

David Forbes: Kittyhawk pilot and eminent plastic surgeon

By Simon Forbes; Mark McGinness

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DAVID FORBES: June 13, 1925 - January 7, 2022.

David Forbes was not only a respected and innovative surgeon but among the last of that heroic generation of RAAF pilots who served, fought and flew in the Second World War.

David Stewart Forbes was the second son of Beryl Garland Stone, the daughter of Edward Giles Stone, an engineer and inspired pioneer in reinforced concrete. David's father was Brigadier Alec Forbes, a career soldier who was Chief of Coastal Defences in Sydney during World War Two and oversaw the retrieval of the Japanese midget submarine in Sydney Harbour. Alec's regular postings meant multiple yet good schools: St Peter's College in Adelaide, and Knox and Cranbrook in Sydney. David played the piano, rugby and cricket but the Air Force Cadets fed his passion for flight.



David Forbes in front of his Kittyhawk Barbara IV at Noemfoor circa, 1944.

David joined the RAAF on his 18th birthday. He was sent to Mildura, training on Wirraway and Boomerang Aircraft, before moving to Spitfire, Kittyhawk and Mustang. On graduating as a pilot he was assigned to 76 Squadron, initially stationed at Townsville, then relocating to Noemfoor in Dutch New Guinea and Sanga Sanga near Borneo.

Two squadrons of Kittyhawks scrambled to attack Japanese ships in the area carrying guided bombs, one of his missions was to drop jellied petrol - particularly effective against Japanese infrastructure. Engaging enemy zeros one afternoon, David's plane was hit. He bailed over the sea and deployed his life dinghy; paddled to a nearby island and camouflaged himself to avoid capture. The next morning an RAAF seaplane sighted his waterproof flare and he was rescued becoming the latest member of the Goldfish Club.

For his war service he was mentioned in dispatches joining his brothers Patrick, Jim (who became the last surviving Liberal in the Menzies ministry), and their father, Alec, in being honoured. In fact, Alec, Jim and Patrick all won the Military Cross in three consecutive wars – perhaps the only Australian family ever to achieve such a feat.



David Forbes at Tudor House School Speech Day 1978.

Still with the Airforce after the war, David became interested in developments treating badly burned war pilots. He was accepted into Medicine. He graduated from the University of Adelaide and in 1954 qualified as a Doctor.

He was the first medical practitioner in the family since his Banffshire-born great-great-great grandfather, John Forbes, was appointed court physician to Prince Albert and to the royal household in 1841. A Royal Naval doctor, John had come to royal attention through his school friend, Sir James Clark, Bart., who had become the Queen's Physician-in-Ordinary soon after her accession in 1837.

Like his descendant, John Forbes was respected for his innovative approach and the advances he made in his specialty. The Queen knighted him in 1853. He was to die in November 1861, a month before the Queen's beloved Albert.

Sir John's grandson, Alexander Forbes, a graduate of Caius College, Cambridge, emigrated in the 1880s joining the merchants, Fanning & Co in Melbourne. This establishing a branch of the clan in Australia.

In 1958 David married Xenia (Zoe), daughter of eminent South Australian, Sir Tom Barr Smith. Zoe is also a second cousin of Rupert Murdoch. In 1959, with their eldest son, Simon, they moved to the UK.

Having decided to be a surgeon, David trained - rather suitably (given his ancestral link) - at the Queen Victoria Hospital at East Grinstead in West Sussex, where Sir Archibald McIndoe, had treated badly burned or crushed RAF and allied aircrew during the Second World War. McIndoe was the younger of two knighted cousins from Dunedin; the other, Harold Gillies, was eighteen years older and had been active in the Great War. It was said that plastic surgery was born in the first war; and perfected in the second.

McIndoe's patients formed The Guinea Pig Club [a mutual support network for British and allied aircrew injured mostly in fire during World War II] in 1941. Twenty years later, during David Forbes's time there, the Blond McIndoe Centre was established. East Grinstead was known as "the town that did not stare".

David worked with McIndoe's successor, Robin Beare, and with John Watson at this new burns unit and became one of the leading surgeons in its development. In the early 1960s at the London Clinic in Harley Street, Beare (regarded among the world's top eight plastic surgeons) lifted the face of the Duchess of Windsor while David chatted with her husband, the former Edward VIII, in the waiting room. It was a boom time for aesthetic reconstruction.



David Forbes in Martin Place in 1946 before demobilisation.

Just as David was about to set up rooms in Harley Street, the Government nationalised medicine and so he decided to return to Australia in 1965.

The family settled in Sydney and David operated at Royal Prince Alfred, St George, Wolper and Bexley using his skills in plastic and reconstructive surgery. He became a founding member of the Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons, joined the Skin and Cancer Foundation and developed surgical techniques well ahead of his peers.

The Foundation established the Forbes/Regan Visiting Professorship. He trained the next generation of specialists at the Skin Hospital and also found time to care for patients without a fee. In 1995, David awarded an Honorary Degree in Dermatology by the University of Sydney.

Misty Glen, the family farm in Kangaroo Valley, proved a respite and release as did, during his second marriage, Port Macquarie where he also practiced until 1992. He was also an enthusiastic and lifelong golfer.

After David's first marriage ended in 1984, he married Merran Joy McCann in 1986 and they spent 35 years together until his death.

Complementing his professional qualities was an inspired raconteur with an irrepressible sense of humour, a genius for friendship and a determination to make the most of life. He is survived by both Merran; and Zoe and her sons, Simon, Andrew and James and their families.

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