

Dr Roy Stauth - A Life Well Lived

Roy Stauth was an extraordinarily multi-talented person, who sought out new places, fresh challenges and acquired new skills throughout his life. This peripatetic lifestyle not only gave him a fund of wonderful stories to tell, but also gave him a broad outlook on life, great wisdom, and understanding of the human condition.

Escape from Iran

When he joined the School of Environmental Studies in 1979, he had just been part of a daring escape from Iran. Roy and a small group of helicopter pilots and crew were in Iran to service the oil rigs in the Gulf - transporting personnel, post and food. In the wake of the fall of the Shah's autocratic monarchy on the 11th February 1979, Iran, now headed by the Ayatollah Khomeini, was proclaimed an Islamic Republic. The pilots and crew now found themselves in a country in deep turmoil that was dangerous and extremely hostile to foreigners.

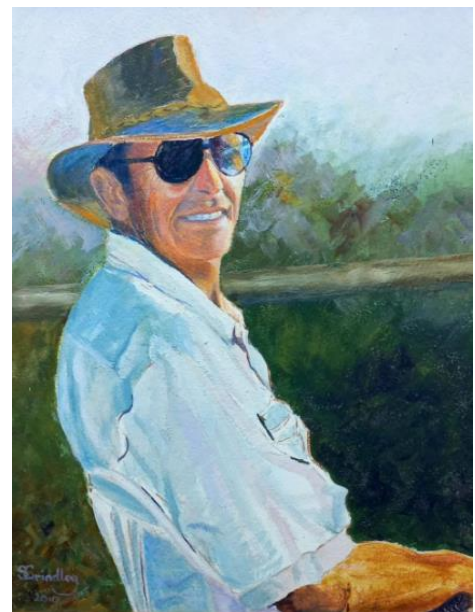
A daring escape was planned between the stranded pilots and their UK employer, Bristow Helicopters. The trapped pilots and crews were all told to fly to a designated airfield at first light, arriving at precisely the same time, where they would abandon their helicopters and sprint to a commercial plane sent for their escape by Bristow that was to be rolling to a halt on the tarmac. However, as the plane readied for take-off, jeeps raced onto the tarmac blocking the runway, and it was only after lengthy negotiations that the airport manager allowed the plane to depart, in exchange for the dozen or more abandoned helicopters littering his airfield - some of them with their rotors still turning. No wonder Professor Fuggle had his doubts about the suitability of this fugitive as a prospective student at UCT! Here is Roy's story:

Early Days

As a young man, Roy attended Colorado State University where he obtained a B.A. degree in English Literature and Creative Writing, with distinction. Here he was introduced to the writings of the early American naturalists: John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and the Transcendentalists, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Their philosophy deeply influenced him and gave him an abiding love for all things wild and a longing to live a simple life close to nature. Here too, his writing skills were honed which stood him in good stead throughout his life.

U.S. Marine Corps and the Vietnam War

Having chosen not to pursue an academic career, he moved to Canada, where he lived until the outbreak of the Vietnam War. He joined the U.S. Marine Corps, where he hoped to be taught some useful skills. He succeeded, in that he was selected to train as a fixed-wing pilot, and was then chosen to train as a helicopter pilot. These skills took him around the world.



Roy Stauth, painted by Shirley Grindley.

He arrived in Vietnam shortly after the Tet Offensive in 1968, and spent the following two years flying the massive twin-rotor Sikorsky CH-53 helicopters out of their base at Phu Bai as part of the 'Heavy Marine Helicopter Squadron 462'. He flew these machines on hundreds of hazardous supply and rescue missions. These heavy-lift helicopters were used to ferry supplies and equipment to remote outposts in the jungle and evacuate wounded soldiers from combat zones. They were often targeted by the Vietcong and caught in mortar- and rocket-fire.

On his discharge from the military, having received numerous awards and recovered from serious shrapnel wounds, he returned to the States where he was employed to train other Marine Corps helicopter pilots. This was a particularly well-paid and sought-after job, but he resigned after a few months. The senseless brutality of the war waged by his country and the hostility that greeted returning servicemen, left deep scars on his soul and he decided to leave the U.S.A. – a country he felt that had lost its moral compass.

Career as a Helicopter Pilot

There were relatively few helicopter pilots at that time that had his skills and thousands of hours of instrument-flying time, so he had little difficulty finding work. His flying career took him to many parts of the world, including the U.K., the Far East and Iran, servicing oil rigs; multiple flights across Africa, delivering helicopters; flying out of Cape Town for the firm, Court Helicopters, to service passing tankers; and, finally, to the Kruger National Park.

When he was offered the job of flying a small single-engine helicopter in the Kruger National Park, it brought together his love of flying, with his deep interest in wilderness and its conservation. He flew rangers and scientists to the remotest parts of the Park and was also part of the elephant-culling team. At that time, the number of elephants had grown to such an extent that they were causing serious damage to their habitat, and culling was thought to be the best solution. It involved extremely demanding and exciting flying that he enjoyed, but he found it increasingly difficult to be a part of killing these majestic animals and he reluctantly decided to leave.

Career in Environmental Conservation in the U.S.

He returned to the States to work for the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife in Washington State and later spent over a year working in Alaska. Here his work included the practical implementation of the U.S. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) procedures.

Study and Work at the University of Cape Town (UCT)

This experience was invaluable to the School of Environmental Studies when it was tasked to draft an Environmental Impact Assessment procedure for South Africa. He edited the first draft while sunbathing on the balcony of his seaside home in Kommetjie, and was closely involved with all the stages of production of the final paper.

