

Al Curr – Eulogy

Presented by Dave Dunlop

Introduction

We are all here this morning to celebrate the life of Alan Joseph Curr – Al to his family, AJ to his Nav Course colleagues, Big Al to his many friends, Big Alla to his Air Force mates, Big Alla La to those who served in Butterworth, Daddo to his daughter Jazzie, Red Baron to his Murray Golf mates and ... he swore me to silence not to mention the childhood nickname his siblings used; and O117504 to the RAAF.

I am sure each one of you has a story or two about Al and I'd like to reflect on a few of the more famous ones as I recount the many and varied stages of his life. Big Alla gave very clear directions for this service and the eulogy and I can hear him now, saying to me: "Stay focussed, Dsquared, no going off on tangents!"

Growing up in Ballandean

Al was born in Stanthorpe hospital on 10th February 1949 to Cammy and Cec, better known as Charlie. He grew up on Curr Road, Ballandean, along with his twin brother Pedro, sisters Glenda and Maureen, and younger brother Ashley. Charlie, a Rat of Torbruk, owned and ran the sawmill which made packing crates from pine log seconds for the local fruit growers. I am sure all the Baby Boomers will remember apples and stone fruit displayed at the local shops packed in those wooden crates. After school, the kids would work in the sawmill and help deliver cases to the farms. The sawmill is still there although no longer working, but, I might add, it was a great venue for Al and Pedro's 60th birthday party, As well as the recovery the next day.

Al attended Ballandean State School and Stanthorpe High, along with schoolmates and life-long friends Angelo Puglisi and Sam Constanzo, who became pioneers of the Granite Belt wine-growing industry. In the early days, the Italian families made grappa for their own consumption. Al related how the townsfolk would gather at

the Ballandean railway station to farewell the wagon loaded with a large wine vat. It was simply addressed "Home Hill" and was for the Italian cane growers in North Queensland.

It seems the Curr kids were always getting into trouble at school. The headmaster would call for Charlie and he'd have to ride his bike up to the school to find out what they'd done now. One incident was when Al used a slingshot from the classroom window to shoot and kill a magpie that was innocently sitting on the goal posts in the sporting field. Charlie was summoned yet again.

Life growing up in the country was full of adventure. The kids dug a 6 foot deep hole in the back yard and put a roof on it. This became their "cubby house". The boys would pile on the steam train at Wallangarra, complete with bikes, and hang out the windows in the breeze all the way to Sydney, arriving with black sooty faces. Days were spent cycling around Sydney having a ball.

Al's Junior examination results were very good (that's Year 10 for the younger generation), but he seemed to get a bit distracted in his Senior years... could it be girls? His teacher noted that he needed to apply himself more, and he must have done so, because he passed all his subjects.

Nav Course

Following in their father's footsteps, Al was one of 3 Curr children who served their country in the Australian Defence Force. Al joined the Royal Australian Air Force and was posted to the School of Air Navigation at East Sale in Victoria to undertake Number 35 Navigators Course along with Ross 'Rosco' Hardcastle, Tony 'Stinky' Stankevicius, Pete 'Kombat' Murphy, and Harry 'Farry' Igras and Dave 'Mario' Hooworth. Most aircrew were given a nick name very early in their careers. On arrival they met their predecessors on No 34 Course including Pete Growder,

‘Growds’ and ‘Noddy’ Clarkson. Most of these cadets were to serve on F-111s together later in their careers and a number are here today.

At Sale, the cadets lived in old WW2 style houses – about 6 cadets per house and ate in the Officers’ Mess but, being lowly cadets, they had to use the side door. They had their own recreation room and bar in the old Officers’ Mess. As old buildings were demolished, cadets would collect timber to burn in the rec room fireplace. They did their knife and fork course, endless drill, weapons and clay pigeon shooting, maps and map reading, Morse code, navigation. and of course, astro navigation. Their flying classroom was the venerable C-47 Dakota. My Academy course visited ESL at that time to fly Vampires at Central Flying School. I recall drinking with the Nav cadets in their Mess and learning how to do carrier landings, with a rather painful outcome if you failed to ‘catch the wire’ and smashed onto the floor!

