



Military History and Heritage Victoria Inc.



RAAFMUSEUM  
POINT COOK

**'By the Seat of their Pants'**  
*Australian Airmen and their Machines 1915-1918*

One Day Conference  
9 am - 4.30 pm 12 November 2012  
RAAF Museum, Point Cook, Victoria

# BY THE SEAT OF THEIR PANTS



MILITARY HISTORY AND  
HERITAGE VICTORIA INC.

**THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE  
HELD AT THE RAAF MUSEUM, POINT COOK BY  
MILITARY HISTORY AND HERITAGE VICTORIA**

**12 NOVEMBER 2012**



## **ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS**

AAC	Australian Air Corps
AFC	Australian Flying Corps
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
AWM	Australian War Memorial
CFS	Central Flying School
DFC	Distinguished Flying Cross
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
KIA	Killed in Action
MC	Military Cross
MM	Military Medal
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NAUK	The National Archives of the UK
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
POW	Prisoner of War
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RNAS	Royal Naval Air Service
SLNSW	State Library of New South Wales

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

### DR CHRIS CLARK

Dr Chris Clark has been the RAAF Historian since 2004, and heads the Office of Air Force History within the Air Power Development Centre, Canberra. He received his PhD from the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) in 1991, for a thesis on the development of Australian air power between the world wars. He has been a Visiting Fellow (Associate Professor) in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at ADFA since 2003. Over his career he has served in the Australian Army, conducted policy analysis in the Departments of Defence, Foreign Affairs, and Prime Minister and Cabinet, and worked at the Australian National University and Australian War Memorial.

Among the more than 20 books on Australian (mainly defence) history that he has published are *The Third Brother: The Royal Australian Air Force 1921–39*, and a volume of the official history covering RAAF involvement in the Vietnam War. He has also written a biography of Frank McNamara, the only Victoria Cross winner of the AFC. Titled *McNamara, VC: A Hero's Dilemma*, it won the RAAF Heritage Award for Literature for 1996. For those in the audience who have not heard of it before, the book is still in print and available from the Air Power Development Centre (APDC) website. While at the APDC, he has been responsible for getting into print Peter Helson's biography of Air Marshal Sir George Jones, who apart from being a controversial chief of the RAAF in World War II (and beyond) was also a decorated ace from the AFC days in France. Published in 2010, *The Private Air Marshal* is also available from the APDC.

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS:  
THE AFC EXPERIENCE AND  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE RAAF**

**DR CHRIS CLARK**

How appropriate to be holding a conference on the history of the Australian Flying Corps (AFC) on the day after Remembrance Day, the 94th anniversary of the end of World War I, which effectively put the AFC out of business. It is doubly appropriate with the Centenary of Anzac commemorations due to begin in Australia in 18 months' time, starting in March 2014 with the celebration of the centenary of military aviation here at Point Cook—the birthplace of both the AFC and the Royal Australian Air Force. After all, a number of famous AFC identities began their war service with other arms of the Australian Imperial Force on the battlefields of Gallipoli—men such as Sir Ross Smith and Sir George Jones. Military History and Heritage Victoria is to be congratulated for having the vision to organise today's event, and for the singularly apt choice of venue.

In the course of today's program, we will be hearing presentations covering various aspects of the AFC's story, including recruitment and training of personnel, the machines they flew, and some accounts of individual members of the Corps. These aspects are all important for raising understanding of the AFC within the Australian community today, because, sadly, it seems true to say that the AFC receives little recognition in comparison with the image of the infantry 'Digger' or the Light Horse. The time has come to rectify this gap in our national story. But it is important to ensure that we highlight and value what is enduringly significant about the AFC experience. We need to give proper attention to the context of the AFC's part in World War I, and focus on the Corps' lasting legacy.

