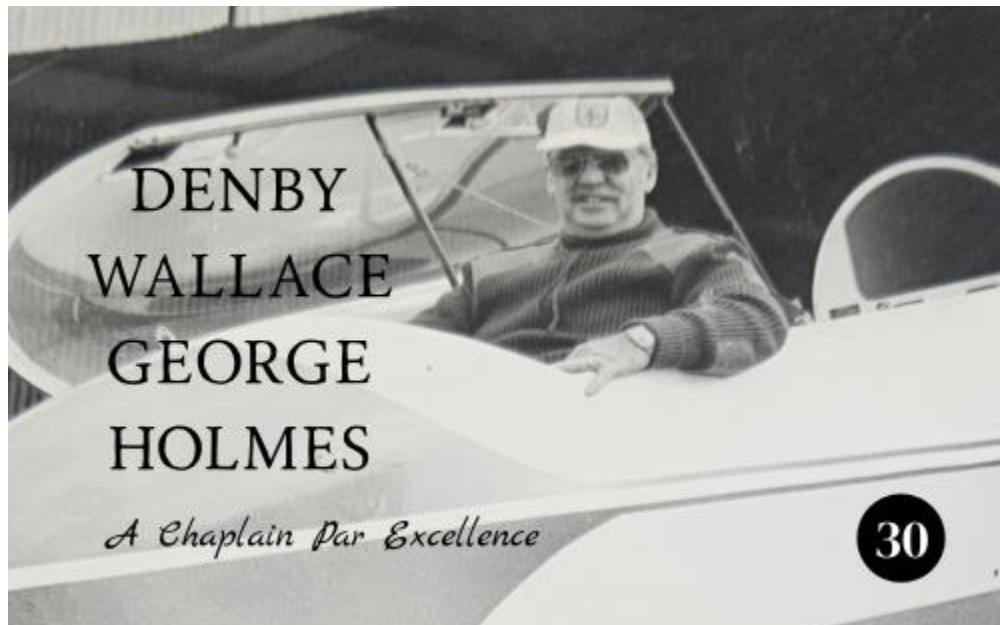


CHURCHES OF CHRIST NSW

Occasional Papers in History and Theology, No. 30



DENBY WALLACE GEORGE HOLMES

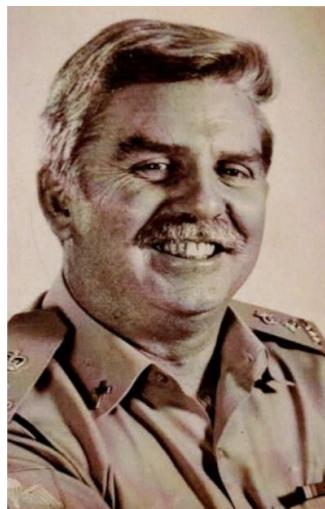
A CHAPLAIN PAR EXCELLENCE

Dennis Nutt

September 2025

The Churches of Christ in NSW will consider for publication short papers on historical and theological topics relevant to the development of Churches of Christ. The publication of a paper does not constitute an official endorsement of the views expressed therein.

Denby Wallace George Holmes (1933–2025)



The Early Years

A child of the South Australian Riverland, Denby Wallace George Holmes was born at Waikerie on 26 June, 1933. His parents were Arthur Sherlock Holmes (1900–1984) and Evelyn Walton Holmes (née Skewes) (1903–1984). Denby had a sister and three brothers: William, Bruce, Margaret, and Garth. He was the second eldest and very close to his siblings.

Life in Waikerie was simple. There was only one shop in town managed by Uncle George. Childhood memories for Denby from this time include eating a lot of fresh fruit, outdoor adventures on the Murray River, huge floods and having to be taken an underground cellar with his siblings by his mother during heat waves.

As a child he attended the Congregational Sunday school. On Sunday afternoon, 17 December 1938 the scholars were treated to a picnic spent at Lake Bonney. A Sand Castle Competition was held and Denby won a prize at five and a half years of age.

