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AIR CHIEF MARSHALL SIR FREDERICK RUDOLPH WILLIAM SCHERGER
KBE, CB, CBE, DSO, AFC.
(1904 - 1984)

A leading Australian airman of the post-1945 era, he was the first officer of the RAAF promoted to the American equivalent of four-star rank. Born at Ararat, Victoria, on 18th May 1904 of migrant grandparents, in his youth he endured intense wartime hostility over his German name. Despite this, he gained admission to the Royal Military College Duntroon in 1921 and a year after his graduation at the top of his class in 1924, he was seconded to the RAAF and subsequently transferred permanently.

Scherger embraced air force life with total commitment, revelling in flying manoeuvres in the open-cockpit biplanes. He became an outstanding pilot, mastering combat tactics in the RAAF's new Bristol Bulldog fighters and serving mainly at the training school at Point Cook, where he was chief flying instructor and frequently a test pilot as well; he was also an early volunteer for parachute training. In 1934 he was sent to England after gaining selection to attend the RAF Staff College, and on completing the course underwent other training in the United Kingdom in navigation and instrument flying.

The outbreak of the Second World War found him at Air Force Headquarters in Melbourne as Director of Training in the rank of wing commander. In July 1940, he was appointed to command No. 2 Service Flying Training School at Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, gaining promotion in September of that year to group captain. He was made commander of the RAAF station at Darwin in October 1941 but had moved to become Senior Air Staff Officer at the Darwin headquarters of North-Western Area a month before the first Japanese air raid in February 1942. In the wake of the initial attack he reacted calmly and professionally while trying to deal with a chaotic situation at the devastated base.

At the Lowe Royal Commission appointed to enquire into the events surrounding the successful Japanese strike, he gave strongly critical evidence regarding the lack of defence preparedness at Darwin. Acute annoyance at his outspokenness caused him to be virtually ostracised by the Air Board for some time, though the commissioner's findings fully endorsed his views. A variety of staff posts, each briefly held, followed during the rest of 1942 - command of the RAAF Station at Richmond, supernumerary at Air Force Headquarters, Director of Defence, Director of Training - until in July 1943 he was made commander of No.2 Training Group at Wagga.

In November 1943 he was given the most important RAAF field appointment available, that of No. 10 (Operations) Group in New Guinea. Granted the rank of air commodore, here he commanded Australian and American air units during the assault on Aitape in April 1944 and the landing at Noemfoor Island in June, displaying courage and leadership which earned him the DSO. He was particularly proud of the fact, as he later noted, that he had been the 'first RAAF man to lead both Australian and American Air Forces'. On the 28th July he was seriously injured in a motor vehicle accident on Noemfoor, suffering a fractured pelvis which necessitated his evacuation to Australia.

Still recuperating, Scherger was filling the post of Air Member for Personnel when the so-called 'Morotai mutiny' led to the removal of Air Commodore Arthur H. Cobby in May 1945 and brought about his own return to No. 10 Group, now based at Morotai and known as First Tactical Air Force. By this time the formation had become a large conglomeration of units totalling some 22,000 personnel, and he set about preparing for its forthcoming use during the invasion of Borneo.

Following the end of the war, Scherger went to London to attend the Imperial Defence College. On his return in 1947 he became Air Commodore Operations at Air Force headquarters and later that same year was made Deputy Chief of Air Staff, receiving the temporary rank of vice-marshal in May 1950. In 1951-1952 he served in Washington as Head of the Australian Joint Services Staff, after which he was substantively promoted to air vice marshal and seconded to the appointment of Air Officer Commanding RAF headquarters in Malaya. Here he was in command of all British air units in the country as well as RAAF squadrons involved in operations against communist terrorists. While again serving as Air Member for Personnel from 1955, he was a major force behind a review into the RAAF College to determine whether it was meeting the service's future needs. His concern to lay the foundations of a nuclear-age air force was behind the upgrading of the syllabus to university level and the renaming of the college to become the RAAF Academy.

Promoted to air marshal in March 1957, Scherger took up the post of Chief of Air Staff in succession to Sir John McCauley who had been the first Royal Military College graduate to head the RAAF. The principal preoccupation of the service throughout the 1960s was the program to re-equip completely with modern aircraft. Scherger overturned proposals to replace the RAAF's Sabre fighters with the United States F-104 Starfighter, later winning approval to acquire the French Mirage III. He also explored with the RAF the possibility of obtaining tactical atomic bombs for Australia, with the aim of keeping the RAAF at the leading edge of technology, until the government warned him off in April 1958. He nonetheless continued to adhere to the doctrine of an Australian nuclear deterrent and even after his retirement occasionally caused minor public furores by speaking out on this issue. He was appointed KBE in 1958.

While Chief of Air Staff, he also attempted to foster RAAF interest in such 'state-of-the-art' issues as missiles, and the adoption of helicopters, and the updating of radar installations in the air-defence system. Considered to be something of an iconoclast who attacked cherished beliefs and who was not afraid to seek new solutions to old problems, at the end of 1959 he challenged whether Australia's aircraft-manufacturing industry provided a genuine and worthwhile degree of self-sufficiency at an affordable cost.

Vacating the Chief of Air Staff position after four years, in May 1961 he succeeded Vice-Admiral Sir Roy Dowling as Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. He held this post for five years and was promoted air chief marshal in 1965 before retiring in May the next year. His principal impact on defence affairs during this period was undoubtedly the role he played in bringing about direct Australian military involvement in the Vietnam conflict. Leading Australia's delegation to military staff talks with the Americans at Honolulu in March 1965, he exceeded his brief by virtually offering combat forces in pre-emption of any political decision for such a course.

In the view of Prime Minister Bro. Sir John Gorton, Scherger was inclined to behave like ' a Politician in uniform.'

As both Chief of Air Staff and Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, Scherger had become a prominent national identity, his personality, style and appearance all enhancing his personal appeal and authority. Behind the charisma, however, was a decisive leader of distinctively Australian character. Returning to civilian life, he became chairman of the Australian National Airlines Commission in 1966 and in 1968 of the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation as well, during which time he served as a member of an Australian defence industries mission sent to the United States in 1969. He was chairman of Mono Pumps Ltd., a Director of International Computers (Aust) Ltd, Plessey Pacific Pty. Ltd. And Associated Broadcasting Services. He retired from these posts in 1975 and lived in Melbourne until his death on 16th January 1984.

Wor. Bro. Frederick Scherger was made a Mason on 21 May 1929 in Adastral Lodge No. 397 United Grand Lodge of Victoria. He was passed Fellowcraft on 26 November 1929 and raised a Master Mason on 11 March 1930. Both degrees were taken in Adastral Lodge.

He called off on 1 July 1935 and re-joined on 17 August 1937.

He was installed as Worshipful Master on 12 December 1939.

He called off again on 19 April 1951. Meanwhile he affiliated with the Golden Fleece Lodge No. 300 in Melbourne on 20 January 1950.

On moving to Canberra, he became a member of Lodge Philosophy No. 916 United Grand Lodge of New South Wales on 12 May 1959.

He called off on 25 November 1966 when he returned to Melbourne.

He called off the Golden Fleece Lodge on 12 November 1982.

Frederick Scherger married twice. His first wife, whom he married in 1929, died in 1974. They had one daughter. He married again in 1975.

He was a keen golfer and enjoyed shooting.

REFERENCES

- * This paper is taken from the entry by Chris Coulthard-Clark in the Oxford Companion to Australian Military History. Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1995.
 - * Harry Rayner - Scherger, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1984.
 - * Who's Who in Australia 1983.
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