

WING COMMANDER WILLIAM 'BILL' SIMPSON McALONEY OBE GC

Engine Fitter / Engineer – The Air Force's only Albert Medal/George Cross Recipient

Incredible Bravery at the Most Junior Rank



Bill McAloney as a Squadron Leader post WW2 (NAA)

The second oldest child and eldest son of William Samuel McAloney and his wife Mary Murphy, William Simpson McAloney was born on 12 May 1910, in Adelaide. He completed his education at Thebarton Technical High School and the Adelaide School of Mines. In 1925, he enlisted in the Citizen Militia Force, serving as a private in 43rd Battalion, while also working locally as a mechanic with several automobile repair businesses.

In 1931, he purchased and managed a garage in the small, isolated community of Wirrula in the west of South Australia, where he repaired cars, trucks and tractors. Experiencing financial difficulties, he was forced to close the business and seek alternative employment. In June 1935 he married Dora Winfred Johnson with whom he would later have seven children.

McAloney enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force in July 1936. Completing initial training as a Fitter, he was posted to No. 1 Squadron at RAAF Base Laverton in September 1936 as a Fitter and Turner, with the rank of Aircraftsman. At No. 1 Squadron he worked with British Bulldog and Hawker Demon aircraft.

Less than a year later, on 31 August 1937, McAloney was one of the ground crew who accompanied three Hawker Demon aircraft that flew to Hamilton for a static ground display at the Hamilton Show for the day. As the aircraft were departing Hamilton for the return flight to Laverton, the second aircraft (A1-32) stalled as it attempted a turn on take-off and suddenly crashed into the ground. McAloney, a passenger in the third aircraft that was still waiting to takeoff, leapt from his aircraft and raced over to the crashed Hawker Demon which had become engulfed in flames. He jumped into the flames and pulled the pilot, who was lying across a burning fuel tank, out onto the wing before being knocked unconscious by an explosion. McAloney was subsequently pulled unconscious from the flaming wreck by onlookers. He was severely burned.

McAloney later recalled:

"I knew I would have to be quick to even get one, I didn't know whether they were still alive or not ... I went in to get hold of the pilot. His clothes were all alight as I pulled him down onto the mainplane. One of his legs went through the fabric and his foot got caught up in this. I kept trying to pull him away, but his smouldering clothes were burning my hands. As I heaved and tugged at him, one of the wing



1 SQN Hawker Demon aircraft at RAAF Laverton in 1938 - the aircraft that AC Bill Simpson would have serviced. (AWM)

tanks exploded and I was hit with the blast. Having run for over a quarter of a mile just previously to reach the men and breathing in all the fumes, plus the heat becoming almost unbearable, I got the blast of it down my lungs. Of course, I was gasping for air and this finished me off."

Tragically, the pilot of the aircraft, FLGOFF Kenneth McKenzie and his observer, SGT Norman Torrens-Witherow, perished in the crash but McAloney recovered after significant time in hospital.

The president of the RAAF court of inquiry into the incident, Squadron Leader Charles Eaton, noted McAloney's "conspicuous gallantry" and the coroner publicly commended his actions. As a result and for his incredible bravery, McAloney was awarded the Albert Medal for his bravery. He was presented with his Albert Medal by the acting Governor-General of Australia, William Vanneck, 5th Baron Huntingfield, in a ceremony at Parliament House, Melbourne on 31 May 1938, while he was still recovering from his injuries.

It was just recognition for a quite remarkable feat, particularly notable given he was a junior airman who had been in the service less than a year. McAloney was the only RAAF Member to receive the Albert Medal and was the last living Australian to be awarded the medal.

