



The Hon. TEF Hughes AO KC

It is with great sadness that I pass on news of the death today of the Hon. TEF (Tom) Hughes AO KC at the grand age of 101. Few lives have been as well lived as his.

Tom was, quite simply, an icon of the Australian legal profession, so loved and admired by generations of lawyers for his forensic brilliance and legal acumen, devastating cross-examinations, marvellous command of the English language, grasp of legal principle, as well as the strength of his civic values. He always exhibited the highest standards of professional civility and courtesy, even in the context of hard fought battles.

Tom Hughes was not only a lawyer but in the 1960s and early 1970s, a prominent Liberal Party politician and, appropriately, Attorney General of the Commonwealth of Australia between 1969 and 1971. In that capacity, he appeared in many leading constitutional cases in the High Court of Australia in which he continued to appear regularly following his return to the New South Wales Bar of which he became President between 1973 and 1975. The next three decades would cement his reputation as one of the finest trial lawyers and advocates in our nation's history. He appeared in the High Court on 91 occasions between 1949 and 2010.

Tom was admitted to the Bar in 1949, following distinguished and courageous service in the air force during the Second World War. More than 50 years later, he was created a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour in the French Republic in recognition of his service commanding Sunderland flying boats instrumental in D Day Operations, guarding the invasion fleet against enemy submarines. Of that service, as with so much of his life, he exhibited great modesty. He retired from practice in 2013, having argued his final case in the High Court of Australia in 2010, at the age of 87. It was my great honour to have been his junior in his second last appearance in 2009.

Preparing and appearing with Tom was a privilege and wonderful education for any junior barrister. His forensic mastery was underscored by hard work and great discipline. An early riser, he would travel by public transport to chambers before dawn and systematically work up the case, particularly spending his time crafting questions for witnesses or memorable phrases to deploy in opening or closing address to capture the essence of his client's case or the weakness in that of his opponent. At this and with the use of language more generally, he was an absolute master.

Although capable of great flourish and flair, he deeply respected the institutions he served so well and within which he worked so skilfully and honourably.

Tom Hughes was a wonderful man, of large spirit, great style and a true patriot. He had a deep love of country and Australian history in which he was an active participant and player.

He will be greatly missed but his legend will live on in the court rooms of Australia. To his cherished family, I offer my deepest sympathy and that of the Supreme Court of New South Wales.

The Hon. Andrew Bell
Chief Justice of New South Wales

28 November 2024