

AUSTRALIAN FLYING CORPS 1912 – 1921
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In August next year will see the centenary commemorations of the first actions by Australian Forces in the First World War. This relatively brief campaign antedated Gallipoli and indeed when the actions were successfully concluded, the First Australian Imperial Force had barely started its recruitment. I refer here to the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force to German New Guinea in August and September 1914.

But more about that later and I will now move on to a brief discussion of the state of development of civil air transportation during the decade before World War I.

The prolific futuristic science fiction writer and, at times a controversial, novelist H G Wells (1866 – 1946) wrote a book entitled *The War in the Air* in which he predicted the destruction of civilization by fleets of aircraft against which there was no defence. The book, his 15th work amongst a bibliography of 41 titles, was published a little over a century ago, in 1908.

A year later, in 1909, the English Channel, a distance of some 37 kilometres between Dover and Calais, was crossed by a Frenchman in a French designed and built monoplane. Born Louis Charles Joseph Bleriot, but known as Henri, (1872 – 1936) he was an engineer, aviator and the inventor of the first practical headlamps for car. He landed awkwardly in quite gusty weather to great ovation and promptly pocketed the £1,000 prize for completing the inaugural trans-Channel flight.

The aircraft flew, almost wave-hopping, at an altitude of seventy-five meters with an air-speed of about seventy two kilometres per hour and the gusting and changeable winds together with poor visibility dictated a very meandering flight-path. At that speed and altitude Henri's aircraft was hardly likely to leave a condensation trail. Not surprisingly the crossing took thirty-six minutes.

The history of the use of military air power antedates the First World War. In 1911 Italy went to war with the Turks in order to conquer the two Turkish provinces, Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. This they achieved and thereafter in 1934 the Italians were to unite the two provinces under the name Libya. The first military reconnaissance mission in wartime was flown by an Italian Army pilot over Turkish lines in Tripolitania on the 23rd October 1911 in a Bleriot type XI monoplane. The second occasion of the use of wartime aviation was during the First Balkan War in 1912 – 1913 between Turkey and the Balkan League consisting of Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece. The reconnaissance missions were carried out using Henry Farman Biplanes.

In September of the same year of Bleriot's historic flight, in 1909, the Australian government showed commendable and astonishing foresight by offering a prize of £5,000 for the development of a "Flying machine for military purposes". On the 30th December 1911 the Commonwealth Gazette announced that the Army would "seek the appointment of two competent mechanists and aviators and that the government would not accept liability for aviation accidents". On the 3rd of July 1912, the first flying machines were ordered and the next month saw the appointment of the first two Australian Army aviators, Henry Petre and Eric Harrison. On the 7th March 1913 the government officially announced the formation of the Central Flying School and the formation of the Australian Aviation Corps. The term Australian Flying Corps first appeared in Military Orders in late 1914.

In late 1914, Lieutenant Richard Williams landed a Bristol Boxkite at the Central Flying School at Point Cook and subsequently he became the first military pilot to qualify for his wings in Australia. This was not, however, the first flight of a military aircraft in Australia. This had been achieved by Lieutenant Eric Harrison flying a similar aircraft, nine months earlier on the 1st March 1914. The Bristol Boxkite was introduced in 1910 and was built by the British and Colonial Aeroplane Company in Bristol, England, with production ceasing in 1914. It was a tandem two-seat pusher biplane featuring a propeller installed to the rear of the engine. It was primarily a training aircraft.

In 1921 Williams became the first commander of the Australian Air Force, consisting then of a mere 151 personnel. The *Air Force Act, An Act Relating to Air Defence, No 33 of 1921* later constituted the RAAF as an independent service which would become the second oldest international Air Force, now 90 years in existence.

On the 4th August 1914, Britain declared war on Germany and two days later, Australia received its first request from Britain to take part in the conflict. The British Secretary of State for the Colonies telegraphed the Australian Governor-General stating, "If your Ministers desire and feel themselves able to seize German wireless stations at Yap in the Marshall Islands, [Yap in fact is in the Caroline Islands,] Pleasant Island, [now the Republic of Nauru], and New Guinea, we should feel that this was a great and urgent Imperial service. Other Dominions are acting in a similar way on the same understanding, in particular, suggestion is being made to New Zealand in regard to [German] Samoa". By the 10th of August, the Governor General sent a reply telegram informing Britain that an expeditionary force of 1500 men was being organised for the New Guinea action.