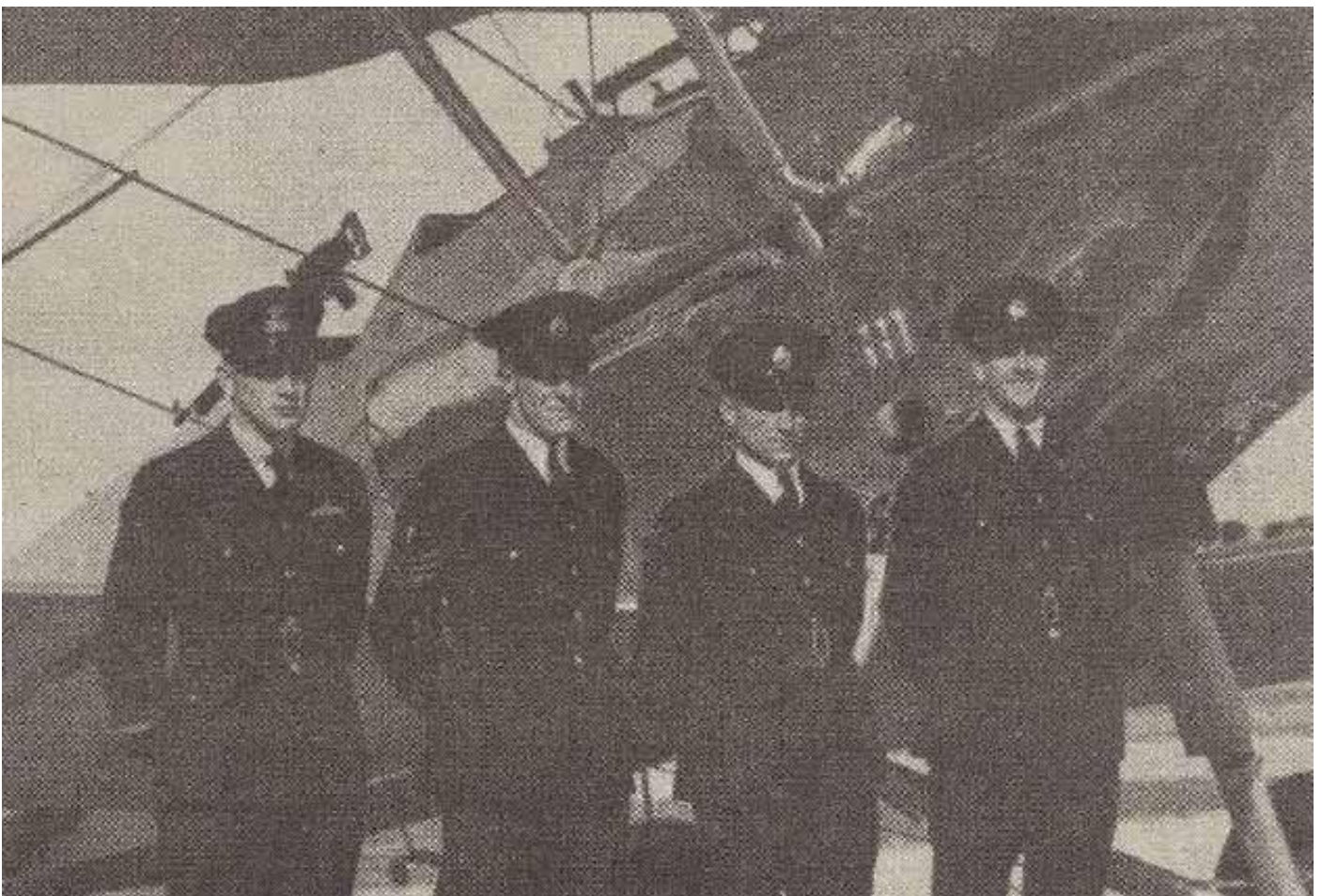


Photo taken at RAAF Laverton in mid-1937 of a Hawker Demon aircraft with FLGOFF McKenzie (left), and the observer gunner, SGT Torrens-Witherow (2nd from left) – (the two aviators killed in the crash at Hamilton on 31 August 1937) and AC McAloney (far right).

Returning to duties, McAloney served throughout World War 2, quickly being promoted through the ranks to Warrant Officer in 1942 and temporary Flight Lieutenant in 1943. He remained in the Melbourne area working at No 1 Aircraft Depot and then at RAAF Headquarters in various technical staff positions. In late 1944, he proceeded on duty to the Netherlands East Indies to fix issues with Pratt and Whitney engines in No. 1 Tactical Air Force.

During 1946, he was involved in another investigation into a series of engine failures which required him to travel across Australia to establish whether the failures were being caused by poor maintenance or defective components.

Wishing to remain in the RAAF after the war, McAloney was able to continue on a short service commission until given a permanent commission and made substantive Flight Lieutenant Engineering Officer in September 1948.

Promoted to Squadron Leader in 1950, McAloney was posted to Singapore in 1952, for twelve months, servicing the No. 1 Squadron Lincoln bombers involved in the Malayan Emergency. Returning to Australia in mid-1953, McAloney completed several engineering staff positions in Melbourne, where he was promoted to Wing Commander.

In October 1960, he was posted to Officer Commanding Engineering Squadron, Aircraft Research and Development Unit; a position he eventually retired from in 1966; an aspect that Air Force specifically extended his retirement age two years to facilitate. This was largely due to his exceptional ability to manage the maintenance of a complex suite of jet and piston engine test aircraft and the modifications and fitting of specialised equipment thereof.

The unit was also supporting the introduction of the new Mirage III fighter, a significantly more complex aircraft than anything the RAAF previously had. From 1965 to 1966, McAloney served as the President of the Mess Committee of the Officers Mess at RAAF Laverton.

For his service at ARDU, McAloney was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 1966. The recommendation for the award specifically stressed:

“His attention to detail and strict emphasis on quality have been the prime factors on building up the excellent safety record enjoyed by ARDU” and concluded “the loyalty, devotion to duty and energy displayed by Wing Commander McAloney surpass what one expects of an officer and are in the very best traditions of the Service.”

Retiring from the Air Force at Wing Commander, after completing 31 years of service, McAloney was made an Honorary Group Captain upon his retirement.

When the Albert Medal was superseded by the George Cross in 1971, he was one of six living Australians to exchange his Albert Medal for the George Cross. He travelled to England in July 1972 to receive the George Cross from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. McAloney later donated the Albert Medal to the RAAF Museum at Point Cook in February 1987.

Considering his humble upbringings, Bill McAloney was one of those extraordinary South Australians who demonstrated incredible bravery at such a junior rank and then served for another three decades in the Air Force to again be recognised at the highest levels. He passed away on 31 August 1995 – ironically, the 57th anniversary of his heroic actions at Hamilton that resulted in him being awarded the Albert Medal. A son, John Douglas McAloney, served in the Army rising to the rank of Colonel and was awarded the Military Cross for distinguished action in the Vietnam War before passing away in 1991, four years before his father.



Bill McAloney in 1985, in retirement, and living in Melbourne. (AWM)

Greg Weller
History Group Member
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