The *Adelaide Chronicle* ran a page entitled “For the Little Folk”. He was a frequent correspondent to “Aunty Dorothy”. In a letter published on 8 July, 1943, he mentioned that he was that sorry his last letter was not in print, and that he would try harder this time. We learn a great deal from his letters. In this one we discover that his brother Malcolm was a Boy Scout and that he was in the Cubs. They had to go to Barmera for the meetings, but now there was a problem: the tyres of their bikes were worn out and they

couldn't get any more, so they couldn't go. Barmera is across the river from Kingston-on-Murray, a distance of ten kilometres. He also mentioned that because he lived quite near the Murray he often watched boats go through, taking his sister and brother, Margaret and Bruce, down to the bank to watch them. He also mentioned that he had "a dear little dog called 'Fellow'".

In December, 1944, he wrote that it was a long time since his last letter. He was now in grade V, was eleven years old, had three brothers and one sister named Margaret. On the next Saturday, Moorak schoolboys were to play against them at football and he hoped his team would win. The Kingston school had celebrated Arbor Day, and he was presented with his beginners' and junior swimming certificates. The family had a cow called "Nancy" who gave three gallons of milk (11.4 litres).

On his 13th birthday, Denby and his brother Bill borrowed a rowing boat and left baby Bruce on an island to have some fun. They eventually managed to go and retrieve baby Bruce, but Denby remembered being in a LOT of trouble over it. He also remembered that his parents gifted him a book about the Royal Navy in England. School consisted of one room leading to a shed with one water bag. Despite the difficulties of living at this time, Denby recalled this period as being one of adventure and excitement with his family. Just prior to moving to Clare, the following appeared in the *Murray Pioneer*: "SELL—Three year old hack, quiet, home Sunday, £12. Denby Holmes, Kingston-on-Murray."

The family moved to Clare as Evelyn had the opportunity to work as a nurse there. At age 15, Denby became an apprentice baker in 1949. With one year to go, the army called him up for national service. He was placed in the "H" hut where his bed was next to a fellow by the name of Angus Holmes who used to kneel beside his bed each night and pray. This had a lasting impression on Denby.

We learn from an article in the *Northern Argus* (Clare) that Denby joined the Cycling Club. In October, 1950, in a road race of eight miles (eleven kilometres), he came third, 1 minute 40 seconds behind the winner. He also joined the Clare Fire Fighting Unit. The Hamley Bridge unit hosted firefighting events with the Clare team. Silver spoons were given to the members of the winning team, plus Jubilee Medals. He was a member of the Clare team, who were the title holders. On the occasion in February, 1952, when a fire broke out at Armagh he was unable to assist as "Mr. Denby Holmes is recovering from an Appendicitis operation".

One day in 1953 Denby had the brilliant idea of travelling, with a mate, to the army recruitment centre in Adelaide. There was no actual plan to join the army, but they would just make an appearance, grab some pamphlets and then go and buy hamburgers and milkshakes. In the recruitment centre, Denby ended

up in an office being interviewed. Meanwhile an army band outside started to play. The officer asked him if he was interested, so the band master gave him a trombone and asked him to play something. Denby played a song called "I Love Ya But Your Feets Too Big". He was told he would be accepted into the army IF he learned to read music within 3 months, which he did. Denby worked his way up to the position of trombone soloist.



He was posted to the first Recruit Training Battalion at Kapooka, new Wagga. It was there that he became a Christian. At a Lloyd Jones Crusade for the Wagga Church of Christ he committed his life to Christ. Arthur and Jean Powell were instrumental in teaching Denby about Jesus. He worked during school holidays for Arthur Powell who owned "Auto Spares", paying for his College fees. On one occasion the band travelled to Tumbarumba, a small country town in NSW, where he was captivated by a young local girl by the name of Marie Louise Gardner. He also met her mother Eunice. There was no contact for twelve months but the following year the band returned to Tumbarumba on Anzac Day. Denby was invited back to Marie's home and Eunice cooked a roast pork dinner. This was to become a special meal in the years to come. Denby and Marie were engaged on 19 January, 1957, and married in Tumbarumba on the 10 January in 1959.

