

Eulogy

Kenneth John McPherson 1931 - 2008

The new Superintendent is a bloke from Kingaroy, McPherson – ex Brisbane. You remember, the bloke whose photo was in the paper, beside the white horse, he was at Theodore at the time, and on Thursday Island before that. He's got a reputation for being a good fund raiser. I suppose that means we will never be free of selling those stinking art union tickets.

This speculation in 1979 by staff at QATB Rockhampton Centre, about this new superintendent proved to be very much off the mark. "John Mac" or "McPherson" as he came to be known, quickly displayed himself to be committed to quality and continuous improvement before those terms became managerial parlance and he also proved himself a very competent provider of resources.

He was particularly committed to, and supportive of, the staff objective of two-officer crews on all cases, and to improving the clinical currency and competency of all operational staff in Rockhampton. Importantly for ambulance patients, he was committed to fund raising strategies that did not directly utilise operational staff.

I clearly remember pestering him about the risks associated with officers having little more than a first-aid qualification and the lack of induction of new staff. Of particular concern was the wide variation in care administered by air attendants in the air ambulance. John listened and said nothing more. About a month later, he came to me with a pair of epaulettes and a key, and said the committee and I agree with your concerns, I have told them we need a training officer, your office will be the old bedroom upstairs, give me a list of equipment you need by the end of the week and a plan for staff training for the next committee meeting. And that was typically John, highly effective and matter of fact.

Within 3 years of his appointment to Rockhampton, John had achieved 2-officer crewing, arranged a second air ambulance, opened a new building with modern communications room and training facilities, overseen the introduction of a range of staff training programs, including a new cadetship, and improved the financial capacity of the Centre to comfortably fund all of this and more - achievements well beyond anything we could have ever envisaged in such a short time.

Graham Buxton, who is here today, and was John's Dept Supt at Rocky, recently described John as the best mentor he had ever had. Graham went on to say John's influence enabled him to contribute in a way he had never imagined.

On leaving Rockhampton in the late 80's to take up his appointment as Superintendent Brisbane, John had, in his time there, modernised the fleet, the sub-centre buildings, expanded the air ambulance fleet to 3 aircraft, introduced early forms of computerisation and modern technology into the office administration and ensured that all staff were exposed to quality training, including in-hospital sessions (with the help of Dr Harvey Hunt who is here today) and ensured that staff had a program of in-service training. John was adamant also that in Rockhampton's heat, all operational vehicles would be air-conditioned for the benefit of both patients and staff - and they were.

In 1991, along with Malcolm McDonald OAM who is here today, John and Malcolm made history as the inaugural Deputy Commissioner's for the new Queensland Ambulance Service. Both had been strong advocates for the changes now incorporated into our ambulance service.

John's commitment to continuous improvement continued throughout his time as Deputy Commissioner Operations in the new Qld Ambulance Service, until his retirement in 1994. When 22 of us became District Superintendents in 1991, each received specific guidance from John on what he expected to be achieved in our respective areas of operations.

Peter McMurtrie, also a co-Dept Commissioner with John, recently observed, for a bloke that some saw on the outside as a grumpy old man who probably did not tolerate fools easily, John on the inside contained a heart of gold in which there was a passion not only for the job, but for caring for those under his command down to the lowest level.

John's time as Deputy Commissioner marked a significant and challenging period in his ambulance career. He had suddenly inherited a political perspective to his role, answering to senior bureaucrats and ministerial minds, and to government - people who were much more challenging, demanding and powerful than any local QATB committee members he had ever dealt with.

John adjusted quickly to this new environment. I recall on occasions when a number of officers-in-charge who were previously superintendents were caught misbehaving, John was particularly clear and forthright in developing their understanding of expected standards of professional behaviours. He was even clearer in enlightening them to the likely consequences of their behaviour becoming a negative story for Ambulance on the front page of the Courier Mail.

John enjoyed his fish and of course the odd serve of chips and from time to time made mention of his seafood treats on TI. In Rocky, we could always anticipate stopping somewhere for fish and chips when on a "bit of a drive" with John, or going back to the Centre to work on some new project. He liked his pepper and would sprinkle the pepper on to the chips for over a minute, something that Terry Beitz and I saw him do with his lunch at the hospital last week. Sadly he was too ill then to take more than a bite or two of his lunch that day.

Like most ambos, John would drop just about anything to go for a "bit of a drive". He was a very competent but fast driver in his heyday. On one occasion, with John driving a V8 1-Tonne Ambulance, we travelled from Rocky to Brisbane in 6 ½ hours, at a time when most took 7 ½ hours, and we even stopped for a quick snack on the way. John's later role as Deputy Commissioner allowed him to do what he enjoyed a lot, i.e. go for a "bit of a drive" in all parts of the state.

Following his retirement from Queensland Ambulance in 1994, John continued his interests in preserving life by caring for plants through his involvement in the Nursery. He also sought to preserve life more indirectly through the dedication of time, expertise and energy on behalf of the Queensland Cancer Fund.

John's early days in Brisbane QATB constituted an environment of strict disciplinarians (ex military people) and die-hard traditionalists, of which he was neither. His appointment to QATB Thursday Island Centre changed his life and his way of thinking, both about the communities he served and the people of the community.

John (and Jean) had a strong regard for, and affinity with, Indigenous Queenslanders. Mostly this can be directly attributed to his time on Thursday Island and also in Theodore. He was highly regarded on TI and he and his family had made many friends with whom they remained in contact over the years.

John was one of a handful of people in Qld Ambulance over time who really understood the community perception of ownership of its ambulance service, and the implications of this

for those providing such services. This understanding was the key to his success in fund raising - for the ambulance initially, and later for the cancer fund and other charities. He could see very clearly what was acceptable and achievable and what was unlikely to be popular.

