

Peter Ian van Blommestein

(1925 – 2005)

It is with deep regret that we have to inform readers of the passing of Peter van Blommestein. He died on 6 September 2005 at Cape Town.

Peter joined the Society in 1978 and started reporting his observations in 1983. He worked mostly on occultations (lunar and planetary) and also reported on a variety of other sightings such as meteors. As an experienced observer and contributor to observations, Peter became member of Council in 1996 and President of ASSA in 2000–01. He was registered as SS295 at the International Lunar Occultation Centre in Japan.

In 1983 Peter made an occultation observation that led him to conclude that minor planet (45) Eugenia has a satellite. He published an article suggesting this in *MNASSA* (“A possible minor planet occultation”, 1983 December, 42(9–12), 73), co-authored with Danie Overbeek. The professional community ignored the observation until the satellite was discovered by professional astronomers in 1998, and designated “Petit-Prince” in 2000. Although his role in its discovery was never credited, it was one of the happiest days in his life when he was vindicated. He also spent some years constructing an 8-inch reflector telescope and making additions and modifications.

Peter had a life-long interest in the natural world around him. His specific interest in astronomy began in 1968 when he met Dr David Thackeray, then Director of the Radcliffe Observatory in Pretoria. At the time Peter was based in Cullinan and employed by the Premier Mine. His daughter was a classmate of Dr Thackeray’s younger daughter and the families came to know one another.

Peter was born in Johannesburg on 14 June 1925 the eldest of three boys. His father, Dr Jack van Blommestein (D.S.O.), was at that time Medical Officer at Brakpan Mine on the East Rand. Due to the great gold mining expansion that was taking place in the Orange Free State, Sir Ernest Oppenheimer appointed Peter’s father Consulting Medical Officer for Anglo American Corporation. This involved a move to Johannesburg so Peter left CBC Boksburg and attended St John’s College until he matriculated in 1943.

He enlisted into the Navy, bluffing his age as 21 because his father was loathe giving his permission. He travelled to Cape Town to S.A.S. *Unity*, the SA Naval Base. There he did his basics and then seconded to the Royal Navy and commenced training in Simon’s Town. Whilst there he grew impatient with the inactivity and longed to see active service.

Taking the situation into his own hands he wrote a direct personal letter to the Commander of the Dockyard stating that he had not joined up in order to peel potatoes at Klaver Camp and requesting immediate attention. Within a week – after a chilling interview with Commander Francis (who ordered that he be confined to detention barracks) – he sailed for the Far East as a signalman aboard H.M.S. *Newcastle*, a Town Class cruiser heading for Trincomalee, the R.N. Base in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon).

He saw action against the Japanese, including landing craft operations in Burma. This entitled him subsequently to be a holder of the Burma Star and a member of the Burma Star Association, which has a worldwide membership.

Towards the end of hostilities he had been transferred to the destroyer HMS *Relentless* that was subsequently part of the great flotilla that sailed to Singapore for the official handing-over of the Instrument of Surrender to Lord Louis Mountbatten. Peter was one of those who was present on the parade ground to witness this historic event.

After mobilisation he studied medicine for a year at the University of the Witwatersrand but decided not to continue. Peter then went into mining and worked his way up to the position of mine captain. He started coal mining at Cornelia Colliery and went on to gold mining at Springs Mines and Daggafontein Mine between 1951–56. Between 1956–58 Peter was copper mining in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) after which he joined De Beers and went diamond mining at Premier Mine, Cullinan near Pretoria from 1958–71. During this time De Beers decided to create a public relations department and Peter was appointed public relations officer for De



Peter van Blommestein at the 2004 ASSA annual general meeting in Cape Town. (Photo: A. Slotegraaf)

Beers and worked in this capacity at Cullinan (1965–1971), Oranjemund (1971–72) and Kimberley (1972–85). Peter retired to Simon's Town in June 1985.

While Peter was doing his naval training at Simon's Town he attended a SAWAS dance at the Rondebosch Town Hall where he met Joan Fuller who lived in Mowbray where her father was Senior Anaesthetist at Groote Schuur Hospital. During his time in the Far East they were able to keep up a steady correspondence thanks to the splendid efforts of the postal services throughout the war years.

After demobilisation Peter made his way to Cape Town as soon as possible where he was reunited with Joan, who, by then having completed her art school training, was working for the publishers Ramsay Son and Parker.

They were married in 1951 and started their lives together at Springs Mines and later at Daggafontein. During this time Joan travelled to Johannesburg where she worked at SA Associated Newspaper as a layout artist on one of their magazine publications. The marriage produced two daughters, Mary (a museologist) and Jane (an art teacher).

During long leave in 1964 they bought a cottage in Simon's Town for a holiday house which later became their permanent home on retirement in 1985.

In March 1986 after much initial thought and research and in consultation with the Chairman of the Simon's Town Historical Society, Gerry Read (O.B.E.), they led a group of members to observe Halley's Comet at Beaufort West using the airfield as their viewing point, being far away from disturbing lights and having a clear sky. This turned out to be a correct decision as the viewing was excellent and conditions perfect for observation. Fortunately the Chairman had trusted his judgement completely in leaving the decision to Peter and more than fifty members were delighted with the experience.

Peter was an able linguist which stood him in good stead during his mining career when he had to communicate with various African people in South Africa and further afield in Zambia and Namibia. As an Anglican lay minister he was able to conduct a church service in the vernacular.

He took a great and active interest in civic affairs wherever he lived and in retirement at Simon's Town sat on various committees, including the Simon's Town Environmental Advisory Committee, Simon's Town Historical Society and the Home Nursing Service (as Hon. Treasurer). He also served in various capacities in the Progressive – later Democratic – Party.

He shared his love of astronomy with the readers of *Snoek Town Calling*, contributing a popular article *The Night Sky*, until the magazine ceased publication with the death of its proprietor/editor, Dr Reg Loxton.

(Chris de Coning)