Call to Ministry (1956–1959)

At twenty-three years of age, despite not knowing there was an Old and New Testament in the Bible, he left military service to train for the ministry at the Woolwich Bible College. He initially failed dismally in both Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek, but he battled on. His experience of student ministry was unusual. Normally, in the first two years of their course, students were appointed to work in a church with an experienced minister to guide and mentor them. In 1956 Denby was allocated to a circuit and so spent time at both the North Parramatta and Holroyd churches. He spent 1957 at Seven Hills and the next year at Mudgee. Because he and Marie were married at the beginning of his final year (1959) suitable accommodation had to be found for them. This meant that they moved from manse to manse to

manse: Rockdale (January to May), Bexley North (mid-May to 26 September) and Padstow (27 September to 20 December). It had to be an unsettling year having to move around so much, but it was necessary as there was no married accommodation at College.

One of the important aspects of the college program at the time was to spend a week in a general hospital and another in a psychiatric hospital under guidance of hospital chaplains. As well as these occasions, Denby also took a course in Tropical Medicine at the University of Sydney in his third year, and another in Methods of Secondary Education at the same institution just after graduation.

At the end of his 3rd year he was elected student president. He graduated in 1959. Lifelong friends were made at College including Kevin Crawford, David Eagling, Laurie Barker, Don Smallbone. Though not in college with Denby, my association with him began at that time.

Parish Ministry: West Morton Circuit (1960–1961)

Denby began his ministerial career serving six churches in the West Morton circuit in Queensland on 2 January, 1960, meaning that he had to preach six times every Sunday. This was a long established circuit having come into existence under the ministry of Philip Pond in 1896 and included churches at Mt. Walker, Rosewood, Marburg, Rosevale, Lowood and Esk.

He led one of the devotional sessions at the Queensland Conference that year. It was during this time that Kathy was born.

Holmes introduced various programs to the circuit. He spoke at a Teaching Mission at Mt. Walker for one week; weekly Bible study and prayer meetings recommenced at the manse; Bible School teachers underwent a training program at Rosewood, and on Friday nights, a men's study group was held at one of the six churches. Discussions at the time centred on how to prepare for morning services. Holmes had the joy of conducting thirteen baptisms in his first year.

A six months' Youth Program in 1961 had as a prize a week at Denby's *alma mater*, Woolwich Bible College. The Circuit was able to report advances in all six churches in June of that year. The Lowood Teaching Mission, conducted by Denby, proved a blessing and coincided with the church's twelfth anniversary. The town was canvassed resulting in a number of visitors.

He concluded his ministry with the West Morton Circuit at the Rosevale Christmas service in 1961 when he baptised three young men in a building packed with members and visitors.

Parish Ministry: Hurstville (1962–1967)

He was inducted into the ministry at Hurstville on 24 February, 1962. In hindsight it was appropriate that he was welcomed to the Hurstville Church of Christ as successor to Dan Wakeley MM, who had been a chaplain at the close of World War I and for the period between and including World War II.

The *Christian Messenger* reported that “splendid attendances are being maintained”. The church was in good heart and there had been a number of confessions of faith in the first year. The young people conducted their first Youth Rally in connection with a mission week in June 1962, and Denby took on the role of President of the Ex-students Association.



Boys' Brigade commenced under Denby's leadership, and Hurstville held a successful Evangelistic Mission with Jack Bond as evangelist on 21–29 November 1964. Bruce Armstrong acted as song leader. A major event was the arrival of Brenda, the Holmes's second daughter, a sister for Kathy. A Girls' Choir was established in 1965.

Denby did not neglect his professional development while at Hurstville. Denby attended a Seminar for Christian clergy on Judaism which was held in December, 1965, in the Great Synagogue War Memorial Centre in Sydney. He wrote a letter of “sincere appreciation for the opportunity” which was published in the *Australian Jewish Times*. He also attended courses on Recognition of Mental Illness (Callan Park, 1963), Psychological, Sexual Development (Father & Son, 1964), Film Analysis (University of Sydney, 1965), Pre-

Marriage Counselling (Father & Son, 1965), Industrial Chaplaincy (ITIM, 1966), and The Minister and Social Problems: Sexual and Psychological Development (1966).

