



'By the Seat of their Pants'
Australian Airmen and their Machines 1915-1918

One Day Conference
9 am - 4.30 pm 12 November 2012
RAAF Museum, Point Cook, Victoria

BY THE SEAT OF THEIR PANTS



MILITARY HISTORY AND
HERITAGE VICTORIA INC.

**THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE
HELD AT THE RAAF MUSEUM, POINT COOK BY
MILITARY HISTORY AND HERITAGE VICTORIA**

12 NOVEMBER 2012



ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AAC	Australian Air Corps
AFC	Australian Flying Corps
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
AWM	Australian War Memorial
CFS	Central Flying School
DFC	Distinguished Flying Cross
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
KIA	Killed in Action
MC	Military Cross
MM	Military Medal
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NAUK	The National Archives of the UK
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
POW	Prisoner of War
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RNAS	Royal Naval Air Service
SLNSW	State Library of New South Wales

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

WING COMMANDER NICK LERAY-MEYER, AM (RETD)

RAAF Service – 1956 to 1983

Nick Leray-Meyer enlisted in the RAAF in 1956 as an engineering apprentice and was commissioned in October 1962 after completing pilot training at No 1 Basic Flying Training School and No 1 Applied Flying Training School. He flew Sabres with No 76 Squadron, conducted weapons trials at No 1 Air Trials Unit (Woomera) flying Meteor aircraft and Jindivik drones, instructed on Vampire and Macchi training aircraft at No 1 Applied Flying Training School and No 2 Flying Training School (RAAF Pearce), and trained Royal Malaysian Air Force fighter pilots on Sabres and CL41Gs 1969–1970. He converted to helicopters to fly gunships with No 9 Squadron in Vietnam 1971. He was Operations Officer with No 5 Squadron (RAAF Fairbairn) and served with the United Nations in Egypt and Israel in 1976. After attending RAAF Command and Staff College in 1977, he was promoted to Wing Commander and posted to Air Force Materiel Branch. He assumed command of No 9 Squadron in January 1979 and was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in June 1980 for outstanding leadership as Commanding Officer of No 9 Squadron. He served on the Directing Staff of RAAF Command and Staff College, January–December 1981. In January 1982, he was posted to be Air Adviser of the 13-nation Multinational Force and Observers (MFO)—a peacekeeping force monitoring the handback of the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt (Camp David Accords)—having first been assigned to the formation of that force in Washington, DC.

Post-RAAF

Nick Leray-Meyer resigned from the RAAF in January 1983 to take up an appointment as Director Aviation with the MFO at its civilian headquarters in Rome, Italy. He returned to Australia in September 1987 and attended the Australian National University from 1988 to 1990. He joined the Civil Aviation Authority in 1990 and was appointed Manager of Operational Standards, based in Canberra. He transferred to Perth in 1995 and remained there until 2000, when he resigned (then a Regional Manager WA/SA/NT) to return to active flying. He then spent nine months flying S-76 and AS332L (Super Puma) helicopters for Bristow Helicopters from Karratha and Barrow Island, servicing offshore rigs. This was followed by three years flying Cessna 560 executive jet and Beechcraft 300 aircraft with Maroomba Airlines (VIP transport of WA Premier and Ministers). Nick moved to Melbourne in July 2001 and ceased active flying in 2003. He then worked as an aviation specialist consultant until 2005 when he was appointed Group Manager Aircraft Operations, Australian International Airshow at Avalon. He remained in that appointment until completion of the 2011 event. He is now fully retired from paid service!

Other Activities

Nick has been a member of the Vietnam Veterans Committee, RAAF Vietnam Veterans Association (Vic) since 2003. He was Vice President from 2005 to April 2008, President from April 2008 to April 2010, and is presently Immediate Past President. He is a member of the RAAF Association, and has been Vice President (Vic) since 2007. He is also Vice President of the Royal Park Veterans Golf Club. Model Trains – he is an active member of

the Australian Model Railway Association. Freemasonry - active member of a number of Orders.

Nick is married to Joyce (1962) and they have two sons (one in Sydney and the other in London) and two grandchildren.

OPENING ADDRESS

WING COMMANDER NICK LERAY-MEYER (RETD)

As I came through the gate today, the memories of the wonderful days I spent at Point Cook, the ‘home of the Air Force’, came flooding back—as they always do!

I was privileged to undertake my pilot training here at Point Cook in the early 1960s, and the sheer joy of learning to fly will always be with me (even if my initial flying instructor made comments like: Ride 3, Take-off technique improving – Actually stayed within the lane boundaries today!!!). And today I get to talk and interact with you about those men of the Australian Flying Corps (AFC) who took their first flights here so many decades ago and how their experiences have contributed to our world of military aviation.

But first, let me thank General Barry for that introduction and the organisers of ‘Military History and Heritage Victoria’ for inviting me to address you today.

