

**WING COMMANDER RICHARD. C. CRESSWELL DFC, DFC & AM (USA) (Retd)  
27 July 1920 – 12 December 2006**

On 12 December, Australia and the RAAF, lost a living legend with the passing of Wing Commander R. C. (Dick) Cresswell.

Wing Commander Cresswell was well known, and widely respected, as an RAAF operational fighter squadron commander during the period of the Second World War, and more particularly in the Korea war. The high standard of his leadership and exceptional ability as a fighter pilot, together with his tenacity and drive in the air, and on the ground, set a fine example for his contemporaries that has rarely, if ever, been equaled.

Dick Cresswell was born in Franklin Tasmania. He joined the pre-war RAAF in 1938 as a cadet and trained as a pilot. His RAAF number was 0383. When the second war broke out he was quickly promoted to Squadron Leader. In 1942 he became the first operational commanding officer of No 77 Squadron then starting life in West Australia.

At the time the military situation for Australia was bleak. Japanese forces controlled South-east Asia and had attacked Peal Harbour and Darwin. Dick Cresswell, as a very young, very inexperienced and very junior Squadron Leader was given a large sum of money by Air Vice Marshal (Dad) Bladin and told to buy whatever was needed to equip a new Kittyhawk squadron, then forming in Perth, and get up to Darwin ASAP.

Dick probably trod on a few toes along the way, but he did the job. He did the job without fear or favour which was to become the hallmark of his approach to RAAF command responsibilities from then on and over the span of his 20 year RAAF career.

After getting 77 Squadron to Darwin Dick Cresswell engaged, and destroyed, a Japanese "Betty Bomber" during a night patrol. This was the first enemy aircraft shot down in night combat over Australia by an Australian pilot.

After Darwin Dick relinquished command of 77 Squadron but continued to fly on operations in New Guinea and in the Netherlands East Indies with No 1 and No 81 Fighter Wings. However, he is best known for the name he made for himself as the Commanding Officer of No 77 Squadron during the Korean War.

On 15 September 1950 he was rushed to Japan to once again take command of No 77 when the CO, Wing Commander Lou Spence DFC, was killed. Dick's actions at this time give some idea of his personality and capabilities. He arrived in Japan on the 17 September, three days later he flew four operational ground attack sorties over the Korean mainland in a Mustang fighter.

When he arrived in Japan Dick found that squadron morale had suffered as a consequence of a series of combat losses. The situation called for strong, determined, leadership. True to form Dick Cresswell rose to the occasion and provided the drive needed to get the squadron back on its feet.

After flying 110 combat missions in Mustangs Dick guided No 77 Squadron through the RAAF's transition to the jet age with the introduction of the Meteor fighter. This proved to be a particularly difficult, and testing, business.

First, the Meteor was not up to the demands of the air combat roles then being flown. Second, the standard of training of the replacement fighter pilots arriving from Australia was not up to the mark. Dick lobbied to switch the combat role of the squadron to ground attack. A role in which the Meteor excelled. He overcame the second problem by introducing in-theatre training and arranging for experienced RAF pilots to be attached to the squadron.

Dick Cresswell flew 144 combat missions in Korea, 110 in Mustangs, 14 in Meteors, and 10 in US Air Force F-86 Sabres. He was awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross, a United States of America Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal in recognition of his in theatre achievements.

In addition, under his command No 77 Squadron was awarded a prestigious Presidential Citation by the President of South Korea. This is manifest by the ribbon worn on the right hand breast by the people who were in the squadron at the time, and today by the people currently serving in No 77 Squadron.

Dick Cresswell was held in high regard by UN and US force commanders in Korea. In fact, because of his extraordinary record during a major crisis in Korea at the end of 1950, the General Officer Commanding the US 5<sup>th</sup> Air Force, Major General Earle E. Partridge, sent a message to RAAF Headquarters in Melbourne commending Dick Cresswell for quote, "his strong and sensible leadership".

On his return from Korea Dick filled a number of staff positions; however, his most influential was as Commanding Officer No 2 Operational Training Unit at RAAF Williamtown between 1953 and 1956. It was in this posting that his impact on the modern RAAF is evident to this day.

Using his Korean experience to good effect he developed training programs, and policies, to bring the RAAF firmly into the jet age. Through his efforts a solid foundation was established which enabled the RAAF to introduce the Mirage, the F-111 and later the FA-18 Hornet into service with a minimum of effort. He also introduced a formal course to train Fighter Combat Instructors.

Speaking at Dick's funeral the Air Commander Australia, Air Vice Marshal John Quaife AO, said – "The Fighter Combat Instructor's course remains a vital part of our force preparation to this day and I believe that, more than any other factor, this course – a Dick Cresswell legacy – is the reason why Australian Fighter pilots were capable of performing with such distinction in our recent combat operations over Iraq.

Praise indeed from the Air Commander.

Dick Cresswell retired from the RAAF in 1957. The high points of his career can be summarized as a series of firsts:

first Australian airman to shoot down an enemy aircraft in night combat over Australia,

first Australian to go faster than the speed of sound,

first RAAF commander to lead jet aircraft into battle.

Dick's funeral was held in the Chapel at the Royal Military College Chapel, Duntroon, on Tuesday 19 December 2006. It was conducted in accordance with the wishes of his family as a balance between sombre reflection, appreciation of the man, music, and shared humour. No 77 Squadron laid on a flypast and provided a uniformed "Bearer Party". A thoughtful, poignant, eulogy was provided by the Air Commander Australia.

Dick's two daughters spoke about their Dad. Former Chief of Air Staff; Air Marshal J.C. Newham AC, spoke of Dick's little recognised contribution to UN operations in the Chosin region during the Korean War after No 77 Squadron had moved to Hamhung in North Korea. Co-incident with the squadron's arrival the Chinese Army launched a massive thrust threatening UN ground forces with encirclement, which included 77 Squadron.

Air Marshal Newham said that under Dick Cresswell's strong leadership the squadron did not waver. He indicated that there have been few occasions, if any, in RAAF history when an RAAF operational unit was in danger of being overrun by enemy action and continued to fight so effectively.

Wing Commander Dick Cresswell DFC, DFC AM (US) holds a special place in the RAAF historical record. I am happy to report that his memory will live on, hopefully in perpetuity, as the four-flag signature design that adorned his Kittyhawk in 1942 now has a permanent place on a selected 77 Squadron aircraft. Currently F/A-18 Hornet aircraft (A21-50) at Williamtown.

**VALE – DICK CRESSWELL DFC, DFC, AM (US) – HONOURED MEMBER  
OF THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE - GOOD AND TRUE AUSTRALIAN.**

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(President No 77 Squadron Association)  
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