

## Vale Walter Fielder-Gill BSc. C.Eng.FIE(AUST). JP

Born 23 August 1923

Died 21 May 2010

Life Member of RAAF Association

Patron Radar Branch and President 1971 to 2007



Walter Fielder-Gill was born on 23 August 1923 in Artarmon, Sydney and educated at Hurstville Boys Primary School, Sydney Technical High and Sydney University where he attained a Bachelor of Science Degree in 1948 after completion of his war service. He went on to become a professional engineer with the PMG Department (later Telecom and Telstra). He was admitted as a Chartered Engineer with the Institute of Engineers and became a Fellow in 1969. In 1963, Walter moved from his position as a telecommunications engineer with the PMG Department and pursued a career in the manufacturing industry with Plessey Telecommunications. In 1969, he subsequently became the Managing Director of Plessey which employed over 2500 personnel before retiring in 1985. Walter became chairman of three company boards and a director of an additional two, all involved in electronic and electrical products before retiring at age 75.

While Walter achieved significant success in his career in industry, his roots belonged to the Air Force. In 1942, Japan had achieved significant and crushing defeats of Allied forces throughout the Pacific, and it was against this backdrop that Walter joined the Royal Australian Air Force on 23 March 1942 as an Air Cadet 1 at Sydney University. Walter was one of many young promising physics students at Sydney University who became commissioned in the RAAF as 'Bailey Boys' under the instruction of Professor Bailey and members of his staff. As a 'Bailey Boy' in 1942, Walter undertook the Radar Physics Course at Sydney University to become part of the RAAF's 'secret war' of radar communications and electronic technology that would involve some 142 ground radar and fighter control units spread across Australia, the Pacific Islands, New Guinea and Borneo and involved more than 6000 men and women.

Walter's progression in the Air Force at War at that time is indicative of the demand placed on his generation and how young Australians rose to the responsibilities asked of them. In this regard, Walter's experience and performance of his duty was exemplary. After completion of Service courses and further Radar technology training at RAAF Richmond in Sydney, Walter was commissioned as a Pilot Officer and was appointed as the Commanding Officer of No 23 Radar Station, Fort Lytton in Queensland with 35 troops under command – at only 19 years of age. As a young man he was very quickly exposed to the harsh realities of a world at war. He was soon to witness tragedy on a grand scale when his unit confirmed the plot of the Japanese submarine that a day later sank the Hospital Ship *Centaur* off Moreton Island on 14 May 1943, the day he took over full command; a chilling experience and initiation for a young CO of 19.

His success in command was rewarded with promotion to Flying Officer and a posting to RAAF Richmond in December 1943 as the Commander of a Transportable Radar Unit of 40 personnel and 20 tons of equipment that was destined to become No 345 Radar Station at Finschaffien in Papua New Guinea in March 1944. His unit was transported to Finschaffien by sea to take part in the amphibious landing with the second wave of US Cavalry. Walter often told a very funny story about the landing which everyone would associate with his quick and dry sense of humour. As Walter told it, he was waiting on the ship with his unit ready to move ashore under fire when a US Army Colonel directing the landing came over and sternly told Walter: 'Son, get ashore and get your Aussie radar operating so we can get air cover over this beach'. Walter's quick, tongue-in-cheek, reply was "but Sir, a fellow could get killed out there". Walter said that it took the Colonel more than a while to digest his humorous understatement and after a short in-vain attempt to explain the Australian sense of humour got on with the job. Less than a month later he moved his Unit to Los Negros in the Admiralty Islands. He was to move his Unit to Bipi Island, back to Los Negros, then to Harengan Island – all in the Admiralty Islands.

It must have been an exciting, yet daunting time for a young man responsible for the safety and well being of his personnel when facing an enemy. A casual glance at the records indicates that each of his Radar Station moves around the Admiralty Islands were accomplished within three days – a testimony to his leadership and drive, and his ability to inspire team work; qualities that would be the hallmarks of Walter in later life which would earn him success.

Walter and his Unit departed the Admiralty Islands 20 months later in October 1945. Walter finally arrived back at RAAF Richmond at the rank of Flight Lieutenant and at the ripe old age of 21 years and 5 months. He was eventually discharged in January 1946. Whilst he recommenced his studies and pursued his career in telecommunications, Walter joined the RSL and RAAF Association and remained on the RAAF Active Reserve for some years. During this period he also reformed the Air Training Corp Flight in Lismore in the 1950s.

While the radar association was formed in 1946, it was in 1960 that the Branch joined the RAAF Association. Walter was elected president of the branch in 1971, an office he held until 2007, when he retired due to failing health. For more than a quarter of a century, Walter nurtured and guided the Branch with his fellow veterans. Throughout that period Walter demonstrated strong leadership, untiring drive, vision, compassion and passion. During his time as President Walter was always a strong supporter of continually forging links between veterans and serving personnel of the Air Force. He was tireless in his pursuit of strengthening these ties between the generations. He was also strongly committed to drawing his fellow radar companions out from the shadow of secrecy and into the fellowship of the Radar Branch.

It was through his vision and drive that the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first operational action of No 31 Radar Station at Dripstone Caves reporting attacks on Darwin by Japanese aircraft was planned and conducted at Bendigo in 1992. Some 500 veterans and their partners participated in the reunion. Together with his Branch Committee, he subsequently held anniversaries for the Sydney University 'Bailey Boys' Golden Jubilee in 1994, established commemorative plaques and a radar display at the Australian War memorial in 1999, 2000, and a memorial to RAAF Radar in Canberra in 2006.

Walter was very much a people person and he reveled in the social gatherings of the Branch. Functions ran very smoothly under his guidance and the late Jo Dunbar was a perfect foil. Walter was never without a joke and was sure to brighten people and bring a smile to their faces while softening the most somber occasions.

Members of the Radar Branch extend their condolences and deepest sympathy to his wife Aileen (Lae) and family. Walter will be missed, but we are all the richer for knowing the man and sharing his company.