



# THE FIRST FATEFUL SHOT: PORT PHILLIP BAY, AUGUST 1914

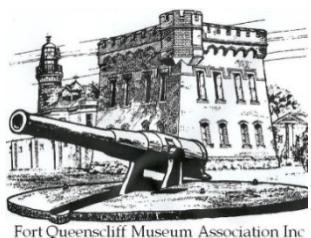


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# Fledglings: Australia's Military Aviation and preparations for war

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## Introduction

Australia was not ready to provide a credible military aviation capability at the outbreak of World War I.

This was certainly not for any lack of appreciation that a military aviation capability was required. It was more due to the political and economic situation in Australia in the second decade of the twentieth century. The rapid pace of aviation technical development in Britain, Europe and the United States—and the successive Federal Governments' inevitable lag in keeping abreast of aviation matters—conspired with Australia's remoteness, and matters of greater urgency to politicians, to ensure that military aviation was slow to develop in Australia. Australian military aviation was immature at best at the outbreak of the war. The determined will of a handful of notable politicians and the power of public opinion brought a rudimentary capability into being just in time to participate in Australia's first overseas action of the war.

To claim Australia was not ready to provide a military aviation capability, it would be useful to know what constituted a mature capability in August 1914. Numbers vary, but Germany had about 246 aircraft in military service, organised into field detachments; France had 160, organised into 21 squadrons; Russia had some 260 aircraft of varying standard, organised into mixed squadrons; while Britain had 113 aircraft, organised into four squadrons with depots and a flying school. Not all of those aircraft were suitable for front line work of course.

By comparison, Australia was able to boast five aircraft, two flying instructors and four mechanics cum mechanical instructors, all employed at a single flying school. There were no operational squadrons and certainly no flying corps. The corps existed as a concept only, without its official title of the 'Australian Flying Corps' and without being placed on the order of battle. However, unlike Britain, France and Germany, Australia was not preparing to fight a war of national survival.

From such humble beginnings, Australia was ultimately to provide a viable military aviation capability that contributed to the war; and perhaps more importantly, the experience gained ultimately led to the establishment of a separate air service—the Royal Australian Air Force—and also to a significant contribution to the establishment of a national system of commercial airlines.

This presentation will outline the establishment of Australia's military aviation capability and its preparation for war in the years and months preceding December 1914.

The presentation is in four parts and will discuss: the events leading to the decision to form a military aviation capability from 1909; the formation of that capability over the next five years; the early operations of Central Flying School; and the (somewhat anticlimactic) first deployment of Australian aircraft on overseas operational service to German New Guinea in November 1914.

### Events leading to the decision to form a military aviation capability from 1909

People have been fascinated by the possibility of human flight since the dawn of recorded history. There are biblical references to flying horse-drawn chariots of fire, and the Greek legend of Daedalus and Icarus still strikes a chord after 2000 years. Nineteenth century newspapers fuelled this long-standing fascination by reporting almost every hair-brained scheme to help humans ascend and remain (at least temporarily) airborne. The gradual discovery of the principles of flight took the work of many people over a long time. Experiments using gliders by England's George Cayley and Germany's Otto Lilienthal provided foundation knowledge that was built on by the likes of Lawrence Hargrave in Australia. The Wright family of the United States is now given credit for being the first to achieve powered, sustained and controlled, heavier-than-air flight in 1903. Their need for secrecy in the hope of gaining financial advantage from their invention meant that their achievement was not widely reported—nor even believed—at the time.

Credit for proving to the public that heavier-than-air powered flight was practical goes to Brazilian-born Alberto Santos-Dumont, who flew his *14-bis* aircraft at a chateau near Paris in December 1906. He ignited intense public interest in flying that ensured France was to become the first great aviation nation. French engineering knowledge gained in the manufacture of cycles and motor cars held the nation in good stead, and—unlike Britain—France was not hampered by restrictive traffic legislation.

In July 1909, Frenchman Louis Bleriot won the £1000 prize offered by Britain's *Daily Express* newspaper for being the first to cross the English Channel by air. The paper's proprietor, Lord Northcliffe, confirmed his 1905 claim that, the day the Channel is crossed, 'England is no longer an Island'.

