

Air Vice Marshal Eric Hay Stephenson AO, OBE

22 July 1922 - 13 April 2017

Dr Warren Harrex

Doc Stephenson, as he was affectionately known by many, had three passions in his long life – his flying career, his medical career and his beloved wife Freda.

He was born in Jarrow on Tyneside in the north of England on 22 July 1922. His family moved to north-west London soon after and he completed his education at Kilburn Boys' Grammar School. He was offered of a place in Medicine at University College London. At the end of first year he was sent to Kingsbury County School to complete a short stint in pure science, and it was here he was captivated by a long-legged girl in a brown pleated gym slip who was full of energy and fun.

This girl was Freda and they quickly became friends despite the disapproval of Eric's father who forbade his 19 year old son from seeing her. Eric disobeyed his father, left home, put his medical training on hold and joined the RAF in late 1941. As he says in his autobiography – *Three Passions and a Lucky Penny*: 'I would volunteer for aircrew and get a pair of wings on my RAF tunic, grow a moustache and Brylcreem my hair and wear a casual silk scarf, and, be altogether irresistible to Freda'.

Following initial training and flight assessment he was assigned for navigator training and formed a close friendship with two other trainees. When the time came for the trainee navigators to pair up for flying, Eric lost a coin toss and had to find another flying partner. Shortly afterwards his two close friends were killed on a training flight when the Avro Anson they were navigating flew into a mountain. A lucky penny indeed.

He joined 207 Squadron to fly Lancaster bombers from Skegness in Lincolnshire. The flying over Germany proved to be very dangerous with mid-air collisions and shoot downs by ground fire or enemy fighter aircraft ever present hazards. As an increasing number of his friends were killed on operations, Eric decided to propose to Freda before he too was killed. Freda accepted his proposal and a wedding date was set, but fate intervened.

On 16 December 1943 his Lancaster was shot down by a night fighter on a bombing raid to Berlin. Fortunately he was able to bail out and as he floated on his parachute into captivity in Germany he recalled in his autobiography: 'And then I thought about Freda – how livid she would be just two weeks before our wedding. I did not see the church steeple that snagged my parachute slamming me into the wall and knocking me unconscious. What a mess, the wrong church, on the wrong day in the wrong town!'

He was captured and eventually incarcerated in Stalag Luft III – the Great Escape camp. Because of his medical training he was put to work assisting injured airmen. In early 1945, he and the other prisoners of war were force marched 100 kilometres over several days to Spremberg, then moved to Luckenwalde by cattle train before being liberated by the Russians some depressing three months later.

After 18 months of captivity, considerably thinner, he returned to London, mentally and emotionally scarred. His family home had been destroyed by a bomb but his parents and sister survived. The promised church wedding now seemed less important, so Eric and Freda were married in a registry office on 11 June 1945.

His wartime experience with the deprivations and horror of his time as a POW, confirmed and deepened his resolve to become a doctor. Supported by Freda, he completed his medical studies and, graduated in 1951 and began working in general practice in Norfolk.

In 1955 he was recruited into the Royal Australian Air Force and was initially posted to RAAF Base East Sale with Freda and their daughters, Jill and Elizabeth. The conditions and accommodation were a startling contrast to the first class travel from the UK, but they made the best of it with Eric providing primary health care for the military people at the base and Freda teaching at the kindergarten.

In 1958 he was promoted to Squadron Leader and posted as medical registrar to No 3 RAAF Hospital, Richmond, NSW. The following year he accepted a Permanent Commission, was granted acting rank of Wing Commander and posted as the acting Command Medical Officer at HQ Operational Command at Glenbrook for 18 months, then in 1963 was posted on exchange to London as the Command Medical Officer in RAF Training Command.

On return from the UK some two years later, he became Commanding Officer No 3 RAAF Hospital at Richmond and then in 1967 was promoted to Group Captain and posted as Commanding Officer No 4 RAAF Hospital in Butterworth, Malaysia. He visited Vietnam during this time and discussed aeromedical evacuation procedures. Butterworth was an important staging facility for aeromedical evacuation during the Vietnam war using the C130 Hercules aircraft for which he had advocated a medevac role a decade earlier.

