

# A TRIBUTE TO LT COL A.W. ROBERTS

By Col (Rtd) L.A. Crook

Photo's by Lcpl Leon Wessels (DRPOWC)



Allan Roberts passed away on Saturday 26 January 2013 and was laid to rest on 1 February 2013; his coffin carried by six senior Warrant Officers from various Cape Town Reserve Force Regiments. A very large crowd attended the service at Christ Church, Constantia. It was evident of the high standing in which the 81 year old veteran was held.

Lieutenant Colonel Allan William Roberts, SM, JCD attested in the Active Citizen Force on 1 July 1948 and his service in 3 Field Squadron, S.A.E.C. was remarkable. He occupied every rank from Sapper to Commanding Officer during his 60 years service to, what is now, 3 Field Engineer Regiment.

By 1952 he was appointed acting Squadron Sergeant Major, receiving his belt as a substantive Warrant Officer the next year. It was just three years before 3 Field Squadron took part in the biggest exercise since 1945 – the “atomic manoeuvres at De Brug.”

Commandant John Manning, commanding the squadron in 1975 (then as a major) recalls that there were whispers of problems that might lead to mobilisation. Officers under him were no senior than Lieutenant and he felt he needed someone more senior. He called his grizzled, experienced sergeant major and suggested a commission. Allan, surprised, agreed! And very fortunately, before the squadron was mobilised for Operation Savannah, he had received a commission with the rank of captain.

On the eastern flank of the operational area Colonel Dan Lambrechts was ordered to advance towards Silva Ports with his Battle Group Boxer. The engineer troop led by captain Roberts was ordered to lead the way. Mines were expected. There were no prods, no other minesweeping equipment and only a visual inspection was possible. Allan recalled later that this was a defining moment in his life – he would either live or not and he called for inner help. The troop made it – but did suffer one casualty.

It has been said of Allan Roberts – and quite truthfully – that he gave everything to all he did. His passion, integrity and loyalty could never be faulted. There was only one number 1 in his life. Number 1 was his wife and children, then his unit, his place as part-time lecturer at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, his bowls and his church activities.

He was highly respected in the printing industry and was the author of the industry’s “estimating for SA printing.” He had twice been elected President of the Printing Craftsmans’ Association between 1978 and 1984, and was an Honorary Life Member of the association. Bowls was given the same passion and he served a term as Western Province Chairman.

3 Field Squadron / 3 Field Engineer Regiment were acknowledged masters in mine warfare – and everything else they did. As builders of bridges they were in a class of their own. At Bloemfontein in 1951, the squadron built a 76m Bailey bridge over the river at Mazel’s Poort. Carrie don two piers it was the longest built in South Africa at that time. It remained in use for about four years and withstood one flood but the second flood finally carried it away.

It was a chastened brigadier in 1979 at exercise Eagle Hill 2 who bet the squadron they could not better the planned bridge building time of one hour and forty five minutes – at night. They did! The first vehicle crossed the bridge twenty minutes after the hour and the brigadier honoured the bet! Allan’s influence in this operation – and others – was amazing. His men would do anything for him. The squadron then commanded by Major John Manning was the only unit classified “battle ready” that year.

Allan had two disappointments in his military career. He had a deep desire that his regiment should receive the Freedom of the City of Cape Town – a city in which the unit had been headquartered since it was formed in July 1926. But it was something that never materialised. So great was their regard that application was made for his appointment as Honorary Colonel. Sadly, when he passed away no word in reply to this request had been received. Although, just over 80 years old, he would have made an honourable Honorary Colonel. Allan had the passion and energy of a much younger man.

His last parade was at Thaba Tshwane when he was awarded the medal for 50 years service. Of Allan Roberts one can truly say: “Here was a man, an officer and a gentleman.”



Pall Bearers from various Reserve Force Units from the Western Cape

Reserve Force members attending the funeral