

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

**Lieutenant Colonel Michael Geneste LANGLEY, MC
(1936-2002)**

Lieutenant Michael Langley, while serving as a forward observer with 5 RAR in South Vietnam in 1967, was awarded the Military Cross for extracting an infantry company from a minefield after the company commander was mortally wounded.

Born in London on 8 October 1936 to film industry parents (father a cinematographer and mother employed in the art department of a film studio). He attended St Alban's School and thereafter won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art but set that aside to complete his two-year national service obligation.

He undertook officer training at the Mons Officer Cadet Training Unit and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Royal Artillery in January 1956. Thereafter, he served with units in Wales, Scotland, and Cyprus (which units unknown). In Cyprus he served 'as a staff officer on an operational headquarters' during the emergency (1954-59) that claimed 457 British lives. He received the General Service Medal (Cyprus) for his tour there and displayed his sense of adventure by, on completion of his service, walking much of the way home across Europe.

He attended Hendon Police College in preparation for an appointment with the Uganda colonial police force in 1958, and completed his police training in Kampala, including a 'lower certificate' in Kiswahili before taking command of a police field force company. He also served in Kasese and Entebbe and was commended for dispersing a demonstration using the classic anti-riot square formation, having a magistrate issue the warning to disperse, and firing tear gas when they failed to do so whereupon the mob dispersed without casualties or further incident.

At independence, Uganda was recognised as having 'a small, effective and well-motivated police force. Operational standards were high, police officers were also proud of serving in and being identified with the force, and the public appreciated their services'.

Michael married Felicity Waugh in London in 1961 whilst on leave. They had met in Uganda where Felicity was nursing. They remained in Uganda after independence migrating directly from there a year later to Tasmania, Felicity's home state, in June 1963.

He applied to join the Australian Army but getting no response he eventually took employment as the Deputy Council Clerk of Beaconsfield. Nevertheless, with the build-up for Vietnam underway, the Army sought him out and he was commissioned into the Royal Australian Artillery on 28 June 1965 and posted to 1 Field Regiment, Holsworthy, as Intelligence Officer (IO).

In 1966, the Australian force in Vietnam was expanded from one to two battalions and relocated from Bien Hoa to Nui Dat and the artillery increased from one battery to a regiment comprising two Australian and one NZ battery. Michael arrived in Vietnam on 22 May 1966 as IO 1 Field Regiment commanded by Lieutenant Colonel R.M.C. Cubis, MVO and they redeployed from Vung Tau to Nui Dat on 5 June.

In July 1966, he was transferred to command the left section of 103 Battery commanded by Major Neville Gair. The battery was in general support of the then two battalion 1 ATF and during the Battle of Long Tan fired 1078 rounds during the five-hour engagement and suffered two wounded by mortar fire the evening before the battle. In the process they were resupplied by Chinook helicopters that pushed the ammunition pallets out the back as they danced along the strip on their rear wheels ready for an immediate departure should they come under enemy fire. Headquarter Battery and others assisted in moving and unboxing the ammunition and some members of 103 Battery, including the Gun Position Officer (GPO), claimed that they fired many more rounds than has been officially recorded, possibly up to 1800.

After the battle, 103 Battery, switched to direct support of 5 RAR and at the end of October Mike became the GPO. There were several difficulties in keeping the guns operational but the most intractable was that, since the arrival of the first battery in 1965, the elevating gear of the L5 Pack Howitzer could not withstand sustained fire at long range often putting guns out of action until repaired. But the most dramatic event of his time as GPO was the sacking of his CO who stopped a 103 Battery fire mission without consulting the BC or the FO incurring the wrath of the Commander 1 ATF.

At the end of January 1967, a replacement forward observer (FO) for B Company 5 RAR was required and the new Battery Commander, Major Mick Burge, allocated Mike to the vacancy.

