



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

One Day Conference
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RAAF Museum, Point Cook, Victoria

BY THE SEAT OF THEIR PANTS



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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

AIR COMMODORE MARK LAX, OAM, CSM

Air Commodore Mark Lax joined the Royal Australian Air Force Academy in January 1974 and graduated dux of his class. After navigator training, he had operational, flight test and instructional tours before completing a number of staff positions. During his career, he was Base Commander of RAAF Base East Sale in Victoria and later, in 1997, RAAF Base Richmond in NSW. In the following years, Air Commodore Lax held appointments at Glenbrook as Director in charge of plans and future development. He went on to hold a number of posts in Canberra developing higher level policy and defence strategy. In 2006 he was appointed to his final position—Director General Strategic Policy in the Strategy Division—responsible for strategic assessments, the strategic plans function for the whole of Defence and a wide range of high-level strategy and long-term planning documents.

Air Commodore Lax retired from the Permanent Air Force in January 2007 and for two years was managing editor of the *Australian Defence Force Journal*. In 2008, he was appointed to the Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal where he acts as RAAF specialist advisor for reviews into veterans' medal claims. Air Commodore Lax also facilitates planning and exercise activities for Customs and Border Protection Command and the Defence College. In 2011, he completed his PhD and was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia in the General Division for his work on military history and support for various veterans' organisations. He has published nine books on RAAF and aviation history.

Air Commodore Lax is a graduate of the RAAF Academy, RAAF School of Air Navigation, Royal Air Force Cranwell, RAAF Staff College, and USAF Air War College. He is also an alumni of the University of Melbourne, the University of NSW and the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. He enjoys cricket, reading, writing and publishing on military aviation. He is also Vice-President of Canberra Legacy.

THE AFC IN HOTTER CLIMES: THE AIR WAR OVER THE MESOPOTAMIAN DESERT

AIR COMMODORE MARK LAX

Australian military forces have been on expeditions to the area now known as Iraq on three occasions—World War I, World War II and again between 2003 and 2007. In all three conflicts, Australia also led the Commonwealth in sending airmen overseas. This paper will examine the first expedition—why it was formed, what it did and how it ended in disaster. The paper will conclude with some comment on No 1 Squadron that followed and the impact the men had on the subsequent development of aviation in Australia.

BACKGROUND

Most people are aware that the first Half Flight of 1915 was the first flying unit from any Dominion to go into action. However, few recall that there was a small Australian flying unit which might well have seen action many months before. Prior to any discussion on the desert air war, I think it worth recalling the first expedition which took place in 1914.

Australia joined with New Zealand in sending an expeditionary force to occupy German colonies in the South Pacific. Lieutenants Harrison and Merz and four mechanics were sent to New Guinea with a naval-military force which occupied the German quarter of New Guinea in October–December 1914. They took with them one of the B.E.2a aircraft from Point Cook, and a Farman hydroplane which had been offered by a Sydney man, Lebbeus Hordern. The hydroplane was worth £1600, so handing it over to the Army was a patriotic if courageous gesture.¹ The aircraft were never uncrated, as the German garrison did not make a fight of it. Harrison, Merz and their mechanics returned to Australia without seeing action, but with a feeling that they had at least made a contribution.

Meanwhile, while plans were underway to send a large land force to the Western Front (which ended up at Gallipoli), other plans were being made in Army Headquarters in Melbourne. On 8 February 1915, the Government of India had cabled the Australian Government with an urgent request for pilots, mechanics and aircraft to provide an air reconnaissance unit for service in Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia was under Ottoman Turkish rule and was rich in much needed oil, so the British War Office directed the Indian Army to mount a campaign to seize the oilfields and thus ensure a regular oil supply for the war effort.

Australia had no aircraft to send, but on 10 February, Australia replied that Major Henry Petre, the chief flying instructor at Point Cook, would be sent in command of a 'Half Flight' comprising Captain Thomas White and Lieutenant George Merz who had trained at Point Cook, an Australian pilot Lieutenant William 'Harry' Treloar, who had returned to Australia after pilot training in England, three NCOs from Point Cook, and 38 NCOs and other ranks

¹ Neville Parnell and Trevor Broughton, *Flypast: A Record of Aviation in Australian*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1988, p. 22, entry for 8 May 14. The mechanics were Sergeant Shorland and Privates McIntosh, Mason and Pivot.

from Army camps at Broadmeadows and Liverpool. The unit was small and was all that could be spared from the nascent AFC ranks. Given that Australia only had seven qualified pilots, the offer of four was extremely generous. A World War I squadron usually comprised three flights, each of about eight to ten flying officers and perhaps up to 100 troops. Thus, this smaller group was about half the usual, so it was called the 'Half Flight'. The intention was that the Royal Flying Corps and Indian Flying Corps would make up the remaining complement of men and machines.² With later arrivals and reinforcements, a total of 63 Australian officers and men served under the Australian Half Flight banner. Eventually, what remained was absorbed into No 30 Squadron, RFC, but more of that later.

MESOPOTAMIA

In 1914, the Middle East maps were quite different. Iraq was known as Mesopotamia—from the Greek for 'between the rivers'—and was ruled by the Turks. The ancient Arabs called the land *Al Jesireh*, 'the Island', for the stretch of fertile land isolated by the Tigris and Euphrates. Iran was Persia and Israel did not exist, that part of the world being called Palestine and Trans-Jordan.

Turkey had entered the war on 31 October 1914 and aligned with Germany. Turkey held the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, the south-eastern extremity of which stretched to the Persian Gulf. In November 1914, the British Colonial Government in India sought to secure the Basra oil terminal and port (vital for the Royal Navy) to deliver the Anglo-Persian oil—and they formed the Indian Expeditionary Force D (IEF D) under Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Barratt. The plan was hatched a month previously when General Sir Edmund Barrow, the Military Secretary at the India Office proposed a *coup de main* against the fields, but his idea could only be put into effect after Turkey had entered the war. Barratt's 6th Division quickly seized the Basra area and by December had advanced up the Euphrates River as far as Qurna. By way of explanation, IEF A was destined for France, IEF B for Egypt where the Turks were also threatening the Suez Canal, and Force C for German East Africa. While the Indian Government argued with London over the merits of an expedition to German East Africa, they were content to expand their area of operations nearer to home and consequently Force D was dispatched to the Persian Gulf.