The Hurstville ministry came to a close with Farewell Services held for Denby, Marie, Kathy and Brenda, on 22 March 1967. About 250 were present and the Conference President, P.H. Morton, gave an appreciation on behalf of the New South Wales Churches of Christ. Greetings from other committees were given and appreciation from the local Ministers' Fraternal. The time at Hurstville proved to be one of great blessing. The elders at Hurstville had invited him to stay for 15 years. However, the army chaplain general, Malcolm McCullough, had heard about Denby and arranged to meet with him. After five years of fruitful ministry, Denby rejoined the Army as a Chaplain. His closing weeks were marked with many decisions and baptisms.

Chaplain Holmes (1967–1983)

First Posting (1967–1968)

Denby Wallace George Holmes was appointed as Chaplain 4th Class (Captain) on 28 March 1967 when he did the Chaplain's Basic Course at Crow's Nest. He followed this by undertaking a Parachutist Course at Williamtown in October/November, 1967. He was then posted was to Annerley for two weeks for induction and then to Enoggera, Brisbane, (April to December) where the work consisted of ministering to troops, their families and the wives of the men in Vietnam. While in Brisbane he helped in the work at Annerley Church of Christ.

Malaysia (1968–1969)

In June, 1948, Britain declared a state of emergency in Malaya that lasted until July, 1960. Australia's involvement began in 1950. Australian contingents served until the end of the Malayan Emergency, and then stayed on as part of the South East Asia Strategic Reserve, including counter insurgency operations in Borneo during what was called Confrontation with Indonesia. United Churches chaplains who serve there included Denby Holmes from 18 January, 1968 to 20 December, 1969.

For this posting he was able to take Marie and the girls to Malaysia for a two year term with 8 Brigade R.A.R. at Rerendak. There the work was much the same as in any community: regular services on Sunday, Bible Studies, etc. Generally though, the work involved "marriage counselling" and "welfare problems" to be sorted out. In Malaysia the blessing came by starting a Church and Bible School in a housing area some distance from the actual camp.

This posting was not uneventful on a personal level. He was hospitalised with a Plantar wart and also for a dislocated shoulder. On this second occasion Marie was also in hospital having broken three ribs. Kathy was also hospitalised because of a virus.

A school teacher named Keith Carly, a self-proclaimed atheist was required to sit and listen in the room with the children. Keith, along with many more others became Christians through Denby's witness and example.

Balcombe/Portsea (1970)

From Malaysia he was posted to Balcombe/Portsea in Victoria on 12 January 1970. Balcombe is the Army Apprentice School at Mount Martha, where boys come in to learn a trade at approximately fifteen years of age for a two-three year period. At Portsea the Officer Cadets are trained. Many young men became Christians and some even joined the ministry due to Denby's personal ministry.

After eight months he was posted to Headquarters Australian Forces Vietnam.

Vietnam (26 August, 1970 to 30 June, 1971)

Fifty-five Army chaplains served in Vietnam and Denby Holmes was one of them. On arrival he encountered some reticence: initially some chaplains were "a bit unsure about having a Churches of Christ chaplain". One Roman Catholic told him he did not believe that the Churches of Christ were a true church. Over time this changed, and the nature of operational chaplaincy again resulted in a flowering of mutual respect and practical ecumenism.



Denby developed a very close friendship with the Roman Catholic padre, who regularly attended Holmes' weekly Sunday services to listen to his sermons. Those services were strictly non-denominational,

and usually had around thirty soldiers present, including the base commander who “always sat in the front row”. He described his ministry as mostly providing pastoral support to troubled soldiers, undergirded by an evangelistic desire to evoke faith as a soldier’s greatest resource to face the traumas of war. It also included the trauma of ministering to badly wounded men, especially those lying on their own or in a state of shock.

