

The nine lives of Bob Richardson



“There were two pilots involved in giving the Hornet the tick of approval, one was more operational and I was the other test pilot... I got to see how fast it could go and how high... We were pushing the flight envelope, doing the gee wizz things, in, around and beside the 'envelope'... The extreme conditions of flight...” - Bob Richardson.

Bowring resident Robert (Bob) Victor Richardson describes himself as having nine different lives.

Bob Richardson was born in 1941 and grew up during the aftermath of World War Two. Among his many achievements throughout his nine lives, Bob serviced in Malaysia during the minor war in 1963-65, was a test pilot for the FA/18 Hornet and was the fence author of the forthcoming 1994 white paper on defence.

He developed a love of flying in his teenage years, because of his father who was also a test pilot and served in World War Two. “I began gliding (flying sailplanes) when I was 16 in Victoria. I went solo long before I could drive a car,” he said.

Having worked as a laboratory assistant and gained a Diploma in Chemistry, Bob only had eyes for the sky, trying to earn as much money as possible to get himself in the air. He trained at Point Cook in June 1961; home of military flying and later the Air Force.

After 15 months of training Bob was given his wings, appointed as an officer and was selected to go to Newcastle for training. He then became a fighter pilot and was in Malaysia from 1963-65, taking with him to East Asia his new wife and child.

“I was 22 and knew nothing. I learnt so much in the minor war. We were attached to the squadron for two and a half years.” Bob trained as an experimental test pilot at the Empire Test Pilots school in the UK. Qualifying, he became involved in a great deal of weapons development and clearance on RAAF combat aircraft. “We got to build the new Mirage Fighter, then build the RAAF Macchi Jet Trainer.”

In 1972 while flight testing an older Mirage Aircraft following refurbishment at Avalon, Bob suffered an engine failure and had to eject from the aircraft. “At 600 feet the ejection was luckily successful and I owe my life to the Martin-Baker ejection seat!” Bob laughed.

Bob suffered some injuries during landing in a very high wind state of 35 knots, hitting the ground at 45 miles per hour; a forward rate equivalent to a fall off a ten foot roof.



“I suffered two minor compression fractures to the upper spine from the force of it and a badly wrenched knee and broken jaw. I was able to return to flying in a month.” Although an experience that would have shattered most, Bob didn't hold any qualms about returning to the sky.

He moved to a posting as an Advance Flight Commander at the Advanced Training Base in Western Australia. Bob was again promoted to Wing Commander to be chief test pilot for a further five years.

“This period was the highlight of my test flying career, because I was selected to be the evaluation test pilot on the new fighter project to replace the Mirage.

“I had the best job in the world, but it was very high pressured and stressful.”

Because it was the largest financial project overseas and billions of dollars were being poured into these projects, a lot of focus was on the pilots evaluating the aircrafts. Bob

gave the tick of approval to the F/A-18, or 'Hornet' (the aircraft flown today), over its counterparts.

"It had a limitation of nine times the force of gravity (9G's), so flying it at that limit the pressure on your neck was equivalent to a 150kg man sitting on your head... You can break your neck if you turn your neck the wrong way.

"We also pushed it to a negative limit... When you go down negative G you see red, because your eye-balls are literally popping out of your head. No one in their right mind operates at negative G."

In his later career he specialised in strategic Defence planning and was co-author of the 1994 Government White Paper on Defence and in RAAF personnel management.

"My major satisfaction from this period was that the government agreed that a minimum of two per cent of GDP should be used as a long term planning basis in defence."

Bob spent several years as an air vice-marshal looking after RAAF personnel and budgetary resources and later Deputy Chief of Air Force. After part-time Reserve duty conducting a major review of the Defence Cadets organisation, Bob retired from the RAAF in 2003.

He now resides on his alpaca farm in Bowning.