

Eric John Clarence Barnett

First I would like to welcome everyone here today. Especially those like Russell and Pam Gulliver who have come long distances. Your support is appreciated.

Eric John Clarence Barnett was born on 25 August 1918. At that time, his father, Frederick William Barnett, was 47 and his mother, Elizabeth Helena Barnett, was 45. He then had four living sisters, Elsie who was 23, Muriel who was 21, Coralie who was 19 and Milly who was 16, and two brothers, Frederick who was 10 and Henry or Harry who was 7. Three other siblings had then died.

Dad was born in Glebe. However, the family had come from Kempsey where his father had been, first, a farmer and then a publican. Dad's niece, Moira, tells me the Clarence in his name was in remembrance of the Clarence River.

As by far the youngest of seven children and with quite elderly parents, dad was very much the baby of the family. By the standards of the time, but not of today, he was indulged. However, in the pre-depression era, times were generally tough. The family's prospects were not enhanced with the early death of dad's father.

In any event, dad went to the local school where he excelled at his studies. He won admission to Fort Street Boys High, one of the few selective high schools of the time. He did well in his studies at high school too. He also excelled as a rugby player and, in 1935, gained selection in the Combined High Schools rugby team. The team travelled to Victoria and won an Australia wide competition.

However, in the late 1930s, there were not all that many opportunities available to a working class boy who could not afford to attend full-time university. Dad never saw law or medicine as being career options for him. He told me he saw his career path as being the AMP, the police or teaching. He won a scholarship to Sydney Teachers College and, in the last half of the 1930s, simultaneously attended that College as well as Sydney University, where he undertook, first, an arts degree and subsequently an economics degree.

During this time, dad continued his rugby career and became a first grade rugby union player, initially with Drummoyne – The Dirty Reds – and then with Sydney University. He was awarded a much sought after Blue at Sydney University, but with the advent of war, this was never actually presented to him. I raised this matter last year with one of dad's former students who remains associated with the Sydney University Sports Union. He checked the records and the Blue was presented late last year.

During the late 1930s, dad acquired the nickname "Basher". I asked my mother how that came about and she said that dad was "bashful". I don't think that was the reason. Two well-known rugby players of his era, whom I came to know during my less illustrious rugby career, Cec Ramalli and Barney Walsh, said that dad was a ferocious, take-no-prisoners competitor and that clearly had something to do with it. In any event, the nickname stuck. It went through the war and then from school to school. Only last month I ran into a fellow teacher from the 1960s at North Sydney Boys High. He asked "How's Basher?".

In addition to his rugby activities, dad was also in the surf lifesaving movement. He joined South Curl Curl Surf Lifesaving Club where he used to row surf boats. It was while he was participating in the activities of that Club that he met my mother, Anne, whose brother, Davie McErlane, was another member and fine all round sportsman, including being a first grade rugby league player with North Sydney.

In 1939, World War II broke out and, like most young men of the time, dad joined up becoming a member of the University Regiment. However, he initially carried on his teaching career and, in the early 1940s, was teaching maths at Mosman Boys Intermediate High.

In May 1941, dad commenced flying training at Narromine. Three months after training began, he was assessed as being an average pupil pilot, although his airmanship was then described as "weak". Going through dad's log book, it is apparent that his flying gradually improved and, by July 1942, he was graded "average +" and, later still "above average". By then, he had graduated from flying Wirraways to a much larger fighter/bomber, the Beaufighter. However, there was little opportunity for dad to fine tune his flying skills. By late 1942, he was engaged in the war as a pilot with 31 Squadron, including being involved in the defence of Darwin.

On 3 March 1943, dad, when on RAAF leave, married my mother at the Star of the Sea Church at Milsons Point. Clearly he wasn't at war all of the time as I was born a week after D Day in June 1944.

The war, however, continued. Dad flew on many missions. Newspaper extracts of the time comment on a number of these. Dad was featured in many stories with titles such as "They blast the Japs relentlessly by day and night; live in bush huts and tents", "Zeros and airstrip roller destroyed", "Door flew past plane" and, famously, "Teacher holds strafing record" and "Maths-master pilot gives Japs the stick".

X In October of 1943, the Air Board awarded dad the Distinguished Flying Medal. The citation to that Award reads – and this is quite long – “Sergeant Barnett was posted to No. 31, squadron on 21 September 1942, and has been actively engaged in operations against the enemy since November of that year. He has completed 145 hours of operational flying, which includes 12 raids against enemy targets in Timor and Islands to the north of Australia.

Sergeant Barnett is a most determined and fearless long range fighter pilot who invariably presses home his attacks regardless of anti-aircraft fire and fighter opposition.