By January 1915 and faced with a slow and methodical campaign up the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, Barratt cabled the War Office on 9 January and asked for reinforcements, including aeroplanes. He followed this request up a few weeks later with a hastener and on 7 February, the War Office agreed to send two aircraft, but could not supply pilots, observers or mechanics. These would have to come from India. Meanwhile, Barratt had initially taken Qurna before coming to a halt due to the winter rains and consequent widespread flooding. The conditions forced his retirement back to Basra. The plan to just seize and hold Basra and the surrounding oilfields was about to become a quest to capture Baghdad. The ease of the campaign to date had lulled the military into a belief that the rest of Mesopotamia would be a pushover. In the new year, rumours of Turkish reinforcements, Arab unrest and the pending Dardanelles Campaign all conspired to force the Viceroy of India to have to reinforce Barratt to guarantee the oil supply, what Barratt had been asking for all along. In early April, the 12th Division under Major-General George Gorringe arrived, but in reality it was a hollow force of three infantry brigades and some artillery. With its arrival, the Indian Government chose to form the Second Indian Army Corps and placed the overconfident and incompetent General

² The Indian Flying Corps was made up entirely of British officers in the Indian Army who had completed flying training in England.

Sir John Nixon in command. At the same time, in April 1915, Major-General Sir Charles Townshend relieved the now ill Barratt, who returned to India. Here the Mesopotamian Campaign plan took a new turn. Rather than hold the Basra position, Nixon interpreted his orders to make an advance towards Amara, and then on to Baghdad. This folly would eventually lead to disaster.

THE NEED FOR AIR RECONNAISSANCE

General Townshend planned to move out of the Shatt-al-Arab coastal area as soon as the rains ceased. Impetuous and keen to be recognised for further promotion, in planning a rapid advance north-west, he was inviting disaster. Any such move was in contravention to his orders to hold the ground and protect the Ahwaz-Sanyeh oil pipeline, and his supply lines were tenuous at best. An advance up the river system would stretch this further and make him vulnerable to Turkish cut-off. However, he was determined to move out as soon as possible but operations could only resume in April and for these, air reconnaissance would be a distinct advantage. As no airmen were available and none would be forthcoming from the RFC, the Viceroy of India, Viscount Hardinge of Penshurst³ sent an urgent request to the other British colonies on 8 February 1915. 'Could you provide any trained aviators for service in the Tigris Valley?' The request also sought mechanics, flying machines and motor transport.

At the beginning of the war, the Indian Flying Corps consisted of just four machines and a few aviators and mechanics. The Government of India had formed the Indian Flying School at Sitapur in 1914 and it was staffed from officers from the Indian Army who had learned to fly at their own expense while on leave in England. At the outbreak, plans for training pilots in India were shelved due to the high and immediate demand for both aircraft and pilots to meet the war effort elsewhere. The few pilots and machines in India were immediately offered up to the War Office and were accepted, the aircraft and crews being sent to Egypt. So when the call came from Barratt for aeroplanes for Mesopotamia, only two serviceable aircraft (Shorthorns) were available. Fortunately, Australia replied that they could furnish officers, men and transport, but no machines—the aircraft would have to be provisioned locally—and although the match was not ideal, it would initially suffice. Given that Australia only had seven qualified pilots, the offer of four was extremely generous, and so the Half Flight was spawned.

While awaiting the dispatch of the Australians, on 25 March 1915, the Government of India reorganised their flying service and appointed Captain Philip Broke-Smith⁴ of the Indian Army as Deputy Assistant Director of the Aviation Organisation and allocated one flight of aeroplanes and established depots at Basra and Bombay. In April, Broke-Smith accompanied General Nixon's staff to Basra to organise the aviation service depot (at Ma'gil just north of the town) while they awaited the Half Flight's arrival.

³ Viceroy from November 1910 to April 1916.

⁴ Captain (later Major) Philip William Lilian Broke-Smith, DSO, OBE. Royal Engineers (RE) and RFC. 25 March 1915 – 2 November 1916.

THE FORMATION OF THE HALF FLIGHT

So who were the Half Flight? Officially, they formed on 1 April 1915 at Central Flying School (CFS), Laverton.⁵ According to Fred Cutlack, author of the Australian Official History Volume covering the AFC, the officers were four in number. They comprised Captain Henry Petre⁶ (pronounced ‘Peter’ and known as ‘Peter the Monk’), Captain Thomas White⁷, and Lieutenant George Merz⁸ all from the Central Flying School, and Lieutenant Harry Treloar.⁹ Treloar was an Australian who had earned his pilot’s licence in England and had recently returned to Australia to enlist. The remainder were 41 other ranks, including 18 mechanics. Cutlack gave their origin thus:

The sergeant-major [Alex Shorland], staff-sergeant [Cyril Heath], and sergeant were from the Central Flying School; the quartermaster-sergeant [Septimus Garling] and the farrier-sergeant [John Neenan] were from permanent artillery units in New South Wales. The corporals, drivers, and mechanics were obtained from the A.I.F. training camp at Broadmeadows, in Victoria.¹⁰

While most had not seen an aeroplane let alone worked on one, the mechanics selected all had experience in motor-engineering shops and were soon brought up to the mark before embarkation. The 41 were later joined by a further 10 mechanics in August and much later in May 1916 a transport reinforcement of seven drivers arrived to complete the Australian contribution. The Australian Government had also suggested a mule team and two workshop lorries should be included, and this was agreed.

The men were assembled and issued rudimentary kit—.303 rifles and bandoliers, water bottles, haversacks and tropical clothing including khaki breeches and leggings. The only distinguishing feature was the Australian Flying Corps patches on their shoulders. As to their progress, the unnamed author of a note now preserved in the Australian War Memorial attested:

We embarked on 21st April 1915 at Melbourne on Mailboat P. & O. ‘Morea’. We had a good time going over calling at Adelaide, Perth, Colombo and arrived Bombay on or about 18th May 1915. We transhipped at Colombo and travelled to Bombay by different steamer. ... At Bombay we were put up in an Indian Barracks called ‘Kalabar’. We were there for about 3 days, when we received orders that the whole of the mule transport was to remain behind and we were to embark for Basrah. We were paid 3 month’s pay in advance at Bombay, and received 30 Rupees (£2) per month extra, above the Australian rates of pay from Indian Government.

