

Farewell to a Friend

Remembering # 12482 Bob Alce, 1958 – 2025

Those who know me well will know that under most circumstances I am a pretty stoic person who is not easily given to showing his emotions. But as I sit here writing this, sometimes it feels like I can hardly hold back the tears. The one thing I could always do was write, and I have done plenty of it over the years. But putting the words on paper that follow has undoubtedly been one of the most difficult things I have ever had to do.

How do you say your last good bye to a flamboyant and colorful character who was without doubt one of a kind ? How do you say your last goodbye to an unforgettable personality who was really and truly larger than life ? How do you say your last goodbye to a giant of a man whose passion for life illuminated the lives of all who ever crossed paths with him ? How do you say your last goodbye to a consummate professional who served his country, his service, and his college with exceptional skill and dedication ? How do you say your last goodbye to a devoted husband and father who loved his family more than anything in this world ?

And how do you say your last goodbye to one of the best and most loyal friends anyone could ever have hoped to have ? Someone who would have done anything for his friends in their time of need ?

The fact is, you can't. You can never really say your last goodbye to someone like the person I have just described. But what you can do – what you **MUST** do – is remember them within your heart, strive to live up to the example they set for all around them, and always do your best to honour their legacy by trying to make this world a better place for all they have left behind.

That, I am absolutely certain, is what everyone who had the honour and privilege of knowing Bob Alce, however briefly, will be committed to do.

To this day, nearly 50 years after the fact, I can still distinctly remember the first moment I met Bob. It was Sunday, August 22, 1976, a beautiful late summer day. It was about 4:00 PM (16:00 hrs in military time) and we had arrived at the Royal Military College to begin our training as recruits. We were standing in Yeo Hall with our fellow recruits and their families. There was me in my suit and tie, hair neatly trimmed. Shaking hands with me was Bob, with his bushy afro and jeans.

A few minutes later we were herded out onto the parade square to form up with our new family, N Flight of 5 Squadron. Standing across from us on the parade square was our Cadet Squadron Training Officer, #11583 Ken Zelenka. On cue, Zelenka snapped to attention, marched smartly up to us, and informed us that we were about to be marched off into the sunset.

Little did any of us imagine the depths of hell into which we would soon be plunged. But that is a whole other story.

N Flight was an interesting cast of characters, to say the least. The 18 original members of the Flight collectively included every conceivable size, shape, background, and personality. There was Bob, tall, good looking, gregarious, charismatic, and athletically talented. There was me, short, ordinary looking, bookish, reserved, and as would soon become apparent, largely devoid of any athletic ability. At first glance, it would be hard to imagine two more different people.

Yet somehow, amid the trials and tribulations that defined the life of a recruit at RMC in the mid-1970's, Bob and I became friends. We both struggled through that agonizing first semester at RMC; militarily Bob was ranked in the middle of the pack, and I finished up dead last. No wonder that he once described me as being the "most unmilitary guy he ever knew in military college" ! (No doubt he was right). But what I remember most about Bob from that period in time was his unflappable demeanor, his indefatigable sense of humor that could always be counted upon to keep the rest of us in good spirits, and most of all, his kindness to everyone around him.

One example of the latter quality which I will always remember was when I was in National Defence Medical Centre just before Christmas of 1976, awaiting treatment for an ankle I had twisted badly during our first month at the College. Having missed the first term Chemistry exam, I called Bob at his home. He told me that the exam had been hard but he thought he had passed it. The very next day he came to visit me at the hospital, bringing some much-needed cheer after what had been a grueling and exhausting first few months at RMC.

