 1990
Auckland: 3-8 December 1990
Detroit: 16-25 December 1990
Frankfurt, London: 18-27 May 1990
Honolulu, London: 30 June – 30 July 1991
Tokyo, Hong Kong: 6-19 October 1991

Postings:

1 Armoured Regiment from E Command: 8 January 1956
Adjutant, 10 Light Horse: 6 March 1958
Attend 2/60 Basic Rotary Wing Course RAN: 5 September 1960
1 Armoured Regiment: 17 February 1961
Instructor, Royal Military College: 6 December 1962
(Detached HQ Australian Army Force FARELF: 15 May – 13 June 1965)
Attached AAS (UK) 2 year training: 11 February 1966
Duties 21C Squadron Leader, Sabre Squadron: 22 March 1966
Long Term Student, Australian Staff College: 29 January 1968
Officer Commanding, B Squadron 3 Cavalry Regiment: 13 December 1968
(Detached to HQ 10 Task Force: 13 December 1968– 13 April 1969)
Redesignated A Squadron 3 Cavalry Regiment: 13 May 1969
Officer Commanding, B Squadron 3 Cavalry Regiment: 29 April 1970
General Service Officer 2 (Operations), HQ 1 ATF
Instructor, Royal Military College: 12 May 1971
Long Term Student attached Army HQ: 29 January 1974
Long Term Student attend Joint Services Staff College: 8 July 1974
RSL (Repost) 2MD by Camp AHQ: 12 December 1974
SO1 Fort Hood, AAS(W): 14 March 1975
COL (Ops) HQ Field Force Command: 17 January 1977
Director Operations & Plans, Operations Branch Army Office: 18 December 1978
Director General Operations & Plans, Operations Branch Army Office: 4 June 1979
Deputy Chief of Operations, Operations Branch Army Office: 18 August 1980
Attend Royal College of Defence Studies London: 8 January 1981
Deputy Chief of Operations, Operations Branch Army Office: 8 February 1982
Commandant, Royal Military College: 7 February 1983
Head, Australian Defence Staff Washington: 27 January 1984
Acting Assistant Chief of the Defence Force – Policy, HQ Australian Defence Force: 4 May 1987
Assistant Chief of the Defence Force – Policy, HQ Australian Defence Force: 3 July 1987
Military Fellow, Australian Defence Force Academy PSD PT2: 13 March 1989
Chief of General Staff, Office of Chief of General Staff: 16 April 1990
Retired transferred to Inactive Army Reserve: 30 April 1992

Decorations, Medals, Awards:

Companion of the Order of Australia (Granted 1987)
Officer of the Order of Australia (Granted 1992)
Member of the Order of the British Empire
Australian Active Service Medal 1945-75 with Clasp Vietnam
Vietnam Medal
Defence Force Service Medal with First, Second and Third Clasps
National Medal with First Clasp
Vietnamese Campaign Medal