⁵ AWM224 MSS511, Date and authority: M.O. 199, Table No. 4 of 1 April 1915. Laverton was then the generic name for the Point Cook location.

⁶ Captain (later Major) Henry Aloysius Petre, DSO, MC, MID*. AFC. 14 May 1915 – 23 May 1916. Invalided to India.

⁷ Captain Thomas Walter White, DFC, VD. 60th Infantry and AFC. 18 May 15 – 13 November 1915. POW.

⁸ Lieutenant George Pinnock Merz, Melbourne University Rifles (MUR) and AFC. 15 June 1915 – 30 July 1915. KIA.

⁹ Lieutenant William Harry Treloar. AFC. 18 May 1915 – 16 September 1915. POW.

¹⁰ F.M. Cutlack, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918 – Volume VIII –The Australian Flying Corps in the Western and Eastern Theatres of War, 1914–1918*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1938, p. 2.

We took no machines over whatever; the only things we took were tools, transport spares and everything for carrying on the good work. We bought tools in Melbourne. In the first place we had a leather bag for each Mechanic, each outfit costing about £7. We took a travelling workshop made at Newport, which was fitted with lathe, drilling machine, farriers instruments, forge, anvil, drills of every description. It was mounted on a 'Commer' Lorry and was overhead drive power from motor. Our stores Lorry was a Garford. It was complete in every detail, nothing wanting, also was made in the Newport Workshops. In addition we had 2 G.S. Wagons and 1 Motor Cycle (Villiers 4½ H.P.). That was really our motor transport. Then we had mule transport consisting of about ½ doz. G.S. Wagons and 30 mules from South Australia. These followed us from Australia on the next boat.¹¹

The vehicles were given AFC serial numbers AFC 1 – AFC 7 as they included a wood-workshop Daimler and a Hupmobile staff car.

ARRIVAL AT BASRA

Upon arrival, the members of the flight found themselves at Basra at the head of the Persian Gulf. Here, the same witness found:

The whole of the place was in a state of turmoil.

Passing into the river on the 26th of May 1915 we disembarked and went to a place called 'Tanumah'. This was to be our first aerodrome but it was under water and it needed great efforts to make it suitable. Capt. Petre selected the site for Aerodrome which after draining turned out very good. The work of draining etc. was done by Arabs.

When the Aerodrome was being finished we built work-shops and supplies were received from forwarding officer in Bombay. The material came from supplies by the Indian Government as it was an Indian Expeditionary Force. In some cases we had stuff sent to us by Indian Government which was of no use. Petre so organised our position as to be able to give a rough estimate of material required, which he forwarded to Indian Government, stating the exact date that it was required. We carried spares in very small quantity. We had a lot of stuff from the Flying School at 'Cetaphore' but it was found to be quite unfit for use. We had in addition to Australian Mechanics, 4 N.C.Os, from the Indian Flying Corps. Had Indian labour, Indian Carpenters who were rather slow but the work was good and the fitters and turners we had were always reliable.

Here on this drome we installed our workshops, erected our planes and prepared for work of service flying.¹²

The aerodrome had been organised on the old Arab cemetery, the only high ground around, and would remain the aircraft park and major workshops throughout the campaign. While the Half Flight and later Nos 30 and 63 Squadrons would fly from numerous airfields during their stay, usually no more than nine or ten mechanics went forward, with most remaining

¹¹ AWM224, MSS513, 'Formation of Flight in Australia & Voyage to Bombay'. My guess is the anonymous author was Private John Brown (based upon commentary about his invalided return to Australia).

¹² AWM224, MSS513, 'Operations from Time of Leaving Base'.

with the depot. As well as their transport, the Flight had a river steamer and two barges to support forward operations.

While Captain Petre had sailed ahead, White, Treloar and 37 other ranks sailed for Bombay on 20 April, with Quartermaster-Sergeant Septimus Garling and the other four troops bringing the motor transport two weeks later. A further shipment of horses and mules followed later again and then Merz, who was detained on instructional duties until June. It had been intended that the four Australian pilots and Captain Hugh Reilly¹³ (a New Zealander) from Egypt were to be assembled at Bombay,¹⁴ but as Petre and Merz were elsewhere, that plan was waived. Upon arrival in Basra on 26 May 1915, the Australians were met by four other officers with whom they would work closely. These were Captains Broke-Smith and Reilly, Lieutenant William Burn¹⁵ (another New Zealander who had been born in Australia), and equipment and workshops officer, Second Lieutenant Wilfred Wills, Indian Army Reserve.¹⁶ They had a staff of 16 British and Indian drivers and mechanics. The Half Flight were then gazetted into the Indian Army (for command and discipline purposes) but always kept their Australian identity.

Meanwhile, Broke-Smith was assigned to GHQ staff in Basra, Petre remained in command and White put in charge of the Aircraft Park at Ma'gil.¹⁷ Fortunately, the expedition arrived in theatre in time to take part in Townshend's summer offensive up the Tigris Valley, but to their dismay, they found their equipment was no better than the training aircraft they had left behind. All the modern machines had been dispatched to France, reserves went to Egypt and Mesopotamia got what was left—in this case two Maurice Farman delivered on 14 May 1915; a Shorthorn (IFC 1) and a Longhorn (IFC 2), both with underpowered 70-hp Renault engines. A week later, two more Shorthorns (IFC 7 and IFC 10) arrived, but without engines. Thomas White was later to recall the Shorthorns were purchased from funds donated by the Rajah of Gwalior and the Longhorn had 'seen considerable service in Egypt and subsequently spent most of its time in the workshops'.¹⁸ Mesopotamia was definitely a sideshow. As to weaponry, Brown continued; 'They were not armed carrying only two carbines with 15 rounds of ammunition for each pilot and observer. Bomb racks were fitted for using 20lb. Hale bombs and carried 4. These bombs were made at Kirkee arsenal India and proved very "dud"'.¹⁹ One of the aircraft was very well used having been at the Cetaphore School from shortly before the start of the war and another reputedly had already seen considerable war service.

¹³ Major Hugh Lambert Reilly, DSO, MID. 82nd Punjabis and RFC. 30 March 1915 – 20 November 1915. POW.

¹⁴ PRO 674/21/6/87 – Campaign in Mesopotamia – 1914–18.