The military potential of aviation was realised by European military authorities long before 1909 of course: observation balloons had their military debut in the 1790s. Italian air power theorist Giulio Douhet wrote in 1909 that, 'at present we are fully conscious of the importance of the sea. In the near future, it will be no less vital to achieve the same kind of supremacy in the air.' Before long, the first use of aerial bombardments came with the dropping of grenades from Italian observation dirigibles against Arab and Turkish forces east of Tripoli during the Italo-Turkish War in October 1911. In the same campaign, Lieutenant Giulio Gavotti dropped hand grenades on Turkish encampments from his Taube aircraft on 1 November.

Britain took longer to catch onto the flying craze that had seized continental Europe, but from 1908, airfields sprang up around England, notably at the Brooklands motor racing track in Surrey, at Sheerness in Kent, on Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire and at Farnborough in Hampshire. The Royal Aero Club began issuing Aviator's Certificates to pilots in 1910.

The 1909 Imperial Conference in London had warned of increased German and Japanese militarism and suggested that military aviation might be useful in countering the threats. Offering prizes was suggested as a means of hastening the design of aircraft suitable for military purposes. So, the Australian Government offered the huge sum of £5000 for an Australian-made military observation aircraft that met a set of stringent conditions. Many designs were submitted, but the competition closed in mid 1910 with no successful applicants by the closing date.

Some foreign-made aircraft were imported to Australia—including a Wright Flyer in 1909 and a Bleriot in 1910—and it was Harry Houdini in a Voisin who was the first to successfully fly an aircraft in Australia. He did so at Diggers Rest, Victoria on 18 March 1910. He became a household name, and the Australian public's fascination with flying continued to grow.

In early 1911, the British and Colonial Aeroplane Company embarked on a colonial sales tour of its Bristol Boxkite aircraft. Pilots JJ Hammond and Leslie Macdonald gave demonstrations in Perth, Melbourne and Sydney. The demonstrations were witnessed by many, and some were so inspired to fly for themselves that they departed soon after for England to learn. Many of the successful ones became famous, including Harry Hawker, Harry Kauper, Harry Busteed, Eric Harrison, Bert Hinkler, Billy Stutt, Horrie Miller and Toby Watt.

Meanwhile, Australia's politicians were concerned about the nation's lack of defence capability. Antiquated pre-Federation resources inherited from the states would be of limited use in assisting the British Empire to defend its interests either regionally or in a wider expeditionary role. Even with the eventual passing of the Defence Act in 1904, Australia's defence stance was one of 'imperial defence': where cooperation with British and dominion forces was of paramount concern, and expert British advice mattered above all else.

The most significant step to strengthen the Army in Australia was the passing into law of the Universal Training Scheme in 1909, which formally commenced on 1 January 1911. Minister for Defence Senator George Pearce was responsible for introducing the scheme, and he invited Lord Kitchener, British Secretary of State for War, to visit Australia in 1909 to prepare a report for the Federal government on the land defence of Australia. The Australian Navy was also strengthened significantly from 1909, with the placement of orders for ships that would form an Australian fleet unit.

Pearce was a strong advocate for the use of aircraft in support of the Navy and Army, and Defence authorities had been watching Hammond's Boxkite flying demonstrations with some interest. After a favourable report by Lieutenant Colonel Godfrey Irving in Perth in January 1911, Pearce instructed Major Cecil Foott of the Royal Australian Engineers from Army Headquarters in Melbourne's Victoria Barracks to report on Hammond's flights at Altona in February 1911.

Pearce asked Foott for recommendations regarding the military use of aircraft. Foott observed Hammond's flying activities around Melbourne for a week in late February—only missing out on a flight himself because the wind exceeded eight kilometres per hour at the time of his promised flight. Foott's report recommended the formation of a flying corps of four aircraft, eight aviation officers and 10 mechanics.

