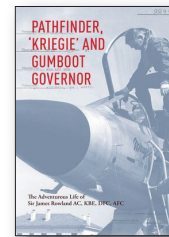


BOOK REVIEW:

Pathfinder, 'kriegie' and gumboot governor: the adventurous life of Sir James Rowland AC, KBE, DFC, AFC



by Air Marshal Sir James Rowland and Dr Peter Yule

Big Sky Publishing: Newport, NSW; 2020; 520 pp; ISBN 9781922387400 (paperback); RRP \$27.75

James Rowland was a Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) bomber pilot in World War II who became a prisoner-of-war¹. Post-war, now an aeronautical engineer, he re-joined the RAAF and became a test pilot, head engineer for the Mirage aircraft procurement, head of the RAAF engineering branch, Chief of the Air Staff, and Governor of New South Wales.

Pathfinder is a succinct overview of Rowland's achievements. It was first published by the RAAF History and Heritage Branch in 2018 and, appropriately, it has been republished for the commemoration of the RAAF centenary in March 2021. In part, the book is Rowland's autobiography and, when in later life the opportunity for note-taking decreased, his story is taken up by Dr Peter Yule. Yule is a research fellow in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne. He has published over 20 books on Australian military, medical and economic history, including the *Collins*-class submarine project. The joint authorship does not detract from the quality of the book and Yule has clearly indicated the parts written by him and those by Rowland.

Born to settler parents in rural New South Wales in 1922, Rowland was brought up on a station near Armidale before attending the University of Sydney to study aeronautical engineering. Life on the station instilled a resilience in him which would stand him in good stead in later life.

Deferring his studies, he joined the RAAF in 1941, and underwent pilot training in the Empire Air Training Scheme at Temora. On arrival in England as a qualified fighter pilot, he was informed that he was to fly bombers as there were no vacancies in Fighter Command, whereas there were plenty in Bomber Command as the 'chop rate' was high.

Selected for operations in the Pathfinder Force, Rowland (aged 22) and his crew served with distinction on Lancasters until, on his 34th mission, a mid-air collision over Hanou, Germany, in 1945 ended his wartime flying. His resilience was called upon during his interrogation by the Gestapo and his imprisonment at Stalag 13. Not knowing the fate of his crew caused him nightmares for the rest of his life. After his death, it emerged that his crew were either killed in the crash or were murdered upon capture.

Post war, Rowland returned to university to complete his aeronautical engineering degree. He re-enlisted in the RAAF in 1947 and re-trained as a test pilot. Thus began an illustrious test flying career during an age when the sound barrier remained an obstacle and jet aircraft were being introduced into service. His service at the Aircraft Research and Development Unit had a lasting impact on the development of the modern RAAF. The Dassault Mirage III fighter aircraft was still under development when the Australian government committed to its purchase. Rowland had to prove the components of the aircraft as they became available and then test fly the aircraft. He taught himself French during this process and led high-level technical meetings concerning the continuing development of the aircraft. His leadership during the procurement of the Mirage was outstanding.

His subsequent movement up through the ranks leading to his appointment as Head of Technical Services recognised his strong professional expertise, leadership skills, drive for improvement, and an ability to mix with all ranks and levels of society.

When the Government selected Sir James to become Chief of the Air Staff (1975–79), it caused a major confrontation within the RAAF. Rowland was not a member of the General Duties Branch and, therefore, customarily ineligible for the position. He remains the only engineer to have led the RAAF. Nevertheless, he was a successful Chief who had to battle the bureaucratic processes imposed on the Services by the Tange Review of Defence (1973), a process that drew the Service Chiefs away from their tasks of ensuring their Services were fit for purpose. Nevertheless, he ensured that he maintained strong links across all parts of the RAAF.

After he retired from the Air Force, he was appointed Governor of New South Wales (1981–89) and then Chancellor of the University of Sydney (1990-91). His service in both roles is replete with examples of his steady leadership, dedication to service, down-to-earth approach, and warm and friendly personality.

This book is well written, easily engaging the reader in an uncomplicated style. Sir James' love of flying continually shines through and his description of his life in the junior ranks is refreshing. It is a story of a man at peace with himself. The book is well referenced and includes photographs that capture the essence of the times. I recommend it to those even with only a passing interest in aviation and the recent history of the RAAF.

Bob Treloar

¹In World War II, Germans referred to Allied prisoners-of-war as *kriegies*.