

**A transcript of the Keynote Address given by Commander Nat Gould RAN (Rtd)**  
**at the Fleet Air Arm of Australia AGM - 27<sup>th</sup> October 2007,**  
**in White Ensign Club HMAS Albatross.**

Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me down today. First of all I would like to introduce my guest, Dennis Smith, who is my neighbour, an absolute 'nut' on military affairs, particularly military aircraft. He loves coming to the Museum, so I've asked him to come along and keep me company.

When I was asked to say a few words, as usual I've reservations about addressing a gathering like this, because a lot of you know me and I'm terrified of being accused of shooting a line. It's very difficult to talk about your own career without saying a few words and being a little immodest. The other worry I have is that my memory is not what it used to be, so if I get dates, and places and people a little bit mixed, tolerate me, please

Now to talk about myself, I grew up in Brisbane as a pre-war bloke, and all I wanted to do was fly aeroplanes. It was the days of Kingsford-Smith, Amy Johnson, Bert Hinkler, and some of the RFC WW1 blokes were still around. All I wanted to do was fly, but we couldn't afford it, so what I did was go out and collect cow manure, mushrooms and sell them to the local people at one and sixpence a bag or whatever, until I had collected 10 shillings and then I could go out to Archerfield and get myself half an hour.

Eventually I got a licence at the age of 18, and incidentally in the meantime I'd joined the Army Reserve and I'd become a Bombardier in the Artillery. When war broke out in 1939, I was actually in camp with the Army, but as I had a licence and they'd started the Empire Air Scheme at that time, I was asked to join the RAAF. It was rather nice that I didn't have to apply, and I was asked would I like to join the Air Force. In our course, which was No 1, nearly all the chaps had flying experience of some sort.

I did my basic training at Archerfield in *Tiger Moths*. We didn't even have a rank or a uniform. We wore civvies and they gave us, overalls and a beret. We had no rank. Sergeants called us 'Sir'. God knows why, I was only 18 and a civvy.

Anyway we finished with *Tiger Moths*, graduated, and went to Wagga, and we were the first people to go direct from *Tiger Moths* onto *Wirraways*. It was a bit of a jump, because not only that, but the instructors didn't know much about the aeroplane themselves. My instructor was a Flying Officer pre-war RAAF, absolutely terrified of *Wirraways*, claiming demons and "wapites" and that sort of thing. So being brash I taught him aerobatics in a *Wirraway*, but at that age, I was only 20, you can do those things. Finally I got my wings and came out as a Sergeant Pilot from Wagga Wagga.

We were losing the war in those days – this was the end of '40 – September/October 1940 – things weren't going very well so we rushed off to the UK and I got there in January '41 and went to an OTU down on the East Coast near The Wash, where the cloud base never got above 800ft, it never stopped raining, it was freezing, and we hadn't flown for a long while because it took us six weeks to get there. A Pilot Officer, Royal Air Force, who had been shot at a few times, came over to introduce me to a *Hurricane*. But first of all he sat me in the back seat of a *Harvard* and gave me a couple of circuits. I think I touched the stick once and then he said "OK off you go in a *Hurricane*". It sounds terrifying, and it is, but remember that in those days the Battle of Britain was just over, and things were pretty grim and they were enthusiastic about getting some recruits.

I think there were 12 of us from the RAAF at that time. Anyway I got into a *Hurricane* and it was a very early model *Hurricane*, and the radio didn't work but I took off and got airborne and got up into some cloud, but finally found my way home. But the second trip in a *Hurricane*, Sutton Green was the name of the airfield down near The Wash, I got airborne in this *Hurricane* but by the time I got my wheels up, the radio didn't work of course, I was in cloud and came up above cloud and I didn't know where I was. I saw what I thought was a *Bristol Blenheim* bomber so I thought he'll find his way to some airfield so I tried to formation on him. But I couldn't catch him. He kept going but I couldn't catch him, and I'd only had about an hour and a half on a *Hurricane*. So I shot out over the North Sea and let down and found my way back. As I got out of the aeroplane, everyone clapped and cheered "well done Nat"! When I asked what for, they said I had just chased a *JU88*! It turned out that the *JU88* had just bombed the airfield, knocked out Sergeant Smith and had killed two people and they all thought here's this brave

Australian just on his second trip chasing after him. My aircraft recognition was nil, but I told them the truth, I couldn't take credit for that.

