

Air Marshal Jim Flemming

Hello Folks,

Yesterday I learned some sad news, belatedly, that last February, Air Vice Marshal James Hilary Flemming had passed away.

"So what" most of you will say, "Never heard of him".....but I'll answer with "I felt honoured and privileged to have known him".

Some of the few things I know about him are....

When WWII broke out he was underage but he enlisted in the RAAF under an assumed name. 6 months later they found out and discharged him.

Still under age, he re-enlisted using his real name and was more successful. It led to a career that started as an Aircraftsman trainee and finished 4 decades later as an Air Vice Marshal.

Unlike a lot of top brass, he worked his way through the ranks and on the way served as an air traffic controller in Darwin and New Guinea. Later he flew P51 Mustangs out of Japan during the Korean conflict and flew on the very first day of operations. He is credited with destroying the first T-34 tank and was later awarded the US Distinguished Flying Cross for his part in the destruction of a strategically important bridge. He was also awarded the US Air Medal, was mentioned in Dispatches and commissioned as a Flying Officer in 1950.

After the Korean war he duxed the first ever Fighter Combat Instructors Course. Later he formed the RAAF's first aerobatic team, the "Meteorites" flying Meteors, obviously.

In 1958 he was posted to the USofA and flew Super Sabres and Starfighters and when he returned to Australia he became Chief instructor on Sabre's.

He later led the first deployment of Mirages to Butterworth, but not before travelling to France to evaluate the new "supersonic" aircraft. During testing he became the first Australian to exceed twice the speed of sound.

In the early 70's and as an Air Commodore, he was selected to attend the prestigious Royal College of Defence Studies in the UK. It was about then that he was appointed as a "Member of the Order of Australia".

He was promoted to Air Vice Marshal in 1978 and took on the role of Chief of Air Force Development and upon his retirement in 1982 he was awarded the order of Australia for his services to the RAAF.



Jim with his Mustang during the Korean conflict and flying his Mirage over Amberly.

Soon after, he was appointed by the Fraser Government to be Director of the Australian War Memorial, and immediately took on the role of overseeing the rebuilding and expansion of much of the building. Seeing that the staff Photographers were short staffed and under a great deal of stress, he organised for a Fleet Air Arm, Carrier Air Group Photographer (Now made redundant thanks to Bob Hawke) to be loaned to the AWM. That Phot was me. Consequently, I had the privilege of working with and photographing Jim on many official occasions and it turned out that he was a terrific fellow to work for.

Unlike many senior public servants, who would go through the many correct, but endless and time consuming channels to fix a problem, Jim developed a reputation for stepping on those senior PS toes by cutting through all the red tape, grasping the problem by the throat and fixing it in no time flat. Consequently this ex-military man became a public service target and eventually the whole situation became political with the new Hawke government appointed, minister for Veteran Affairs, Arthur Gietselt, appointing another director. But not before cancelling Jims contract....and at one stage, laughably, both men turned up for work at the same desk. Jim dug his heels in, and stayed put.

When my time was up at the AWM, I asked him for a reference. He happily obliged and in it he used the words "he is the complete professional photographer" and I used that reference to help me gain the Senior Photographers position at the National Gallery.

I saw Jim twice after leaving the AWM. Once, he opened the door when I made a delivery to his Campbell home around 1994.

In 2012 Sandy and I were on a cruise ship hopping around New Zealand. I thought I recognised him reclined and sleeping on a deck chair next to his wife. I asked the lady if it was Air Marshal Flemming. She confirmed it was and so I said well, when he wakes, tell him Rob Patterson from the AWM said to say hello. She said I'll do better than that and gave him a big shake saying "Jim, Jim, wake up...someone important is here to see you". He immediately remembered me and nearly an hour of banter then took place.

I had no idea then that he was battling cancer and he succumbed to it on 11th Feb 2015.

Vale James Hilary Flemming

Officer of the Order of Australia

Member of the Order of Australia

Mentioned in Dispatches

War Medal 39-45

Australia Service Medal

Korea medal

United Nations Medal

National Medal (+ 2 clasps)

United States Distinguished Flying Cross

United States Air Medal

Now you know.....