¹⁵ Lieutenant William Wallace Allison Burn, MID. NZ Staff Corps, attached RFC. 14 May 1915 – 30 July 1915. KIA.

¹⁶ Second Lieutenant (later Captain) Wilfred Ridout Wills, Indian Army Reserve. Equipment Officer.

¹⁷ Also called Tanumah, the location was selected after the original site at Mekina Malsus (2 nm NW of Basra) became flooded.

¹⁸ Cutlack, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918 – Volume VIII –The Australian Flying Corps in the Western and Eastern Theatres of War, 1914–1918*, p. 5.

¹⁹ AWM224, MSS513, 'Operations from Time of Leaving Base'.

FLYING OPERATIONS COMMENCE

According to Petre, the Farman's engines only arrived on 24 May and with only one spare, yet test flying began on the 27th. Nevertheless, Major Reilly (with Major Broke-Smith) and Captain Petre (with Lieutenant Burn) made the first two operational flights on 31 May.²⁰ These were reconnaissance of the enemy positions north of Qurna. Their reports led to a successful British advance on the town in what has been referred to as the Battle of Norfolk Hill and the subsequent capture of 2000 prisoners, 17 guns and the sinking of two gunboats—the most effective form of enemy surface transport. To keep up with the advance, a forward landing ground was established at Abu Rabah with two Farmans, four officers, 13 mechanics and a stores tug, and as it was so successful, this concept of using forward landing grounds was adopted. The effectiveness of aerial reconnaissance convinced Nixon to press for more aircraft and on 12 June, he asked for additional air support. By month's end, the War Office agreed to detail two flights of the RFC from Egypt, but it would be slow in coming.²¹

On 14 June 1915, Petre sent his first report the Chief of the General Staff in Victoria Barracks, Melbourne. In it, he stated:

Though for many months no advance beyond Kurna [Qurna] has been possible from the first day that the aeroplanes were employed the Turkish forces have retreated continuously and the country is now clear of them as far up the River Tigris as Kumait [sic]. The cause suggested for this is twofold; as regards the Arabs, they are completely cowed by the very sight of an aeroplane of which they evidently had no previous knowledge. As regards the Turks they take the use of aircraft as a sign of a completely equipped and organized army and are inclined to give in.²²

So far it had been easy, but this was about to change. On 4 July, two Caudrons were added to the establishment, but they were not up to the hot and sandy conditions. The Caudron G.III was fitted with an 80-hp Gnome rotary engine, but had no armament. Usual revs setting was 1200 rpm, allowing the aircraft to climb and operate at 6000 feet maximum, but the heat, dust and sand meant pilots had to fly lower to clearly observe enemy positions and other features. Eventually, the rotary engines gave in to engine failure with disastrous consequences. On a calm day 50 mph was possible, but when the *Shamal* wind blew up, the aircraft would sometimes track backwards!

A few weeks later, the Half Flight began reconnaissance in support of the next army thrust up the Euphrates to Nasiriyeh and as the Official Historian later noted, 'on the 21st [of July], an aeroplane reconnaissance gave General Gorringe for the first time a comprehensive idea of the enemy's dispositions and the local topography'.²³ Merz and Reilly also made a recce of Nasiriyeh and again their report assisted in the taking of that city on the 24th. These recces were carried out between ¼ and ½ mile over the Turkish lines. No wirelesses were installed (the sets would have been too heavy to carry anyway) so reports had to be brought back or dropped in film canisters with a streamer attached.

²⁰ National Archives of Australia (NAA) A2023, A38/8/202 – 'First Half Flight (AFC) in Mesopotamia – Reports by Commanding Officer Capt. H.A. Petre A.F.C.'

²¹ Brigadier-General F.J. Moberly, *History of the Great War: The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914–1918*, vol. I, His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1923, p. 269. It would not be till the end of the year before the promise would be fulfilled.

²² NAA A2023, A38/8/202.

²³ Moberly, *History of the Great War: The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914–1918*, vol. I, p. 290.

As well as the extremes of weather, the men had to watch out for marauding Arabs. Corporal Bill Wheeler, one of the first reinforcements, recalled the precautions they had to take:

A small section of the Half-flight when stationed at Amara were 'camped' in a small mud walled enclosure (called a compound) quite possibly the site of an early village since it was fairly close to the River Tigris. The mud wall would have been about eight feet high and about three feet thick at the base. While sentries were posted at night for protection against thieving Arabs, Warrant Officer Heath in charge of the workshops arranged for the barbed wire fence on top of the wall to be electrified by means of a magneto driven all night. Probably the first electric fence in the world.²⁴

MERZ AND BURN ARE LOST

Adding to the mechanics' woes was the flimsy construction of the obsolete aircraft, which meant accidents were both common and also costly. Very quickly, the Farmans were reduced to one and the two Caudrons were lost to enemy action. On the first occasion, on 30 July, after completing a reconnaissance of Nasiriyeh in Caudron IFC 4, Lieutenants Merz and Burn landed in the desert near Abu Salibiq with engine trouble. The other Caudron, IFC 3, piloted by Major Reilly (with Sergeant Sid Player, a mechanic as passenger), also force landed but they saved themselves by later fixing their aircraft and flying back. Not so for Merz and Burn. They went missing and, after sighting flares, Lieutenant Wills together with Staff Sergeant Cyril Heath, an Arab river pilot and two Indian soldiers, used a 'bellum'—a form of flat-bottomed boat—to investigate. For this effort, Sergeant Heath was later awarded the only AFC Distinguished Conduct Medal for the war. His citation read; 'For considerable pluck and determination in Mesopotamia on 1st August 1915, when he assisted to pole a bellum 28 miles in 12 hours, in most intense heat, in order to rescue aviators who had been forced to descend in the enemy's territory'. Despite his and Wills' efforts, Merz and Burn were never found.

According to later Arab reports, the missing aviators were attacked by marauding Arabs and although the pair put up a good running fight covering over five miles using their service revolvers in defence, eventually they were overcome and killed. Their bodies were never found, but the hacked apart aircraft was located by Reilly two days later and was returned to the depot for salvage. While much is made of the Gallipoli ANZAC spirit, unnoticed is the fact that Australia's and New Zealand's first air casualties—Merz an Australian and Burn a New Zealander—died together, beginning the close relationship the two air forces share today.

