SIR RANALD DENNIS BUCHANAN

Category: **Elite**

Classification: **COMMERCE – Aviation**

Category: **Honours**

Classification: **Imperial – Knight and MBE**

Ranald Dennis Buchanan who was a great grandson of a convict, who professed to love the Goulburn River Valley, especially the Baerami area, who founded airlines in both Papua New Guinea and Northern Australia, who was a member of the Papua New Guinea parliament, who was awarded two Imperial Honours, and was a man of whom Rudyard Kipling could have truly said, he could "walk with Kings — nor lose the common touch".

Ranald Buchanan was born on 6th November, 1932, at Crown Street Women's Hospital, Surry Hills, Sydney, being one of nine children to Brisbane and Jessie Buchanan. His mother died, when he was six years old, in June 1939. Dennis' father struggled to keep the large family together, but decided, in early 1942, to send his youngest children, Dennis and Lilla, to live with their Uncle Dangar Buchanan, aunt Winton and cousin Inez, on a dairy farm at Mount Dangar, Baerami, West of Denman, in the Upper Hunter Valley of NSW.

These two young siblings, Dennis aged nine and Lilla aged five years, attended Baerami Public School, a one teacher school of about one dozen pupils, with Glen Whalan in charge. He later married their cousin Inez. They were happy in this rural district with at least seven relatives living nearby.

At the end of 1943, Dennis returned to Sydney to complete his primary education at Eastwood Public, while living with a family friend. His father enrolled him at All Saints' Anglican College, a boarding school in Bathurst, where he obtained his Intermediate Certificate in 1948.

The following June, Bobby Gibbes of Gibbes Sepik Airways (GSA), Papua New Guinea, an old boy of All Saints', sought a "lad with a lot of

go in him" to work in Papua New Guinea. The bursar recommended Dennis.

He flew to Wewak in December 1949 with Mr Gibbes. This was his first flight. Dennis, or "Junior" as he was soon known as, learnt a great deal about the airline business at GSA including accountancy, flight schedules and loading and unloading aircraft.

In 1955, aged 23 years, while still working at GSA and with Mr Gibbes' approval, Dennis formed a partnership with Frank King to grow coffee near Goroka. He turned this investment into a "bank" of £4,000 stg, almost six times his original borrowed capital, in about 12 months.

He wooed and wed Della Brown, a young Chinese girl, in Lae on 27th December, 1956 and they became proud parents of nine children.

Dennis was soon to start a life-long business career, principally in the airline business. He purchased, in January 1958, Territory Airlines Pty Ltd based in Goroka, with two aircraft for £12,000 stg. Despite borrowing £500 each from his father and a brother, the profitable venture resulted in being paid for in just two years. He was an astute entrepreneur, operating mainly Cessna planes, which were ideally suited to conditions in the New Guinea Highlands. By June, 1969, he had 21 aircraft. In 1974, he changed the name Territory Airlines Pty Ltd to Talair Pty Ltd, a Buchanan family owned company. At the peak of its operation Talair had 70 aircraft, 1,000+ employees and served 150 ports. With three larger planes, including a 36 seat mini-airline, Talair competed strongly with the national airline Air Niugini.

When economic conditions deteriorated and fare increases became difficult to obtain, Dennis, in 1993, reluctantly closed his Papua New Guinea operations and sold some planes overseas, sold some planes to other small Papua New Guinea operators and others were transferred to his new Queensland airline, Flight West Airlines Pty Ltd (FWA) which he had founded in 1987.

Once again, Dennis built up a substantial regional airline which, in the early 1900s, had a $90m revenue, carried 400,000+ passengers per year, employed 400+ people, had 16 aircraft and flew to 34 destinations in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Norfolk Island. Some aviation experts claim that it was the biggest family owned airline in the world.

In early 2000, Dennis, who was suffering from myeloid leukaemia, and mindful of increasing airline costs of operation, attempted to sell the company. Failing to attract a buyer, Dennis put FWA into members

voluntary liquidation on 19th June, 2001. The company ceased trading while solvent and had nett assets in excess of $6M which was the culmination of almost 52 years in aviation.

This highly successful businessman had served his community well. He had one term in the Papua New Guinea House of Assembly from 1968 and was awarded a Member of the British Empire in the 1976 Papua New Guinea Queen's Birthday Honours List for services to aviation and tourism. In 1991, he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth ll at Buckingham Palace for services to aviation in Papua New Guinea.

Sir Dennis passed away on 29th August, 2001. A remembrance service was held at St John's Anglican Cathedral, Brisbane on 31st August, 2001. He was laid to rest in the graveyard at St Matthews Anglican Church, Mount Dangar in his beloved Baerami area, quite close to his Asaro Lodge horse stud on which he had intended to retire, but is now conducted by his New Guinea-born son, John.

This Buchanan family were pioneers in the Baerami district. John Buchanan (1818-1898) came to NSW as a convict on Waterloo (5) in 1838, received his ticket-of-leave in the 1840s and was engaged by John Hale (also an ex-convict) to take horses from Windsor to Patrick Plains (Singleton). In 1861, he took up a selection at Baerami and, in 1879, won an award for wheat grown in the Hunter Valley. He hid his convict background and lived a blameless life. He was buried on 11th June, 1898, at Mount Dangar, in the same churchyard cemetery as his great-grandson, Sir Ranald Dennis Buchanan, MBE, the subject of this profile.

Inducted December 2003