Hammond moved his Boxkite demonstrations to Ascot in Sydney in April 1911, and the Commandant of Military Forces in NSW, Colonel Josef Gordon, invited him to fly to the Liverpool army camp in May. Hammond used the occasion to take other officers for reconnaissance flights, including Lieutenant Colonel John Antill—the training camp commandant.

Colonel Gordon had hoped to take a flight with Hammond that day, but Hammond left the camp before Gordon completed his other duties. To make amends, Hammond's manager invited Gordon to be the first passenger to take a flight over the centre of Sydney the following day. Gordon readily accepted, although Hammond was not available, and his

assistant, Leslie Macdonald, acted as pilot. Gordon spent two hours in the air with the 20-year-old Macdonald, whom Gordon later described as ‘cool as a cucumber’.

In June 1911, Senator George Pearce attended the Imperial Conference in London. While there, he visited one of the regular Sunday flying days at Brooklands to see the flying first hand. He later said, ‘what I saw that day and the talks I had with the flying men convinced me of the wisdom of our having a flying school in the Defence Department’. Pearce’s colleague, Attorney-General Billy Hughes, shared Pearce’s interest in establishing a military air capability.

So, the stage was set for Australia to embark on its own first steps towards military aviation. The full value of aircraft in war had not been appreciated, even by the British and European powers, but public pressure and the lead by Britain were sufficient for Pearce to take action.

### **Formation of a military aviation capability over the five years from 1909**

Pearce did not take long, placing an advertisement in the *Commonwealth Gazette* for ‘two competent aviators and mechanics’ on 30 December 1911. Little detailed planning was carried out to establish the flying corps and school, and much of the necessary advice was expected to come from the successful appointees. The broad plan was to form a flying school and eventual flying corps along British lines—if not on the same scale—and to take as long as four years to do so. The school and corps were to be part of the Militia.

Potential sites for the school were inspected by the only qualified pilot serving in the Army, Captain Oswald Watt, in March 1912. Logically for Senator Pearce, the best site was on land adjacent to his newly-formed Royal Military College at Duntroon. Land was set aside, and flying training was to commence by the end of 1912.

The first two flying instructors were to be commissioned as officers in a new Aviation Instructional Staff and paid £400 per annum—more than three times the national average wage—and the mechanics were to be paid £200 per annum. Four aircraft were to be operated at the school by a staff ultimately comprising four officers, seven warrant officers and sergeants and 32 air mechanics. It was envisaged that, as each flying course concluded, the corps would grow and more aircraft would be purchased. The plan looked robust and simple.

At that stage, Australia’s plan was not far behind Britain’s. Britain’s Central Flying School and the Royal Flying Corps were formed in May 1912 at Upavon on Salisbury Plain, and that school started its first course on 17 August. By the end of 1912, Britain’s school had 36 aircraft.

Australia’s Department of Defence went ahead with the selection and purchase of the aircraft needed for Australia’s school after seeking advice from London. The War Office recommended purchase of two Deperdussin monoplanes and two BE2a biplanes; and the purchases were confirmed by Pearce in June 1912. This was before the appointment of the instructors who were to train new pilots on them, and the decision to purchase these aircraft types affected the final selection of instructors. Curiously, the Deperdussin was a single-seat aircraft, and the BE2a was a fore-and-aft two-seater with single control from the rear cockpit that did not allow the front passenger to use (or even see) the controls.

No applications for the instructor positions were received from resident Australians by March 1912. This might have been expected, because virtually all Australians engaged in flying

were doing so in Britain and continental Europe. Advertising was extended to Britain, and over 100 applications were eventually received. In July 1912, it was announced that Henry Petre and Harry Busteed had been selected.

Petre was the great-grandson of the 11<sup>th</sup> Baron Petre and was working as a solicitor when he learnt to fly at Brooklands in 1910. He and his brother had attempted to build their own aircraft before Petre was engaged by the Deperdussin aircraft company as a flying instructor on their aircraft at Brooklands. His ability to fly the Deperdussin monoplane secured him the position.

Busteed was an Australian-born mechanic from Melbourne. He was the second Australian to be awarded a pilot's licence by the Royal Aero Club. Busteed was a highly regarded pilot, practical engineer and aircraft designer. His employers—the British and Colonial Aeroplane Company—were the makers of the other aircraft recommended for purchase (the BE2a) as well as the Bristol Boxkite.