Anyway I graduated. We all graduated – even if you couldn't handle the darned thing you still graduated, they needed you, and I got sent to a very very famous Royal Air Force Squadron, called No 17. No 17 had been in the thick of the B of B, and they had lost a whole pile of blokes, they had shot down something like 70 or 80 aircraft, and one poor bloke I got talking to had been shot down twice in one day. Anyway, I joined 17 Squadron and fortunately they were due for a rest and got sent up to Scotland.. I had my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday up there. There was no war on up there and being young and enthusiastic and it was still mid-1941 and the desert wasn't going very well, and with Australians there, I wanted to go out to the Middle East, so I asked for a transfer, and I finally found myself in a little airfield near Catterick in Yorkshire, and I started getting issued with a lot of flying clothing like passion killer things, flying suits, flying boots and so on, which didn't look like they were for the Middle East to me.

Anyway there were three other Australians with me, and the next thing I knew we were on a little aircraft-carrier called the *Argus*. I was still a Sergeant Pilot, and it was *HMS Argus*, which people didn't know very much about, and a lot of people who did know about her got it wrong. She was the very very first aircraft carrier in the world, long before the Americans. She was commissioned as an aircraft carrier in 1918. I've learnt all this since of course, btw, anyway here I was with 120 hours or something, in this *Argus*, and we still didn't know where we were going of course, and my knowledge of strategy and international politics and how the war was going – as a Sergeant of 20, I didn't know much about it.

Anyway, got aboard this aircraft carrier, never seen one before, we went out from Glasgow out of the Clyde, turned right, and I said that's not the way to the Middle East, and as it happened it wasn't, it was the way to Russia, So they told us we were going to Russia, and I thought that was strange because I thought we were fighting the Russians – I told you I didn't know much about all this. Actually it wasn't long after when Britain and Russia decided we were all on the same side.

Anyway, we got on this carrier, low cloud, fog and so on, and after a while on our way to Russia, and we were up near Spitsbergen, and we were flying different *Hurricanes*, *Hurricane* Mk.2s – didn't know much about them – the compasses

had never been swung, but it didn't matter, because I'm sure as you are all aware, being near the North Pole a compass always points north. So our briefing was take off, do a port turn, we'll put a destroyer on the starboard beam, line her up, pull your directional gyro out, and line her up. Now that made sense to me, and they said now fly along for half an hour or whatever it was, (oh by the way, they gave us maps which were in Russian and we couldn't read anyway) and fly till you hit it, Russia's a big country, you can't miss it, and when you hit it, turn right, go along a little bit and then and go down the river and on the right you'll find an airfield!

I should mention that *Argus* had a little ramp on it, something like the ski jump on the modern RN carriers, way back in 1941 they had this and the whole idea was to scoop you up in the air but none of us had ever been on a carrier before, and none of us had ever flown these aircraft which hadn't been tested for many many weeks. They lined us up one at a time, as far back as we could, but there was no wind over the deck, and poor old *Argus* was flat out, and if she could do 20 knots I would be surprised, anyway we went charging along and we got airborne – I did at any rate – but two of the blokes hit this little ramp and broke their undercarriage. We were also briefed and told later on not to worry if we went in the water, because it was so bloody cold you weren't going to last very long, and in any case the destroyer's not going to stop and pick you up because there's a lot of trouble around.

We eventually got to this place called Vianga, just outside of Murmansk. Murmansk was just an airfield, the snow hadn't started then, this was July, and the Russians had funny little Fighters there, and some Dive Bomber things, and they had no two-way radios. They had no radar of any sort, and the Germans had a big base at Passano, which was not very far away, 40 or 50 miles, that sort of thing, with *ME109s* and *JU88s*, so the first thing we knew about a raid on us was either when the flak opened up or the bombs dropped. And just to show a little bit of support, we had nothing else to do, but get airborne. The strange thing was too that at some stage, the Finns, who were then enemies of the Russians, had *Hurricanes*, and so to a lot of Russians, the *Hurricane* was the 'baddie', and we got jumped quite a few times by the Russians, which confirmed my idea that we should have been fighting them instead of being with them.

This was a bad time and the Russians were losing the war, and so Mr. Churchill had promised them some help, so that is why the two *Hurricane* squadrons were

there. The whole idea was not just for us to teach them to fly them, which was fairly easy, but also how to maintain them, because the *Hurricane* was a quantum leap on the little agricultural things they had. Rolls Royce Merlins and 100 octane was bit of a surprise for them. Anyway, that was what it was supposed to be, but we did get involved in quite a few sorties and we were officially confirmed with 15 German aircraft. It was quite a few more than that. The Russians themselves were strange people and they didn't want to give us any confirmed. We found out afterwards that they themselves got X number of roubles for every German aircraft they shot down and they didn't want to share any of it with us, and in any case one of our bright blokes said that well, if we kept the money would lose out amateur status.