As part of his duties, he ministered to the Training Team men throughout the whole country, meaning great privileges in seeing Vietnam as a whole and meeting with missionaries and local Christians, who were witnessing for the Saviour in an exciting and wonderful way. The Australian Training Team were the most highly decorated unit in the Australian Army. He remarked that they were, as a group, the most courageous men he had ever known. When at “home”, he lived in the hospital area, where he met all battle casualties. Needless to say, this ministry brought both great challenge and reward.

Denby kept what might be called a Vietnam War Diary. It sets out in stark relief the brutality and pain of war in his private reflections. But there are some entries that can be mentioned here. On his first Christmas Eve in Vietnam the Officer Commanding told him that he had been promoted to Chaplain 3rd Class (Major). In April of 1971 he flew by chopper on Sundays to take Services on Board USS *Corpus Christi* anchored off Vung Tau. There was a packed chapel on each occasion. Another Chaplain and Denby, dressed only in towels were looking at Dust Off (the American radio call sign for the medical evacuation chopper), in view of the Officers Mess – including women – when a surgeon snatched their towels off and threw them on the roof! He was presented with a pushbike which had a siren on the handlebars. Denby rode into the Officer Commanding’s tent unawares and activated the siren. “MY GOD!” He, jumping to his feet. “NO! JUST THE CHAPLAIN.”

He was continually amazed at the humour of the Australian soldier when under stress; so original, and with the ability to pick everyone up again. He noted that “the spontaneous remarks among the wounded far excels Peter Sellars.”

At a Men’s Dinner in 1984, after he had left the army, he related experiences of human courage in war time. He spoke of a young digger who had been badly wounded in a mortar attack. He told about another wounded soldier who crawled among the dead and dying reading them the 23rd Psalm. He said that this young man had given them courage. But the thing that surprised him most is that “he wasn’t a Padre”. Denby also related some of the humorous things that happened as men lived under intense stress. One concerned an RAAF pilot coming in to land at a military airfield at night. “He switched his landing lights

off and called over the radio 'look mum, no lights.' But he nearly had apoplexy when the Air Traffic Controller turned the runway lights off and replied 'same here, son.'"

Despite tremendous difficulties faced, and the horrors of war, the Lord protected and used him. He would regularly fly around Vietnam visiting injured and dying military personnel as well as ministering to and supporting medical teams. The final note in the diary reads: "Emotional to see the last of SVN (South Vietnam) slide below the wing. Spontaneous cheer on landing Mascot". It was good to be home. But Vietnam never left him and the horror of it jumped up to bite him every so often in the form of nightmares. Today we call it Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

One thing he appreciated throughout this time was the contact made by Churches of Christ people, i.e. letters from various ministers and friends, the receiving of the *Christian Messenger* etc. This "keeping in touch" meant much particularly during times of separation.

Headquarters Western Command (1972–1973)

This posting was to the Special Air Services Barracks Swanbourne, Headquarters of the 5th Military District. Due to the nature of this placement there is nothing that can be reported.

Balcombe/Portsea (1974–1975)

From Western Australia he returned to Balcombe/Portsea, where he believed God would bless, as many opportunities were given. At Balcombe, by way of example, he lectured to the Protestant Denominations lads for forty-five minute periods, all told this involved fourteen lectures a week. A newly formed Monday night service and Sunday night Bible Study were well attended. The family also settled into the Tootgarook Church of Christ, which gave the family fellowship with our churches and a means of "taking in" and "giving out".



The *Australian Army* newspaper reported that soloist glider pilots were on the increase at the Army Apprentices School, Balcombe, Vic. "Interest in gliding began at Balcombe early in 1975 with the arrival of Padre Denby Holmes", reported ARMY's UC, Lt. G. Holloway. Holmes was the holder of the Silver C award and was also a qualified instructor. During his time at the Army Apprentice School he founded the Army Gliding Club.

The Silver C is a gliding badge awarded by the International Gliding Commission (IGC) of the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI). It represents a significant achievement for glider pilots, requiring them to demonstrate specific skills and endurance. To earn the Silver C, a pilot must achieve three distinct goals: a 1,000-meter altitude gain, a five-hour duration flight, and a 50-kilometer straight-line distance flight. These accomplishments are typically achieved in separate flights.