The small number of graduates of the Central Flying School's first course, led by Lieutenant Eric Harrison, together with a single BE 2c aircraft was included in the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force. However, such was the limitation of the enemy resistance that the Australian Aviation Corps troops returned to Melbourne without having unpacked its aircraft. In the attack by the Expeditionary Force on German-held Rabaul on the morning of the 11th September 1914, the light Australian casualties amounted to six killed and four wounded. The dead included that of the first Australian Army Medical Officer killed in the First World War, 24 year-old Captain Brian Pockley, AAMC, from Sydney.

Early in 1915 the Indian government asked Australia to contribute pilots, aircraft and ground crew mechanics to support the Indian Flying Corps' operations against the Turks in Mesopotamia, now modern day Iraq. No aircraft could be spared but four officers and forty-one airmen collectively known as the Half Flight were rapidly despatched. They arrived in Mesopotamia in May 1915 and by November that same year all four of the original pilots had been killed. In July 1915 Lieutenant George Merz, a medical graduate from the University of Melbourne, was the first Australian airman to die in combat in the First World War. Dr Merz with his New Zealand observer were murdered and their aircraft burnt by Arab nomads after engine failure had caused a forced landing. After three months operations the Half Flight was reinforced by British personnel and renamed 30 Squadron Royal Flying Corps. The predominantly Indian Army garrison at Kut-al-Amara, on the banks of the River Tigris in southern Mesopotamia, surrendered to the investing Turkish force in April 1916. Among the 10,000 Indian and 3,000 British troops were nine Australian Flying Corps mechanics. Only two of the AFC mechanics survived their internment. Number 30 Squadron performed the first air supply operation in history dropping food and ammunition during early April 1916 to the besieged Kut defenders.

By 1915 the increasing flow of manpower enabled the Australian government to increase the AFCs contribution to the war in the air. Number 1 Squadron was formed at Point Cook in January 1916 and arrived in Egypt in April 1916. Subsequently numbers 2, 3 and 4 Squadrons were formed at the Central Flying School between September and October 1916 and continued further intensive training in England. Finally after pilot conversion to operational fighter aircraft such as Sopwith Scouts, Sopwith Camels and RE8s, the 2, 3 and 4 squadrons progressively arrived on the Western Front and commenced combat operations in late 1917. All the AFC squadrons on their formation prior to leaving Australia suffered from pilots with insufficient hours on type, operating usually with insufficient number of aircraft and lacking adequately equipped ground support.

The first four AFC squadrons were all integrated into the Royal Flying Corps and were initially allocated RFC designations of 67, 68, 69 and 71 Australian Squadrons RFC through till 1918 when they resumed their original AFC designations. Four additional AFC training squadrons were raised in Gloucestershire, England, as Numbers 5, 6, 7 and 8. These too were redesignated 29, 30, 32 and 33 Australian Squadrons, RFC. Wherever flying training was undertaken, and in what aircraft type,

it was certainly a dangerous occupation. RFC statistics show that during the First War training programmes, on average, every pilot wrecked two aircraft completely and destroyed six undercarriages. Accidental aircraft and pilot losses were not unique to First War flying conditions. In one three-month period during the Battle of Britain, 463 Hurricanes suffered from non-combat mishaps, sometimes total and fatal. As many as one-third of both Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding's, RAF Commander-in-Chief, Fighter Command, and Reichsmarshal of the Greater German Reich Hermann Goering's overall fighter losses were accidental.

No 1 Squadron AFC remained in the desert and patrolled extensively both west of the Nile and east into the Sinai often in very unfriendly flying conditions in single engine aircraft that were intermittently quite unreliable. Number One Squadron became involved in the revolution that air bombardment brought to modern warfare. In November 1916 nine BE2s carrying 20-pound bombs and one Martinsyde G 100 carrying a single 100-pound bomb struck the Turkish stronghold of Beersheba. The operation was completed by the observer-gunners photographing the resultant damage. The squadron was deployed to Palestine in December 1916. In March 1917 near Gaza, Lieutenant Frank MacNamara was awarded the first AFC Victoria Cross. On the 31st October 1917, Number One Squadron returned to Beersheba as part of the force that captured the town an action best remembered for the bold cavalry charge of the Australian 4th Light Horse Brigade. The BE 2 designed by Geoffrey de Havilland was introduced in 1912 and was flown throughout the war. It was a 2-seater biplane with a pilot and an observer-gunner used primarily as a reconnaissance and a trainer aircraft.