Roy received encouragement from many people whilst at UCT, but three played a vital role in his academic career.

- Professor Richard Fuggle gave him invaluable support, guidance and encouragement throughout his time in the School of Environmental Studies, both as a student and later as a member of staff.
- Professor Ben Gurzinsky introduced him to Economics and guided him in the use of economic principles in environmental decision-making.
- Professor George Ellis supported his effort in the development of a panel decision-making tool known as the “Delphi Method”, and wrote the computer programme on which it was run.

Roy felt deeply indebted to them and others who supported his research at UCT for the generous sharing of their time and knowledge. He completed his PhD (*An Environmental Evaluation Methodology for Improving Resource Allocation Decisions: A Treatise With Selected South African Case Studies*) in 1989.

He took a three-month sabbatical after completing his PhD thesis and spent this time in splendid isolation on a mountain, in a small, stone cottage kindly lent to him by a close friend in KwaZulu-Natal. Here he spent his days writing, reading and fly-fishing - his three most-loved pastimes.

In 1987, Roy was appointed as a lecturer in the recently formed Department of Environmental and Geographical Science. His brief was to develop and promote environmental economics and economic applications in natural resource management. In many ways, Roy pioneered the now pivotal discipline of *Resource Economics* in South Africa.



Shirley Grindley & Roy Stauth, when in the Timbavati Private Nature Reserve.

After a productive period of three years on the staff of the Department, Roy's relentless spirit saw him leave UCT after an investment that his father had made on his behalf was sold, making him financially independent. His warmth, energy and passion had quickly endeared him to the staff, researchers and students in ENGEO and the Environmental Evaluation Unit. His relentless curiosity, and search for meaning, added lustre to the perhaps dashing image of a helicopter pilot. He gave generously and enthusiastically of his time in helping fellow staff, researchers and students with their work.

Consulting and Coaching

After Roy left UCT, he and his partner, Shirley Grindley, ran a private business for a few years, researching and writing EIA reports for clients. He then spent three years in Costa Rica and Chile in the Peace Corps, where he advised the Chilean Forestry Department on management and resource use.

Life in a Wild Place

His deep desire to live a simple life close to nature was finally achieved when he and Shirley were fortunate enough to be asked to care-take 6,000 ha of wilderness in the Timbavati Private Nature Reserve (TPNR). This reserve borders Kruger National Park and became a part of the greater Kruger National Park when the fences between the two were dropped. Living in this unspoiled place, close to wildlife, in a rudimentary camp with no perimeter fence, was a wonderful experience and was probably the happiest period of his life.

At the end of their six-year sojourn in the Timbavati and Balule Reserves, the Timbavati Management Committee asked Roy to write a report on the management practices employed in the Park over the years. He diligently trawled through their archives and wrote an invaluable management tool for future decision-makers on the successes and failures of past management practices in the TPNR.

Life in a Small Karoo Town

On leaving the Lowveld, Roy and Shirley moved to Graaff-Reinet, a beautiful, small town in the heart of the Karoo. After six years of rough and isolated living spent in the bushveld, their lives changed completely. Here, they bought a 200-year-old Cape Dutch home, and Roy threw himself into civic affairs, and cultural events, soon becoming a highly respected leader in the community. He also played an important role in the successful fight against the oil companies who had plans to frack the shales of the Karoo. He wrote extensively while in Graaff-Reinet, including his book, *'Hogan's Goat'*, an autobiographical account of his service in Vietnam.

A Stroke of Misfortune

When he left to visit his family in the United States in 2012, he had no idea that he would never be able to return. Whilst on a trout-fishing holiday in the Rocky Mountains, he was felled by a massive stroke that tragically left him semi-paralysed and unable to walk. He lingered on for 11 years, before his death from cancer on the 20th December 2023.



Roy Stauth, painted by Stephen Parsons, when Roy and Shirley lived in Graaff-Reinet.

Tributes from Friends and Colleagues

Roy was widely liked and admired by all who met him, as was evidenced by the crowd-funding by colleagues to send Shirley over to the USA to see Roy, after his deterioration (and then diagnosis of cancer), and by an avalanche of tributes upon his passing. They told of the high esteem in which they had held him and the profound impact he had had on their lives, both professionally and personally.

The bench in the courtyard of the Department of Environmental and Geographical Science was placed there by these friends, to honour his memory and mourn the loss of an exceptional human being.

He lived life to the full, by being a restless seeker of knowledge, novel experiences and adventures, as well as being a deeply thoughtful and introspective thinker and writer.

As Henry David Thoreau wrote, "*When it's time to die, let us not discover that we have never lived.*"



Friends and colleagues clubbed together to install this recycled-plastic bench in the courtyard of the Environmental and Geographical Science Department's courtyard, in Roy Stauth's memory. They also made a generous donation to the Mouse-Free Marion Project (to eradicate invasive House Mice from Marion Island) in Roy's name. In the photograph are some of the friends who were able to join at an event at the ENGEO courtyard: Koos Williams, Guy Preston, Elaine Williams, Sue Lane, Sandra Fowkes, Anne Field, Debby Grindley, John Field, George Ellis, Shirley Grindley, Gabby Grindley, Chris Grindley, Merle Sowman, Richard Fuggle and Richard Hill.



Left: A smaller group later gathered for the fixing of the plaque to Roy's bench: Penny Brown, Richard Hill, Merle Sowman, Frank Eckardt and Stephen Granger; Richard Fuggle and Guy Preston.



Dr Roy Bryan Stauth
7 January 1941 – 23 December 2023