Victoria Barracks (1975–1984)

Chaplain Denby Holmes' final posting in 1975 was to Sydney's Victoria Barracks, Paddington, as Staff Chaplain Headquarters 2nd Military District. He was promoted Chaplain 2nd Class (Lieut. Colonel) on 17 February, 1977, and became Senior Chaplain of Field Force Command on 1 July, 1981.

By the time he was posted there his expertise in gliding was well-known. Under the heading "A

Look at the Variety of Situations in a Soldier's Life" a Sydney newspaper wrote:

A PADRE at Victoria Barracks, Sydney, more than lives up to his Army nickname of "sky-pilot". High flying Chaplain Denby Holmes ... likens gliding to being on cloud nine. Chaplain Holmes has been riding thermals for about 10 years and still bubbles about the sport as if each flight was his first. "Flying beneath clouds and with the birds is an incredible sensation," claims the padre. Chaplain Holmes began gliding in 1971, and since then he's notched about 1500 flights and 380 hours. He's been an instructor for several years and taught in Western Australia and NSW ... Also a qualified Army parachutist, Chaplain Holmes scoffs at suggestions of a safety back-up. "Gliding's safe as long as you're careful," he maintains.

This appointment, which lasted for eight and a half years, was his last. Wherever he was posted he "did the work of an evangelist". During the last few years of his posting in Sydney he assisted the Paddington Church of Christ, and, in effect, used it as a chapel for Victoria Barracks. Several soldiers came to experience

a vital faith in Jesus Christ as a result. One of them, Frank Langford, is now a military chaplain himself. Denby was also on the Billy Graham Crusade Board in 1979.

All this time he was well supported by his wife Marie and his daughters Kathy and Brenda. Army service was not easy for them. Like most army families it meant being frequently on the move. By 1983 they were living in their 23rd home, although sometimes this had its compensations. Their home during this posting was the old lighthouse keeper's at South Head. They had a multi-millionaire's view from their back fence. They also got free lighting, even if it did only shine once every eight seconds.

Being so close to the South Head of Sydney Harbour, and the infamous Gap, Denby became an unofficial member of the Police Squad's Suicide Prevention Team. On a number of occasions the police called him out to talk to potential suicide victims, perched on the edge of those sheer cliffs. There are several people who are still alive today because of this.



The *Daily Telegraph* of 14 April, 1981 ran a headline CHAPLAIN IN DRAMATIC CLIFF RESCUE. On this occasion Denby risked his life to stop a soldier jumping to his death over the Gap. For almost two hours he sat perched on a ledge centimetres from a 90 metre drop talking to the soldier, an army corporal, whom he knew, and who had threatened suicide. The drama began at 10.30 pm when nearby residents told police a man was threatening to jump over a cliff because of an argument with his wife.

The soldier told the Police Rescue Squad he didn't want to live because his wife no longer loved him. The police immediately called Denby from his home at Watsons Bay and began a search for the soldier's wife who was located almost two hours later at a friend's house at Pendle Hill. Before his wife arrived the man repeatedly threatened to jump over the cliff onto the rocks below. Several times he moved to the edge of the cliff but was talked back to safety by Denby. The soldier told the chaplain he had taken a box of sleeping pills and was determined to jump if his wife would not arrive. At about 12.30 am the soldier's wife arrived in a police car and talked her husband back to safety.

On 15 November, 1982, Chaplain Lieut. Colonel Denby Holmes received the National Medal, an Australian award given for long service by operational members of specified eligible organisations. It was introduced in 1975, as an original component of the new Australian Honours system, and replaced a range of medals available to military and civilian uniformed services for long service and good conduct. The eligible groups have in common that their members serve or protect the community at the risk of death, injury or trauma, hence it is only available to members of the eligible organisations who are operationally deployed.

At a meeting at the Great Synagogue War Memorial Centre, Chief Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits met a distinguished array of church leaders. The guest list was headed by Sir James Cardinal Freeman; the Bishop of Parramatta, representing Archbishop Sir Marcus Loane; Lilian Weels, moderator of the Uniting Church, and heads of all the other major Christian denominations. Professor Eric Sharpe, of Religious Studies at Sydney University; Patrick Kirkwood, head of the ABC's Religious Department, and members of his staff, and Staff Chaplain Lieut. Colonel Denby Holmes, of 2 Military District, also attended.

