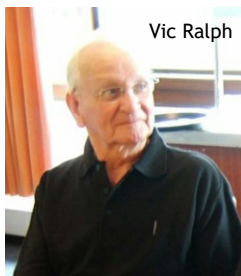


Those observant among you would have noticed a small Phoenix incorporated into the design of the CVA standard which is proudly borne aloft by our Deputy Chairman Fred Davies at all official CVA functions; some of you may have been puzzled as to why it is there? The presence of the Phoenix signifies the struggles and sometimes tribulations of a tenacious man who I am proud to say I got to know very well. It

represents the endeavours of CVA founder and gentleman Vic Ralph.

To understand the beginnings of the CVA you have to know a little about the former Commando Association (CA) or to give it its proper title 'The Old Comrades Association of the Army Commandos'. Formed on 20th June 1943 at the Commando Basic Training Centre Achnacarry the founding member was the now famous Lt. Col Charles Vaughan who held the membership number 1. The CA ran until 2005 with many eminent war time Commandos at its head. For most of its existence the day to day running of the CA had been done by Henry Brown OBE who held the position of General Secretary for 40 years, followed by Ron Youngman who continued in that roll until the stand down in 2005. During its time in existence the CA had had upwards of 10,000 enrolments from WW2 commandos. I had had contact with the old CA through my father and with him attended several reunions and ladies nights in the 70's. It was obvious to me then that the CA members were a very proud and dignified group of old comrades whose shared war time experiences bound them together as a band of brothers. When the decision was taken to stand down the CA, there was a definite split by the membership into two groups. One group believed the Old Comrades should march into history and it was time to finish. On the other side the members believed it was too important to let go and the Commando ethos needed to be taken forward into the future.

Standing firmly on the latter side was Vic Ralph. Vic had served in No1 Commando and in later years had concurrently been the Secretary of both the London branch CA and the Lincoln branch CA. I first met Vic in 2002 through research into my father's war time history. John Lowman (also No 1 Commando) had answered an advert in the CA's newsletter for anybody that had known my father. John and Vic were both members of Lincoln branch and John invited me to go along and meet Vic who had served in the same Troop (No 4) as my father in No 1 Cdo and had also spent time with him on leave in India.



Vic Ralph

I went along to the next Lincoln Branch meeting excitedly, and what a welcome I received. Vic cut an elegant figure was quietly spoken and extremely modest but with a keen sense of humour. The whole meeting was a great success.

This was the start for me of many meetings with Vic and the members of the Lincoln Branch. Slowly the idea became apparent that Vic was intending to carry on the Commando Associations work into the future and form the CVA.



I thought this was a tremendous idea and immediately volunteered to help in any way I could.

Vic soon gathered around him a group of stalwart supporters from both the London branch and the Lincoln Branch of the CA. Slowly things started to take shape. You have to realise at this point Vic was being met by stern resistance from the CA members who took the opposite view to him. Henry Brown had written to me in a letter saying 'Vic is a lovely man but has some odd ideas' and it was obvious to me what Henry was referring to. However, Vic carried on relentlessly putting things in order. Frank Johnson (3 Cdo), Harry Winch (No 1), Stan Scott (No 3) and Billy Moore (No 5) were among his staunchest supporters as were many other branch members of the old guard. Vic was also given help and moral support by family members among them Ron Lain and David Cotton. One of the ways in which I was able to help was in the printing and distribution of membership cards and posters. I would often receive a letter from Vic in his fine copperplate handwriting. The letter would give me details for cards for new members and it always ended with an enthusiastic postscript such as 'Great week-end John - 3 more for your kind attention'.



Sylvie Townsend constantly raised funds without which we would have sunk without trace. Finally and most importantly we must not forget the Commando wives who gave their full support and encouragement to Vic; everybody just wanted this to be a success.

We slowly crept forward to our first full meeting which was to be held at the annual gathering in Fort William in November 2003.