I still remember how he got the nickname "Ace", which is how he came to be known by all of us. As I recall, he was christened with the nickname by his recruit flight Cadet Section Commander, the imitable #11530 Scotty Miller. Back in the 1970's, the term "ace" was cadet slang for something that was good, and in retrospect, it's clear that Miller could not have picked a more appropriate sobriquet. Like all of us, Recruit Ace had his challenges – I seem to recall that ironing pants with the required razor-sharp crease was not his strong suit – but in other things he did well. He was a determined competitor in recruit boxing, and he made his name as a killer badminton player. And of course, when it came to social activities, there was good old Bob, the life of the party. To this day I still wonder how it was he seemed to be able to find a different girlfriend every week.

Of the 18 rooks who started with N Flight on August 22, 1976, 15 survived Recruit Camp and joined the Cadet Wing on October 2 of that year. All of us would eventually go on to pass our first year, albeit with widely varying records of academic accomplishment. At the beginning of May 1977 we assembled on the same parade square where we had first set foot eight months earlier, and boarded buses which took us to CFB Borden, where over the next eight weeks we attended Basic Officer Training. It was here that Bob's natural talent for leadership started to shine through. He excelled on the course, but regrettably wasn't permitted to receive an "A"

grade only because he had failed a map reading exam at RMC. Meanwhile, at the end of the course the Canadian Forces unceremoniously showed me the door, and it would be another 15 years before I eventually reconnected with Bob.

From what I heard through the grapevine, Bob went on to have a highly successful career at RMC and later in the Royal Canadian Navy. Perhaps it is all the more ironic that some the things that defined his career happened almost by accident. For example, years later he confided to me that he never intended to go to RMC in the first place. His original goal had been to attend Carleton University as an ROTP cadet. But as fate would have it, one day when Bob was out, the recruiting office called his home and spoke to his father Ken, a Colonel in the RCAF. The recruiter advised that a spot at RMC had come up, and Colonel Alce was good enough to inform the recruiter that Bob would accept. It was a strange twist of fate that would later cost Bob a good many circles, a great many parades, and countless hours pressing his uniform and polishing his boots !

Likewise, his subsequent career in the Royal Canadian Navy – one in which he would go on to excel – came about by similar circumstances. From what I recall, Bob's original goal was to follow in his father's footsteps and pursue a career as a logistics officer in the RCAF. From what I understand, sometime after his second or third year Bob was ordered to go on "on the job" summer training with the Navy. Initially, it was something he wasn't happy about, but the Staff Officer Careers apparently persuaded him to acquiesce. As things turned out, over the course of the summer Bob discovered that he liked the Navy so much he decided to make a career of it. I can only imagine what it must have been like to be cooped up on a ship with Ace – it brings back visions of that old TV series *McHale's Navy* that those of us who grew up in the early 1960's would remember.

So where does this bring me ? If I were to write down all of my memories of Bob they would fill a book that would rival Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. So all I will say is that my memories of Bob – and there are many of them – are nothing but good memories. The best memories of a lifetime. Even though we knew each other for what now seems like only a moment in time – one tiny bit of our lives – what will always stand out about Bob will be the memory that he was one of the best friends any of us could ever have hoped to have.

Truly, our lives would never have been the same without him. And it is only with the passing of time that I think we have now come to realize that.

From what I understand, Bob suffered grievously in the last years of his life, so in some ways I suppose his passing was a deliverance. But right to the end, he remained his old optimistic and cheerful self. The last time I spoke to him was only a few weeks before he died, and he was upbeat and looking forward to the reunion in September. Now, he's not going to make it, but he will always remain the same old Ace we all knew and loved. And although he will not be on the Old Brigade parade in body, he will most certainly be there with us in spirit.

Rest well, Bob. You are in God's arms now. Fly with the angels in eternal tranquility. Enjoy the lasting peace that you so richly deserve. And know that those of us you have left behind will never forget you and what you did for us, will always love you, and will be proud to carry the torch you have thrust into our hands, and do what we can to pay tribute to your legacy of service, loyalty, and friendship.

TRUTH, DUTY, VALOUR

Proud and grateful to be your friend forever,

#12570 Mike Kennedy

5 Squadron, N Flight, 2 Section