What a peculiar war it was. It's almost hard to believe. You have to remember that the Russians were very strange people at this time that they just had very little to say, had no 2-way radio, had no radar, and the army were fighting a very big battle only about 20 or 30 miles away from us. The Germans had a couple of Infantry Divisions trying to take Murmansk, a warm water port. We could go to bed at night and hear the guns at the front, so it wasn't very far away. The 'A' flight were sent to escort a couple of these Russian Dive Bombers who were going to give close air support to their troops up one of the big inlets. My flight went off to give some sort of support to the Russian destroyer which was up this fiord because the presence of the German 109s and the JU88s.

It was a beautiful day, with not a cloud in the sky, you could see everywhere. To my absolute astonishment, I saw the lead Russian Dive Bomber dive down and dive bomb the Russian destroyer. To my further astonishment, I saw the destroyer open up and shoot this bloke out of the sky. We saw the crew bale out and so on. That's how strange the war was – we started to wonder whether 'A' flight was on our side or not!

Anyway, eventually came the day when it got really and truly into winter and it was time for us to go and we had handed over the aircraft but there had been no organisation to get us back, no real organisation, so another young Australian and I, Nobby Clark, went down to the wharf at the fiord. There was an RN destroyer called the *Intrepid* and I went up to the destroyer and asked the bloke where they were going and he said back to UK. So I asked for a lift and he said "sure, hop aboard" so Nobby and I got onboard this destroyer. I got a pair of twin Lewis guns

out on the bridge, I'm not sure what for, but this bloody mad Captain, instead of going back to Scapa Flow and back to UK, was going in and out of all the fiords at night looking for that something, and eventually he found his something, and it was a German troopship tied up alongside at Passano, so he torpedoed it. Then he found he needed more fuel so off we had to go, back to Vianga, to refuel. Anyway, we then headed back to Scapa and UK, and eventually I got back to London and reported in down there, still a Sergeant Pilot. I went in and said "Gould here", and they said "you're missing in action" and I said "I hope you haven't told anybody".

The Squadron then went to Northern Ireland for a rest and we got re-equipped with *Spitfires*. It was very pleasant in Northern Ireland then, I can't remember what the weather was like, but we did some nice flying, but it was non operational, and we escorted the odd convoy coming in off the coast. And then for some reason, they commissioned me and I became a Pilot Officer.

Oh by the way, on the way back from Murmansk to UK, December 1941, Pearl Harbour happened, we heard about it over the ship's system, Again, you need to put your mind back to those sort of grim days, we were losing the war, no doubt about it, and we were terrified about what was going to happen with the Japanese and Australia. So we four Australians said we wanted to come home, and they "yes you can" after a little time. I remember it was St. Patrick's Day, 1942, when I sailed from Belfast and came back via Canada and the US on the first American troopship to come to Australia, and I eventually got back in May '42.

A couple of weeks leave, and then I joined RAAF 75 Squadron which had been up in Moresby, and those of you who know anything about the history of Moresby know it was a very bad time for 75. It had been shot out of the sky almost to the last Pilot, and certainly to the last aircraft, and so they were in a bad way. It was not only myself of course, but a lot of other Australians had come home via various ways, and so we got rushed up to join 75 Squadron, which were flying *P40 Kittyhawks*.

Before I left Kingaroy, had a couple of weeks and went back up to New Guinea to a place called Milne Bay, and we got up there round about June or July '42, and we had a very bad time there. Milne Bay was just a little strip in the mud with his PSP planking stuff all over it and if you went off the runway you would hit a coconut tree, no taxiways worth talking about. Poor ground crew, I take my hat off

to them, it never stopped raining, it was mud, and there was no cover at all, they worked on the aircraft, the armourers and fitters and riggers, God knows how they did it.

We all had malaria; I had malaria and dysentery at the same time, going at both ends! I hope you're all enjoying this! The sort of thing that happened is you would be in your little tent on your stretcher, and the Doc would come in and say "don't you get out of that stretcher", and as he walked out the CO would come in and say "go and get airborne", so you would go and get airborne. It was unpleasant flying in the *Kittyhawk* with the diarrhoea. I remember you would take your mask off and have a quick old vomit, and then put your mask back on, but the diarrhoea would be running down the back of your legs and you had another hour and a half on patrol, and the chance of a dog fight in the middle of it.