He was posted to the USA and performed the role of Deputy Command Surgeon & Chief of Professional Services at USAF Air Training Command, Lackland Air Force Base Texas from 1969-71. His performance reports from the USAF included the following comments: *"His bearing and behavior exemplify top military standards."*; *"He is an officer and a gentleman"*; and *"This physician is a gifted administrator...He is an admirable speaker, a wit who on occasion pricks our consciences and moves us to further explore our policies and procedures. He writes in a horrible hand, as do all physicians, but what he writes is concise, clear and communicates his ideas in an outstanding fashion."* He was awarded an OBE for this service and, at his request, he received his OBE from the Queen at Buckingham Palace in 1972 so his father could attend the ceremony.

This US posting subsequently led to a regular exchange of medical officers between the RAAF and the USAF. Several of those officers have since become Surgeons General.

He returned to Canberra and was appointed the Director of Air Force Medicine from 1971-74. Wishing to broaden his education, in 1975, he was posted to the UK and completed a Master of Science in Occupational Medicine before returning on promotion to Air Commodore as the Deputy Director-General Air Force Health Services from 1975-80. He was also appointed the Queen's Honorary Physician.

In 1980, he was appointed Director-General Air Force Health Services. As Director-General from 1980-84, he became a father figure to the health

staff, both in stature and manner. He had that ability to endear himself to people and the relationship was one of mutual respect. Not surprisingly, he was soon affectionately known as 'Father' among many of the staff. He was an innovative manager and there was a "breath of fresh air" through the health services when he took over. He managed to institute policy changes which made the Health Branch far more effective. He was also held in respect by the Air Force's senior management because of his wartime service in Bomber Command. He could command respect while encouraging subordinates to increase their knowledge. This was noted to be one of his hallmarks over the next forty years. He enjoyed the company of young health professionals and it helped keep him mentally alert and the questions he asked undoubtedly contributed to maintaining the currency of his medical knowledge

He actively promoted the health and well-being of all who worked in the Air Force, not just aircrew. He encouraged medical officers to visit the working areas of air bases, in order to observe first-hand the conditions under which service personnel worked, and which may have adversely affected their health. He strongly supported post graduate training in aviation medicine and occupational medicine in the UK and this continued for two decades. He understood more than most the importance of training in giving the next generation of health staff an understanding of the complexities of the functions of a military health service.

Under his guidance, there was an increased emphasis on the emerging areas of health promotion and occupational health and safety, and this influenced a generation of Air Force Health staff. By the mid to late 1990s, the RAAF was regarded as an exemplar organisation when it came to OH&S and the health care of its personnel.

For the last two years of his service, he was the Chair of the Services Health Policy Committee, a position later to be formalised as the Surgeon General Australia Defence Force. AVM Stephenson formally retired from the RAAF in June 1984, having earlier that year been appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO).

Following his retirement, Doc Stephenson remained medically active, performing aircrew medical examinations at Russell Offices and RAAF Base Fairbairn and administering medical fitness assessments in Campbell Park. He was a member of the Veterans' Appeals Tribunal, and he provided advice to the RSL on veterans' issues.

He remained a valuable ally for the Health Services, successfully lobbying behind the scenes for retention of training of medical officers in aviation medicine in the UK despite cost pressures for its cessation. Again, his credibility from his wartime aircrew operational experience was successful in preventing the loss of this important training for support of aircrew.

In September 2005, while CDF, Sir Angus Houston hosted a special luncheon at Fairbairn to recognise Doc Stephenson's 50 years of dedicated service and association with the RAAF and the ADF.

Doc Stephenson remained an active member of the Australian Society of Aerospace Medicine. He was awarded honorary membership of the society in 1999. In 2010, the annual scientific conference of this society was held in Canberra. Many of the members present recall with fondness the conference dinner held in the Aircraft Hall at the Australian War Memorial. Steve was wearing his kilt, dancing with Freda, under the Lancaster wing of G for George. His three passions all in one.

Doc Stephenson will be remembered by the aviation medicine community with the annual award established in 2011 named in honour of

his commitment to aviation medicine. The Eric Stephenson Award comprises a financial prize and a commemorative certificate, and is awarded for the best scientific paper presented at the annual conference by a member of the Society. Sadly, Freda, his avowed best friend, passed away in 2012. Later that year, he was awarded honorary Fellowship of the newly formed Australasian College of Aerospace Medicine with its aim of training the next generation of aviation medicine specialists.

Medical student, courageous Bomber Command navigator, caring medical assistant to his prisoner of war mates, doctor, aviation medicine specialist, Air Vice Marshal, Director-General Air Force Health Services and always a gentleman, devoted father and husband.

Air Vice Marshal Eric Hay Stephenson was an inspiration to all of us.

Acknowledgements:

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