

OBITUARY

Peter Wood (1936)

The Association lost one of its great characters at the end of May when Peter Wood (Ashley Peter Wood to give him his full name) passed away peacefully in his sleep, at the ripe old age of 95. Peter packed so much into his long life that it is difficult to do justice to his achievements.

He was born in London's East End in 1918, the last year of World War I, from where his family moved to the Shirley area just in time for Peter to join the Whitgift Middle School in 1929, where he really thrived. School vice-Captain in his final year, he skippered the rugby team and played for England Schools against the three other home nations. Rugby was not his only sport, as Peter also played for the cricket 1st XI. The fact that he had won international schoolboy rugby caps went unmentioned for many years, and that was typical of a man whose reluctance to talk about his wartime experiences, even to his children, was well-known. Peter was drum major in the school Cadet Corps of Drums, and led the school as it marched up Crown Hill from Pump Pail to North End in 1931.

Peter married Joan in 1939 and they had two children, Carolyn and Michael, each of whom now has two children. They spent virtually all their married life in West Wickham where they enjoyed an unforgettable telephone number, 777 5555. They had hardly settled in their new home when World War II intervened.

Peter joined up straight away and his cadet training helped him to go straight into the Officer Training Unit at Aldershot, emerging as a 2nd Lieutenant. He soon found himself in the ill-fated British Expeditionary Force in France and Belgium, resulting in him being evacuated from Dunkirk in 1940. Promoted to Captain, he was sent to North Wales for a commando course, and after a spell in Northern Ireland he was seconded to the Indian Army. After a senior officers' course in North India, Peter was attached to the 6th Battalion Gurkha Rifles as Adjutant. Now a major, he commanded a Road Patrol Column on the North West Frontier. From there to staff college in Quetta and then on to the 10th Commando Group in Burma, where he was attached to Orde Wingate's famous Chindits. In the following year he was attached to the Air Training School in Rawalpindi, and then joined a Special Operations Battalion attached to the 14th Army in Burma.

Though the war in Europe had ended in 1944, the war against the Japanese continued. At the grand old age of 26, Peter was a Lieutenant Colonel and a commanding officer, when he was captured by the Japanese. Accounts vary as to how it happened but Peter managed to escape, and was found in the jungle by his own troops when the Japanese retreated. He was suffering from double pneumonia and spent some time in hospital in Lucknow. When discharged he was seconded once more to the Imperial Police College in Posna as an advisor on the Officer



Selection Board. His final posting was as Assistant Adjutant-General for the Bombay area, and from there he returned to England to be demobbed – the end of a distinguished army career.

Back in Blighty Peter rejoined J. Lyons, the catering and food manufacturing company (Joe Lyons to you and me), and was involved in the pioneering development of the LEO (Lyons Electronic Office), the world's first commercial computer. In 1950 he became Operations Manager for LEO I, then General Manager of their computer centre in 1962.



Peter (left) at LEO's controls. There are, today, many hundreds of times the computing power in the average mobile phone than there is in this room.

Once Peter had recovered from the huge weight loss he had suffered in the Far East he threw himself into playing and admin. jobs for the OMWA, in both the rugby and the cricket clubs. He played for the 1st XV for many years, and was still propping and skipping the C XV in 1969, aged 51. He was also rugby fixture secretary for 12 years, chairman for five years and President for three years. For the cricket club he continued to play into his 60th year, and was again President for three years. Peter was the Association Ground Secretary for many years, and filled a number of other Association roles. For this work he was elected a Vice-President.

On packing up cricket Peter immediately joined the Shirley Park Bowls Club, which he later captained in 1985 and was President in its Jubilee Year, 1988. He also took up golf!

Peter's wife, Joan, was a great support in all these activities and her death in 2004 was a severe blow to Peter, who never really recovered from the loss. Though he often attended the Thursday Lunch Club at the clubhouse, he became increasingly reclusive, and he spent his last years in a care home on Hayling Island, quite close to where his son Michael lives.

A true gentleman, Peter will be remembered as a stalwart of the Mids, a physically strong man with a dramatic life story, which he rarely talked about; a good friend to all who were lucky enough to know him.

John Starling