Denby was discharged on 20 August, 1983.

Parish Ministry: Paddington (1984–1990)

Paddington was a church with an illustrious history. Established in 1905 by the redoubtable Thomas Bagley, it had been ministered to by the A-List of Churches of Christ ministers among them Thomas Hagger, Arthur E. Illingworth, John Chapple, Roy Greenhalgh, Roy Wilson, and John Timms. But some of that lustre had faded; times had changed and the church had not kept pace.

From January, 1984, Denby enjoyed the more settled life as minister of the Paddington church. It brought its own set of challenges, and Denby was not lacking in meeting them. But while there he said that every Tuesday he would "stand with tears in his eyes outside the gates of Victoria Barracks, listening to the band".

His being at Paddington church, located not far from the Barracks, was a useful arrangement; soldiers from the Barracks attended services and helped swell the congregation. Also attending Paddington during the 1980s was a well-known Sydney business woman, June Dally-Watkins.

For the seven years of his ministry at Paddington he faced the problem of a mobile congregation. There were the soldiers who came and went, the nurses from St. Vincent's and the Women's Hospital who also came and went. He once remarked that one year he "had to replace thirty people who had been posted or

moved" just to stay at the same number of members. This is illustrated by the last year of his ministry there when the gains were five, but the losses thirteen.

While he largely confined himself to his church work he occasionally ventured further afield. In 1987 he was the guest speaker at the Taree church's 124th Anniversary. He was delighted to discover that as a former army Chaplain and a Vietnam veteran, several of his previous army acquaintances were present at the men's breakfast. St Vincent's Hospital used to ring him at all hours to visit sick and dying patients, and he continued his role with the police force.

Parish Ministry: North Turramurra (1991–1993)

This was Denby's last official ministry. It was a very different socio-economic area from Paddington. At the time North Turramurra had an affluent congregation, a relatively modern building, two manses and highly competent leadership at Board level. It was, indeed, a good church with which to minister. The church was in good heart and ministered to him as much as he did to it. In the attached photograph Denby is seated between Harold Hayward and Don Smallbone at the regular gathering of the older men of the Church at a local bakery and coffee shop.

Retirement



Following almost forty years of ministry, Denby Holmes retired and settled down to a quiet life with his beloved Marie at Ourimbah. They really enjoyed having extra time to show hospitality and spend time with family and friends. They enjoyed further exploring Australia with friends on mini-holidays. He regularly attended the ANZAC Day service at Ourimbah.

As his daughter Kathy noted, "Dad enjoyed spending time in God's creation (his large garden!)." Denby was able to pursue his passion for photography and he volunteered as a gliding instructor at the Mt White Gliding Club.



Always ready and willing to share the gospel with anyone he came into contact with, he became involved with a church at Mangrove Mountain, counselling and mentoring a wide variety of people. However, the calm waters of retirement were disturbed in 2007 when Marie suffered a stroke. Now, not only her husband, he became her carer for eight years until Marie passed into her Lord's presence on 19 May, 2015, aged 78 years, after 56 years of married life.

An especially close friend to Denby in recent years was Don Smallbone, who picked Denby up from the retirement village and took him to church and for outings.

After a life where he had seen the best and worst the human race had to offer; where he had ministered to the wounded and dying on the battlefield; where he had sat at the Gap at Watson's Bay leading people away from destroying their own lives, and where he had visited St. Vincent's Hospital at all hours to visit the sick and dying, Denby fell asleep quietly and peacefully, sitting in his chair on 22 July, 2025 aged 92 years.