Number 2 Squadron arrived on the Western Front prior to the Battle of Cambrai during November and early December 1917 and flew low-level DH5 fighters in order to strafe entrenched troops, gun positions, fortifications and supply trains. The de Havilland 5 was a single seater fighter biplane introduced in May 1917. It was armed with a single .303 Vickers machine gun fitted with synchronised gearing to fire through the propeller blades.

In a later deployment to the Western Front, Number 3 Squadron's task was perhaps less spectacular. Flying RE8s for reconnaissance and army liaison, using visual observation and photography, was nonetheless hazardous flying. During the Battle of Hamel in July 1918, 3 Squadron devised a system for dropping small arms ball ammunition to the troops of Lieutenant General John Monash's Australian Corps. This aerial re-supply operation was a world's first. Later 3 Squadron were also tasked for day and the difficult flying involved in night bombing raids. The RE 8 was a 2-seater biplane introduced in 1916. It was designed to replace the much less effective BE 2 biplane. The RE 8s main roles were for reconnaissance and as a bomber. It was armed with a Vickers machine gun with interrupter manned by the pilot whilst the observer-gunner manned twin mounted .303 calibre Lewis guns.

Last to arrive in theatre at the Western Front, was No 4 Squadron which was to become the AFCs most successful fighter unit in terms of enemy aircraft destroyed. In part this was due to the squadron having been equipped from the outset with one of the war's outstanding fighters, the Sopwith Camel F 1. This aircraft was introduced late in the war in June 1917 and the F 1 was the main production version. It was a single seat biplane fighter armed with twin 0.303 Vickers fitted with synchronised gearing.

Casualty rates amongst First War flying crews were unbelievably high reaching 88 per cent in some squadrons for extended periods and averaging more than 50 per cent for the war. The life-expectancy of a new pilot on the Western Front was three weeks which equated with the expectations of the Allied infantry platoon commander. The German air losses were probably higher. Additionally other unique hazards of flying involved the sustained flight above 3,000 meters in winter weather in open cockpits. Decompression sickness, hypothermia, dehydration to mention only some of the new physiological disturbances attending combat aviation that added to a pilot's risks.

The rise of Air Power between 1914 and 1918 represented the 20th century's first revolution in military affairs. The early leaders of the RAAF had thus all received a rigorous professional education, a legacy to pass on to young trainee flight crews.

Of the original 8 AFC Squadrons, only five remain today on the RAAF Order of Battle. 1 and 6 Squadron, based at Amberley, fly F/A- 18F Super Hornets. Numbers 2,3 and 4 Squadron are based at Williamtown. 2 Squadron was reformed in 2000 to operate Boeing 737 Wedgetail E-7 Airborne Early Warning and Control aircraft. 3 Squadron operates the soon to be replaced F/A 18- A/B Hornets and 4 Squadron's function is to train Forward Air Controllers. Both 7 and 8 SQNs, operating DAP Beaufort medium bombers, were disbanded at the end of WW II. 5 SQN, operating Bell UH-1 Iroquois helicopters was disbanded in 1989.

Such were the modest beginnings in the development of RAAF Aerospace Power into the 21st Century with a current force mix of F/A- 18A/B Hornet and F/A – 18F Super Hornets, twelve recently purchased Boeing EA 18G Growler electronic warfare aircraft, the Airborne Early Warning and Control E-7 Wedgetail and the KC -30A Air-to-Air Refuelling tankers. The high endurance and capacity of Unmanned Aerial Systems expand the intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance role of the RAAF.

The transition to the fully stealth F- 35A Joint Strike Fighter engaging new weapon systems, sensors, networks and data-fusion capacity, to replace the F/A 18 A/B Hornets, will further enhance the 2013 Defence White Paper strategic directions to Air Force.

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