2SQN Vietnam

Al graduated as a Navigator in May 1968 and was posted to 1 Bomber OCU at Amberley to convert onto the Canberra bomber. He was subsequently posted to 2 SQN at Phan Rang in South Vietnam and served there from 22nd Oct 1969 to the 8th Oct 1970.

Like many of his colleagues, Al arrived in this strange war environment with his 20-year-old eyes wide open. However, after the initial shock, he settled into the daily squadron routine. The squadron normally flew 8 sorties a day, mostly visual daylight bombing under the direction of a Forward Air Controller but they also flew some night Combat sky spot missions.

This routine was interrupted on one mission when he was flying with Mike Birks. A broken gear door arm resulted in an emergency landing with the nose wheel retracted. The landing went well till Al jettisoned the hatch above him. As the explosive bolts fired, he was peppered with shrapnel; It seems Al was 'not amused'.

He turned 21 while in Vietnam and, as usual, the squadron celebrated with drinks and a dinner. Sadly, after dinner, Al found himself solo in the bar as the squadron was flying the next day. Luckily, Graham Neal who had been posted to serve with the US Air Force as a forward air controller, was visiting 2 SQN that evening and joined Al to celebrate his coming of age. They drank Dirty Mothers till the wee hours. What you ask is a Dirty Mother? Well it is Tia Maria and, wait for it, carnation milk.

Big Al flew his final mission in Vietnam – his fini flight - with RickOF, Rick O'Ferrall. As usual, this was celebrated by all the aircrew who were not on bombing missions and the crew was hosed down and drank champers presented by a Red Cross girl, affectionately known as the Donut Dolly.

Al's return from Vietnam was saddened when he heard that Magpie 91, aircraft A84-231, flown by Mike Herbert and Bob Carver, had been lost. Al had been crewed with Mike and Bob was Al's replacement. When the wreckage of their Canberra was finally located in April 2009, Al was part of the team that escorted the crew's remains back to Australia. Doing this duty was of great importance to Al.

The 2 Squadron Vietnam Veterans are very close. Al was a proud member of the 2 SQN Association and each Anzac Day would go to Brisbane to march with his 2 SQN mates and of course catch up at their favourite watering hole afterwards. He was very disappointed this year when his deteriorating health prevented him from attending.

F-111

On return from Vietnam, Al was posted to Number 37 SQN to fly – wait for it – C-130 Hercules transports. Now being a fast jet type of guy, he never admitted to his trash hauler days. He always said it was his twin brother who was there – although Pedro was in the Army at the time.

In 1974, Al returned to Amberley being posted back to 2 SQN flying Canberras in the survey mapping role. This was quickly followed by a posting to 6 SQN to convert onto the very new F-111s. He was on the second F-111 conversion course. Al's association with the F-111 was to span 30 Years.

In the early days in 1 Squadron, he was appointed to be the Route NAVO – the navigator responsible for the selection of the route to be flown during a training mission. Now interestingly, many of the low-level segments seemed to overfly Ballandean. When I was flying with Al, we always arrived over Ballandean early and needed to do an orbit to lose time. On our second pass, Cammy would be out the back of the house, madly waving a tea-towel.

Al quickly became a very competent Strike navigator and was awarded Category A status, something that only a few achieved. Later on, he was also the nav selected for the initial PaveTack pod evaluation, followed by the project.

During his flying career, Al had a couple of close shaves. The one most of you would know about was his ejection out of A8-137 on the 25 Aug 1979 in NZ at the RNZAF base at Ohakea. The weather at the time was rain with low cloud. On take-off, the aircraft ran into water pooled on the runway surface and spray from the nose wheels was ingested into the engine air intakes, causing both engines to flame out. As the end of the runway approached, all Al's training came to the fore. He made a

split-second decision and pulled the ejection handle. Point 35 of a second later, the crew module left the aircraft just as it overran the runway and crashed into the field below, bursting into flame. Al said that the delay felt like 10 seconds. Both Al and his pilot, Mark Kelly, survived the ejection but both suffered from back injuries.

Al's last F-111 flight was on 24th August 2004 with Kev McGrath. They were number 2 in the formation with his old mate Boggy in the lead aircraft. What a way to finish your flying career - bombing at Saumarez Reef and then low level along the beach of Frazer Island scaring all the unsuspecting surf fishermen.

