

# The Quiet Man: The Autobiography of Air Chief Marshal Sir Neville McNamara

Neville McNamara

Reviewed by Brendan Roberts

We in Australia are relatively starved of books giving the personal perspectives, opinions and experiences of our top military leaders, especially Air Force commanders, rather strange, given the prominence within our culture of our national military legacy. Whether or not through natural reticence on the part of the various incumbents, we are the poorer for it. This account by the former Chief of the Air Staff and Chief of the Defence Force Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Neville McNamara, is therefore a very welcome addition to a rather sparse autobiographical bookshelf as well as being a very good read in itself.

Sir Neville was born at home in Toogoolawah, Southeast Queensland in April 1923, a third-generation Australian of solid Irish stock on both sides of the family. He enlisted in the RAAF in October 1941 as an 18-year old aircrew trainee and served continuously from that time until his retirement as CDFS on 12 April 1984, just five days short of his sixty-first birthday. That was an unbroken run of more than 42 years, and he is thankfully still with us in retirement in Canberra.

This book recounts a 50-plus year journey from pre-World War II country-Queensland boyhood through wartime aircrew training and subsequent operations as a sergeant pilot in the Southwest Pacific. This is followed by his first-hand experiences of the Korean and Vietnam conflicts and his steady rise through the ranks to the very top of the uniformed tree — only the second RAAF officer to reach four-star rank and one of only three overall to date. This career allowed an up-front and very personal vantage point from which to view these major conflicts and events, something very rarely accessible these days. His descriptions are quite illuminating — surprising even, in their simplicity and complete absence of front or gravitas.

Of his career progression, Sir Neville would have us believe that his various promotions, especially those at the senior level, came as a complete surprise to him. He insists that his rise be put down to others clearing the way or pointing him in the right direction. Given the consistent tone of this book, very self-effacing and humble, the reader will have little trouble accepting its author's claims in this regard, but will marvel nevertheless. His avowed approach was to meet each challenge with a resolve to do the best he could, confident or otherwise at the beginning, and get on with it.

After commanding the RAAF contingent in Vietnam (April 1971 to February 1972) he spent nearly three years as the Air Attache in Washington DC. Returning to Australia in January 1975 he was heavily involved in the implementation and immediate aftermath of the 1974 Tange re-organisation, first as Deputy Chief of the Air Staff (January 1975 to

March 1979), then Chief of the Air Staff (March 1979 to April 1982) and finally Chief of the Defence Force Staff (April 1982 to April 1984). His

view that the far-reaching changes brought in by Sir Arthur Tange allowed the Service Chiefs to properly command their Services, rather than manage them as a first-among-equals on a statutory board, is a considered perspective.

But this is primarily a story of personal experience, not of strategic analysis or second-guessing of events. While he calmly discusses the main positives and negatives of the 1974 reorganisation he makes quite clear he believed his role was rooted in service to country, its government and its processes. He certainly had little time for those who actively resisted or railed against the changes. He saw such action as nugatory and self-defeating and would have no part of it.

As the story unfolds over 20 chapters, there is growing definition of the character of the man himself. Here is a truly humble man, a man not given to grudges, remonstrations, loud insistence or fancy talk, but one who clearly respected his fellows at all levels and routinely demonstrated that respect. That he was so successful in his career, and that he commanded the utmost respect from others, will come as no surprise.

This book grew out of the Office of Air Force History's oral history program and this has naturally influenced its style and content. Transcripts of extended interviews with Sir Neville in 1994 and 2005, by Wing Commander Ken Llewellyn and Group Captain Phil Morrall respectively, have been very skilfully organised into text by the RAAF Historian, Dr Chris Clark. He and his assistants deserve a special accolade for their achievement here, as the words roll by at a very pleasant rate, and the reader is soon enmeshed. Several pages of well-captioned and relevant photographs are also included and these will be of particular interest to former and current Air Force members.

Aptly titled, this handsomely presented book is a highly recommended first-person picture of the life and times of one of Australia's most senior military officers. ♦

*Sir Neville McNamara, 'The Quiet Man: The Autobiography of Air Chief Marshal Sir Neville McNamara', RAAF Air Power Development Centre (APDC) and the Office of Air Force History, Canberra, 2006, Casebound and jacketed, 251pp., RRP\$A40.00 (plus \$A3.25 postage if ordered from the APDC in Canberra at (02) 6266-1433 or airpower@defence.gov.au.*