THE ADVANCE UP THE TIGRIS

By August, Force D had expanded to divisional strength and had commenced its advance up the Tigris. On the 6th, the decision was made to continue the advance to Kut-el-Amara. Around this time, two New Zealand officers arrived together with Lieutenant Thomas Scotland²⁵ from the 10th Light Horse Regiment, AIF to join the fliers. As the first stage of a mini-reorganisation of the flying service in Mesopotamia, in late August, the Half Flight received four, single-seat Martinsyde S1 scouts and was redesignated 'A' Flight of No 30

²⁴ Corporal W. Wheeler, 'Formation of First Half-Flight', unpublished manuscript, RAAF Museum.

²⁵ Lieutenant Thomas Scotland, 11th Reinforcements, 10th Australian Light Horse Regiment. RTA – 29 March 1917.

Squadron, RFC.²⁶ All officers were gazetted into the RFC. War Office promises continued with further assurances of a complete squadron of three flights arriving 'in the near future'. However, while the Martinsydes were delivered to the Basra depot in working order, they were still obsolete aircraft unwanted on other fronts. The rest of 30 Squadron was in Ismailia, Egypt, yet to join up in Basra, but this would not happen until the end of the year. Three Short RNAS seaplanes also arrived with crews from East Africa and these were used for naval support and artillery spotting.²⁷ It was not until the long-awaited B.E.2cs arrived at the end of October (together with the Australian mules) that the Squadron finally possessed enough aircraft to sustain regular flights.

In early September, Force D again began moving north, concentrating on Ali Gharbi, which was to be the mounting point for the Kut attack. Ali Gharbi also became the advance landing ground and a detachment of about nine mechanics was sent forward to support forward flying operations from 7 September onwards. Townshend pushed on and by mid-September his forces had reached Sannaiyat, aided by the fine work of the airmen. On the 9th, Farman IFC 1, Caudron IFC 3 and Scouts IFC 5 and IFC 6 flew up to Ali Gharbi in support. Within two days, a British pilot wrote off the Shorthorn IFC 1 in a bad landing. On the 13th, Scout IFC 5 crashed on the same ground during a test flight and on the 16th, the sand and heat took their usual toll as on this date, Treloar's number came up. Flying IFC 3, he years later recounted what happened:

I was just landing at Headquarters after an hour & a half's flight from our temporary aerodrome at Sheikh Saad where I had received an order from the Flight Comdr to join Divisional Hqrs on the Tigris river nine miles above Arak, when I espied my observer, Captain Atkins making his way towards me with his usual bright smile lighting up his tanned face. We start at daybreak tomorrow, he commenced, to reconnoitre the position supposed to be held by the Turks about fourteen miles in our front, & we are to find out at any cost whether they still hold the place and several other minor matters. Our ships went within 6000 yds of their position today & there was not a single shot fired at them. The Arab spies say that they are there in force but reports from other sources contradict this saying the Turks have retired before our advance, if this is the case our force must follow rapidly in pursuit.²⁸

They went off to plan the flight ...

... [We] came to the conclusion we would make for the Turkish left flank & fly down their line getting necessary information we required and then come home by the river signalling to the 'Shaitun' [a command vessel] as we passed them that we had finished.

... Now we are just over their front line on its left flank there we find redoubts, trenches & information enough to keep Atkins sketching and writing at his fastest rate. A little puff of smoke over to our left quickly followed by others shows us plainly that we have

²⁶ No 30 Squadron, RFC, would relocate to Basra on 7 December 1915. New arrivals would be 'B' Flight under Captain A. Graves and 'C' Flight under Major Seaton Massy. Massy would command the unit from 22 November 1915.

²⁷ Under command of Squadron Commander (Major) Robert Gordon, DSO, BM, the contingent included four officers, one warrant Officer and 21 petty officers and other ranks. The seaplane flight eventually became No 7 Squadron RNAS.

²⁸ AWM PR84/244 – W.H. Treloar Letters, 'Handwritten Account by Lieut. Treloar', undated.

succeeded in our mission and that the Turk has betrayed himself by using his artillery on us.

... I fancy the engine is slowing up & I glance at the indicator to find the revolutions are indeed dying down fast. I tell my observer, who has also noticed the failure & we decide to make for a dry piece of ground on the left bank of the river, well in the Turkish Front where possibly I may be able to make a hurried repair and still get away.

... A few shrapnel shots burst here & there but as before their shooting is very bad. I see the Gunboat & know that I cannot reach it against the rising wind.

... A long slow glide during which we are able to tear up our notes & maps and cast them over the side & also keeping a careful watch for any stray patrol parties which may be out in front & now we are about to land.

... We are now about 200 ft up & I see the irrigation channel which we are just going to skim over has been turned into a trench & is full of men. From a calm we glide into a perfect hail of rifle fire & land about 80 yds in front of this trench, which was full of Arabs, Turkish Irregulars. The bullets were whizzing past our heads, going through the woodwork & tangling [sic] off the bracing wires. We jumped out of the machine quickly & placed our hands up but as the firing continued, we took what cover there was, eventually deciding to try & run to the boat but before going many paces we were surrounded by some cavalry, and in a minute or two by an excited crowd of Arab fanatics & Turkish Irregulars, who started to loot us at once, tearing off most of our clothes & equipment.²⁹

Just when things seemed grim, a Turkish officer appeared and they both went into captivity. Initially transported to Baghdad, and although badly treated, they survived the war as POWs.

THE MOVE TOWARDS KUT

Within a week of the Flight's arrival at Ali Gharbi, three of the four aircraft were gone leaving a single Martinsyde IFC 6 to support the advance on Es-Sinn, a Turkish stronghold before Kut. Given the need for air support, Scout IFC 9 was crated and together with three seaplanes was sent up river on a pair of barges. But the first barge became stranded on a sandbank and it was well into October before it was freed. So Petre flew Scout IFC 8 up to support the advance, unfortunately damaging it at Sannaiyat, which caused further delays as well as injuring his left foot. The other Shorthorn, IFC 7, was flown up by White, arriving safely making only two aircraft available for Townshend's 26 September assault on Kut (IFC 6 and IFC 7). By the 30th, Petre's IFC 8 arrived, but on 2 October, he crashed it again³⁰.