Evaluation

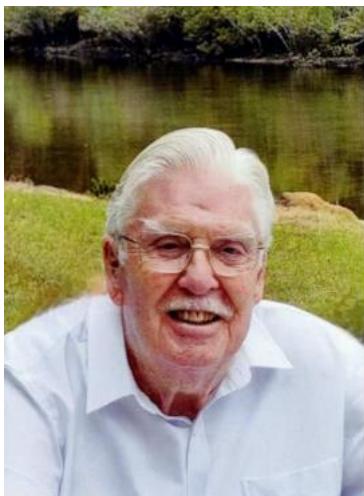
When Denby Holmes left the army in 1983 Bob Smith asked this question: What do the minister of a prestigious North Shore church, a pioneer church planter in Perth and an enthusiastic theological student have in common? He answered the question in this way:

Well, they were all, until relatively recently, members of the Australian Regular Army. They also had a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, and Denby Holmes. To be more specific, their encounter with Jesus came as a result of their friendship with Chaplain Denby Holmes. They

are just three of some 15 former soldiers who are now in ministry or mission work as a result of Denby's service in the Army.

In every posting Denby established a Sunday School—even in Vietnam. During his service in Malaysia the Sunday School grew from 3 to 130. One of those who came into fellowship and taught at one Sunday School is now running a city mission.

Denby's success as a Chaplain is not only based on the fact that he was an excellent minister of the gospel, but also on his affinity to army life. He made it a priority to experience army life as “Diggers” do. He never isolated himself in the Chaplain's office, but always trained, worked and sweated alongside the troops. He was one of those strange creatures who seemed to enjoy exhausting and dangerous activities, like being the first Chaplain to qualify as a parachutist. He went to sea in a submarine; he flew through the sound barrier, and he was also eligible to wear a marksman's cross rifles on his sleeve, but felt perhaps that didn't really fit the Chaplain's image.



During his time as a Chaplain he served in 6 Task Force, Northern Command; 28 Brigade in Malaysia; HQ Australian Force Vietnam; the Army Apprentice School and Officer Cadet School; Headquarters Western Command, and for the last eight years of his military career at Victoria Barracks, initially as Staff Chaplain, Headquarters Field Force Command.

His parish ministries were all innovative and progressive, from the rural West Moreton Circuit to inner city Paddington. They number eighteen years in total, just shy of the number of years he was a Chaplain.

What amazes me is that somehow over all those years he managed never to serve on a Conference Committee, although he was elected Vice-President of Conference in 1982.

If the writer may intrude two personal reflections. I had the blessing of ministering in the adjoining parish to Denby for two years. When I told him I had been invited to teach a subject at our *alma mater* he remarked, “I guess I’ll have to call you Professor”, to which I replied “and I’ll have to call you Colonel”. And so it has been until 22 July 2025 the day he “fell asleep in Jesus” as those of earlier days would say. It was prophetic as both of us attained those ranks.

In my year as Conference President, a move was made to change the Constitution that significantly reshaped how Conference functioned. As time for decision approached discussions became increasingly adversarial. The Conference Business session began with a devotional, which I asked Denby to give. His graciousness and the high esteem in which he was held ensured that there “was no blood on the floor.”

“A father in Israel” has gone from us, and the church of God on earth is the poorer.

Photographs

Page 1: Chaplain Lieutenant-Colonel Denby Wallace George Holmes

Page 3: Young Denby and Marie in 1958

Page 5: More mature Denby and Marie

Page 6: Denby conducting a funeral in Vietnam

Page 8: Glider Pilot

Page 9: Denby with Bill Howard, Roy Aitken and Bob Smith, fellow Churches of Christ Chaplains

Page 9: National Medal awarded 1982

Page 11: Senior men meeting at the bakery and coffee shop North Turramurra
Denby at Ourimbah ANZAC Day service in 2006

Page 12: Denby in God's creation

Authors' Note

The author gratefully acknowledges permission to make use of the eulogy delivered by Charles Corban, his son-in-law, at Denby Holmes's funeral, and an article written by then Chaplain Captain Bob Smith on Denby's retirement from the Army. Bob rose through the chaplain ranks and was later appointed as United Churches member of the Religious Advisory Committee to the Services (RACS) which had a 2 star status (Major-General). I have added material of my own. Photographs are provided by the family. *Ave et vale amice meus.*