That I am addressing you today in my capacity as RAAF Historian, and the title I have chosen for my presentation, gives a clue to what I think on this subject; I will come to that in due course. I want to begin by focusing on the national and international dimensions of the AFC's contribution in the war, as I believe that this provides much of the missing context. The background to the raising of the Corps supplies vital shape and meaning to what came after. It is often thought that the Corps was brought into being in direct response to the start of World War I. In fact, we find the first use of the name 'Australian Flying Corps' nearly three weeks before the war began, in a clutch of Military Orders issued for the 'guidance of the Commonwealth Forces'.

Military Order 382 of 14 July 1914 spelt out the detailed plan for creating the Australian Flying Corps as 'an aeroplane squadron of two flights', manned mainly from the Citizen Forces and eventually numbering four officers, seven staff sergeants and sergeants, and 32 rank and file. But the orders issued immediately before and after M.O. 382 make it clear that even this was only a transition point in a lengthy process. M.O. 381 explained the relationship of the Corps with the Central Flying School that had already been brought into existence by that stage, and was about to hold its first course of training. M.O. 383 gave authority for raising 'No. 1 Flight' of the AFC over the course of the 1914-15 financial year.



COMMONWEALTH FORCES.

**MILITARY ORDERS,  
1914.**

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE,

Melbourne, 14th July, 1914.

The following Orders are promulgated, by direction, for the guidance of the Commonwealth Forces.

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C. 8832.

Figure 1: Commonwealth Forces, Military Orders, 1914

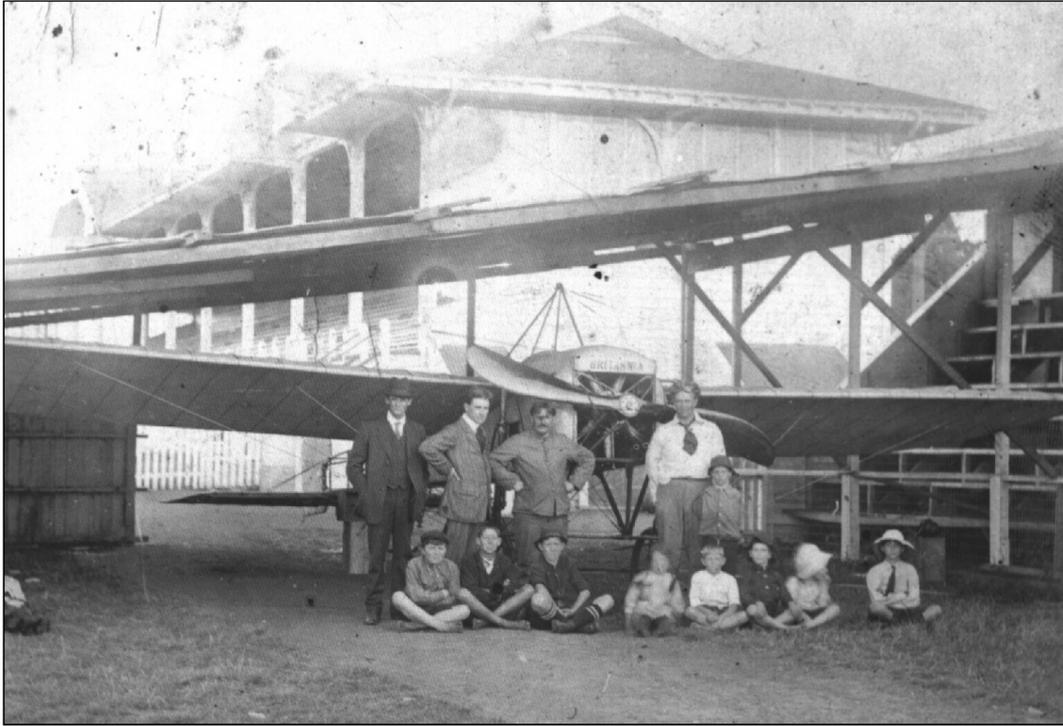
This evidence shows that Australia had been taking positive steps to enter the military aviation field well before World War I broke onto the scene. It explains the purpose behind setting up the means to conduct flying training locally, beginning with the placing of advertisements in England in December 1911 seeking the services of two flying instructors; the steps taken early the next year to select a suitable site, which appeared to settle on Canberra, and the placing orders for five aircraft for training purposes in July and November the same year; the start made in mid-1913 for the acquisition of land at Point Cook, after the location of the flying school was changed, followed by the move of personnel onto the site at