Petre and Busteed were engaged on initial 12-month contracts. The two provided the perfect mix of British experience and Australian practical knowhow. However, Busteed soon wrote to the Australian High Commissioner asking to be released from his contract due to an offer of better employment. He was released and began work as chief test pilot for British and Colonial before joining the Royal Flying Corps in 1913.

Eric Harrison was appointed in Busteed's place a month later. Like Busteed, he was an Australian-born mechanic and hailed from Castlemaine in Victoria. He saw JJ Hammond fly at Altona in 1911 and, in his own words, 'took the next boat for England'. He learnt to fly on the Boxkite alongside Busteed at the Bristol Company's school, and he went on to instruct on Boxkites in Spain, Italy and Germany. Ironically, Harrison awarded flying brevets to German pilots who were later to fight against Allied pilots in the war.

It appears likely that Harrison and Busteed suggested the purchase of an additional aircraft—a Bristol Boxkite, as an introductory trainer—to overcome the obvious problems with the other two aircraft types. This completed the initial Australian fleet of five aircraft.

Meanwhile, the Army took steps to create the necessary structure and personnel establishment for the Central Flying School and Australian Flying Corps. Senator George Pearce approved their formation in September 1912, and the whole arrangement was placed under the command of Major Brudenell White as Director of Military Operations.

Henry Petre sailed from London and docked at Fremantle, Perth in January 1913. He gave a press interview, in which he predicted that flying would become routine within a very short time. He said that flying 'is bound to become more or less a chauffeur's business'. After he reached Melbourne, he began planning the detailed administrative procedures for the school and corps, including designing the hangars, workshop and office for the flying school.

Harrison was the more practical man. His first task was to remain in Britain and oversee the construction and test flying of Australia's new aircraft, spare engines and propellers. The papers proudly reported that the 'tests were done with the thoroughness required for British purposes'. He sailed for Australia in May 1913 and was accompanied by 'Henry' Chester and 'Ted' Shorland, two of the four mechanics recruited in Britain for the Central Flying School.

Chester was Australian-born and had assisted Harrison in the preparation of the aircraft for despatch to Australia. Shorland was English-born and was also an aircraft engine mechanic. The other two of the original four mechanics—Cyril Heath and George Fonteneau—sailed a month later. Fonteneau was a French-born mechanic, who had worked for Deperdussin in France.

The Bristol Boxkite and the two Deperdussins were shipped to Sydney in preparation for their movement to Duntroon, and the BE2as were to follow later. So, all was set for the birth of Australia's military aviation: the flying instructors and mechanics were engaged, the aircraft had arrived, and plans were under way to establish the flying school.

Senator Pearce had already decided that co-locating the flying school beside his newly-opened pet project at Duntroon was an ideal situation. Pilots could be selected from the best and brightest of the college's graduates, and medical facilities were nearby.

However, criticism by knowledgeable members of the public, notably by well-known aviator William Hart of Penrith, NSW, led to a halt in establishing the aerodrome. Hart was in a position to know—he had bought one of Hammond's Bristol Boxkites in 1911. He had inspected landing grounds around Goulburn while planning to make the proposed first Sydney to Melbourne flight. At 1600 feet, he claimed that the altitude of Canberra was above the ceiling height of the aircraft. An aircraft would not even be able to take off from Duntroon.

Henry Petre was sent to inspect the site and declared that, 'the atmosphere was so rarefied in Canberra'. Petre and Harrison inspected alternative sites at Langwarrin, Cribb Point, Werribee and Altona Bay—all not far from Army Headquarters in Melbourne.

They decided that the Altona Bay site—now known as Point Cook—was the most suitable. It was flat land located beside the bay, with the advantage of being suitable for landplanes as well as seaplanes to meet the Navy's proposed requirements. Harrison also pointed to the greater availability of aircraft parts in Melbourne than elsewhere in the country. However, not long before he died in 1962, Petre also admitted that he did not wish to suffer the isolation of Canberra.

