

A genuine master of the air

John Noble

ONE of Air Force's last great aviators and true characters died just months shy of his 100th birthday.

Former AIRCDRE Vin Hill was Australia's oldest air rank pilot, having participated in three major wars by flying fighters in WW2 and Korea as well as Canberra bombers in Vietnam.

Retired AVM and former DCAF Dave Rogers maintained a friendship with Mr Hill over the years, recently visiting him at his home near the Bay of Islands in New Zealand.

Mr Rogers described Mr Hill as one of nature's true gentlemen who embodied a spirit and importance to the nation and to RAAF.

"Vin Hill really was the essence of what it meant to sign up and serve with distinction in the Royal Australian Air Force," Mr Rogers said.

"His contribution to our Air Force, over a career spanning more than 30 years, is almost immeasurable and his positive impact on those who worked with him over those years even stronger.

"There are very few in Air Force history who'll even get close to matching the experience of Vin Hill, who was able to contribute to and witness so much change in RAAF that it now barely resembles the Air Force he

joined during the Second World War."

Born in 1924 in Malvern, Victoria, Mr Hill trained as a telephone mechanic and developed his passion for aviation at a time when the Japanese seemed invincible in the skies above the Pacific in WW2.

At 19, he enlisted in the then Empire Air Training Scheme, trained at Western Junction and graduated as a pilot in June 1943.

He initially flew the Vultee Vengeance dive-bomber in the islands at 21, became a fighter pilot flying Kittyhawks and later Mustangs in Borneo and Japan. All this without a drivers licence.

Following the war, Mr Hill completed a Bachelor of Science in Western Australia before being called up by the RAAF for Korea. As a Flight Commander in 77SQN, he flew more than 130 missions, often leading large formations on ground attack missions over North Korea.

His initiative, drive and leadership saw him decorated with the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC).

Back in Australia, his operational experience and university degree led to his selection in 1954 for the prestigious Empire Test Pilot School at Farnborough in England. He graduated top of the course and was awarded the McKenna Trophy, the first Australian to do so. During the course, the Queen presented him with the DFC at Buckingham Palace.

His new skill as a test pilot was used in the Aircraft Research and Development Unit, where he was involved in operational test and development work on the new RAAF Sabre fighter. He then completed an exchange tour in Canada at the Royal Canadian Air Force Experimental Proving Establishment near Ottawa.

After seven years in the test pilot environment, Mr Hill was again decorated with the Air Force Cross in recognition of his skill and dedication.



Above: Former AIRCDRE Vin Hill with former DCAF, retired AVM Dave Rogers, at Mr Hill's home in New Zealand in January.

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In 1966, he was appointed CO 6SQN, then flying the Canberra bomber. After 18 months, the unit was combined with 25SQN as part of the preparation for the F-111. He soon found himself in Phan Rang, Vietnam, as Officer in Charge Flying in 25SQN, flying operations in his third war.

His leadership, example and experience proved invaluable on the initial deployment and he was again decorated with a bar to his DFC.

After a few short staff appointments in plans and then personnel, he was appointed to command 82WG for the training, ferry and operational

development of the F-4E Phantoms at Amberley. He completed the US Air Force Air War College in Alabama followed by a promotion to Air Commodore and senior staff posts in Melbourne and Canberra.

Mr Hill retired in 1976 and moved with his family to New Zealand, where he lived for the rest of his life.

He told Mr Rogers during his visit in January that he couldn't have asked for a better or more colourful career. "It reinforces my firm belief that 1924 was a good year to start life in aviation," Mr Hill said.

"While today's Air Force boasts incredible sophistication and cutting-

edge technology, it also comes with enormous purchase and operating costs. The very idea of spending an hour practising aerobics among the clouds just for the joy of it is probably unthinkable nowadays.

"So I reckon that we, of my generation, had the best of it. Mind you, the timing also needed to be right to get a go at three wars."

Mr Hill was indeed the last of a generation.

A private family service for Mr Hill was held on March 5 in his hometown of Russell, New Zealand.



Above: Former AIRCDRE Vin Hill.

Vincent Jerome Hill enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force at 19, as a trainee in the Empire Air Training Scheme, an organisation designed to provide aircrew for service during World War 2. His aptitude and knowledge saw him selected for pilot training and he graduated in a little over 18 months. As he succinctly put it, at nearly 21, I was 'more or less qualified as a dive bomber pilot in charge of an eight-ton aircraft' yet he didn't even have driver's licence. At 21, he was flying Kittyhawk fighters and later Mustangs in Borneo and Japan.

At war's end, he moved to the part-time Citizen Air Force, while completing a Bachelor of Science degree at the University of WA. He kept his flying skills alive on weekends flying Mustangs and the new Vampire jets. When the Korean war erupted, the Air Force was short of experienced fighter pilots, so he was among a small cadre who were re-enlisted and as he said, 'given the generous rank of Flight Lieutenant' and moved to Korea.

He was a Flight Commander in the famed No 77 Squadron flying Meteor jets involved in ground attack missions against the enemy and his leadership skills shone through as most of the pilots were recently graduated young NCOs. Developing tactics and leading large formations day in day out for nearly a year, saw him decorated with a Distinguished Flying Cross for valour.