the end of the year, to get the school actually up and running; and finally the first flight of any of the school's aircraft on 1 March 1914. All this activity was not an end in itself. The point of it was to begin training the first pilots for the AFC.

Of course, the AFC envisaged was not the body that eventuated. The arrival of World War I most definitely altered and adjusted the scope and scale of the plan on which the Department of Defence had been proceeding in the previous two years. The Corps was first thought of, not as a combat force, but purely for reconnaissance purposes. In June 1913, the Military Board had been considering proposals to appoint officers of the Australian Intelligence Corps 'for duty with [the] Flying Corps'. This was because the Intelligence Corps had been tasked with overseeing the military survey of Australia's national territory, and topographical mapping was seen as the principal mission for which the AFC should be utilised.

Although the start of World War I diverted the Defence Department from its original plan, the preparations that had been undertaken up until August 1914 placed the Commonwealth Military Forces in the box seat when it came to getting its aviation arm operating on an effective basis within a remarkably short time. The fact that it had the means on hand enabled it, for instance, to consider providing air support to a special force sent to New Guinea in November that year, soon after the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force had taken possession of the former German colony in September. It hardly matters that the secret German base that the special force was sent to deal with was a fiction, the point of real importance was that Australia had the ability to respond promptly to a perceived military threat.

Although it would be fair to say that Australia was well placed to make an early entry into the military aviation field, this country was not *uniquely placed*, because the other main British dominions had been taking similar steps in the same period. Canada, South Africa and New Zealand had all made greater or lesser strides in the prewar years, so all had some semblance of an air arm attached to their armies going into World War I. And all responded with an alacrity that matched Australian gestures. Even New Zealand was quick off the mark. It possessed a Bleriot monoplane (a gift of the Imperial Air Fleet Committee in 1913) and a single military pilot who trained in Britain. The aircraft was duly despatched in a troopship to the UK in 1914 for use by the Royal Flying Corps (RFC), and the pilot, Lieutenant W.W. Burn (an Australian by birth), was sent to Mesopotamia in 1915, where he was killed in company with Lieutenant G.P. Merz of the AFC.