Joseph Cook's Commonwealth Liberal Party Government replaced Andrew Fisher's Labor Government in June 1913, and Senator Edward Millen replaced George Pearce as Minister for Defence. Millen did not take long to overcome Pearce's intransigence over the site for the flying school and ratified the location of Point Cook on 7 July—two weeks after taking office.

If Millen's was quick in settling the location of the school, he was not so hasty in the next steps that were needed to create a military aviation capability. War preparation had been going on for over four years, and the cost was mounting. The implementation of the Universal Training Scheme proved to be very expensive, and public support for military expansion for a European war began to wane. Millen commenced what he termed a 'go slow policy', and this delayed the preparation of the Point Cook site by some six months. Millen's had promised the first flight on New Year's Day 1914, but the date came and went.

By early 1914, Australia had been actively engaged in forming a flying corps for over two years and had owned its first military aircraft for close to a year, yet no military flying had taken place. The aircraft had deteriorated in shipping and storage, and the construction of an

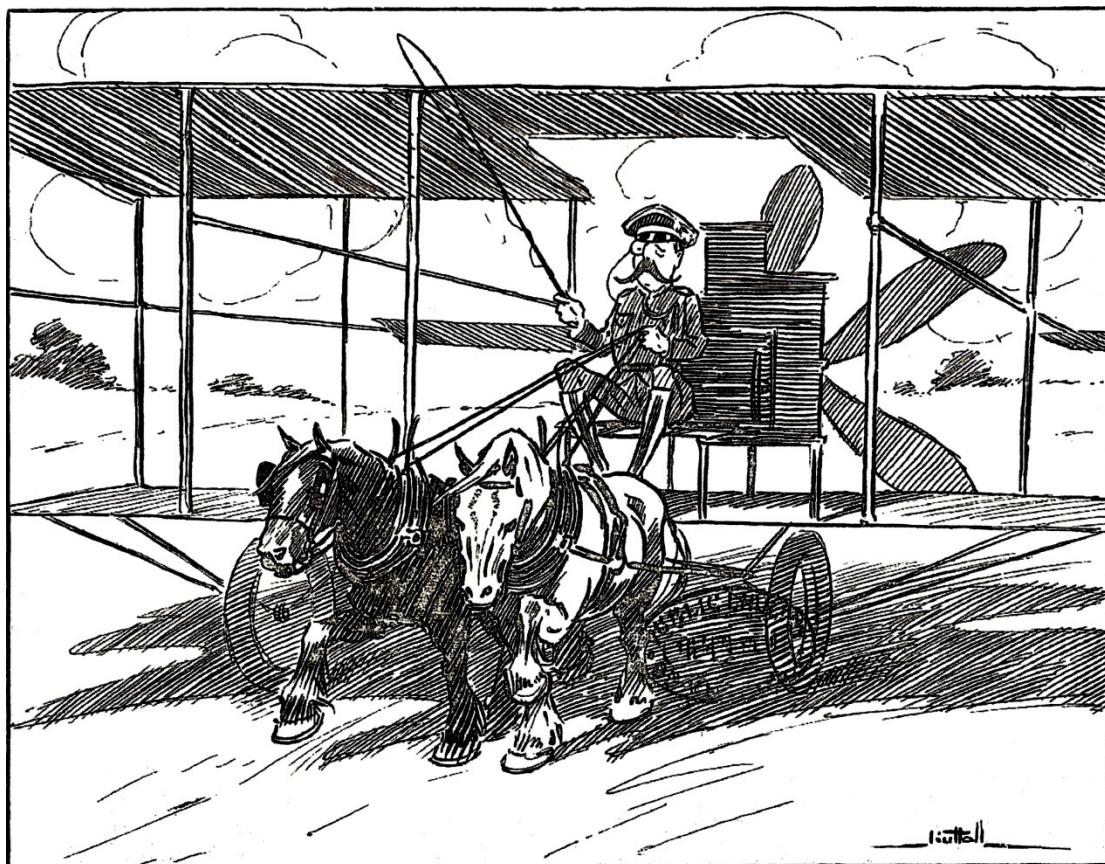
## The First Fateful Shot: Port Phillip Bay, August 1914

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aerodrome had only just commenced. The flying instructors had not flown for 12 months, and public dissatisfaction was high. Referring to Petre and Harrison, the *Argus* newspaper wrote that, ‘there would almost seem to be a possibility of the experts going stale for want of practice’.

