

Air Commodore John Robert Macneil (Retd) 1927-2020



Air Commodore John Robert Macneil passed away in Melbourne on 19 March 2020, aged 92. Born in Parkville, Melbourne on 12 November 1927, he was the son of a merchant navy officer and a seamstress. John grew up during the Depression and WWII in Pascoe Vale South, which back then was mostly paddocks. He joined the Air Training Corps and in 1945 was accepted for RAAF pilot training, only to have his ambitions halted by the ending of the war a few months before he turned 18.

Following engineering studies he decided to attend teachers college and then spent a few years as a school teacher in various Victorian country schools (and in the CMF). With the outbreak of the Korean War, John decided to join the army, but his father (perhaps motivated by a mother's concerns) advised him to join the air force instead because he could reach Sergeant sooner! So John enlisted in the RAAF and joined No. 7 Aircrew Course on 26 February 1951 at No. 1 Flying Training School, RAAF Base Point Cook. His 92 course mates included Jake Newham (a future CAS) and Billie Collings (a future Deputy CAS). Towards the end of the course John elected to undergo training as a navigator and transferred to RAAF Base East Sale to commence No. 7 Navigator Course (along with friends like Frank Lonie, Lawrie Hubbard, Sandy Baxter and John Young). On graduation in August 1952 John was promoted to Sergeant and posted to 86 Transport Wing at RAAF Richmond.

John was then posted to 91 (Composite) Wing based in Japan and Korea at the end of February 1953, and served for the next nine months as a Dakota (C-47) navigator with 30 Transport Unit (later 36 Squadron) based at Iwakuni and Kimpo. He flew 765 hours on operations during that period. John was involved in the repatriation of prisoners of war under Operations Little Switch and Big Switch in the period April – November 1953. While deployed John was commissioned on 30 June 1953 as a Pilot Officer. His crew consisted of Reg Burr, Snow Morton, and Clarrie Walker.



(L to R) FltLt Reg Burr, Captain; Sgt Snow Morton, 2nd Pilot; Sgt John Macneil, Navigator; Sgt Clarrie Walker, Wireless Operator. Yong 'Dong' Po Airfield, Korea, March 1953)

At the end of 1953 John was posted to 11 Squadron on P2V5 Neptunes (maritime reconnaissance). In 1954 he was seconded for a short time to 817 Squadron RAN as an observer on Fireflies on HMAS *Sydney*, giving him some interesting experiences of Navy life, before returning to 11 Squadron. He then did the Advanced Navigation Course, and was posted to the RAAF College in 1956 as an instructor (his trainees included later CASs, Barry Gratton and Ray Funnell). John was then posted to be ADC to the Governor-General, Field Marshal Sir William Slim, during which time he met his future wife Joan Mullins, an Ansett air hostess. They married in April 1957 (Joan passed away in 2017), and he was then posted to 6 Squadron at Amberley on Canberra bombers.

In 1958 he was posted as an exchange officer to the UK with 50 Squadron RAF and later 35 Squadron RAF on Canberra bombers (the other RAAF crew members being Brian McCabe and Bob Black). John did the Specialist Navigation course at Manby, followed by a posting to the School of Air Navigation (SAN) at East Sale as an instructor, becoming the Chief Navigation Instructor in 1963. In 1964 John attended RAAF Staff College, and then became the personal staff officer to the Minister for Air, Peter Howson until the end of 1966. He was then posted on exchange to the USAF as a flight commander with the 3536th Navigator Training Squadron at Mather AFB, Sacramento for two years.

From 1969-1971 John was the CO of the Officer Training School at Point Cook following promotion to Wing Commander (he was initially posted to ARDU as navigation officer but with more than 2000 hours on Dakotas decided he'd rather do something else so managed to arrange a swap with Pete Kennedy and go to OTS instead). John always said that a highlight for him of his time at OTS was to increase the number of women trainees significantly, and to bring in a more diverse range of instructors. In 1972 he was posted to Canberra, initially working in the Equipment Requirements Staff. He attended the Joint Services Staff College in 1974 and then spent time in Air Force Plans (he wrote the proposal to move both 10 and 11 Squadrons to RAAF Edinburgh), before being posted as the Defence

Attache in Malaysia on promotion to Group Captain. From 1978 to 1980 John was the Officer Commanding RAAF Base Laverton – the first navigator to hold the position. In 1980 he was promoted to Air Commodore and took up the position of Director General Service Conditions, from which he retired in March 1982 after 31 years of service.

John continued working for many years after retirement from the RAAF, including as Assistant Administrator of the National Trust (Victoria), as a high school teacher, and as an instructor at the Defence International Training Centre at Laverton. He was an avid gardener, and in his late 80s started a tree farm outside Bendigo. Vision and mobility issues saw him move from Bendigo into the RSL home in Frankston in 2018, where he passed away peacefully, surrounded by family.

John, who self-published his memoir (*'Before I Forget'*) in 2019, remained very proud of his achievements in the air force training sphere, and maintained a strong sense of identity with the air force. He is survived by his sister, three children, six grandchildren, two great-grandchildren, and many other members of his extended family and group of friends. He will be missed greatly.

Richard MacNeil (son)