We did very well up there, we lost a hell of a lot of blokes I think one day when I was up there we lost five from the squadron in one day, and 76, who were with also us up here, they too lost a few. However, biggest deal was not the aerial combat. The Japs were coming in to land at Milne Bay, and because the weather was foul, the *B25s* and *B26s* from Moresby couldn't get out. So the two *Kittyhawk* Squadrons went off with 2 x 500lb bombs instead, and our briefing was - go for the troopships of course, never mind the naval ships, and try to stop the landing.

Again a typical area of low cloud and rain and the Japanese were quite well escorted, a lot of flak ships and destroyers and so on, so I came out of the cloud and of course the squadron was split up and dispersed because the flak was pretty intense, so I went down to dive bomb a troopship, dropped my bombs, then back up in the clouds and came home. The boss came over when I landed and said "well done Nat" and I said "what for" and he said "you sunk that flak ship" and I said "well I was aiming at the bloody troopship"! So that's how good my dive-bombing was!

Anyway the biggest part of the war in Milne Bay from our point of view and from the armourer's point of view, and I don't know whether people realise this, but it WAS the first time the Japanese army was beaten on land. The army did an incredible bloody job there, they finished up hand-to-hand fighting. At one stage, the Japs owned practically their end of the strip and we owned this end. We used to take off up over the water, and crouch down over the armour plating, pull your

wheels up, breath a sigh of relief, turn round and strafe. A sortie was something like 10 to 15 minutes. Between the water's edge and the mountains was only about 3 or 4 miles, and it was thick jungle canopy and the army was fighting through this stuff and they asked us to give them strafing support and what they did, the leading unit would fire a red Very through the canopy and then a number of whites for every hundred yards past the reds (it was something like that I can't remember the exact figure now,) and of course it sounds pretty good but if you're in a *Kittyhawk* with low cloud and you've got 2 or 3 blokes with you and you're pulling out of low cloud at 180 or 200 hundred knots or whatever it is, and the mountains are there, and up through the canopy comes this thing and trying to pinpoint where was almost impossible, so what you tried to do was line something up on the coast. Anyway to make sure you strafed well ahead of where you thought it was, you strafed well ahead of where you thought it was, and we did this for a couple of days, and to our astonishment, the army said it turned the battle for them so they were very grateful.

Well, we came out of Milne Bay round about Christmas time 1942, and I was sent to Mildura, which was the Fighter School, and that was far worse than any war I ever went to because the kids were coming out of school with their Wings, 200 hours, maybe 250, and they came to Mildura and we had them for six weeks. Six weeks was all you had them for and in that time we had to convert them – we had three front line aircraft at the time, *Boomerangs*, *Spitfires* and *Kittyhawks*, and you converted them to whatever, and taught them fighter tactics – we weren't flying instructors – and we had blokes from the Middle East all twitched up with DFCs, DFMs, and blokes who'd been in tank battles and so on and you had to sit in the back seat of a Wirraway, as if you were an instructor, and teach these blokes fighter tactics. On the day I arrived there they killed four, and on the dive bombing range I think there more casualties than there were bombs at one stage, because these blokes didn't have enough time. You put them in a *Kittyhawk* sent them off solo, then air combat, strafing, dive bombing and so on. After about two months of this I went up to the Group Captain and said "Can I get out of this bloody place" and he said "get in the queue" but finally a very famous Group Captain, Clive 'Killer' Caldwell came. He and I had been great friends for many years and when he took over I thought here's my chance so I went up to him and he said "where do you want to go", and I said "anywhere". He then said "well, I'm going up to take over the Wing in Darwin, the *Spitfire* Wing, how would you like to come". Oh boy, so, to cut a long story short again, I found myself up in Darwin with 457

Squadron, flying *Spitfires*. However, the war was tailing off up there, the Japs were moving away and I think I fired my guns only once. Anyway, it was good fun and I enjoyed it, but after about 10 or 11 months I got sent back to Mildura.