**Figure 2: Bleriot Monoplane**

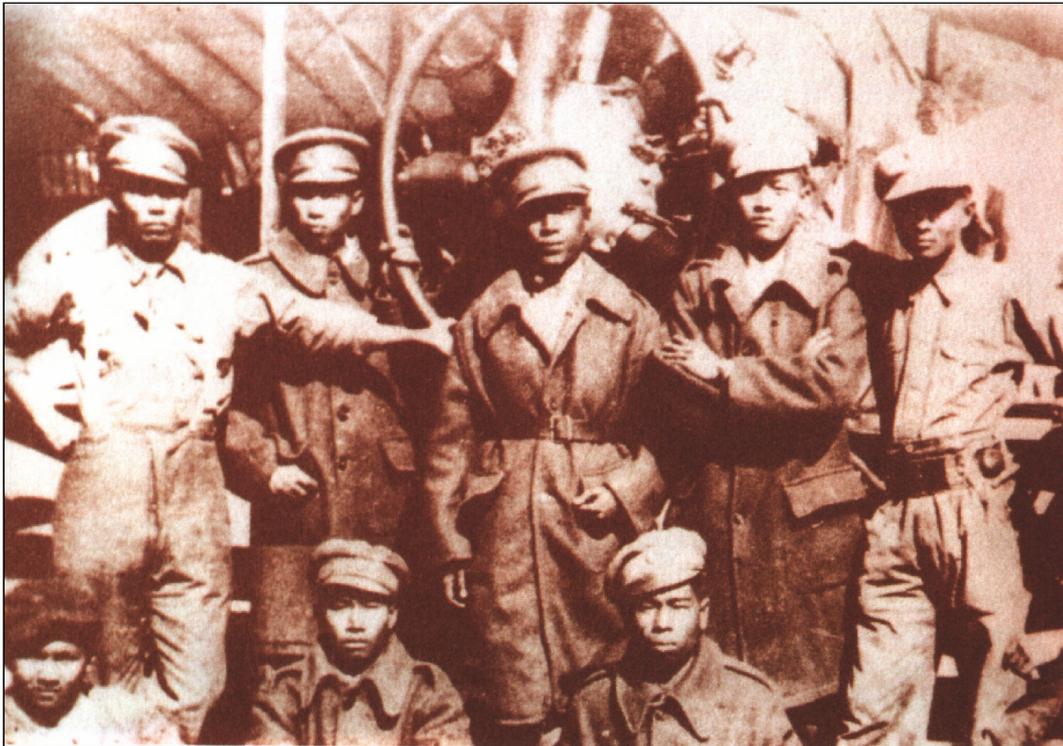
Canada responded to the call of empire by immediately offering its ‘Canadian Aviation Corps’. This meant sending three personnel and its one and only Burgess-Dunne biplane to Britain on 30 September 1914. But neither the RFC nor the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) wanted the aircraft, so that it was never flown, but left to rot in the open on Salisbury Plain. Instead, volunteer personnel became Canada’s main contribution to the air war, especially after the RFC opened its own flying school in Canada from which it produced 3135 pilots and 137 observers. By the time the war concluded, nearly 23 000 Canadians had joined the British air services. These personnel had been awarded more than 800 decorations, including three Victoria Crosses—the most famous being to Major ‘Billy’ Bishop.

It is important to note, however, that Canada never formed any air units of its own until World War I was nearly over. Only in the last months of 1918 did it form a ‘Canadian Air Force’ of two squadrons in England, along with a Royal Canadian Naval Air Service for the defence of Canada’s east coast. Both these corps were disbanded soon afterwards—in mid-1919 and December 1918 respectively—so it remains noteworthy that the vast majority of Canada’s airmen served as individuals rather than in national units, and they returned home as individuals.

South Africa, too, had begun forming a flying section in May 1913, but its six pilots went to the RFC for advanced training in April 1914, and by October five of them were on active service in France. The Government recalled its military airmen to form a ‘South African Aviation Corps’ (SAAC), which became operational in May 1915. This went to German South-West Africa soon afterwards, and when that campaign was successfully concluded in July the SAAC was disbanded. Subsequently, South Africa also contributed only personnel to the British air services—some 3000 of them in total.

Even within Australia’s nearer region, our contribution was not solitary or without parallel. Although history would probably lead us to expect that Japan was the main ‘player’ from this

part of the world, this assumption would be incorrect. It was actually the Kingdom of Siam (or modern Thailand) which also established an aviation section in 1913. After its first pilots returned home from training in France, they were able to practice their flying in eight aircraft also purchased from the French. In March 1914, the section was upgraded to become the Army Air Corps. By July 1917, Siam even sent an expeditionary force to fight alongside the Allies on the Western Front; this 1250-strong force comprised 850 members of the Transport Corps, and 400 from the Army Air Corps.



**Figure 3: Aviation Personnel from Kingdom of Siam**

The stand-out feature from World War I was, therefore, not that Australia contributed an appropriate share of effort towards supporting Britain's effort in the air war, but the almost unique form that this contribution took. Australia had been the only dominion that sent formed units, as part of what amounted to a national force. It is well known that the British were initially loathe to accord recognition to the Australian squadrons and persisted in designating them as RFC units within their own numbering system until January 1918, when finally the AFC numbering of its own squadrons was accepted. Even so, Australians were able to identify and appreciate the contribution that its airmen made in the war—not just at the time, but in later years when Australia, with the other dominions, had formed their own peacetime air forces.