In 1954, he was selected to undergo training at the Empire Test Pilots School at Farnborough in the UK. While there he was invested with his DFC by the Queen at Buckingham Palace. He graduated top of the course, being awarded the McKenna Trophy, the first Australian to do so. He returned to Laverton in Melbourne and was involved in the developmental flight test work on the new Australian designed Avon Sabre. He then completed an exchange tour as a test pilot in Canada. He spent seven years in the test pilot world where he was highly respected and subsequently awarded the Air Force Cross. This was followed by Staff College and some staff appointments in planning and personnel which he considered 'the antithesis of flying and command jobs, where you made and were responsible for any decision'.

In the mid 60s, he was selected to command No 6 Squadron, then flying the Canberra bomber at Amberley in Queensland. After a year or so, the squadron was placed on a cadre basis in preparation for the new F-111 and the crews merged with No 2 Squadron in Malaysia. Shortly after, Vin found himself flying the Canberra on operational missions in his third war in Phan Rang, Vietnam. Again, his experience and leadership skill were put to the test as OIC Flying in No 2 Squadron, planning the operations and flying nightly for many months. For his dedication he was later awarded a Bar to his Distinguished Flying Cross.

His last flying appointment in 1970 was to command No 82 Wing for the US training, delivery and operational development of the new F-4E Phantoms, the interim strike capability until the F-111s arrived. His comment on the powerful, supersonic Mach 2 Phantom was that 'it was exhilarating and brutish to fly, nothing like the bird-like qualities of my earlier favourites'.

He then completed the US Air War College course in Montgomery Alabama in the deep south, after which he remarked, 'it was another but not favourite part of my education!' He returned to Canberra where he was promoted to Air Commodore and filled a number of senior staff appointments before retiring from the Air Force in 1976, after 34 years.

Vin was the last of a generation in our Air Force who enlisted as an airman, flew in three wars, was awarded two DFCs and an AFC, rose to the rank of Air Commodore and at the time of his passing, was the oldest living Air Rank officer in the RAAF.

The Royal Australian Air Force has not, nor never will, forget Vincent Jerome Hill.

Postings:

10 OCT 42 - No. 1 RAAF Recruit Centre
10 OCT 42 - No. 1 Initial Training School
08 DEC 42 - No. 7 Elementary Flying Training School
13 FEB 43 - No. 7 Service Flying Training School
07 AUG 43 - No. 4 Operational Training Unit
08 NOV 43 - No. 25 Squadron
01 FEB 44 - No. 2 Embarkation Depot
23 FEB 44 - No. 25 Squadron
04 FEB 45 - No. 1 Personnel Depot
10 MAR 45 - No. 2 Operational Training Unit
05 JUL 45 - No. 3 Reserve Personnel Pool
06 SEP 45 - No. 76 Squadron
28 FEB 47 - Transit Departure and Reception Centre Laverton
22 MAY 47 - No. 38 Squadron
19 JAN 48 - RAAF Station Pearce (for Termination of Appointment)
30 SEP 48 - Re-Appointed to a Commission in the Active Citizens Air Force
30 SEP 48 - No. 25 (City of Perth) Squadron
26 MAR 52 - Appointment to Active Citizens Air Force Terminated
12 JUN 52 - Appointed to a Commission in the Permanent Air Force
11 AUG 52 - No. 2 (Fighter) Operational Training Unit
03 OCT 52 - Emplaned Mascot
05 OCT 52 - Deplaned Iwakuni, Japan
05 OCT 52 - No. 77 Squadron, Korea
24 APR 53 - Emplaned Iwakuni, Japan
25 APR 53 - Deplaned Darwin
28 APR 53 - Base Squadron Pearce (Reserve Pool)
03 JUN 53 - No. 25 Squadron
06 JUL 53 - Aircraft Research and Development Unit
01 FEB 54 - Overseas Headquarters, United Kingdom
15 FEB 54 - No. 13 Empire Test Pilot School
11 DEC 54 - Overseas Headquarters, United Kingdom
21 JAN 55 - Base Squadron Laverton
24 JAN 55 - Aircraft Research and Development Unit
05 OCT 56 - Air Attaché Washington
30 DEC 58 - Base Squadron Laverton
12 JAN 59 - Aircraft Research and Development Unit
22 JAN 62 - RAAF Staff College
17 DEC 62 - Department of Air
24 JAN 66 - No. 82 Wing Headquarters
17 APR 67 - No. 2 Squadron, Vietnam
30 OCT 67 - No. 82 Wing Headquarters
08 JAN 68 - Department of Air
02 DEC 70 - No. 82 Wing Headquarters
17 JUL 72 - RAAF Attaché Washington
18 JUN 73 - Headquarters Support Command
07 JAN 74 - RAAF Support Unit Canberra
04 FEB 76 - Base Squadron Fairbairn (for Termination of Appointment)

Honours and Awards:

Distinguished Flying Cross and Bar

Air Force Cross

1939-45 Star

Pacific Star

War Medal 1939-45

Australia Service Medal 1939-45

Australian Active Service Medal 1945-75 with Clasps 'KOREA', 'VIETNAM

Korea Medal

United Nations Service Medal (Korea)

Vietnam Medal

Australian Service Medal 1945-75 with Clasp 'JAPAN'

Defence Force Service Medal with First Clasp

National Medal

Australian Defence Medal

Air Efficiency Award

Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal

United States of America Air Force Outstanding Unit Award with Valor Device

Returned from Active Service Badge

***VALE VINCENT JEROME HILL,
Good and True Australian***

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