

MAKING HIS MARK

RON MARK, MP, MINISTER OF DEFENCE, AND FORMER SOLDIER

Main photos: LAC Chad Sharman

Ron Mark readily admits he could have once have been destined for jail. As a youngster many of the ingredients for a criminal career were there.

But the feisty young man with deeply held beliefs kept his eye on the goal and ended up in the Army and in politics.

Now, he is New Zealand's Defence Minister. In an interview with *Army News* editor Judith Martin he talks about his time in uniform, his prescient mother-in-law, and a hurt he thinks might never go away.

Fresh from the debating chamber, Ron Mark exudes confidence.

His handshake is vice-like and he is keen to talk.

Mark, 64, is proud of his military background, which, were it not for his nimble negotiating skills, may never have happened.

"When I was 16 I told my foster father I wanted to be a

soldier. He said, 'Yes, but what do you really want to be?' He insisted I learn a trade in the Army, and wouldn't sign the papers unless I did."

The Regular Force Cadet graduated into the Army's RNZEME, a now-disbanded corps that covered most aspects of the electrical and mechanical trades. While he did extremely well in automotive engineering, passing Advanced Trade Certificate and becoming an advanced recovery specialist, he also relished the regimental side of his new career, the physical challenges that came with that and the camaraderie.

He moved among the Army's units, completing postings with 2/1 Battalion, 3 and 10 Tpt Regiments and QAMR. He completed the Parachute Course at PTSU in Whenuapai as a Lance Corporal and, after graduating from Officer Cadet Training Company as a 2LT he went on to complete a stint at Burnham Training Depot, commanding a platoon of 4 Otago South. It was after that the young Mark put himself forward for what he considered to be the ultimate challenge: to become a member of the New Zealand Defence Force's elite fighting unit, 1 NZSAS Group. He completed and passed selection with, among others, Lieutenant General (Rtd) Sir Jerry Mateparae.

In the meantime, however, things were heating up in the Middle East. The Sinai's Multinational Force and Observers was being put together, New Zealand offered to assist and was asked to provide a mechanical engineering officer.

Lieutenant Mark was offered acting Captain's rank and was asked if he would go. With becoming a badged

member of the SAS still firm in his mind, he accepted the operational posting, eventually completing a 13-month tour of duty in the Sinai, during which time he was promoted to the rank of Major.

He returned to New Zealand fit and enthusiastic, and asked for permission to pursue his SAS ambition. But he was told by his EME commander he wasn't going anywhere – he'd had his fun, and he was needed in his own unit.

"I was devastated. As a young soldier you always strive to hit the pinnacle of your career. Anyone who wears a uniform wants to achieve as much as they can personally and professionally."

Maybe it was then Mark's rock-hard resilience began to show.

"While I was fighting the battle to join the New Zealand SAS I heard they were recruiting Commonwealth officers to work for the Sultan of Oman. I asked again if I could be released to do cycle. They refused again, so I accepted an appointment in Oman."

During his time working for the Sultan he was approached by the CO of the Sultan's Special Force, a unit trained and led by former officers from the British equivalent of our Special Forces, 22 SAS Group. They needed an electrical and mechanical engineering officer. Mark spent more than four years with them, providing support to their SF operations and rising in rank from Nageeb (Captain) to Raaid (Major).



Sussing out new weaponry, including the new Barrett M107A sniper rifle.

“I was responsible for repairing and maintaining all their vehicles, portable plant, and marine and weapons systems, as well as trialling and evaluating new kit and designing and organising the build of specialist vehicles. It was my job to ensure they had what they needed, when they needed it, and where they needed it to be.”

Five years later it was time to return to his family and children in New Zealand. The New Zealand Army offered him a post as the SO2 Quarters at Linton Army Camp, but after the hustle and excitement of the Middle East the position did not appeal and he decided to put the Army behind him.

He used his engineering skills to work in small business, establish one of his own, and generally make his way in the world.

How did he get into politics? He blames his mother-in-law.

“She was staunchly Labour, and when I visited her there was always lots of political discussion in their house. I was never shy to express my opinion, and she encouraged that. When I returned to New Zealand from the Middle East in 1990 I learned I had been a card-

carrying member of the Labour Party, courtesy of my mother-in-law, for the whole five years! I had no idea.”

In 1990 she had nominated him to stand for Parliament and he had been accepted but he didn't want to do it. He didn't really like politicians. In 1993 she asked him again to stand and again he turned her down. But she persisted.

“It was during one of those discussions we often had in the early hours of the morning when my mother-in-law said: ‘In all the time I have known you, you have always had strong views on the way the country was being run – on social development, welfare, law and order and defence. What we are offering you is the opportunity to stand for Parliament and if you get elected to go to Wellington and try to make a difference. Now it's up to you whether you do this or not, but if you do not do it, I don't ever want to hear you complain about anything, ever again.’”

He stood against Ruth Richardson in Selwyn and almost beat her.

Three years later, Winston Peters asked him to join New Zealand First and he agreed.

Mark served four terms during that stint in politics. His political acumen was honed in those years, and his combative streak came to the fore regularly.

He puts his perceived abrasiveness down to his early upbringing. As a child, he learnt the hard way to fight his own battles.

“When you are a foster child at the age of three, moving from home to home and dealing with everything that comes at you, it has an impact. I know I was viewed by others as homeless and not wanted. I guess you can evolve one way and end up in prison, or you can go the other way.”

He says he will always challenge people who want to run the country on strictly philosophical lines.

“Yes, I will challenge someone if I feel they are out of touch or don't understand an issue. But I pick my battles. I live in hope that people, regardless of their personal views, will be open to listening to someone else's perspective and examining other options.”

He will stick up for the underdog when they are right, something he says he always did as a soldier and as an officer.

He says he made some “God awful” decisions as a young man, but he was lucky to have good mentors within the Army who had faith in him and steered him in the right direction. “I'll be forever grateful to those men, who could see through my behaviour and see I had potential.”

He is excited about his role as Minister of Defence, and has already clocked up several visits to the troops. He wants to visit as many camps, bases and deployments as he can.

It's early days, but he is impressed by the professionalism he has seen. He is not fazed that other parties in the Government he is part of have made it clear in the past they do not share the same views on defence that he holds.

“I would like those MPs to see what the Defence Force actually does. To see, feel and sense the culture, and see what it is that Defence is offering and doing. They need to know the NZDF is not just about combat – it has teeth arms but also works with various government departments, border protection agencies and non-government organisations performing a very broad range of duties, from assisting in science to humanitarian relief in time of disaster and civil emergencies.

“Defence probably isn't as well understood by some MPs as it could be. I want to raise Parliamentarians' understanding of what our servicemen and women do, and are capable of doing, for the betterment of New Zealand and its people.”



Ron Mark greets troops on Exercise Southern Katipo 17.