About this time, the Royal Navy came out in a big way, and I'm now talking what, early '45, or late '44/early '45, and I don't know if there are any RNers here, but they brought out a magnificent new force, which a lot of people probably don't know about, and included were aircraft carriers' Some of you would know them of course, the *Implacable*, *Indomitable*, *Indefatigable* and *Formidable*. I served at sea in both the *Implacable* and the *Indomitable*, and we had 80-odd aircraft in each ship. It was quite an armada, seeing so many ships together, and we had a lot of aeroplanes in the sky

Anyway, about this time, the RN and the RAAF got together and said, look we're going up to get ready for the attack on the home islands\*, and you've got plenty of Pilots, can we have some? The two governments agreed of course, and so one day I was a Flight Lieutenant with a big moustache, and the next day I was a Lieutenant RNVR, without a moustache! This was early '45, and we went to Schofields, just outside Sydney. There were 12 of us and we were all quite experienced, ranging from Pilot Officers to Squadron Leaders, and we all became Lieutenants, there were some pretty gonged-up blokes too.

Anyway they put us on the *Seafires*, and the Squadron I joined had 36 aircraft and that same number of Pilots, and I'd been in the Navy half a dog watch, and I was the Senior Pilot, didn't even speak the language, so we embarked in *Indomitable* did our deck landing just off the coast here, which went pretty well all right, though we lost one bloke off the coast here. Then I went to *Indefatigable* and did a tour round New Zealand, which was great fun.

Then I went to *Implacable*, which, with the rest of the fleet went off to the home islands. We're now getting towards mid-45 and half a dozen of us were put on a small Escort, can't remember the name of it now, part of the fleet training, to back up the main fleet, and we got just north of Truk (oh and by the way, when we got to Manus, in the Admiralty Islands, we saw an armada you'll never see again in your life, the Yanks, the Brits and the Australians getting ready for the attack on the home islands. There were battle ships, aircraft carriers, as far as you could see, cruisers too, it was an enormous sight. One night in the mess I go talking to some

Yanks and they wanted to talk about *Spitfires* and I wanted to talk about their aeroplanes. I said I wanted to fly *Hellcats* and they said ok, have mine buddy - and I had a flight in a *Hellcat* the next day, so I've got a *Hellcat* in my Log Book!

Anyway we got up to north of Truk in this little escort thing, and they dropped the 'Bomb' on Hiroshima. So we did a '180' and came home, and that's nearly the end of my story you'll be glad to hear but not quite because we got back, and our Flag Officer Aircraft Carriers was Sir Philip Vian, don't know if you know him, amazing bloke. He loved us, and he called us his Abos. He gave us a party aboard his Flagship, can't remember it's name now, and we all got a little bit drunk, and he said "what are you all going to do, you'll be out of work"? I didn't know, I still loved my flying and I was only what, 25, I didn't want to be a civvy, and he said "would you like to join my Navy".

I thought about it for a while and a couple of us got together and decided it wasn't a bad idea, so I went back to him, here I was this lowly Lieutenant RNVR, and I said to this extremely high ranking Admiral "Sir, I would like to join your Navy on one condition" and he asked what condition, and I said "that we continue to fly", because I could see us all going back to the UK, poor tired old UK, because the war was over, and they weren't going to waste any money on us flying aeroplanes, we were going to get a dead-end job somewhere. And he said "I'll fly the ass off you". Anyway, four of us went across, Bunny Hare, Keith Clarkson and I can't remember the others now, and the next day we joined the Royal Navy, and signed up for 4 years!

He kept his word, and they spent a lot of money on me. They sent me to Central Flying School, Instrument Flying Instructor's School. School of Naval Air Warfare, and I was then fully qualified. And then, of course, in 1948, we bought the carrier *Sydney*, and the RAN FAA was born, and I had a letter from the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board, "Dear Lieutenant Royal Navy Gould, would you like to join our Navy!" And I said you bet, the money was better and in any case I wanted to come home, I had been away for two and one half, nearly three, years I suppose! Anyway, you know the rest of my story, I joined the Royal Australian Navy and came home.

Just to end up, one of the saddest things to me is we no longer have a carrier with fixed wing, and I hope one day and there are signs that it's possible, that we may

fly again though we won't call it a carrier, I believe the ship they're looking at is 600 or 700 ft, about 20,000 tons, that sort of thing, which is about the same size and shape as *Sydney* was, and if you get one of these with VTOL aircraft. I hope and pray we get back into fixed wing flying, and I don't see any reason why we shouldn't, because if you want to project your power in this part of the world and show something, you've got to have a carrier with fixed-wing aircraft on it, and project us wherever you want to.

Gentlemen, thank you very much for listening to me

Notes:

- 1 \* By home islands, I assume Nat meant Japan.
- 2 This transcript is almost, but quite, a 'verbatim' copy of Commander Gould's address. The details are both complete and correct, but a few grammatical changes have been made in places to make for easier understanding,

Tom McDonald  
15 November 2007

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