On his first operation in early February, a cordon and search of An Nhut village near Dat Do, the company commander of C Company, his second-in-command, and the FO were killed, and five others wounded after one of them stepped on a mine. Fortunately, the cordon was not otherwise engaged but it was a harbinger of things to come.

Operation Renmark (18-23 February) followed. It was a search and destroy operation, commencing in the northern reaches of the Long Hai hills but on the 21st 5 RAR redeployed to the south. While moving into the new AO the first armoured personnel carrier of the troop transporting B Company hit a mine that threw the vehicle into the air landing side down. The convoy stopped ready for action and the company commander and others dismounted to investigate and deal with the casualties.

One of them set off a M16 jumping jack mine that killed and wounded several more including the company commander and lead platoon commander. There being no second-in-command, Mike assumed responsibility for securing the scene and maintaining control, clearing paths, evacuating the casualties, and withdrawing the company to a safe overnight harbour. For this he was awarded the Military Cross for which the citation read in part:

‘Near the village of Long My at 1411 hours, the company headquarters group became caught in an enemy minefield and at least two mines were detonated. The whole of the

command element of the company was included in the casualties, of whom nine died and a further 20 were wounded.

Placing his own party of men in a safe place, Lt Langley immediately moved forward into the minefield. With complete disregard for his own safety, he rendered first aid to the injured and arranged subsequent evacuation by helicopter. He then took command of the remnants of the company, organised local defence of their position and successfully maintained morale and fighting spirit. He remained in command of B Company until 1107 on the following day when the company was able to rejoin the Battalion Headquarters.

Lt Langley, by his immediate action was able to steady the survivors at a critical moment and prevent further casualties from occurring. His complete disregard for his own safety and his care for the wounded soldiers displayed a standard of calmness and bravery that reflects great credit upon himself, his Regiment, and the Australian Regular Army.'

Except for brief stints helping fence the controversial Dat Do minefield, B Company was not employed on any other major operations and Langley returned to Australia mid-April with 103 Battery.

Thereafter, he served with 5 Field Regiment (1967-68), 4 Field Regiment (1968-69), and the independent 108 Battery in Singapore (1969-71), again serving under Major Gair as an FO and Battery Captain. During the last five months in Singapore the Battery came under operational command of the newly formed 28 ANZUK Field Regiment and took part in the first Five Power divisional exercise, *Bersatu Padu*, in Terengganu State, Malaysia.

On return he served with 6th Training Group (1972), Tasmania, attended the Australian Staff College in 1973, and was posted to 3 Military District 1974-75. He was an instructor at the Land Warfare Centre 1976-77 and Second in Command of the Corps of Staff Cadets, RMC, 1978-79 before returning as Chief of Staff 6 Military District (Tasmania) 1980-82, again under the command of the now Colonel Gair, and a final appointment as an instructor at the Army Command and Staff College, Queenscliff (1983-85).

His annual reports reveal that he was a highly competent and widely respected officer. And he never failed to remind his reporting officers of his fluency in Kiswahili but this facility for languages failed to parley into an exchange posting with the French Army which he advocated should be established.

During his last posting in Tasmania, he was the initial army point of contact for the royal visit in March 1983 (Charles and Diana) and after retiring was invited to be the CEO of the planning committee for the Papal visit to Tasmania in 1986. Thereafter he joined one of his old UK school friends in a strategic level business development firm with contracts to provide services in Australia and Southeast Asia.

In 1996, Mike was a board member of the Port Arthur Historic Site when the massacre occurred resulting in 35 deaths and 23 wounded. He arrived soon after and both he and Felicity played active parts in the intense and extended community response to the aftermath of the massacre.

He died of cancer in 2002 and was remembered by his parents (Brian and Phyllis), Felicity, their children Alexander, Jane, and Oliver, and his two sisters, and was remembered as always calm and imperturbable, deliberate, precise, a gentleman, stylish, and one who bequeathed an example of personal bravery, integrity and all the soldierly virtues.



Lieutenant Michael Langley
Gun Position Officer 103 Battery SVN 1966