

## **Eulogy**

**Air Chief Marshal (Ret'd) Sir Neville McNamara KBE, AO, AFC**

**Delivered by Air Marshal Geoff Brown, AO**

**Chief of Air Force**

As a former Australian Chief of the Air Staff and Chief of the Defence Force Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Neville McNamara was an enigma.

Sir Nev, as he was affectionately known, was a modest man who did not seek promotion.

He was popular and well liked across all ranks.

When he joined the Air Force, young Neville only wanted to fly.

He often said his only ambition as a young man was to remain a squadron pilot 'forever'.

Graduating as a Sergeant Pilot, he served as an instructor before he fulfilled his ambition to become a fighter pilot, flying Kittyhawks with No 75 Squadron in the South-West Pacific.

Neville Patrick McNamara was born on the 17th of April 1923 at Toogoolawah; a three pub country town in Queensland.

Education was an adventurous affair at Toogoolawah State School.

Many students walked kilometres, others came from distant towns by train, while a number rode more than 20 kilometres each way on horseback; such was life in the bush.

Subsequently, he attended the Christian Brothers School in Warwick and later, St Josephs Nudgee College in Brisbane.

During his school years he had an uncomplicated, happy existence where he excelled at a number of sports including tennis, cricket and football. Yet his spiritual values were always uppermost in his mind.

In his autobiography, *The Quiet Man*, he recalls “My Catholic upbringing had an abiding influence in my life and gave me a strong sense of moral values”.

“Its teachings also gave me tolerance, patience, understanding, the need to control anger and the importance of giving everybody a fair go. These values stood me in good stead as I advanced through my career” he reflected.

After leaving school, he worked as a junior clerk at the Ipswich Railway Workshop before enlisting in the Royal Australian Air Force on the 12th of October 1941.

Prior to the war, pilot entry to the RAAF required a pass at Queensland’s senior level.

“The war did me a great favour,” he reflected. “I understood I did not have the qualifications to be a pilot and my parents could not afford to continue my education to Queensland’s senior level.”

Soon after war was declared, the entrance standard for pilot was lowered to junior level.

Ironically, for selection to be a pilot it was rumoured that one should not do ‘too well’ at the written test otherwise you might be selected to be a navigator.

Other sage advice offered to young Neville was that if the board asked if he rode or sailed, he should always say ‘yes’.

He of course answered in the affirmative, as supposedly this indicated reasonable hand eye coordination and a good sense of balance.

Although not too sure whether these answers had any bearing on the outcome, he was successful and was categorised as a pilot.

Sir Neville always remembered the thrill of his first flight in a Tiger Moth. This experience convinced him that flying would be his life.

After graduating from the advanced phase on Airspeed Oxfords, he received his wings at Point Cook, near Melbourne.

After graduation, he joined No 13 Squadron of the United States Army Air Corps, based at Charters Towers in Queensland to fly B-25D Mitchell bombers.

He then served for a short period in New Guinea, flying operations with this unit.

Upon return to Australia, he trained as a flying instructor, where in his words, 'there was nothing like a pupil to teach you how to fly'.

In early 1945, he finally got his wish to be a fighter pilot and was posted to No 75 Squadron to fly in the South-West Pacific.

However, at that stage of his career there was some frustration as the Japanese were giving little resistance and operations in the South-West Pacific were drawing to a close.

He recalled, "When peace was declared jubilation was tinged with regret; operations had come to an end.

Yes, we had a great party, the beer was flowing and I suffered a terrible hangover. But in the sober moments that followed I thought, "what next?"

Air Chief Marshal McNamara always wanted to remain in the Air Force after the war.

He was granted his wish and was posted to Japan to fly Mustangs as part of the occupation force.

Upon reflection, he admitted that posting was often boring after active service.

He said, “We maintained our patrols, ran a training program and participated in fly-pasts and goodwill visits, but I would have to conclude that we were not very productive as far as air operations were concerned”.

In 1948, after nearly three years in Japan, he returned to Australia, and in 1949 was awarded a permanent commission.