Contracts for the construction of the hangars, workshop and office were finally awarded in January 1914, and building commenced in February. A new date for the first flight was mooted to coincide with Sir Ian Hamilton’s visit of February 1914.

Further public criticism was whipped up by Harry Hawker in February 1914 when he claimed that the aircraft were ‘out of date and useless for defence purposes’, and that, ‘they can only be used...for schooling purposes’. Public opinion turned very much against the Government for failing to provide the infrastructure for the Central Flying School to commence its work.



THE FLIER.

Against a backdrop of local and visiting civilian aviators setting new ‘firsts’ and showing that flying had a firm future, the *Sydney Morning Herald* declared that, ‘Australia has placed herself in a ridiculous position in the aviation world’, and a humorous verse published in *The Mail* on 10 January 1914 summed up the public sentiment:

Though the clouds of war may thicken,  
Does Australia fear a foe?  
Every fellow's pulse will quicken  
As he boldly answers, “No!”  
For above the cannons' thunder  
They will hear the motors' roar,

Drumming out the latest wonder—  
Australia's Flying Corps.  
Till now each biplane's rested in its crate;  
They haven't had a chance to aviate.

We have bought all it requires  
For a corps to be complete;  
British aeroplanes and flyers,  
With a record hard to beat.  
Though they came out here and landed  
Many, many months ago,  
They've done nothing; to be candid,  
They are sure, if they are slow,  
And if we've got the patience just to wait,  
In several years, perhaps, they'll aviate.

They have got to build a hangar  
When they've picked a flying ground;  
So please safety-valve your anger,  
Till the chosen place is found.  
They are drawing handsome wages,  
And they answer, "Bye-and-Bye,"  
When the poor taxpayer rages,  
Asking when they hope to fly,  
Perhaps flying will be getting out of date,  
When really they begin to aviate.

On 7 February 1914, Harry Hawker flew demonstration flights at Caulfield. He made flying look easy, and Senator Millen was there to watch. Millen even arranged a secret flight with Hawker to gain firsthand experience. Petre and Harrison were there to watch too, and Harrison also took a flight with Hawker. The sympathetic press later noted Petre and Harrison's frustration saying, 'The airman deprived of the opportunity to fly is a sad man.'

### **Early operations of central flying school in 1914**

Despite the facilities not being ready, Millen ordered the instructors into the air before the end of February, and he authorised the use of a tent as a temporary hangar. The Deperdussin monoplanes and the Boxkite biplane had been moved from Sydney to Victoria Barracks in Melbourne and were repaired there, and their engines were test run. Stores were ordered, and a telephone line was run from the Williamstown exchange to the paddock at Point Cook as the Central Flying School planned its inauspicious start under canvas.

The advance party—led by Harrison—arrived at Point Cook on Monday 16 February 1914, and they were joined a week later by Petre and the remainder of the nine initial staff members. The aircraft were moved from Victoria Barracks to Point Cook by road, arriving on Saturday 28 February—the last day of the minister's deadline for flying.

The permanent hangar and workshop under construction were located at the southern end of the aerodrome near the bay, but there was no shelter for a summer camp nearby. So, the

triangle of about 100 trees at the northern end of the property, previously used for shelter by grazing sheep, provided the campsite.

The first flight by a military aircraft in Australia finally took place on Sunday 1 March 1914. The first secret test flights by Harrison in the Boxkite and Petre in the Deperdussin lasted for about 15 minutes each. After two flights by the Boxkite, flying came to an abrupt halt after Australia's first military flying accident, when the spinning propeller was damaged beyond repair by a dog running into it. Both airmen had not piloted an aircraft for over a year, and the disgruntled press were not informed of the flights until afterwards.