Townshend now set his mind to take Kut and to do so he required knowledge of the Turkish defences. In 1915, Kut-el-Amara was a native town of about 6000 inhabitants nestled in a tight bend on the left bank of the Tigris. The town, built predominantly of mud brick, was of strategic significance because it controlled the river traffic. On 14 and 15 September, aerial and naval reconnaissance of the Turkish lines had been carried out, showing the Turks were in strength and digging in. When Treloar and Atkins failed to return, Reilly in the Caldron made an evening flight, bringing back a hand drawn map of the Turkish positions which

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Information from Dr Brian P. Flanagan, 'The Indian Flying Corps and the Australian Half-Flight', in *Cross & Cockade Journal (US)*, vol. 17, no. 2, Summer 1976, p. 173.

Townshend in his memoirs described as 'fine work' and by the 17th, all was ready. White had also tried aerial photography, but the poor quality film combined with the weather conditions meant the shots he took were of little use. However, the subsequent assault on Kut on 27 September was successful, the Turks withdrawing three days later. Townshend's eagerness to capture Kut extended his lines of communication, and, as we shall see, it was later to be his downfall.

By October, the advance had reached within 50 miles of Baghdad, but it would be at much cost. Although operations had resulted in 4000 Turkish casualties, including 1153 POWs, Townshend's force was tired and stressed by the heat and poor provisions. The Flight flew repeated reconnaissance missions and the occasional bombing sortie. Since the battle of Qurna, two-pound hand-bombs were tossed over the side, causing panic amongst the enemy soldiers. Later 20-lb bombs arrived in theatre, but the inadequate bomb racks meant crews preferred to drop them through a hole cut in the cockpit floor. Most operations were carried out up and down the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, as that was the most likely place to observe troop movement and the easiest method of getting around was by river transport. As well as bombs, crews also dropped messages to troop commanders thereby assisting them in their task, giving descriptions of the terrain and maps of Turkish troop positions.

Meanwhile, problems with aircraft serviceability improved slightly and by 13 October, Farman IFC 2 had been repaired making four aircraft to continue reconnaissance and bombing missions. On the 22nd, engine trouble forced down Captain Thomas White with Captain Frank Yeats-Brown, an Indian Army observer, near Zeur and as Yeats-Brown, armed with only a rifle, acted as guard and navigator, White taxied the aircraft back across the rocky ground until safe over the British lines. The audacity of the move must have stunned the Turks, who never fired a shot. After taxiing for 17 miles, the engine picked up and they were able to fly home. It was a remarkable escape. At the end of the month, four more modern B.E.2cs arrived at Basra together with four pilots and these too were shipped up to Kut by river barge.

In early November, White in Longhorn IFC 2 rescued Major-General George Kemball, the Chief of Staff to Nixon, who had been forced down in enemy territory when one of the Short seaplanes in which he was a passenger developed engine trouble. Landing close by, White returned the General to camp leaving the seaplane pilot and a salvage crew to get the seaplane out.

TOWNSHEND EXCEEDS HIS ORDERS

Townshend's thrust into the Mesopotamian heartland continued with a gathering enthusiasm to capture Baghdad. This was far beyond his orders and, as it turned out, his force's capacity. Blinded by success and a thirsting for fame, he pushed onwards, requiring more and more from his aviators. On 13 November 1915, Captain Thomas White in the Longhorn IFC 2, again with Captain Frank Yeats-Brown, volunteered for a mission to cut the main telegraph line into Baghdad. Carrying necklaces of guncotton and extra tins of fuel and oil, the pair discovered that the telegraph wire ran westward from Baghdad along the main road and not out into the desert as the maps depicted. As Turkish troops were constantly moving along the road, it was inevitable they would be caught. Although landing in a spot where the surface looked smooth, the aircraft crashed into a telegraph pole damaging it irreparably for flight. Despite the arrival of an armed party, Yeats-Brown managed to blow up the wires while under fire as White refuelled the aircraft, hoping to taxi it to safety as he had done previously. But his efforts were to no avail, and they were captured and interned. White later escaped

after two and a half years in captivity, recalling his story in his book, *Guests of the Unspeakable*. After the war, he turned to politics and after serving as a wing commander in World War II ended his working life as Australia's High Commissioner in London. General Nixon who had arrived at Aziziya the same day, and fearing the loss of further precious aircraft, forbade the long-distance flights, effectively denying himself any intelligence on Turkish reinforcements—it would be a crucial mistake.

A week later, Major Hugh Reilly and Captain Edmund Fulton became the final casualties of the Half Flight. On 21 November, while reconnoitring Ctesiphon in Scout IFC 6, Reilly was shot down by ground fire and taken prisoner. His latest report of Turkish reinforcements at Ctesiphon never reached Townshend—a misfortune that would signal the end for Townshend's force. Had it done so, the campaign outcomes may have been different. Reilly's maps, however, fell into Turkish hands where they were a godsend. According to translated documents quoted in the Official History:

Major Reilly's greatest gift to us was a sketch showing the course of the Tigris from Diyala to Aziziya. This little sketch, probably of small account to the enemy, was an important map in the eyes of the Iraq Command. For at headquarters and with the troops there was no such thing as a map.³¹

The next day, Fulton received the same treatment in Scout IFC 8. By now, the Flight had only one Scout (IFC 9), one Shorthorn (IFC 7) and three B.E.2cs (IFC 12, 12A and 14) remaining. Petre was the only pilot.

The dream of an early and triumphal entry into Baghdad evaporated in late November. The Battle of Ctesiphon (*Suliman Pak* to the Turks – 22–24 November 1915) did not go well with the infliction of severe casualties on the overstretched and outnumbered British forces, and was the first reverse of the campaign. Although only the Farman IFC 7, two seaplanes and, later, a B.E.2 were all that were available, the aircraft were used to constantly recce the situation, dropping messages on the 6th Division Headquarters. On the 25th, they reported a large Turkish force advancing towards the British from Diyala, some of whom they bombed with 100-lb bombs. The British had marched to within 24 miles of their target, Baghdad, but it would be another year and a half before that prize would be claimed. They were now forced to retire. After Townshend's failure to secure the town, on 3 December, his 3000 British and 10 000 Indian troops and their camp followers³² withdrew back to Kut-el-Amara. Here they were besieged for five months while Nixon attempted to organise a rescue. Major Seaton Massy,³³ who had arrived from Egypt during the battle, took command of the unit from 28 November 1915, replacing Reilly.