On 31 January 1943, while attacking Penefoei by ground strafing, he exploded a large bomb dump. In this attack his aircraft was damaged by fragments from buildings in the vicinity disintegrated by the explosion. In spite of this damage, Sergeant Barnett completed a second attack from a height of 20 to 50 feet, setting fire to two enemy bombers and damaging 2 other aircraft. He then attacked a heavy anti-aircraft position, wiping out its crew, after which he flew between 2 wireless masts, destroying the wireless aerial by running into it and pulling down the Japanese flag flying on one of the masts. On his return to base, fragments of the explosion were taken out of both engines and his airframe was also extensively damaged by flying debris.

Sergeant Barnett’s courage, daring and determination in all his attacks on the enemy are worthy of the highest praise.”

Dad did not finish the war unscathed. He had damaged one of his eardrums which finally led to deafness in one ear and this ended any chance of a job at Qantas. He also had injured his knee and, in later life, this troubled him too. However, then, as recently, he was stoic in dealing with his ailments.

Dad never talked much about the war and it obviously had an effect on him. In fact, in the 40 years following it, he never once attended Anzac Day with members of his Squadron, although he was asked each year to do so. However, some 20 years ago, he did attend and never missed another function. This included attending reunions in Darwin and in Canberra. By the way Jack ^{Anderson} McMahon, Phil Quance and Bill Hosking as well as Shirley Nauthe, the wife of Max Nauthe, all from 31 Squadron, are here today.

X After the war, dad returned to teaching. Although initially he may have seen this as one of the few employment alternatives available to him, he was good for teaching and teaching was good for him. Although the times were not as politically correct as they are now, boys

seemed to enjoy having a teacher who was nicknamed "Basher" and, as previously indicated, the name survived football, the war and postings to various schools.

Dad really had a passion for teaching and was very good at it. He also invariably coached the first grade rugby team of the school concerned, whether it be rugby league or rugby union and was a very successful coach. Very many of the boys he coached went on to play at very high levels, including representing Australia. Andy Town and Andy Stewart of Northern Suburbs and Dennis Preston of St George Leagues are just three players whose names come to mind.

There are a number of documents which attest to my father's quality as a teacher. Just at random, I've seen his inspection report of June 1970, when he was at Meadowbank Boys High. The inspector commented "Mr Barnett is a vigorous personality, essentially practical in outlook, who is in his second year as Deputy Principal. His friendly, unaffected manner, firmness of purpose and ability to infuse life and enthusiasm earn him the respect, confidence and co-operation of parents, staff and pupils. He remains a forceful and energetic teacher, confident in manner, who obtains good class response and participation in his lessons". He particularly said, and this may seem anomalous for someone called Basher, "He shows a friendly interest in pupils, has a sympathetic understanding of their needs and obviously is a strong influence on the boys of the school". This attitude is reflected in an address he gave in 1967 at North Sydney Boys High to the sixth formers who were then leaving the school. He prefaced his speech with a quote from King Lear, "As flies to wanton boys, are we to gods; they – and I believe this means the boys – kill us for their sport".

Now we have an Australian Governor General and, what's more, a woman. In 1964, Lord DeLisle was Governor General of Australia. He was an English peer who, I believe, had been awarded the Victoria Cross. In any event, he was in Australia with his son, Philip, who wished to study to enter an English military academy in the next year. The Governor General asked the Education Department to find Philip tutors in mathematics and English. He expressed a preference that the tutors be decorated men. Dad, then a maths master at North Sydney Boys High School, and an English master from Sydney Boys High School were chosen. For a considerable period, dad attended Admiralty House coaching Philip in mathematics.

In January 1965, the Governor General wrote to dad to inform him that Philip had been successful in all the subjects he took. The Governor General said "I know you will be particularly pleased to hear that of the three subjects, he did best in Mathematics". He went

on to say "This is, I think, the first time that he has shown that he has the ability to tackle mathematical problems. I am, therefore, particularly grateful to you for bringing out a capacity to solve problems, which had hitherto been unrealised".

I read somewhere that Sir Donald Bradman said the greatest partnership he ever had was with his wife. Dad's partnership with my mother was like that too. They were married for more than 50 years. They were perfectly happy in their own company. Dad didn't seem to need the male bonding sessions which so many of my friends and I have. He went home straight after work each day and his only vice, if you could call it that, was that he often went fishing, for many years with mum's father.

Particularly over the last 25 years, Dad and Mum kept to themselves, their extended family and their wonderful neighbours, Carol and Alex Ternacz. Carol, in particular, was a great source of comfort and friendship to my father over the last year or so and, like my wife, Sue, did so much more for him than could ever be expected.

During the last year or so dad also received great assistance from the team at Homecare Services, in particular Judith and Julie. He also received care, compassion and kindness from the staff at Manly Hospital.

So there were a number of facets to dad's long, rich and full life. He was a good scholar and a good sportsman. He was brave in war. He was a truly inspiring teacher and a great family man. We will all miss him.