

RICHARD "Dick" CRESSWELL DFC

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Dick was born on 27 July 1920 in Tasmania. When he was almost four his father passed away and a few years after he moved, with his mother, to Sydney. At the age of 15 he joined the firm of Westinghouse as an electrical apprentice. Two years into the five year apprenticeship he joined the RAAF and commenced at Point Cook in July 1938.

He held command of No. 77 (Fighter) Squadron twice during World War II, and again during the Korean War. The only man to serve as commanding officer of a RAAF squadron on three occasions during wartime, and the first officer to lead a jet-equipped Australian squadron in combat. His performance in Korea earned him both the Commonwealth and the US Distinguished Flying Crosses.

20 April 1942 saw Cresswell, recently promoted to Squadron Leader, commanding the newly formed No. 77 Squadron at Pearce, Western Australia. The Squadron was flying P-40 Kittyhawks. At twenty-one, he was younger than most of his personnel. Initially responsible for the air defence of Perth, No. 77 Squadron transferred to Batchelor Airfield near Darwin in August, becoming the first RAAF fighter unit to be stationed in the North-Western Area. It moved to another of Darwin's satellite airfields, Livingstone, in September. Cresswell led the squadron in the defence of Darwin against Japanese raiders and claimed its first aerial victory just after 5 a.m. on 23 November 1942, when he destroyed a Mitsubishi "Betty" bomber. It was the first "kill" for an Australian squadron over the mainland, and the first night victory over land.

In February 1943, No. 77 Squadron was transferred to Milne Bay in New Guinea. The Japanese attacked Milne Bay on 14 April, and Cresswell claimed one of four bombers (and a fighter) credited to No. 77 Squadron. The next month, No. 77 Squadron began island hopping, firstly to Goodenough Island.

He was wing leader of No. 81 (Fighter) Wing in New Guinea from May 1944 to March 1945, simultaneously commanding No. 77 Squadron for a second time between September and December 1944.

Cresswell arrived at Noemfoor on 26 September 1944 to be informed by No. 81 Wing's new commander, Group Captain Gordon Steege, that he did not need a wing leader. Instead, Steege assigned Cresswell to command No. 77 Squadron, for the second time during the war. Cresswell questioned the decision through official channels, with the

result that he retained the position of wing leader, as well as the command of No. 77 Squadron. The wing flew 1,125 sorties against Japanese buildings, stores and transport.

The Late Ken Wilkinson (431527) recalled his first encounter with Dick Cresswell:

Five raw N.C.O. Pilots joined the squadron at Noemfoor, Dutch New Guinea in September 1944 where the squadron had moved to from Manus Island.

We were introduced to other pilots and after allocation of tents we were told that Wing Commander Cresswell the C.O. wanted us to report to him in his tent at 1300 hours. We duly arrived, he was sitting in a director style chair, dressed in non-regulation clothing and black high boots [not flying boots]. He said, 'You have joined the best fighter squadron in the R.A.A.F., you have received the best training possible in a wartime situation and we have recently been equipped with the latest model Kittyhawk P40-N25 and N30, aircraft, so if any of you dare prang one of them, back home to your mother's you will go'. A great welcome.

After World War 2 Dick was responsible for developing Crew Conversion Courses, at Williamtown Base, which were charged with converting RAAF pilots to Mustangs. As well as Chief Instructor of the unit he was Officer Commanding Williamtown Base for a time.

77 Squadron had, in the mean-time, moved to Japan as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF) and were to remain there on the declaration of hostilities between North and South Korea. After the death of the CO of 77 Squadron, Lou Spence, on 9th September 1950, Dick was sent to replace him and became the Squadron's longest serving commanding officer in the Korean War and commander of 77 Squadron in combat for the third time.

He oversaw its conversion from P-51 Mustangs to Gloster Meteors, becoming the first RAAF commander of a jet squadron in war. As well as Meteors, Cresswell flew F-80 Shooting Star and F-86 Sabre jets in combat while on attachment to the United States Air Force in Korea. He handed over command of No. 77 Squadron for the last time in August 1951, but flew six more missions as a Meteor pilot in 1953.

Dick resigned from the RAAF in December 1956 and was discharged on 30 April 1957 so ending the service career of one of Australia's finest.

Wing Commander Dick Cresswell holds a special place in the RAAF historical record. (Jim Treadwell)

He went on to several different and varied jobs but all connected in some way to flying including the Antarctic.

Dick died of an heart attack in Canberra on 13 December 2006. His funeral was held at the Duntroon Chapel and to honour the man four F/A-18 Hornets from 77 Squadron flew over the Chapel in the missing man formation.

For anyone wishing to read more of Dick's life and Air Force career I recommend *Mr Double Seven* by George Odgers and the Wikipedia entry under Richard Cresswell. There is also an interview with him to be found at the [Australians at War Archive](#). All tell much more about the man than can be written here.

Lesley C Gent