

A celebration of the life of
John Robert Sweetten



8th March 1924 - 11th February 2016

Joseph Allison Chapel, Essendon

Friday 19th February 2016 at 2pm

To know him, was to love him.

VALE JOHN ROBERT SWEETTEN

8.3.24 - 11.2.16

Aged 91 years

TAA Foundation Member

Born in Geelong in 1924, John, or Jack as he was also known to avoid confusion with his brother-in-law, was up there amongst the greatest from "sleepy hollow". Geelong has produced many greats - Bobby Davis, Denis Walter, Barry Crocker; Ford Motor cars and of course The Mighty Cats AFL team. It must be something in the air down there as John was also destined to do great things. His caring, friendly attitude, courage, loyalty, teamwork, integrity, humility and a meticulous work ethic were qualities that would endear him to many people throughout his life. He was also resourceful, with a gentle, caring nature.

The world of his youth shaped his destiny and outlook on life. The Great Depression in the early 1930's, then World War II. Hardship didn't stop this enterprising young man. He developed skills with his hands after leaving school, learning plastering with his uncle and bricklaying with his father Edison. Corio Bay provided a plentiful supply of fish so he and brother Cyril made sure there was always food on the table, even if it meant wagging school to go fishing.

In 1942 Australia faced the threat of invasion by the Japanese. On 8 April that year, at the age of 18, John enlisted with the RAAF, a decision that would shape his working life for the next 35 years. After initial training in the rank of Aircraftman Class 1 he advanced to become a Flight Sergeant in the role of Flight Engineer. He was posted to several RAAF stations including Shepparton, Deniliquin, Tocumwal, West Sale, Rathmines and Moratai.

In early 1945 he was posted to Rathmines, in NSW. This was the home base of all RAAF Consolidated PB5A Catalinas and Catalina personnel. Situated on beautiful Lake Macquarie south of Newcastle, it was a preferred posting for all ranks whether flying or ground crew. It soon became known as "The Country Club" because of the local attractions.

Catalina flying boats, although not the fastest or sleekest aircraft, were invaluable in service as long range maritime patrol bombers or for air sea rescue roles. John loved them and would talk about them for hours on end. The knowledge he gained of their Pratt and Whitney radial engines would be of benefit after the war.

After completion of training as a Flight Engineer John was assigned to the crew of Catalina A24-104 in the 113th Air Sea Rescue Flight which comprised 4 aircraft. It was also the amphibian version of the Catalina. With a crew of eight the "Black Cats" as they were nicknamed in RAAF service would provide a vital role in the rescue of downed pilots and return of Australian POW's from the various islands in the southwest Pacific following cessation of hostilities.

After the war ended in August 1945 John commenced a peacetime role in the RAAF, chosen to

be part of the only Australian Catalina unit to be sent to Japan with the British Commonwealth Occupation Force. In February 1946 they commenced the long flight via Brisbane, Cairns, Darwin, Ambon, Morotai, Luzon and Okinawa to a former Japanese air base at Bofu on the main island of Honshu. Bofu was located south of Hiroshima on the Inland Sea. It was here there was a close call during a search for four RAAF P51 Mustangs lost in bad weather. During the search mission over the Inland Sea two cylinders blew out on the port engine forcing a heavy landing on rough seas. The crew were lucky to survive with just a few bruises. The aircraft was then towed to a small fishing village temporarily before another tow across the Inland Sea, to another base at Iwakuni, some 80 miles away. During the tow by an Indian Navy cruiser, rough seas caused the flying boat to corkscrew and gyrate wildly. Most of the crew on board were seasick so they took turns aboard the aircraft and ship.

During his time at Bofu John courageously joined his crewmates to journey by train to Kure and Hiroshima. It was 9 months since the atomic bomb had devastated that city. He witnessed first hand things that were very confronting for a 22 year old. He found it difficult to talk about in later life. He took many photos of his Catalina experiences, creating a valuable record of his time with the Air Force.