This proved a powerful legacy when it came to converting Australia's wartime experience into more permanent arrangements following the return to peace. The prewar measures for introducing aviation into the Commonwealth Military Forces still appeared to provide a relevant basis for planning peacetime arrangements—in fact it seems never to have been questioned whether Australia still needed an air arm for its forces; it was more a question of whether both Army and Navy should each have an air corps of their own. This explains why, in the last year of the war, the government placed orders for 20 Avro 504K and 12 Sopwith Pup training aircraft to replace the mishmash of tired and outdated types acquired at the Central Flying School over the course of the war years.

Faced with competing schemes from Army and Navy to have their own air arms, in January 1919 the Australian Government made the momentous decision that it would follow the example set by Britain in April 1918 and establish a single and separate air force to meet the needs of both the other Services, purely on the grounds of cost alone. An offer made soon after by Britain to provide 100 war surplus aircraft and ancillary equipment, as a gift, effectively cemented the decision in place, and created the need for an interim air service, called the 'Australian Air Corps' (AAC) to take delivery of the Imperial Gift material that began arriving in Melbourne from January 1920. Following its return to Australia during 1919, the AFC had been officially disbanded at the end of that year.

The scene was now set for the formation of the 'Australian Air Force' on 31 March 1921, or the Royal Australian Air Force as it became in August that year. What were the influences of the AFC on this successor organisation? Is it possible to identify the impact or the legacy of the AFC on the later RAAF? The point should probably be made that there was no other contender for the title of direct descendent of the AFC. The AAC was always only intended as a temporary measure, made necessary by the need to receive, unpack and store the Imperial Gift—it did very little flying, and had a negligible effect on defence arrangements.

From the outset of its existence, the RAAF was very conscious that it was the inheritor of the AFC, both its example and the traditions it had (sometimes very consciously) created. An example of this can be seen in the squadron traditions that were adopted, although it was not until several years after formation that the RAAF actually had numbered units—the first being Nos 1 and 3 Squadrons raised in 1925. Although there was no formal grant of squadron badges until after World War II, there were unofficial emblems in use during the 1930s that were eventually incorporated into the badges, and there can be no surprise that these drew inspiration from their AFC forebears.

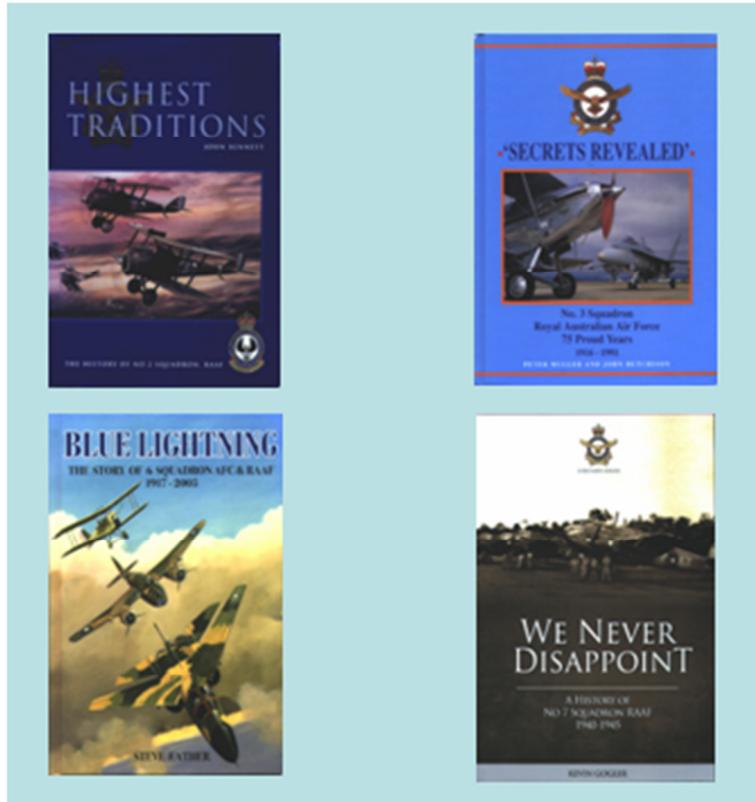
The badge of No 1 Squadron featured the Cross of Jerusalem, and the image of a diving kookaburra which was taken as a reference to the action which earned Lieutenant Frank McNamara the Victoria Cross in 1917, swooping down to rescue a fellow pilot who was in danger of capture by Turkish ground forces. The use of the Fleur de Lys on the badge of No 3 Squadron was an unmistakable reference to the unit's wartime work in France during 1917–18.



