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Korea veteran recipient of MC says ‘nice to meet you Ma’am,’ again

By **Michael Pembroke** and **Brad Manera**

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ARTHUR PEMBROKE: 1928-2022

Arthur Pembroke was known throughout the Australian Army as “Bushy”. He graduated from the Royal Military College, Duntroon with the Sword of Honour in 1950 and a few years later was invested with the Military Cross by a very young Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace.

In 2011, 58 years after his investiture, Pembroke was reintroduced to the Queen at a garden party in the grounds of Duntroon House in company with his granddaughter Harriet, then a staff cadet at the College. The British popular press revelled in the occasion with headlines like *We Meet Again, Ma’am*, *Queen Reunited with Korean War Hero* and *Good to see you again, Your Majesty*.

Pembroke’s MC was awarded for exemplary gallantry during the Battle of Maryang-san when he was the commander of 9 Platoon in the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment. The October 1951 engagement was a historic infantry battle fought against the Chinese in a mountainous region above the Imjin River just north of the 38th parallel.



Queen Elizabeth II, left, meets Arthur "Bushy" Pembroke, right, and his granddaughter, Staff Cadet Harriet Pembroke, following the Presentation of the Colours at the Royal Military College Duntroon in Canberra, Australia, Saturday, Oct. 22, 2011. AP

Australia's official historian of the Korean War, Professor Robert O'Neill, AO, described Maryang-san as "probably the greatest single feat of the Australian Army during the Korean War". The British Major General Sir James Cassels went further and suggested that it was "one of the finest battalion actions in British military history". The battle became standard training fare for Australian infantry officers.

During the battle, Pembroke's platoon was reduced to less than half its strength but withstood repeated attacks from Chinese infantry who were supported by artillery, mortars and small arms fire. The citation from company commander, Major Jack Gerke, recorded that "due to the platoon commander's cool and clever planning, the enemy was repulsed each time, leaving dead and wounded behind ... Lieutenant Pembroke, through his many acts of bravery under fire, inspired confidence in his men. At no time did he consider his own safety before that of his men".

Pembroke's own assessment was more self-effacing and heartfelt. He described the action as "a frightening but most humbling experience" and that "I shall never forget what the NCOs [corporals and sergeant] and men of 9 Platoon taught me about soldiering and the essential human values of living and dying". Pembroke had just turned 23. The men of 9 Platoon were mostly older and many veterans of World War II. It was a remarkable start to an outstanding military career.

Bushy's application to Duntroon in 1946 was his third attempt. But when finally admitted, he soared. It is reasonable to say that four years at Duntroon made Pembroke and that Korea, where he came of age, defined him.



Arthur "Bushy" Pembroke in the garden of Buckingham Palace on the day of his receiving the Military Cross in Oct 1953.

Pembroke's childhood and youth were modest. His father Joseph was from Enniscorthy in County Wexford and his mother was a Scot. In about 1925, they made the courageous decision to bring their family of four children to Australia. Joseph's brother, who farmed south of Brisbane, sponsored the family. Three more children were born after their arrival. Bushy was the second of the Australian-born children and the second-youngest of seven.

The 1930s Depression was hard for everyone but especially for a large family, newly arrived, with little regular work. Bushy often recalled memories of milking cows and long walks to the pictures on Saturdays to save the tram fare. By 1940, when the war came, the family had a home in Toowong. Two of the older boys went to war and the much younger Bushy was accepted at a GPS school in Brisbane commonly known as Terrace, where he excelled.

His headmaster wrote in support of his application to Duntroon: "character irreproachable; essentially strong; diligent at study; straightforward and commanding". He added that he was the officer commanding of the school cadet corps, a member of the first XV and captain of the second XI. He even held the record for the fastest try in the Brisbane GPS rugby competition after scoring directly from a kick-off.

In 1953, following the armistice in the Korean War, Pembroke was posted to the UK, which included a stint with the Cold War-era British Army of the Rhine in Germany. The years in England and Germany were a hinge point in his personal life. When he departed Sydney in July,

he left behind a 20-year-old nurse-in-training whom he had only recently met. Their long-distance separation was trying for both of them and they soon resolved to rectify the situation.

The young Lois Sheldon abandoned her final nursing exams and departed Sydney by ship in January 1954, arriving in London in February and marrying a few weeks later in March, just days after her 21st birthday – thus avoiding the need for parental consent. The wedding was at Westminster Cathedral, the modest reception was in Sloane Square and the first night was in the Grosvenor Hotel in Mayfair.



Duntroon barrackers at the GPS v. Duntroon match at the Showground yesterday were Peggy McDonald and Sen. Under-Officer Arthur Pembroke of the RMC. August 13, 1950. FAIRFAX

Lois wrote in her journal that “The guests comprised Australian Army Staff – or rather three of them with their wives – and of course, Major Fitz and Myra...[there were] one or two other Australian Army bods and some friends whom we had both made on our respective ships coming over”. It was a low-key start to a marriage that lasted 68 years.

Over the next 25 years, Pembroke balanced a growing family with the demands of an energetic and gifted infantry officer undertaking a series of regimental, staff and training appointments in Australia, the United Kingdom and Singapore.

Highlights included three years as the adjutant of the 6th Mounted Rifles; a return to the United Kingdom (with three children) to attend the British Army Staff College at Camberley, Surrey; two years as an instructor at the Australian Army Staff College at Queenscliff, Victoria, teaching infantry tactics to junior officers from across the Commonwealth and from the United States of America; and a return to Brisbane to command B Company, 2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment. Brisbane was followed by a stint in Canberra including a period of secondment to the Prime Minister’s department and appointment as the aide de camp to President Park of South Korea – who was a decade later to be assassinated.

From Canberra, at the height of the Vietnam War, Pembroke was posted for two memorable years to the Headquarters of Far East Land Forces in Singapore, a British Command that was ultimately succeeded by a joint Australian, New Zealand and UK command.

Pembroke endeared himself to the men under his command and was never afraid to speak up for them. One of his junior officers at B Company was George Mansford, who later achieved the rank of brigadier. George recalled their time in B Company: “Major Bushy Pembroke was now the father of a military family christened Bravo Company ... I will never forget him for his ability to determine right from wrong and never reluctant to challenge those senior to him, particularly when it came to protecting soldiers under his command.

In the 1970s, Pembroke was the Commanding Officer of 17th Battalion, Royal New South Wales Regiment. He said that it was one of his most satisfying appointments.

In retirement, he was honoured to become patron of the Association of 17th Infantry Battalions. On being informed of his death, the Governor of New South Wales, the Honorary Colonel of the Regiment, wrote to Lois to note that Bushy’s actions at Maryang-san “were a matter of legend within the Regiment” and that “it is difficult to estimate the number of officers who were positively influenced by your husband”.

Bushy Pembroke retired from the regular Army in 1978 and spent the next 10 years as director of operations, State Emergency Services and Civil Defence. He was president of the NSW branch of the Defence Force Welfare Association, served for 17 years on committees of the Department of Veterans’ Affairs, served for 25 years on the RSL defence committee and was an active member of Sydney Legacy, the Royal United Services Institute and the Killara Golf Club. In 2000, he was one of 26 veterans selected to visit South Korea to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the start of the Korean War.

In his final years, Bushy Pembroke resided at Anzac Village in Narrabeen where he slipped away quietly at the age of 93. He is survived by his wife, three children, 12 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

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