The meeting was packed to Vic's delight; it looked like we had prevailed. The first committee was voted in
President: Pat Churchill CdG, Secretary: Alan Frasca, Chairman: Stan Scott and Treasurer: Vic Ralph.



Some of the early business of the fledgling CVA was to decide on what qualified individuals for membership. The old CA had been formed initially for WW2 Army Commandos but later WW2 RM Commandos were also admitted into membership. This would obviously have been a bad idea for the new CVA. Time was taking its toll and we could not rely on just WW2 personnel. It was decided to allow, and recognise any one from any military service who had qualified to wear the coveted Green Beret, into membership. Vic had by now gathered around him a band of probably about 20 individuals who were just keen family members or friends of former commandos. Vic and Frank Johnson were keen to recognise this group and encourage them to carry on with their support and this became a moot point and was hotly discussed. It was a major step away from the old CA who never had such a membership band. Eventually this group of early supporters became the nucleus of the CVA Associate members. Early members I can recall among others were Jennie Barlow, Bill Harvey, Ken Holroyd, Gary and Pete Winch and Stephane Fraser. This turned out to be a wise decision and to this day the CVA still enjoys great support from its Associate members.

The next couple of meetings were 'lively' affairs to say the least. They were also very long meetings with lots of people expressing many ideas as to how the new CVA should progress. All points from the floor were given a good airing and votes taken. Over this period there were also changes to the committee, Pat Churchill and Alan Frasca had stepped down due to other commitments but the most significant thing was the re-appointment of Stan (Scotty) Scott as Chairman. I think every-

body who can remember those times will agree with me that where Vic had given the CVA purpose and meaning Scotty gave it direction. I can remember well Scotty's speeches that he gave to the gatherings in that upper room in the Alexander hotel. One time in particular which I noted down on my copy of the minutes went like this: 'There are rumours we can't do this and we can't succeed. But we are the best and we are doing this and we will march forward like we always have done.' to huge applause.



Time passed and the membership steadily grew but it was slow. Vic was getting bogged down with work. I visited Vic many times at his bungalow; it was like one big office full of commando business and paraphernalia. He was effectively running three branches at the same time so he therefore asked me to take over Secretary of the Lincoln Branch duties which I was only too pleased to do for him.

I was privileged to serve Chairman Pete Dovey BEM (No1) and the members there for three years before Lincoln Branch stood down.

It became clear that the new association needed somehow to make a statement of its existence; it needed something to make it all solid and worthwhile. We also needed young Commandos to join and carry things forward into the future. We needed something to represent the Associations efforts. The Web-site was set up to bring the CVA into the modern era of communication and to archive the history of the Commandos. This helped but many of the members were not computer savvy. We plodded forward.

One wintry day in December 2005, Vic, Frank Johnson and I were walking around the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire surveying the scene when suddenly the idea hit us. We needed a memorial in here, a memorial that would say something about the CVA for the future. We didn't think about it too long before the memorial project was launched. Lincoln Branch put the idea and motion in writing to the CVA National Committee, it was passed, and we all set the ball rolling again.

At the next meeting in Fort William Vic asked me to explain to the gathering, with the help of a small model made by the designer Norris Pickford, the plans for the memorial and also the need of recruiting new young Commandos into the CVA family.

From the back of the room emerged a tall smart figure, 'I think I can help there' he said.

It was WO1 Geoff Murray..... and the rest as they say is history.

After that meeting Vic shook my hand and said in his quiet voice

'John the Phoenix has arisen'.



I am extremely proud of my part in the formation of the CVA and I am particularly proud of the web-site, and the work it has entailed, of my son Daniel, Pete Rogers and Nick Collins and also my part in the coming to fruition of the Memorial at Alrewas.

But this pride is tinged with great sadness that Vic did not live to see the memorial installed and unveiled and the CVA thriving as it is today.....but I think all involved can rest assured Vic would be a very quietly happy man.

[John Mewett, Commando Veterans Association]