

Obituary Air Marshal Selwyn David Evans

AC, DSO, AFC (Retired)

By Ken Llewelyn

It is the end of an era for the RAAF – the last Air Force Chief to have served in WW11, Air Marshal David Evans, passed away in Canberra on 2 September aged 95. His much-loved wife Gail passed away late last year.



For his dedication and outstanding service to the Air Force and Australia he was accorded the highest honour - a rare full Service funeral at Duntroon's Memorial Chapel. The service was supported by Australia's Federation Guard who provided a guard of honour and the firing of three volleys from their Vietnam era SLR rifles. It was the Air Force at its best – the ceremony was faultless!

COVID-19, and the need for social distancing, meant only family and invited guests were present. CAF, Air Marshal Mel Hupfeld, his wife Louise and six former chiefs attended: Air Chief-Marshals: Sir Angus Houston and Mark Binskin; Air Marshals: Ray Funnell, Barry Gration, Errol McCormack and Geoff Brown.

The ultimate Service accolade was provided by a low flypast of two F/A-18s and two F-35s concluding with a 'missing man departure' by an F/A-18. The following are acknowledgements of his achievements from retired Air Force chiefs and former Chief Executive of the NCA.

Air Marshal Jake Newham: *"I admired David for his extraordinary zeal, and robust action that boosted sense of pride in the Service. He was probably the most open and frank officer I had the fortune to work with. Sharp wit, often amusing, David got things done. No doubt who was leading."*

Air Marshal Ray Funnell: *"A critical element of David Evans' service as a senior officer was his strong belief that Australia needed a better approach to defining national security and developing the strategic structures and plans needed to secure the nation. He was an air power advocate but never an air power zealot. He fully appreciated the important place of land and naval forces in a truly integrated Australian Defence Force. However, he was determined that air power, broadly defined, should be given the prominent place it deserved in our strategic thinking. So much of what he believed in and advocated was dramatically affirmed in his retirement years."*

Air Chief Marshal, Sir Angus Houston: *“I have a very high regard for David as Chief of the Air Staff. He put Air Force interests first and was able to argue the air power case very effectively in a way that resonated across the community. He had the courage of his convictions and insisted on the highest standards in the air and on the ground. He led by example, and his strong leadership characterised his time as Chief. In my opinion he would have also made a great wartime chief.”*

Annabell Pegrum (former Chief Executive of the National Capital Authority): *“Air Marshal Evans was Chairman of the National Capital Authority from 1997 to 2004. David believed in Canberra as the Nation’s Capital. He understood what the city represented and its potential as part of the national identity. He appreciated the city was evolving and that everything we did would have consequences for the future. He demanded its development had to be first rate and a place of design excellence and of cultural meaning for all Australians.”*

David was born in Paddington, on 3 June 1925, and educated at Marist Brothers College in Mosman. The son of a policeman, Selwyn Evans and his wife Eileen, David was a schoolboy when war was declared. In spite of his age, he avidly followed the reports of the Battle of Britain fighter aces which only reinforced his ambition to be an air force pilot. To foster his chances he joined the Air Training Corps, and after a short stint as a bank clerk, he enlisted in the RAAF on 5 June 1943.

Initial training on Tiger Moths at Narromine was followed by a posting to Bundaberg to continue his advancement on the twin-engined Avro Anson at Bundaberg. On his first cross country sortie he suffered an engine failure and was forced into a successful ‘wheels-up’ landing. He was congratulated by his instructor, ensuring the young trainee was soon on his way to being awarded his wings. David’s dream of serving his country overseas appeared to be fulfilled when he was posted to No 1 Operational Training Unit, at RAAF Base East Sale in Victoria, for conversion onto the Bristol Beaufort. Unfortunately, it was not his time, on 14th August 1945, after only 15 hours on the British twin-engined bomber, crews were advised the war was over. David was devastated – he admitted that statement could provoke criticism but he was only 19. The tyro bomber pilot desperately wanted to continue a career as an Air Force pilot. He had no interest in flying with an airline. He managed to state his case with his Commanding Officer, who made it very clear that all course members would be discharged within weeks.