However his association with the Pig was not over. He was assigned to help organise Pigs Tail – the farewell to the F-111 celebrations held in early December 2010. One of his responsibilities was to arrange for the provision of wine at the celebrations. No points for guessing who provided the wines - his old school mates Sam Costanzo from Golden Grove winery and Angelo Puglisi from Ballandean Estate.

AMB Social Life

Big Al loved functions in the Officers Mess. Dinners with mates, pay night raffles and buffets, Dining In Nights and of course the Mess Balls. Stories abound of his exploits - the human flame thrower, the koala incident, riding the balance board, mess rugby. Occasionally the fun led to let's say unplanned outcomes. Erik Green, being the smallest person in the squadron, was on the top of the human pyramid supported by Al riding the balance board one evening when it collapsed, resulting in Erik falling from a great height and breaking his elbow. It was all Al's fault said Erik. Big Al was also in the rugby scrum that drove into the atrium plate glass window smashing through it. Luckily nobody was under the glass when it collapsed.

Of course, when Al was the President of the Mess Committee, much later in his career – when he had matured – such antics would result in a severe dressing down

of the young officers. Foolish behaviour and bad manners were not to be tolerated in his Mess!!!

Career

Besides his flying postings, Al had a number of 'ground jobs'. He was a Weapons Instructor, a member of the Pavetack Project, the Commanding Officer of Base Squadron ESL, and was on the staff at the Air Power Studies Centre, Force Development and Analysis in the Department of Defence, HQ Air Command and HQ Integrated Air Defence System in Butterworth. Besides his involvement in the Vietnam war, Al also served in East Timor as the Chief of the Air Operations Centre for the United Nations Peace Keeping Force. Towards the end of his career, he deployed to the Middle East Area of Operations as a member of a Defence Analysis Team.

Family Life

Al's exploits as a hard-playing singly came to a screeching halt when in the mid 80s he met and was tamed by Fiona, the lovely lady with whom he created his greatest achievement, his precious daughter Jasmine. Gone were the days of wild parties and drunken binges, replaced instead by sweet smelling nappies and spaghetti in the bathtub before a bedtime story. Al and Jazzie have been an inseparable team for more than three decades, their motto being "You and me together against the world!" Al could not have been prouder.

Cars

As you would imagine, any aspiring dashing fast jet jockey must have a suitable chariot. As a teenager in Ballandean, Al rode a motorbike – a rather beaten up one. But later in the Air Force, he had a number of memorable machines including a stand out maroon coloured Holden Monaro. Who could forget it. Like most of his

cars, he kept it for a long time and expensive servicing was to be – minimised. On returning from a deployment, he would pour lighter fluid into the carbi to get it started. Worked every time.

The yellow jelly bean Celica lasted, I reckon, 20 plus years. In the end, it had a cracked windscreen and several rock bite dents in the rear mudguard. I got the blame for one of them. It proudly sported the number plate O2CHE, one of Al's favourite sayings.

Now you can imagine that we all fell out of our chairs when he announced he was buying not only a new car, but an Audi A3 convertible. After battling with golf clubs in the boot, he soon upgraded to an Audi TT. It really suited him with his full grey beard and signature moustache, however he always drove it with great care.

Retirement

Al had two retirements from the Air Force. After the first, he moved to the Sunshine Coast and got a job at Australia Zoo. Although he liked working there, he missed the RAAF so went back both as a Reservist and as a full time member. Eventually after helping with the farewell for the F-111, he finally retired.

In retirement, Al's activities revolved around organising and playing golf, skiing, going to the gym, the RSL, the Liberal National Party and of course, neighbours and family.

Golfing

Al was passionate about golf and played off a low handicap for all his golfing career. As he aspired to play golf 10 days a week in his retirement, we were not surprised when he built his home in Pelican Waters overlooking the then 4th fairway.

Many of you here today are his golfing mates and neighbours. At Pelican Waters he quickly became involved in the local community and especially the Golf Club. We are told he even was the Santa at the Christmas party and many of the ladies sat on his knee. I might add that at the Air Crew Association, he also became the Santa and gave the ladies boxes of chocolates. He learnt how to be Santa from young Merv Draffin, who retired from that role at age 95.

In recent years, Al was the Vets captain at Pelican Waters. He was rather fixed in his ways and heaven help anyone who called up to play after he had finalised the tee off times. I am not sure if the same rules applied with his F-111 golfing group but I suspect they did.