THE SIEGE OF KUT

After it was clear there was no escape, Townshend ordered all serviceable aircraft back to Basra, and so on 7 December Petre flew Farman IFC 7 out with Major Massy to continue

³¹ H.A. Jones, *The War in the Air: Being the Story of the Part Played in the Great War by the Royal Air Force – Volume V*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1935, p. 265, q.v. *The Battle of Suliman Pak* by Staff Bimbashi Muhammad Amin.

³² The official numbers were 3152 British, 8455 Indian and 3530 camp followers.

³³ Major Seaton Dunham Massy, Indian Army and RFC. Some sources incorrectly spell the name Massey.

operations out of Ali Gharbi. B.E.2c IFC 11, also departed,³⁴ flown by Captain Eric Murray³⁵ with Lieutenant Granville Spain.³⁶ The two river barges and mobile workshops had also been lost in the retreat, so there were no spare parts and no way of repairing the grounded aircraft. Scout IFC 9 and two B.E.2cs were abandoned. More unfortunate for the squadron, half the aircrew and most of the rank and file mechanics were left to their fate.

Many months later, the German mechanics succeeded in rebuilding a single aircraft from the remains in Kut and it joined the aircraft of their flying squadron. Meanwhile, back at Basra, and with a decision that would presage the formation of the RAF in April 1918, the RNAS Short seaplanes and the RFC's Farman IFC 7 and B.E.2c IFC 11 were combined into a single flying unit identity—the RNAS had aircraft and few pilots, the RFC had pilots and few aircraft. Only when two Voisins arrived in early February did the pilots have the ability to resume regular patrols.

With the virtual loss of the squadron, on 27 December, 'C' Flight arrived at Basra from Egypt both completing the unit establishment and adding vital reinforcements. The Flight Commander was Captain G.B. Rickards.³⁷ Meanwhile, Townshend's force was now cut off and surrounded by the 18th Turkish Corps and while English reinforcements were being rushed up to assist, they were held off at Fallujah by the 13th Turkish Corps in a flanking move. Had Townshend known the real extent of the Turkish 6th Army and the fact that it was a shallow force, he might have seized the initiative and been prepared for a breakout. Aerial reconnaissance was uncoordinated and aerial photography and interpretation methods only in their infancy, so the true extent of the enemy's position was not appreciated. The Siege of Kut, which lasted from 7 December 1915 to 28 April 1916, would be a disaster of monumental proportions, eclipsed only by the fall of Singapore some 26 years later.

From January 1916, attempts were made to relieve the beleaguered garrison using a revamped British force, the 'Tigris Corps'. Under newly appointed Lieutenant-General Fenton Aylmer,³⁸ it was to be hamstrung on three counts. First, the Turks were by now well established and knew the ground. Second, the Tigris floods prevented outflanking manoeuvres and third, apparently Townshend made no offer to help.³⁹ The first attempt to relieve the garrison commenced on 4 January when Major-General Sir George Younghusband's⁴⁰ 7th (Meerut) Division advanced from Ali Gharbi to Sheikh Saad. His force would go no further. The airmen continuously moved up with the troops operating from Ali Gharbi, Musandeg, and Sheikh Saad, finally arriving at Ora on 16 January.

As the Turkish commanders were considering their own position, in late November 1915, the Germans and Turks agreed to the creation of a new flying squadron after they had

³⁴ Here records differ and are incomplete. One of IFC 12, 12A and 14 was apparently flown out by an unnamed British pilot. The other two were abandoned. Henshaw also claims a Voisin was also lost, but it must have arrived in Kut after February 1916.

³⁵ Captain Eric Mackay Murray, DSO, MC. Arrived October 1915. Squadron Commander 31 May – 7 August 1916.

³⁶ Lieutenant Granville Alaric Richard Spain. Observer. Arrived October 1915.

³⁷ Captain G.B. Rickards, MC. RFC 20 November 1915 – 1916.

³⁸ General Fenton J. Aylmer had been sent out from India to command the Meerut Division, but on arrival was given the task of relieving Kut.

³⁹ Norman F. Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*, Futura, London, 1988, pp. 101–105.

⁴⁰ Major-General Sir George John Younghusband, KCMG, KCIE, CB.

successfully secured the Dardanelles. On 1 December, *Fleigerabteilung 2* left San Stefano under command of *Hauptmann* von Aulock. The unit was essentially German crewed with 10 aircraft, including four *Pfalz* Parasol monoplanes for fighter duties. After a tortuous journey by wagon, ship, rail and river steamer, the procession arrived in Baghdad nine weeks after departure where an aircraft depot, *Flugpark 6*, was established.⁴¹

The first Turkish aeroplane, however, appeared in the Baghdad skies on 27 November and reported the British occupation of Lajj, but this event went unreported through the British chain of command.⁴² This was no doubt one of the two captured British aircraft (IFC 3 or Shorthorn IFC 7) which a Turkish crew had managed to get airworthy. Later, Townshend casually considered the arrival of enemy air on 1 January with a note on a cable, which read: 'An aeroplane passed over here in the forenoon reported, by a look-out man. As I understand yours did not go out from Ali Gharbi, it would appear to be a hostile one'.⁴³ Indeed, four aircraft had also been brought forward and for the next six weeks the German fliers now in theatre merely reconnoitred the British lines. The British Air Historical Branch publication *The Royal Air Force in the Great War* states that these were three Fokker monoplanes and an Aviatik biplane.⁴⁴

However, on 13 February, the Kut garrison experienced their first bombing raid, an action which greatly improved the morale of the Turkish troops and firmed their resolve. At 9.15 am, the enemy aircraft appeared overhead dropping four bombs into the town and flying away unscathed. It was to be the beginning of a new phase. So close was the enemy aerodrome at Shumran that lookouts in Kut could watch them take off and thus sound the alarm. Despite the regular arrival of the enemy aircraft overhead, few casualties were recorded from the bombing, as most of the garrison was living underground, the German 30-lb bombs having little effect. So the siege continued. The garrison responded by placing machine guns on the roofs of houses and by converting one of their 13-pounder guns for anti-aircraft operations, but this only forced the enemy to fly higher. According to the British Official Historian, Brigadier-General Fred Moberly, those left in Kut 'suffered from further periodical bombardments, which at times did considerable damage'.⁴⁵

Hauptmann Hans Schüz who flew with *FlAbt 2* later recalled that: 'Day and night the 'Parasol' monoplane hummed over Kut, dropping bomb after bomb upon the crowded troops below, who previously had been secure against all bombardment'.⁴⁶ The Germans established an aircraft depot at Baghdad and, like their English and Australian counterparts, found it very difficult to keep their aircraft serviceable. They too were only provided leftovers from the other fronts. Schüz continued: 'One of our greatest difficulties was the manufacture of

⁴¹ Dr Brian P. Flanagan, 'The History of the Ottoman Air Force in the Great War: The Reports of Major Erich Serno', in *Cross & Cockade Journal (US)*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1970, pp. 123–124.