John began his service with the QATB Brisbane Centre in September 1953, at the age of 22. Les Wilson tells of a young John at Oxley, who was one of the first officers to be stationed there on its opening in March 1961. In those days, most ambulance child cases were taken to the Mater by crews south of the river. Almost all of John's cases went over the river to the "Royal." Why was this so? Les says because that's how John could get to see Jean who worked at the Royal, John put up his hand for all cases going through to that hospital.

As he matured, John's focus on the good of humanity strengthened. Leo McNamara observed that John was a man who was revered by his colleagues and others. He was a man of vision, whose tragic loss when Jim was taken prematurely, was turned to a positive through the creation of the Kenneth James McPherson Memorial Trust. His vision to build and develop the profession of Ambulance Officer for the benefit not only of ourselves as paramedics, but also for the ill and injured we seek to serve. He also saw benefits in the Trust for the medical profession with whom we work hand in hand to provide excellence in pre-hospital care that enables them to deliver the health care needed in a modern society.

But most of all John should be remembered for his humanity and for his vision of a family of ambulance officers who are well led, well trained and well resourced. He showed leadership throughout his career and has shaped many of the leaders of today in the QAS - through tough and not so tough times

Leo observed that John showed a determination to build an ambulance service that was second to none. He did so with empathy and he engendered a reverence and sense of dignity and displayed a genuine love of his fellow person. John McPherson above all was a decent man.

John had great expectations for his son Jim. Jim and his sister Joanne had lived and breathed ambulance and hospitals from their early years. It is not surprising both embarked on health-care careers. Up to his untimely death, Jim displayed many of the qualities and values of his father. He would come to Rocky to visit and get involved in projects that enhanced the audio-visual aspects of our training facilities, often sounding like a replay of John in his understanding of the need for ambulance people to improve their clinical practices.

Jim's sudden passing left John and Jean devastated. It would be fair and understanding to say that they never really got over it. In 1989, when the opportunity emerged to establish a foundation in Jim's name to commemorate all of those who gave their lives in ambulance service in Queensland, John and Jean were both touched and excited by the proposal. They were both foundation members on the original Trust Committee and continued to serve and contribute on the more recently titled KJ McPherson Education & Research Foundation.

Our Acting Commissioner Neil Kirby has commented, "From my very beginnings in the Queensland Ambulance service some 30 years ago, John has been a senior statesman of the QAS. It is due to that statesman status that I have always addressed John as Mr McPherson.

Many staff would give testimony to his leadership and guidance over his many years of service and, even throughout his retirement years, he has never been far from the

Service. I (Neil) am personally indebted to Mr McPherson and the McPherson family, being a recipient of the Kenneth James McPherson Memorial Trust QAS Personal Development Award in 1992. I regarded it then, and still do today, a significant honour to have received that award, which was in recognition of my work in rural and remote service delivery – a topic always of special interest to Mr McPherson.

Neil added further - Mr McPherson's continued and tireless work for the KJ McPherson Education and Research Foundation is testimony to his life long dedication to his family and the Queensland Ambulance Service. He is cemented as a significant contributor to the history of the QAS and will be sadly missed.

These comments from Neil have been echoed widely. John's life in the ambulance service and beyond has been one of service to humanity. Like many of his peers, it has been a life of long days, high responsibility, of dedication and commitment.

Finally Gerard Lawler Chairman of the KJ McPherson Education and Research Foundation has been close to John and his family for many years. Gerard will remember John as a respected leader, friend and confidant, who provided both a learning and support environment for the first regional commissioners through his capacity to listen, analyse and provide wise feedback.

Gerard remarked that John's approach and style ensured a very dependable setting for us all during a very busy period of change and development in the service in those early years. He was respected and admired for his values, ethics and capacity to 'get things done' with a clear focus on all patients and staff.

While some aspects of John demeanour was very quiet and unassuming, his very real presence and stature as the Deputy Commissioner Operations for the State of Queensland was most inspiring and resolute as was his determination to make the service the best possible.

John, on behalf of your past staff, patients and significant contribution - thank you and rest easy, we will miss you.

May I then summarise as follows:

Kenneth John McPherson

1931 – 2008



*Toward the end of his life,
With a trilogy he ailed.
But as in his prime,
His strength of purpose prevailed.
For this was a man,
Strong with intent.
And there was no illness
His courage could dent.*

*A lifetime of commitment
To projects galore.
Supporting communities, disabilities
Ambulance and more.
His wife and his soul-mate
Jean by his side,
And often the children
Swept up in the tide.*

*His ambulance dedication
Spanned forty years.
Including the death of son Jim
That brought a torrent of tears.
John started in Brisbane,
Then TI and Theodore
Kingaroy and Rocky,
Heading for Brisbane for sure.*

*He was a provider of resources
That few could surpass.
For ambulance and charity
The funds raised were vast.
His instincts were tuned
To where funds could be raised.
T'was ne'er in his nature
To seek to be praised.*

*Like most ambulance leaders
John attracted his share
Of support, of criticism,
Both strong in his air.
But none could e'er question
His commitment to the cause,
Evidenced here today
In the crowd he now draws.*

*We are here now to celebrate
His dedication in life,
So soon after we did it
for Jean – his wife.
The legacy they left
Is there to be seen,
John would have us think
It was all due to Jean.*

*To laud the woman
behind this man
Is just and is fair.
But in most of their ventures
They achieved as a pair.*

*The hour has now come
To bid him farewell.
The future of his soul
Who really can tell?
But one thing is for certain
If he has his way,
His life in the here-after
Will be busy each day.*

*Mick Davis AM
1 February 2008*