John's courage was tested in many other ways. There was the tiny working space he endured as he monitored the engines during long missions which could last up to 20 hours. There was bad weather, including the Inter Tropical Front which lay in wait on the Equator - thunderstorms with tops up to 30,000ft, low cloud, heavy rain, icing and severe turbulence. The Catalina had no weather radar so it had to fly through at low altitudes. Other hazards included hundreds of sunken ships littering harbours, unexploded mines and damaged aircraft at the many airfields they landed at.

John's unit returned home to Rathmines in June 1946. He was discharged from the Air Force in October 1946 with his knowledge of Pratt and Whitney radial engines highly sought after by the newly formed government airline TAA. Joining TAA on 18 November, 1946 John became a Licensed Aircraft Maintenance Engineer working on the Pratt and Whitney piston engines of the then TAA fleet. These included the DC-3, DC-4, DC-6B and the Convair 240. The work involved doing engine runs using "Test Trucks" on which the engine was mounted. It was noisy, dirty and heavy. He later worked in the Supply Department then became a Production Inspector - Powerplant certifying the Pratt and Whitney JT8D jet engines for the Boeing 727 and Douglas DC-9. John would enjoy 31 years with TAA, contributing to its world wide reputation for safety, innovation and engineering excellence. John lived the TAA Safety Culture - "Service is Important but Safety is Paramount" even when it came to servicing his own motor cars.

At TAA he met and married his wife Gladys in 1949. They then purchased a home on Pascoe Vale Road in the then new suburb of Oak Park. Being close to the airport John would often ride his pushbike to work. In November 1952 his son Peter entered his world followed by daughter Janette in November 1956. John saw TAA progress from the era of radial engines, through prop-jets then the jet age with the Boeing 727 and DC9 from the mid 1960's. He would often take his

family on visits to Essendon Airport; Peter also rode his pushbike there during school holidays. He would sometimes meet Peter and they'd explore all the hangars or aprons as he proudly showed off all those magnificent airliners. John also made sure the family attended nearly every annual TAA Christmas party, held in a hangar at Essendon Airport. Santa would sometimes arrive by TAA Helicab helicopter (either Hiller 12E or Bell 47) to hand out the gifts.

On completion of 20 years service in October 1966, John was entitled to a free flight including his family to any port in Australia. He chose to take them on their first ever trip to Sydney during the Labour Day long weekend in March 1967. Travelling on the Boeing 727 for the first time the family experienced the sights of Sydney Harbour and Blue Mountains. Returning from Sydney they flew on the Vickers Viscount via Canberra which afforded great views out of the large oval windows.

Ill health forced John to take early retirement from TAA on 29 April, 1977. After a lengthy recovery overseas trips followed as he and Gladys visited Hong Kong, Thailand, Japan, Hawaii, Singapore and New Zealand. On their two trips to Japan in 1985 and 1986 John revisited Hiroshima which had risen from the ashes to become a modern vibrant city. Together they travelled to many cities on the Bullet Train and met friends they had corresponded with.

Ill-health over the last 40 years tested John's energy and recovery. He demonstrated a strong will and lived life to the full in retirement. Joining the Woodlands Historic Park group at Gellibrand Park near Melbourne Airport he and Gladys proudly conducted guided tours at weekends for many years until illhealth forced him to give it up. They were both highly respected and received recognition from the Government and fellow volunteers, being presented with a number of awards for their service.

John and Gladys moved to Arcare Nursing Home in Craigieburn in 2014. The staff and residents always enjoyed John's vivid recollections of his life . Alas, John's stay at Arcare lasted only 18 months. In early January 2016, he suffered heart problems, followed by gradual kidney failure. Despite this his memories remained vivid. He continued to suffer despite the excellent care provided by the nursing staff at John Fawkner. John passed away on 11 February after five weeks hospitalisation.

Rest in peace John, we will never forget all the wonderful life experiences you shared.