**Figure 4: Squadron Badges, Nos 1 and 3 Squadrons**

Published unit histories have similarly reflected recognition of the AFC example in those units whose squadron number had an AFC precedent.

For example, the volumes covering 2, 3 and 6 Squadrons have all carried an allusion to each unit's AFC days in either image or title (Figure 5). For John Bennett's 1995 history of No 2 Squadron it was use of the Airco D.H.5 on the cover, while the 3 Squadron history published in 1991 clearly considered that 1916 was the unit's date of creation, as did Steve Eather's 2007 history of 6 Squadron (one of the units of the AFC Training Wing) which showed the unit as dating from 1917. Even the very recent history of No 7 Squadron (another Training Wing unit in World War I) made initial mention in the text of the AFC precedent.



**Figure 5: Published Unit Histories**

The first aircraft with which the RAAF was equipped also frequently carried some AFC overtones. The Avro 504K trainers in the early RAAF inventory were identical with the types used in squadrons of the AFC's No 1 Training Wing based in Gloucestershire, England, throughout 1918, even though not all the RAAF models were surplus aircraft from the Imperial Gift—some were even manufactured locally in 1922–23. The S.E.5A scout (Figure 6) which served as the RAAF's first fighter until 1927–28 was a type well known to at least No 2 Squadron, AFC, during the first months of 1918. The light bombers received with the Imperial Gift, the D.H.9 and D.H.9A, would have been a familiar sight to many ex-members of the AFC, although these aircraft were not used by AFC squadrons.



**Figure 6: S.E.5A Aircraft**

The chief legacy that the AFC passed to the RAAF was in personnel. This was inevitably the case, since preference was given during recruitment for both the AAC and the RAAF to officers and men who had served in the air services—British or Australian—during the war. While the personnel enlisted were not exclusively from the AFC, a great many were, and they provided a rich injection of AFC experience. First and foremost among these men were two who figured as the RAAF's top leaders for most of the Service's first 30 years.



**Figure 7: Air Marshal Sir Richard Williams – Chief of the Air Staff 1922–1939**

**Air Marshal Sir Richard Williams** (Figure 7) was the RAAF's Chief of the Air Staff (CAS), off and on, for the years from 1922 (when the post was first formed) until early 1939—though not in the rank of Air Marshal, and he was not knighted until 1954 (for his services as Director-General of civil aviation after the war). During World War I, however, he had been a commanding officer of the AFC's No 1 Squadron in the Middle East (where he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order in 1917), before becoming a Lieutenant-Colonel and commander of No 40 (Army) Wing, one of the two wings forming the RAF Brigade in Palestine in 1918.



**Figure 8: Air Marshal Sir George Jones – Chief of the Air Staff 1942–1952**

Williams' tenure of the RAAF's top job was almost matched by **Air Marshal Sir George Jones** (Figure 8), who managed an unbroken 10-year stint in the job from 1942 until 1952. Also like Williams, Jones spent most of his term in the rank of Air Vice-Marshal, not receiving promotion to Air Marshal until 1948 (when his Service was actually at a postwar ebb); his knighthood also did not come until after he had vacated the post. Jones' record in the AFC had been as a Captain with No 4 Squadron in France, where he was wounded in air combat, won the Distinguished Flying Cross, and achieved a score of seven air victories to qualify as an 'ace'.