As *Punch* reported, 'the visit of Hawker has not been without excellent public effect', adding in reference to the 1 March flights that, 'it has actually resulted in inducing our military airmen to take to the air'. The report caustically added that, they had not flown 'till young Hawker's comments shamed them into an effort'.

The few days after the first test flights were spent preparing for the first official flight on 5 March. Sir Ian Hamilton's itinerary was too full, so the honour of taking the first flight fell to the Chief of General Staff, Brigadier-General Joe Gordon.

They planned to fly in the morning, but the wind was too gusty, and flying was postponed to the afternoon. Unfortunately, the wind dropped as soon as they postponed flying, and the calm was only interrupted by more 30 knot gusty winds when Gordon and his party arrived mid-afternoon. It was too windy for flying, but Gordon insisted. His experience of flying with JJ Hammond in 1911 when he was NSW commandant gave him a false sense of confidence.

Harrison took Gordon on board the Boxkite, which almost overturned on start-up due to the wind gusts. The combination of low engine power, the weight of two people and the 30 degree air temperature made it impossible for the aircraft to gain any height. During a takeoff roll of over six kilometres, the aircraft only lifted from the ground a few times to a height of about 30 feet.

To the horror of the official party of onlookers, the Boxkite only just managed to clear the three-rail timber fence that divided the paddocks, and Harrison was launched momentarily from his seat. Harrison was not game to turn the aircraft broadside to the wind for fear of it flipping. He gave up his attempt to take Gordon for a flight many kilometres from the start at the triangle of trees. He shut the engine down and asked Gordon to alight into a thistle patch. The mechanics raced by car to swing the propeller for Harrison to take off solo and to rescue the general, who was described by *The Argus* as 'somewhat weather-beaten and sunburnt, but quite collected'. Harrison gave a solo flying demonstration; and after being launched momentarily from his seat on the approach to land, flying was cancelled for the rest of the day.

Despite the success of the first military flights, Senator Ed Millen was not prepared to approve the expansion plan for the school proposed by Petre and Harrison. The press suggested, 'their proposals were registered by him as far too ambitious for such a young nation'. By contrast, in March 1914, the British Army had 75 trained pilots, and they were flying every day in all weather conditions. In fact, while Australia was concerned about spending in the order of £10,000 for its aerial defences, Britain had voted £1,000,000 for the purpose in 1914.

French aviator Maurice Guillaux arrived in Australia in May 1914, and carried out daring flying displays that included his signature manoeuvre of ‘looping the loop’. While in Sydney, he made the maiden flight of Lebbeus Horden’s new Maurice Farman hydroplane, which took off from the waters of Double Bay. Naturally, the military use of hydroplanes became a topic of public conversation, but Senator Millen did not ‘propose to rush and buy a number of seaplanes simply because a clever French aviator has demonstrated their utility.’ Moreover, Millen had not been convinced of the role to be played by naval aviation in the defence of Australia. However, in September, the public-spirited Horden offered the hydroplane to the Defence Department. Senator Millen accepted the offer.

Central Flying School settled down into a routine of preparation for the first courses for pilots and aviation mechanics over the next five months. Petre learnt to fly the Boxkite and the two BE2a aircraft were tested. Flying activities included overland trips to nearby Gisborne, Winchelsea, Colac, Geelong and Queenscliff. For many inhabitants of these towns, it was the first time they had seen an aircraft. The hangar was completed in July 1914, and the peacetime Army establishment was amended to authorise the establishment of No 1 Flight of the Australian Flying Corps.

By August 1914, arrangements were finally in place to commence training. Three flying students were selected from applicants already serving in the militia: Captain Thomas White and Lieutenants George Merz and David Manwell (a Queenscliff man). One was chosen from the Permanent Forces: Lieutenant Richard Williams. Six aviation mechanic students were chosen: Leslie Carter, Norman Dyer, George Mackinolty, Reginald Mason, Hugh McIntosh and Arthur Murphy.

