

Obituary

Ralph Gordon Conley AM

Born: Walcha NSW 26 January 1919

Died: Brisbane QLD 5 November 2014

‘Smithy’ inspired a leader in Australian and New Guinea aviation

Wagging school to watch the aircraft come and go at Mascot aerodrome and a chance meeting with Charles Kingsford Smith sowed the seeds of a love of aviation in Ralph Conley which in later years saw him hold leadership positions in airlines in Australia and New Guinea. After receiving a promise he would not wag school any more, “Smithy” agreed to give the young Conley and a couple of his mates a quick flight.

Born in Walcha, NSW on Australia Day 1919, Ralph was the fourth child of John and Mina. The family moved to Sydney soon after where he went to Randwick State and later Sydney Boys High obtaining the Leaving Certificate. An outstanding sportsman, he was the school’s athletics champion and represented NSW against Queensland in secondary schools rugby league.

He began his working life in a clerical position at Nestlé and to keep up his love of action joined the NSW Militia’s Scottish Regiment in 1937. He later transferred to the army engineers where, after studying diesel mechanics and electricity generation at the North Head gunnery fortifications, was promoted to sergeant.

Conley met his future wife Sheila Carmichael while working at Nestlé and they married in 1941.

With Japan entering the war in 1942 and despite his ongoing desire to learn to fly and join the RAAF, the army assigned him to a newly formed commando company. The 2/2 Australian Independent Company was then despatched almost immediately to Timor with orders to observe Japanese movements. “Sparrow Force” as the unit became known, succeeded in tying up Japanese air, naval and ground forces at a time when the invasion of Australia was imminent. Although the unit became isolated and was forced to live off the land with the help of the Timorese it communicated intermittently with Australia via a makeshift hand-made radio. They managed to harass the Japanese operations so effectively the Japanese termed them ‘the men who come out of the ground’ – the title of Paul Cleary’s book on the 2/2’s action in Timor.

Ralph, now ill with malaria, together with his fellow commandoes was rescued eventually by a Dutch destroyer and returned to Australia via Darwin in December 1942. He was promoted to First Lieutenant shortly after.

The war’s end saw he and Sheila start a family. A new job with a stationery supplier took them to Brisbane. It was there Ralph saw the opportunity to pursue his passion for aviation. In 1947 he joined the finance department of the fledgling Trans-Australia Airlines (TAA). Drive and enthusiasm were always integral to Conley’s character and these qualities were soon recognised. He was promoted to Manager, Mount Isa in 1957. This posting led to further advancement including Manager, Townsville and in 1962 to Assistant Manager, Queensland. Seemingly always on the move,

the Conley family were once again uprooted in 1966 by Ralph's move to the position of Assistant Manager, Papua New Guinea, a posting he held until promoted to become TAA's Manager, Papua New Guinea in 1968.

The move to Papua New Guinea proved to be life changing for Ralph. His managerial abilities and superior people skills encouraged such trust and affection amongst the emerging nation's leaders and people that he was seconded by the Australian Government to establish and launch the country's own national airline. He became the fledging carrier's first General Manager in 1973, a role he fulfilled until 1976 when he returned to Australia to become TAA's Queensland Manager.

His return to the top job in Queensland coincided with TAA's expansion into Queensland Barrier Reef Resort operations. The purchase and operation of resorts such as Great Keppel Island, Dunk Island and Bedarra Island resorts was designed to boost passenger numbers on TAA aircraft to regional Queensland ports from southern capitals. This the result achieved and the resorts enjoyed increasing numbers of international visitors as well. Conley, through his direct involvement and unique personal style of engagement at all levels, became the driving force in their success which saw the airline eventually operating eight premier resorts on Queensland's Great Barrier Reef islands and coastal destinations, all served by TAA flights.

He was awarded a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the 1981 Queen's Birthday Honours for service to the aviation industry

Following a stellar career, he retired from TAA in 1982. He became President of the Queensland Tourist Industry Association and at the Premier's invitation, a member of the Committee for the Economic Development of Queensland.

His aviation leadership skills were further called on after his retirement when the New Guinea government engaged him to consult on some emerging operational matters for Air Niugini. Ralph Conley's extensive work for Air Niugini was recognised by the Papua New Guinea government in 2012 awarding him the national honour of Companion of the Order of the Star of Melanesia (CSM).

Conley's strong community affiliations saw him a member of The Rotary Club of Brisbane, of he was president in 1982, The Brisbane Club and the RSL. He had a host of professional associations such as Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Transport, Fellow of the Australian Institute of Directors and Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management.

He retired to his beloved Bribie Island enjoying the time to improve his skills at lawn bowls.

His funeral service on Bribie recognised Conley's amazing military achievements in Timor as well as his exceptional contribution to aviation in Australia and New Guinea.

His wife of 73 years Sheila, son Paul, daughter Janis, four grandchildren and four great-grandchildren survive Ralph Conley, who died on 5 November. His youngest son Mark is deceased.

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