Nineteen-year-old Flight Sergeant Evans then decided on a remarkable course of action. He planned to plead his case to ‘higher authority’ at the RAAF headquarters in Melbourne. To avoid scrutiny at the gate, he snuck out of the Base in a RAAF truck then boarded a train to Melbourne. On arrival at Flinders Street Station he had to ask for directions to the RAAF Headquarters in Victoria Barracks. Opened in 1872, Victoria Barracks was built to house British Garrison troops. In World War Two it also housed the War Cabinet and even today it is a rabbit warren of offices. David wandered up and down corridors before finding a door marked Flight Lieutenant Jones – Postings. David walked in, saluted, and stated his case but to no avail. Not to be deterred he continued his search for a further hour to find ‘discharges’. Finally, he found an office marked ‘Squadron Leader Law-Smith, Discharges’. He was greeted affably by Law-Smith. “What can I do for you Flight Sergeant?” He was both amused and impressed by the 19-year-old pilot’s initiative and eagerness to stay in the Air Force. He also recognised this was a pilot the post war Air Force needed. He told David; “If

I can find a posting for you, I will cancel your discharge". Twenty minutes later he returned and greeted David with a smile, "How would you like to fly Dakotas?" David quickly replied, "Sir I would fly anything!" Two days later his Flight Commander at East Sale read out the discharges – only Evans had a flying posting. After the parade The Flight Commander was very curious. "Did you know anything about this Evans?" David replied, "How could I Sir?".

The squadron leader who salvaged Evans career, was not only a decorated pilot but later knighted for his contribution to Australian business. Finally the tables were turned, and at Air Marshal Evans farewell in the Support Command Mess in Melbourne, the Chief could finally give his profound thanks to his special guest, Sir Robert Law-Smith, for saving his career.



Charming and persuasive, David was not short of female admirers. However, at an Air Force dance in early 1947 his bachelor days were about to end. David had an early morning 'take-off' but was persuaded to attend by his co-pilot. While checking-out the talent his attention was drawn to a stunning young girl on the other side of the dance floor. There was no time to waste – he immediately strode across the dance floor and cajoled the startled girl onto the dance floor. David left with a smile – in his pocket he had her name 'Gail' and phone number. In retrospect David was amazed Gail, the daughter of a marine captain, remained in touch. Although she was also smitten, she kept her social diary full with very attentive and generous pilots from the United States Army Air Force. However, destiny was at hand and on the 29 August, they were

married. But eight days before the wedding David was advised he was posted to Germany for duty on the demanding Berlin Airlift. The happy couple enjoyed five days of married bliss before they were confronted by the media at Kingsford Smith Airport – their short honeymoon was news! After a very public embrace and kiss, David boarded the Qantas Constellation for London. First class seating and free drinks eased the pain on leaving his bride but he did not return for fourteen months. In Berlin the flying tempo had been relentless and crews were required to fly in the most appalling weather. Seventy-eight allied airmen lost their lives during the Airlift, including David's friend, Flight Lieutenant Mel Quinn, and his RAF crew. Just 26, he was survived by his British wife Margaret and son Mel - born seven months after the death of his father.



After a short break, Evans undertook an instructor's course before he was posted to Point Cook instructing students on Tiger Moths and Wirraways. David enjoyed instructing, but during his tour he witnessed close friend, Ron Johnson, losing control on a night sortie and spinning into Port Philip Bay. David immediately drove home and told Gail he would be late. The aircraft and the bodies of both pilots were found after daybreak. When he got home Gail said "Ron's dead isn't he – I heard three loud knocks on the wall during the night". (Gail was very intuitive with a strong psychic gift). Over many years David spoke to me about that incident, and although he was a strict Catholic, he often pondered whether his mate was really trying to communicate that he was indeed 'alive in spirit'.

After a posting as an instructor in the RNZAF he was advised in June 1953 that he was to join 77 Squadron in Korea. However, a truce was declared and a posting to 38 Squadron instructing on Dakotas followed. Evans was disappointed because he wanted to see how he would perform in combat operations. But in December 1954 he was appointed as a VIP Captain. Although he primarily flew the Governor General, Sir William and Lady Slim (nervous passengers he also flew the Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies (apparently a very nervous passenger) and the Duke of Edinburgh (a difficult passenger) who was in Australia for the Opening of the Olympic Games. Evans was promoted to Squadron Leader and for his outstanding service to the VIP flight he was awarded the Air Force Cross.

Following conversion onto the Canberra from 1960 to 1962 he served as a Flight Commander on No 2 Squadron in Butterworth, Malaysia.

After a number of staff appointments, in 1965 he was being posted to Washington as the assistant Air Attaché. In April 1967 the Government committed No 2 Squadron Canberra bombers to action in the Vietnam war. In December 1967 he was posted as CO (Commanding Officer) of the squadron. Evans demanded greater efficiency from his aircrew and was forensic in seeking ways to improve bombing accuracy. Such was his leadership that he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his performance as CO of No 2 Squadron.