Their training started on 17 August 1914, two weeks after the declaration of war and two years to the day after the Royal Flying Corps’ first course commenced. Richard Williams described the scene at the camp well when he said, ‘there was no air of an army establishment, apart from the tents, and the ground was in the same condition as when it was purchased—a sheep grazing area, now covered in long grass.’

A large degree of natural talent was required to fly in 1914. Noting that there were no dual controls, Tommy White said that, ‘our labouring box-kite, capable of only forty-five miles per hour, was provided with no instruments other than a barometer’, and ‘the senses took the place of instruments. One’s ears did duty as engine counters; the rush of air in the face told whether the climb or glide was at the right angle’. The flying students graduated in November 1914.



After Australia’s first Federal double-dissolution election on 5 September 1914, military aviation’s old champion, Senator George Pearce, reclaimed the Defence portfolio. Military

aviation was allocated £41,980, and Point Cook was promised additional hangars and workshops and the purchase of several new biplanes. Under the budget plan—much of which was not achieved—a flight of the Australian Flying Corps was to be activated at Point Cook and additional flights established in New South Wales and Queensland. Three courses of pilot training were to be carried out each year, with 12 pilots graduating annually, and 25 mechanics were to be trained each year. However, the plan rested in the home forces and not the AIF. So, with no intention to deploy air capability to the war, the newly-graduated pilots were sent back to their units, and the new mechanics were taken onto the staff of Central Flying School.

### **First deployment of Australian aircraft on overseas operations**

However, two weeks after the first pilots' course graduated, Australia did deploy its first military aviation force. Army Headquarters issued orders to Point Cook on 27 November to have a small and efficient 'aerial outfit' ready for active service as soon as possible. The six-man party was commanded by Lieutenant Eric Harrison and comprised the newly-graduated pilot Lieutenant George Merz with mechanics Sergeant Shorland and Privates McIntosh, Mason and Pivot. Harrison was already in Sydney, and the remainder left Werribee railway station to join him the following morning before dawn with one of the BE2a aircraft and Lebbeus Horden's donated Farman hydroplane—both packed in crates. A comprehensive range of spares and fuel for a 12-month deployment followed on that evening's express train.

The party was a last-minute inclusion with Colonel Pethebridge's 'Tropical Force' and sailed aboard the *Una* (the captured German naval yacht *Komet*) to Madang in German New Guinea attached to the North-West Pacific Expedition of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force. German New Guinea had been under Australian control since September, but there were rumours of a heavily-defended German radio station on the Sepik River that needed to be captured. Colonel Legge from Army Headquarters suggested that there might be a 'decent scrap'.

Current air power doctrine claims that military aviation has only ever had four enduring roles: intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), strike, air mobility and control of the air. Arguably, by the outbreak of World War I, aviation technology was such that only the first role (ISR) was truly practical—a sort of elevated cavalry scout role. It was for that role that the force was deployed.

In anticipation of more robust action, Harrison and two of the mechanics fixed small propellers to the back of a number of 36-pound artillery shells to convert them into bombs.

The mooted German wireless station at Angorum proved to be a small police outpost manned by a German policeman, a German doctor and about 30 native police boys. All but the doctor had abandoned the post when the Australian reconnaissance party arrived by boat.

Harrison claimed that the aircraft could be made ready for flying within six hours of the order being given. However, there was no need for aircraft in the operation, and the aircraft were not even un-crated. The party filled in its time in part with tours of the battle sites and a visit to the war graves cemetery.

The disappointed aviation contingent returned to Australia in January 1915. Their deployment was kept a secret until the personnel returned, and Harrison's absence was

explained by a cover story that he was on his honeymoon after his recent marriage. All party members returned with malaria.

### **Conclusion**

From the realisation that Australia needed an offensive aviation capability, through the indecisions of government and the countering force of public opinion, Australia's fledgling military aviation capability gradually took shape. Considering that controlled powered flight was mastered only a few years earlier, the technological advances, maintenance discipline and flying training that allowed Australia to even consider sending aircraft to New Guinea in 1914 were remarkable. Australian airmen went on to distinguish themselves in action in Mesopotamia, the Middle East and on the Western Front not long after their faltering start in the New Guinea operations.