

# Obituaries

## *Peter Francis (1916–2009)*

Colonel Peter Francis, Honorary Colonel of the Natal Carbineers, died in the early hours of 15 May. He was 92. As well as being known for his association with the Carbineers, Francis was also a lawyer and long-serving member of the *Witness* board.

Francis was born in 1916 and educated at Michaelhouse and Dundee High School from where he matriculated in 1933. He then studied law at the Natal University College and was admitted as an attorney in March 1939.

His long involvement with the Natal Carbineers began when he joined the volunteer regiment in 1935. During World War 2, Francis served with the Royal Natal Carbineers (as the regiment was known from 1935 to 1962) in the East African, Abyssinian, Libyan and Italian Campaigns. For a brief period he was an aide-de-camp to Field-Marshal Alexander, Commander in Chief of the Middle East Forces.

Francis was the youngest ever officer to command the Carbineers when ap-



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pointed their commanding officer in Italy in October 1944. At 27, he was also the youngest commanding officer in a South African division. During the war, Francis won the Military Cross and was three times mentioned in dispatches.

At the end of the war in Italy, the Carbineers garrisoned the Italian Riviera up to the French border and Francis was appointed Military Commander of the Italian Province of Imperia. During this period he

was invited by the Prince of Monaco to a gala in Monaco and on a subsequent visit met Winston Churchill at the Hotel du Paris where the two men enjoyed a chat over brandy and a cigar.

Francis retired as officer commanding in 1955, but his association with the Carbineers continued. He was appointed an Honorary Colonel of the regiment in 1969. 'The honorary colonel is like the god-father of the regiment,' says Major John Hall, former regimental RSM. 'Colonel Francis was a distinguished man and the custodian of the traditions of the regiment.'

Francis was always a keen supporter of Carbineers history, according to regimental historian Mark Coghlan, author of *Pro Patria: Another 50 Carbineer Years 1945–1995*. 'He made a point of donating all his papers to the Carbineer archive and these were an invaluable addition which greatly informed my work.'

After the war Francis joined Reginald Tomlinson in practice and together they formed the firm, Tomlinson Francis & Company. He became a leading Maritzburg lawyer and was appointed to the boards of a number of local companies.

For many years, Francis was a board member of *The Witness*. 'He was a good friend of my father's,' says Stuart Craib, *The Witness* CEO. 'When we were a small organisation he was very much my father's sounding board.'

Francis was actively involved on the boards of several private schools and became a founding trustee of Cowan House School at the time of its forced relocation from Mountain Rise under apartheid legis-

lation in the early 1960s. He served on the board of St Anne's Diocesan College for 17 years and was chairman for four years. After his retirement to Balgowan in 1975, he sat on the board of Michaelhouse.

Francis was also politically active and was a foundation member of the Progressive Party. He was the party's candidate for Pietermaritzburg District in 1965 and he remained a staunch supporter of the party and its successors all his life.

A keen golfer, Francis was a member of Maritzburg Country Club (now the Victoria Country Club) from the age of 17 until his death. At various times he was its club champion and in later years acted as chairman and thereafter president. He was selected to play for and also captained, the Natal golf team. He later became involved in golf administration and was president of the Natal Golf Union and on the executive of the South African Golf Union. In his mid-80s he recorded two holes-in-one in the space of six weeks. He played his last game at the age of 91.

Francis leaves a wife, Priscilla (whom he married in June 1943 when the Carbineers returned briefly from North Africa), four children, Robin, Elizabeth, Simon and Victoria, and several grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

The funeral took place at the Michaelhouse chapel, Balgowan and he was subsequently interred in the churchyard of St Matthew's Church, Lidgetton, with much military ceremony.

STEPHEN COAN,  
courtesy of *The Witness*