Promoted to Group Captain in January in 1969 he organised the gift of twenty-three RAAF Sabres to the Indonesian Air Force and later posted to London to undertake studies at the Royal College of Defence Studies. On return to Australia he was promoted to Air Commodore undertaking the role of Director General Plans and Policy before he was posted as Officer Commanding RAAF Base Amberley near Brisbane in 1975. His love of flying remained throughout his career and he was delighted with the opportunity to convert onto the F-111. Both 1 and 6 Squadrons looked after their new boss and to ensure 'procedures were followed' he invariably flew with an experienced QFI (qualified flying instructor) in the right-hand seat.

On leaving Amberley Evans was promoted to Air Vice-Marshal and in 1980 was appointed Chief of Joint Operations for the Australian Defence Force. His predecessor Air Chief Marshal Sir Neville McNamara strongly recommended Evans should succeed him. On 21st April 1982 he was appointed Chief of the Air Staff.

Evans was not averse to promoting his service, even if there were risks involved. And in 1984, the Chief and Air Vice-Marshal Ray Funnell hatched a plan in London's Lord Nelson

wine bar, to fly the first two F/A 18 Hornets direct from the United States to Australia. There were real risks involved and the Chief was strongly advised against the flight by many of his senior staff. Regardless, Evans rejected their advice and rang his colleague, USAF Chief of Staff (CAS), General Charles Gabriel to request tanker support. The CAS agreed and McDonnell Douglas KC-10 tankers kept the two Hornets aloft for the fifteen-hour record breaking flight. At RAAF Williamtown on 17 May, 1985 a USAF tanker led the record breaking F/A-18s and six Mirages from 77 Squadron. Evans considered the fly past 'icing on the cake-a touch of class!'

Early in 1985 I approached the National Press Club in Canberra to ask if they would be interested in having the Air Marshal as a guest speaker. There was unanimous agreement as a Service chief had yet to accept an invitation. I broached the idea with the Chief – he agreed but needed the tick from the Defence Minister. I was in the Chiefs office when he rang Beazley. After a short discussion Beazley gave the green light – although he could not understand why Evans was interested! The Chief gave a brilliant address without notes. Such was Evans presence and forceful presentation that the questions thrown at the Chief by journalists were somewhat muted. Evans never shied away from the media. He appeared to intimidate journalists before a word was spoken. It was not unusual for nervous reporters to seek, from me, appropriate questions to ask the Chief. Indeed, the Air Marshal was at the top of his game! It was no wonder he was upgraded and awarded Companion of the Order of Australia when he retired.

I first met my future boss in January 1984 when he gave an entertaining and informative eulogy for Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Scherger at St Michael's Uniting Church in central Melbourne. He was also given a service with full military honours including a flypast. For the chief it was only one of many eulogies he gave during his career. And few know of the dozens of letters he wrote to servicemen, to friends who were suffering or sending condolence messages to loved ones.

In retirement, golf was not enough to keep him amused, so he turned to politics. Evans was very keen to be appointed Defence Minister and stood as a Liberal candidate for the seat of Eden-Monaro in the 1987 federal election. Many thought he would have made an outstanding Defence Minister but at the election he was 'out-gunned' by Labour's Jim Snow.



In 1990 he joined the Board of British Aerospace Australia and later appointed defence advisor to BAE Systems Australia. In 2005 Evans was appointed Chairman of the 60th Anniversary of the Victory in the Pacific (VP) Steering Committee. More than 60,000 Canberrans and hundreds of veterans watched the very powerful and moving tri-Service commemoration over Lake Burley Griffin.



David and Gail were together for 71 years and were devoted parents to four children – three girls and a boy. Interestingly, there was a very caring side to David's uncompromising persona! His eldest daughter Darilyn, admitted her mother ruled the family with a firm hand while her father was as soft as butter. She admitted it was tough for Mum! "Dad would disappear for a week and sometimes six months at a time. Yet when he returned he

had time to teach me morse code and we would conduct conversation in dots and dashes. But when young I would always stay awake until he came to say goodnight. He was always the calming influence through my teenage years and he seemed to have an incredible empathy to the way I was feeling. He was the source of my desire to succeed at school and go to university. After that he bowed out gracefully – he never clung to the role of a dominating parent. He was a wonderful father – he was a great man!"

Air Marshal Evans wrote three books – *A Fatal Rivalry: Australia's Defence at Risk*; *War: A Matter of Principles*; and his autobiography *Down to Earth*.

3 June 1925 – 2 September 2020

Beloved husband of Gail for 71 years,
together again.

Much loved father and father-in-law of Wendy (dec), Darilyn, Edwina, William and Sue.
Loved grandfather of Andrew and Justine; Keara, Beth and Joe; Alana, Mitchell and Jordan;
David, Harry, Elle, Amelia, Will and great-grandfather of their children.