Apart from these two, by World War II the RAAF's top ranks were filled with leaders who owed their start in air warfare to service with the AFC. Men such as those detailed below.



**Air Vice-Marshal W. H. Anderson** – ended his AFC service with No 3 Squadron as a Major with the DFC (1918); was No 3 in the seniority of RAAF officers throughout the 1920s and 30s.



**Air Commodore A. H. Cobby** – the leading AFC ace of World War I (29 air victories scored with No 4 Squadron, DSO, DFC and two Bars), he served in the RAAF until 1935 when he resigned to work in civil aviation; rejoined in 1939 and rose to command the 1st Tactical Air Force, the RAAF's most important formation in the South-West Pacific Area.



**Air Vice-Marshal A. T. Cole** – originally an airman with No 1 Squadron, AFC, he flew fighters with No 2 Squadron and achieved 10 victories in air combat; held a succession of staff and command posts before and during World War II.

**Air Commodore F.W.F. Lukis** – a Captain with No 1 Squadron, AFC; rose to head area and operational commands in northern Australia 1941–45.



**Air Vice-Marshal F.H. McNamara** – Australia's only air VC of World War I, and only RAAF member who lived to wear the VC on his tunic; filled command and staff posts with the RAAF and RAF.



**Air Vice-Marshal H. N. Wrigley** – from Captain with No 3 Squadron, AFC, rose to Air Officer Commanding RAAF Overseas Headquarters in London in World War II; later emerged as the RAAF's most devoted strategic thinker on air power.

It was not just former officers of the AFC who rose to later prominence in the RAAF, as some airmen from the First World War also enjoyed equally significant later careers in the RAAF. Men such as the following:



**Air Vice-Marshal G.J.W. Mackinolty** – an air mechanic in 1914, he served with 2 Squadron, AFC, and the 1st Training Wing; rose to become Air Member for Supply and Equipment 1942–51.



**Air Commodore A.W. Murphy** – served with No 1 Squadron in the Middle East (DFC); filled a range of aircraft maintenance and engineering posts during World War II.

There were other ex-members of the AFC who joined the early RAAF, but elected not to further pursue careers there, given the fairly restricted opportunities initially on offer. Men such as;



**Wing Commander L.J. Wackett** – an officer of the permanent military forces who served with Nos 1 and 3 Squadrons, AFC; later pioneered aircraft design in the RAAF, until he resigned in 1931; later knighted for his contribution to aircraft production in Australia.

**Squadron Leader A.M. Jones** – distinguished himself with Nos 1 and 2 Squadrons, AFC; joined RAAF and was CO No 1 Station (Point Cook) 1922–24, but then left; later service with civil aviation and then senior management of the De Havilland company in Australia.

There were others who did not join the RAAF during the 20 years of peace separating the two world wars, but did enter the Air Force during World War II. Men such as:



**Group Captain E.R. King** – the AFC's second highest ace (26 air victories); ended up commanding Point Cook base in 1941, and died there.



**Group Captain T.W. White** – famous for contributing a dent to a hangar at Point Cook, and for writing about his experiences while a prisoner of the Turks following his capture while serving with the AFC Half Flight in Mesopotamia, 1915; during World War II he took leave from Federal Parliament to command RAAF base facilities in Victoria and Britain.

There are a number of other ways in which the AFC might be said to 'live on' in the later RAAF. The evidence is especially rich here at Point Cook, which throughout World War I continued to train pilots for the AFC—just as it did for the RAAF from the early 1920s until the early 1990s. This place also played an important role as an assembly point for AFC units despatched to the war—a fact which finds special poignancy in the Air Force Memorial unveiled by the Governor-General, Lord Gowrie, on the edge of Point Cook's station parade ground in October 1938 (Figure 9).