One of the last vets days he organised was the now famous bus trip to Gympie. On the way, the bus caught fire. Luckily everyone got out in time but sadly all the golf clubs in the luggage compartment were lost. I can hear all the golfers groan. A very sad day indeed.

One of Al's favourite golfing trips, was his annual pilgrimage to the Murray. To his Murray colleagues he was the Red Barron which morphed into the Red Barr- on. After a couple of years, Al decided he should provide a trophy for the closest to the pin comp. He called it the Bombs-on-Target trophy and it featured a model F-111 and a PaveTack pod. He was very disappointed that, although he was runner-up a few times, he never won it.

As part of the extras that came with his Audi TT, Al was invited to play in the annual Audi golf competition. Much to his delight, he and his partner won the QLD division which entitled them to play in the Australian playoff in Melbourne. He ventured to MLB but sadly his partner got Covid so they didn't participate in the comp. But, Al

did get to play a round on a very exclusive course and, of course, join in all the festivities.

Skiing

Another one of Al's passions was snow skiing. He was in the RAAF team on a number of occasions and more recently, each year, he carefully planned his trip south to the snow fields with his skiing mates. Never one to let fashion get in the way of a bargain, Al's famous 1970s retro psychedelic coloured ski outfits are a testament to the style of the local Boutique, Aldi, and ensured that he would always be easily spotted on the slopes. He preserved these fashion masterpieces with great care. Kombat said that the amount of attention and ribbing he got while on the slopes of Perisher had to be seen to be believed. Girls would front him to borrow a suit for dress up parties. Others wanted to buy one, while others cheered him for wearing it. Of course, he loved all the attention.

Gym

Staying fit is an integral part of military life. But for Al it was also a passion. Going to the gym was very important as it helped him to manage the back pain resulting from his F-111 ejection. Without the rowing machine, his back would 'play up', with it, he was fine. Rowing technique became a hot topic discussed at parties. Now we are told his gym class consisted of Al and 8 ladies, all doing exercises around him. I gather he also had lunch with them. When I tried to find out more details, I was told 'What goes on in the gym stays in the gym'. Sounds a bit like deployments.

Neighbours

Many of his neighbours will remember him as a dedicated golfer or as the guy who rode his bike everywhere; or perhaps as the 'not happy chappie' who put a bucket out next to the gutter so that the postie would not ride over his perfectly groomed

footpath. As his health deteriorated, he was deeply grateful for all the support his neighbours provided.

RSL

As a retired veteran, Al became very involved in his local Caloundra RSL as a member, a volunteer, a director on the Services Club Board and as an enthusiastic consumer of its fine fare.

From his Air Force days, he held a bus and heavy vehicle drivers licence and would volunteer to drive the bus for the various visits organised by the club. Even after he was diagnosed with cancer, he provided the transport to ferry members between the QLD Air Museum and the RSL for the RAAF's 100th Anniversary activities.

When Covid struck and the Club had to shut down, Al was one of the worker bees who did the behind the scenes activities to keep it in good order. He was a diligent Board director and applied himself to this task. I know he will be sorely missed by Cathy and his fellow Board colleagues.

Friday afternoons would find Big Alla in the Sub Branch members bar enjoying the comradeship of his retired ADF colleagues. The Air Force team was a close-knit bunch and took over the covered pool table as their watering hole. Even after he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, Al lived life to the fullest extent possible, watched over and supported by Phil Andrews and his other close RSL mates.

It is fitting that this final celebration of Al's life be in this, his second home, in the company of family, fellow veterans and the many who shared his friendship. On behalf of the family, I would like to acknowledge and sincerely thank both the RSL Services Club and the RSL Sub-Branch for their generous contributions to this celebration.

Conclusion

We will all remember Al in our own special way...a strong, fit, larger than life, colourful character who had firm views about everything; a staunch friend, an accomplished navigator, a better than average skier and golfer, a dedicated volunteer, a distinguished veteran of three wars and, most importantly, a devoted father. I can just see Rosco, Stinky and Big Alla right now sitting around a heavenly bar, drinking Bundy, reminiscing about the good old days and watching us today; and, no doubt, Big Alla will be critically assessing our performance at his farewell.