During his subsequent ground tour as an air traffic controller with No 23 Squadron, which he wasn't all that thrilled about, he met his future wife Joan, an attractive forthright young lass, who had served with the Navy during the War.

Sir Neville looked back with delight at the ‘very fine parties’ they held at No 23 Squadron.

At one particular function, a number of TAA hostesses encouraged the eligible young pilot to go and pick up a poor girl who was slaving over a teletype machine at the airline office,

He said, “I was not keen on travelling to pick her up. And when we met she was not keen on going to the party; the atmosphere was distinctly chilly!”

Luckily, they quickly found out that they had much in common and from there they got on famously!

At the time, he did not want to give up his bachelor life and Joan detected this.

She pointedly asked him one day: ‘Do you want to continue this relationship?’

He recalled, "I suddenly realised I was letting go a very good thing". The couple married in 1950 and had a happy life together, raising two beautiful daughters Shelley and Julie.

In 1952, Air Chief Marshal McNamara was promoted to Squadron Leader and after a stint with the Central Flying School, he was posted to No 77 Squadron in Korea flying Gloster Meteors.

The capability of the Meteor in the air-to-air role was always contentious. Sir Neville said by 1953 it was obvious the Meteor was not suitable for air combat against the Mig 15 and the aircraft had been relegated to the ground attack role.

He returned to Australia in 1954 and was posted to Headquarters Training Command as the Pilot Training Officer. He said he quite enjoyed the leisurely life of a staff officer.

In 1955, he served as Staff Officer Fighter Operations and later completed a stint as Commanding Officer of No 25 Squadron before an appointment as Commanding Officer of No 2 Operational Conversion Unit.

His outstanding performance as Commanding Officer of No 2 Operational Conversion Unit, which included the introduction of the CAC Sabre, earned him the Air Force Cross in 1961.

Following a series of staff postings in Australia and overseas, Air Chief Marshal McNamara was posted to Vietnam as the Deputy Commander of the Australian Forces and Commander of the RAAF Forces Vietnam.

Having completed an Iroquois and Caribou conversion course, he flew missions with No 9 and No 35 Squadrons and accumulated two hundred operational flying hours in Vietnam.

He described the helicopter flying, in particular, as one of the most enjoyable and rewarding periods of his service career.

He made the point of how rewarding it was to go in and lift out a bunch of diggers who had been through the mill on operations and how they would be dirty and smelly, but the happiest bunch of fellows you ever saw.

Following his tour in Vietnam, Air Chief Marshal McNamara spent nearly three years in Washington as the Air Attaché.

On return, he was involved in the implementation of the Tange reorganisation, firstly as Deputy Chief of the Air Staff during the period of January 1975 to March 1979, and then as Chief of the Air Staff, and finally, Chief of the Defence Force Staff until he retired in April 1984.

He was appointed Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire (KBE) on the 31st of December 1980.

He was the last Air Force Chief to be knighted before Australia withdrew from the Imperial honours system.

From an Air Force historical perspective, Air Chief Marshal Sir Neville McNamara was without doubt an outstanding officer and gentleman, best summed up by his autobiography, *The Quiet Man*.

His Christian values gave him great strength to not only survive through multiple conflicts, but also through the demands of the highest positions in the Australian Defence Force.

He recalled the pressures of the Chief of the Defence Force Staff position and how his faith got him through many difficult situations.

To the end he remained actively involved in the RAAF Women's Association Education and Patriotic Fund as a trustee.

He also remained acutely interested in the Air Force and wider Australian Defence Force.

As recently as February this year, he wrote to me expressing his regrets in being unable to attend the Air Power Conference that was held in March. In his letter, he asked that I extend his congratulations to the men and women of the Air Force on their “response to duty and particularly in their support to all the members of the ADF.”

Sir Neville had an amazing career spanning World War II, Korea and Vietnam.

From the rank of Sergeant, he rose to the highest levels, commanding the Air Force and the Australian Defence Force.

Throughout his service, he was a man admired by all for his strength of character, his quiet unassuming manner and the respect he showed all people.

He was a man who was an inspiration to others and one of our finest.

He leaves behind an outstanding legacy and will be greatly missed.