



## Wing Commander A. F. McSWEYN MC, AFC

[1918 – 1994]



### Wing Commander McSweyn was President of the Club 1952-53

Allan Francis (invariably “Frank”) McSweyn was born on 31 July 1918 at Ashfield, Sydney. His parents were Neil Alexander McSweyn [1888 -1959] and Millicent (née Rath) [1895-1924]. Neil was a farmer at Ardlethan, NSW, and had served in the 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Light Horse [1915-1917]. They had married in 1918 and Allan had two siblings – Millicent Eileen [1920-1921] - tragically killed in a horse and buggy accident), and John Kevin [1922- ]. Kevin also served as a Flight Sergeant in the RAAF (1942-1948). Millicent died in 1924 and, in poor health, Neil and the family moved to Sydney.

Allan was educated at Kogarah Boys High School and later studied accountancy – although not completing his qualification due to his war service. In the late 1930s he worked firstly as an audit clerk, and then as an accountant for a furniture manufacturer. He saved for flying lessons, gaining a Civil “A” pilot’s licence. A Presbyterian, he was also a keen sportsman who played soccer and cricket for Kogarah teams.

*We thank the History Interest Group and other volunteers who have researched and prepared these Notes. The series will be progressively expanded and developed. They are intended as casual reading for the benefit of Members, who are encouraged to advise of any inaccuracies in the material.*

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On 6 March 1944, at the parish church, Winchester, UK, McSweyn married Barbara Margaret (née Smith) [1920-2016] - a Section Officer in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. They met at an RAF station in Scotland where he was training before posting to 115 Squadron; and it is rumoured that he borrowed the nine pounds from her to purchase her engagement ring. They had two children – a daughter, Susan Gay [b.1946], and a son, Ian Geoffrey.

His war service was as a Royal Australian Air Force pilot serving with the Royal Air Force. He was shot down and captured at Bremen, Germany in June 1941, and made many escape attempts before reaching Britain in December 1943 - and became known as Australia's most persistent escaper.



Pilot Officer McSwain (2<sup>nd</sup> from right) and his 115 Squadron Wellington bomber crew

He had enlisted in No.1 Course of the Empire Air Training Scheme in February 1940. His initial flying training was at Narromine, Australia, followed by advanced flying training in Canada – which he completed being commissioned as a Pilot Officer in December. In April 1941, after completing training in England, he was posted to No. 115 Squadron, Royal Air Force, based at Marham, Norfolk. He was promoted to Flying Officer in June.

McSweyn was shot down on his 14<sup>th</sup> operational flight while commanding a Wellington bomber over Bremen, Germany on 30 June / 1 July 1941. The aircraft was hit by flak before the target but managed to drop its bombs on the target before being attacked by two German night fighters. The rear gunner shot down one enemy aircraft, however the second managed to severely damage the bomber. The crew parachuted out at 400 feet, with only the rear gunner killed as a result of his landing.

McSwain eluded capture for 4 days and found himself in the vicinity of a German fighter station. He attempted to fly a fighter back to England at night, but the ground crew were alerted and captured him. This was his first of ten escape attempts.

His activities as a PoW included:

- Interrogation at Dulag Luft at Frankfurt
- Oflag IXA/H at Spangenberg Castle (July to October 1941). A second thwarted escape attempt.
- Oflag VIB at Dossel. (November 1941 to September 1942). Third escape – recaptured after 2 hours. Attempts at 5 tunnel schemes.
- Oflag XXIB at Schubin (Poland) (September 1942 to April 1943). Three thwarted tunnel and wire escapes.

- Promoted to Flight Lieutenant in December 1942.
- Stalag Luft 3 at Sagen (May to July 1943). Swapped identity with Corporal John McDiarmid, Seaforth Highlanders. Moved on from the camp as a “troublemaker”.
- Stalag VIII B at Lamsdorf (August to September 1943). Captured at sea off Danzig after 6 days escaped. Subsequently he escaped with others and evaded capture through Berlin, Frankfurt, Mannheim, Saarbrücken and into France at Luneville. There they entered the French Resistance network through Lyons, Limoges, and Toulouse. Six weeks working with the Resistance in Ruffec before a difficult crossing of the Pyrenees into Spain; eventually reaching Gibraltar for a flight back to England.

He returned to England in December 1943 and was seconded to the Air Ministry, completed an MI9 Intelligence School course and conducted lecture tours of operational bases instructing in survival and escape techniques. In early 1944 undertook a refresher flying course and was posted to non-operational flying duties in Transport Command. He qualified at the RAF School of Air Transport Course and was promoted Temporary Squadron Leader in July 1944 as an instructor at No.105 (Transport) Operational Training Unit, Bramcote – reported as possessing ‘strong character and above average ability,’ he displayed ‘utmost patience ... particularly when dealing with backward students’.

He served in Transport Command of the RAF in England until November 1945.

For his war service he was awarded the:

- Military Cross as a Flight Lieutenant in May 1944 – for “gallant and distinguished service”. The bland citation is believed to be protection for French Resistance sources who facilitated McSweyn’s eventual escape from Europe. Presented by H.M. King George VI at Buckingham Palace on 10 July 1945.
- Air Force Cross as a Squadron Leader in June 1945 for his post-escape work and flying. Presented at the same investiture as his Military Cross.

In 1953 he received the Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Medal.

On demobilizing in February 1946, he joined the Department of Import Procurement for a brief period. Then, declining a permanent commission in the RAAF, he joined Trans Australian Airlines (“TAA”) in May 1946 as Assistant Manager Flying Training School, Point Cook. While there he qualified as a “B” Class Flying Instructor and as a Commercial Pilot. In August of that year he transferred to Sydney to become Acting NSW Manager for the airline’s first scheduled flights. Then in November 1946 he was appointed Queensland and Northern Territory Manager until August 1955, when he resigned.



Frank McSweyn (centre) on TAA business c.1950

In late 1955 he moved and established a motor dealership at Lismore, New South Wales, and from 1960 held senior roles with American Machine and Foundry Co. (Australia) Pty Ltd, ultimately managing its Melbourne-based southern sales region. AMF was a large American manufacturing conglomerate – with such diverse products as ten-pin bowling machines, tennis racquets, pretzel-twisting machines, nuclear power reactors, ICBM launching systems, bicycles, Harley Davidson motor bikes and many others.

Allan joined the Club in 1947 on moving to Brisbane from Sydney. He joined the Committee in 1949 and was joint Vice-President 1950-51. He was elected President in 1952-53. He was Immediate Past President 1954-55, and it was during the 1954 royal tour of Australia (when Prince Phillip, Duke of Edinburgh was elected a Life Member) that he was elected to Life Membership. Extroverted and sociable, he made friends easily, frequently hosting dinner parties and barbeques.



Wing Commander McSweyn in the 1980's

Allan and Barbara retired to the Gold Coast in the mid-1980s.

Wing Commander McSweyn died of lymphoma in Brisbane on 24 April 1994.

Sources included:

- Various web pages
- *United Service Club, Queensland: The First Century, 1892-1992* by Flight Lieutenant Murray Adams and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Charlton
- Club Meeting Minutes, Annual Reports, and sundry documents
- NAA Service Records
- *Against the Odds Escapes and Evasions by Allied Airmen, World War II*. Edited by Murray Adams
- John Moremon, 'McSweyn, Allan Francis (Frank) (1918–1994)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mcsweyn-allan-francis-frank-29686/text36728>, published online 2020, accessed online 5 September 2020.