**30 October 1938**  
**Memorial unveiled to World War I airmen**



The Australian Flying Corps Association in Melbourne, of which the Chief of the Air Staff (Air Vice-Marshal Richard Williams) was President, instigated the construction of a memorial to Australians who died during World War I while serving with the Royal Flying Corps, Royal Naval Air Service, Royal Air Force, or the Australian Flying Corps. Because aviation in the Australian defence forces had started at Point Cook, and the 'sacred trust of imperishable honour and duty to country [of the wartime airmen who died] is now given into the keeping of the Royal Australian Air Force', it was decided to place the memorial at the RAAF base there. The unveiling was performed on this day by the Governor-General, Lord Gowrie. This memorial was, Williams maintained, 'the only one erected in Australia to the memory of airmen who gave their lives in that war.'

**Figure 9: AFC Memorial, Point Cook**

In the current RAAF Association we also find an ongoing connection with the AFC, which effectively links and keeps alive the historical relationship between the two organisations. We are reminded that before the RAAF Association there was the Australian Flying Corps Association (which Air Vice-Marshal Williams headed as President), and even today the body which followed is still formally called the 'Australian Flying Corps and RAAF Association Inc'. The Association's National Council still acknowledges the AFC Associations within the respective Divisions as 'the Foundation Bodies of the Association'.

## **RAAF ASSOCIATION NATIONAL COUNCIL**

**The Australian Flying Corps and RAAF Association Inc is a non-profit organisation established in each state and territory of Australia to promote social activities, welfare, commemoration events, aviation history and the memory of fallen friends.**

**The National Council is the governing body of the Association and conducts the business of the Association in accordance with the National Constitution 2006.**

**The Australian Flying Corps Associations within the respective Divisions are the Foundation Bodies of the Association.**

**Figure 10: RAAF Association National Council**

From everything I have put before you today, I hope one thing is abundantly clear: while the AFC is not, strictly speaking, part of the RAAF's history, it is nonetheless very much part of the RAAF's heritage. For at least the first decade of the RAAF's existence, the Service lived and operated very much in the shadow of the AFC. It not only looked like the AFC in its aircraft and equipment, and in its organisation, but the experiences of the AFC were what provided many of RAAF personnel, from its senior officers to its airmen, with their understanding of what air power would and could bring to future conflicts in which Australia may take part. The 1920s was the decade when the AFC volume of the Official War History, along with the very first personal historical accounts, appeared in print.

But it was also true that the small size of the AFC told against it when it came to claiming its share of public recognition. According to one set of published statistics, a total of only 460 officers and 2234 other ranks had served in the wartime Corps. Even if these figures might be disputed, it is clear that the AFC's size within the greater Australian Imperial Force was very small. At the same time, the RAAF had the perfect tool with its aircraft for recalling the AFC to the public mind, which undoubtedly explains the purpose behind the first air show (or 'pageant', as it was termed) in December 1924.

The RAAF began to modernise and change significantly in the 1930s. It was then that it began to replace its single-engine open-cockpit wood and canvas biplanes, all with fixed undercarriages, with fast metal monoplanes having enclosed cabins, often multi-engined and with retractable undercarriages. Of course, the picture changed again totally on the aircraft front during the course of World War II, and the AFC was left far behind, already a relic of historical curiosity.

But the legacy lived on in the personnel of the Air Force, in figures of the former AFC who could still recall and recount the World War I experience—men such as Williams, Jones, Wrigley, and a few others. The longevity of so many AFC members stayed with Australia into the 1990s. When Sir George Jones died in August 1992, he was not only the last ace of World War I to exit the scene, he was also the last surviving chief of any Allied air service of World War II. Today, the modern RAAF remains no less cognisant and appreciative of the example set by the Australian Flying Corps.