I must admit to some trepidation when I saw the list of speakers who will follow me—mindful of their nominated topics, what would or should I talk about? Should I focus on, say, one key element or perhaps just a quick run over the target?

‘By the Seat of Their Pants’, what a title! For me, it immediately conjures up a mental picture of relatively fragile, rag top aircraft crewed by pilots dressed in riding gear with an apparent laid back approach that bordered on the horizontal!

However, while at times there may have been an element of truth in that snapshot, in reality the lot of our first airmen was quite different and today our task is to see if we can address a number of aspects of their wartime service, such as:

- Where did the Australians fit into Allied air operations?
- How did they rate as pilots and units?
- How did they adapt to new aircraft types and tactics?
- How did they fare against a skilled and well-led enemy?

While these are all valid questions, I am inclined to use my time to discuss the extent to which that experience nurtured or shaped the training I gained during my time flying fighter aircraft with the RAAF—essentially, ‘What did later fighter pilots learn from the experience of those who were the genesis of Australia’s air power?’

For me, I believe one of the primary lessons was that, no matter how superior the fighter aircraft may be against that of the enemy, it was how the aircraft was flown—in other words the skill and focus of the pilot—that made the biggest difference. Thus, a successful pilot had to have not only the basic aircraft handling training, but had to have, or at least strive to achieve, the mindset that he would not be bested in any fight or action? During my fighter training, my instructors and colleagues strived to instil in me (as well as in the other pilots on conversion course) that desire to give it my all and not accept defeat. Thus, life within a

fighter squadron became incredibly competitive, with no quarter given; even to your best mate.

This, I am not going to be ‘second best’ mindset, which I am sure was perceived by outsiders as somewhat egoistical, is clearly evident when you read fighter pilot stories emanating from all the major air battles—be it World War I, World War II, Korea, Yom Kippur and even over North Vietnam.

Another of course was the importance of position or situational awareness—‘Beware the Hun in the sun!’ From the early days of World War I, when singleton aircraft flew around primarily on reconnaissance missions, it quickly became apparent that they could be easily ‘picked off’, especially the single seaters, since the pilot was often too focused on looking at the ground picture and not enough on seeing who else was flying nearby—situational awareness! Thus, pilots had to learn the value of one of the established principles of war—surprise—and formulate countermeasures.

The first counter tactic was the adoption of the ‘wingman’. Now two aircraft flew in loose formation with the wingman’s task to keep an eye out for potential threats while the leader got on with the task. If engaged in attacking enemy aircraft, the wingman’s job was to protect the leader’s rear and thus become the target. As we saw in later conflicts, the wingman was often considered to be expendable in the larger picture.

Interestingly though, keeping a good lookout, especially above and behind, meant that during the early years of World War II the wingman was almost constantly manoeuvring his aircraft. Why? Well, whereas World War I fighter aircraft had open cockpits, almost all early World War II fighters had closed cockpits such that, even turning in the seat and looking back over the shoulder, the pilot generally had a blind spot between 5 o’clock and 7 o’clock, through which the enemy could close in undetected. This, in turn, required the wingman to position further away from the lead to avoid a midair collision—a requirement that seemingly took quite a while to be understood and needlessly cost lives.

The introduction of the wingman also saw the introduction of a new defensive tactic—the defensive or vertical split. Imagine if you will two aircraft being chased by another, intent on shooting them down. If they could sucker him in to committing to the wingman, there was a good chance they could reverse the role. How? Well the wingman continued to turn but also descend. The leader eased the turn and climbed, thus causing an immediate horizontal split (two different circles). If the attacker followed the wingman then the leader simply rolled on more bank and positioned himself behind the attacker. If the attacker pressed on to the leader, the wingman reversed his turn and started back after the attacker, thus sandwiching the attacker between them. And so it went on within dogfights, moving from one-on-one, to two-on-two and, ultimately, to ‘circus versus big wings’.

That basic tactic is still taught today but obviously involves greater airspace to accomplish.

Finally, before I close, my study of World War I aviation shot down a few conceptions I had gained over time. One was the use of ‘big wings’. From Paul Brickhill’s *Reach for the Sky*, I had always assumed that the use of big wings was a World War II concept—the result of a long argument between the Air Officers Commanding 10 and 11 Groups (Leigh-Mallory, spurred on by Douglas Bader, and Park). However, while aware of the Baron’s Circus, I was not aware that the argument for and against the use of big wings also embroiled Australia’s two major aviation theatres of action—those fighting the war in the desert versus those at the

Western Front! Both had valid points for and against but, in the end, the dogfights usually degenerated into 1 v 1. Interestingly, the big wing concept essentially died after World War II—it was simply too hard to coordinate!

Thank you for your attention and I trust you have an informative and enjoyable day.