⁴² Brigadier-General F.J. Moberly, *History of the Great War: The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914–1918*, vol. II, His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1924, p. 111.

⁴³ *ibid*, p. 200.

⁴⁴ Air Historical Branch, *The Royal Air Force in the Great War*, The Imperial War Museum, London, 1996, p. 142.

⁴⁵ Moberly, *History of the Great War: The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914–1918*, vol. II, p. 307.

⁴⁶ Schüz quoted in Major Georg Paul Neumann, *The German Air Force in the Great War*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1920, p. 259.

bombs, but with the assistance of cast-iron pipes inserted one inside the other, filled with high explosives, and detonated by a cartridge, we succeeded in producing an efficient substitute'.⁴⁷

Not so fortunate were the British. Moberly was later to write:

For the greater part of February General Aylmer had only one serviceable aeroplane at his disposal and, although by the end of the month three machines of the Royal Naval Air Service had joined him, he had no longer superiority in the air. The Turkish aeroplanes were increasing in number and efficiency and were generally faster and better fighting machines than those of the British. In addition to bombing Kut periodically, three of them bombed General Aylmer's camp on the 22nd of February.⁴⁸

Adding to British lack of aircraft, on 5 March, the Turkish machine-gunners succeeded in shooting down a Voisin (serial: v1541) near Es Sinn, with recent arrivals, pilot Lieutenant Roland Peck⁴⁹ and observer Captain Walt Palmer⁵⁰ both killed.

By now, the weather was also turning, becoming very hot during the day and the high sun glare and dust adding to the misery. To top it all, the mosquitoes and flies became unbearable and appeared in plague proportions, maddening horses and men alike. After Younghusband's first attempt to break through in January, another was set for 7 March. The Battle of the Dujaila Redoubt was likewise a failure, the British losing over 4000 men. Aylmer was subsequently replaced by Gorringe as Commander of the Tigris Corps, now newly promoted Lieutenant-General. When hearing of Gorringe's elevation, Townshend reportedly burst into tears. He realised he would never be promoted to that high rank.

ATTEMPTS AT AIR RESUPPLY

Attempts to relieve Kut by air were also doomed, mainly because of the lack of numbers of aircraft and their poor carrying capacity. At the beginning, there were three RFC aircraft and two seaplanes available, but on 26 April two aircraft were shot down. First was a Short 184 seaplane (No. 8044) flown by Second Lieutenants Cecil Gasson (wounded) and Arch Thouless (killed).⁵¹ The other was a B.E.2c (probably IFC 11) flown by Lieutenant Donald Davidson,⁵² who was wounded, but escaped. His unarmed aircraft was delivering supplies and had 32 bullet holes plus the right aileron shot away. During the last days of the siege, Petre (now the sole AFC pilot remaining) and a few of the RNAS seaplane pilots flew 140 air resupply missions over and into Kut using makeshift supply bags. The air resupply began on 15 April with food, medical supplies, money (£10 000 in gold, silver and notes), and spare parts for the wireless all flown in. Food was carried in 50-lb bags slung under the fuselage and in 25-lb bags fixed to the undercarriage. On one occasion, a 70-lb millstone was dropped to grind corn, and parachutes were made at the Basra base cut from old aeroplane fabric to

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Moberly, *History of the Great War: The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914–1918*, vol. II, p. 302.

⁴⁹ Lieutenant Roland Henry Peck, Dorsetshire Regiment, attached RFC. Died age 24. Basra Memorial.

⁵⁰ Captain Walter Gerard Palmer, 113th Indian Infantry, attached RFC. Died age 32. Basra Memorial.

⁵¹ Second Lieutenant Archibald Cecil Thouless, 9th Battalion, Norfolk Regiment, attached RFC. Died age 19. Basra Memorial.

⁵² Lieutenant Donald Alastair Leslie Davidson, MC, MID, RFC. Pilot. 30 Squadron – 10 December 1915 – 6 May 1916. KIA, 30 April 1917, with 19 Squadron.

permit safe drop of the supplies. Although over 19 000 lbs of supplies were dropped (mainly by the RNAS) in 61 sorties, it was to be to no avail. Despite attempts by Gorringe and Aylmer to mount a land rescue, these failed due to Turkish entrenchment, lack of river transport and the floods. On 29 April 1916, and almost starving, the garrison surrendered after 146 days. Private Brown later stated that only 12 of the original mechanics from the Half Flight at Kut escaped to Basra to be absorbed into 30 Squadron, RFC.⁵³ This air resupply was notable, however, as it was the first time in history that aircraft had been used to carry and drop supplies of any significance.

INTO CAPTIVITY

Townshend's Force D had been decimated through disease, heat and starvation, but this was to be only the start of their suffering. A forced march into captivity from Kut to Anatolia, a distance of over 700 miles, meant many perished on the journey and in scenes to be repeated in Burma-Thailand in the next war, the survivors were forced to work on the railway in the Taurus mountains. Only 2000 of the original 13 000 survived. Left behind were several pilots and observers⁵⁴ and 44 NCOs and men, including nine Australians. Of those nine, only two survived.⁵⁵ Corporal Jim Sloss and Air Mechanic Keith Hudson because of their skills as mechanics, were put to work servicing German staff cars. Despite their deliberate 'go-slow', the work under German supervision probably saved their lives. British airmen losses were likewise significant.

A memorial plaque to the Kut Garrison is now in St Paul's Cathedral crypt. It states:

KUT-EL-AMARA
5th December 1915 to 29th April 1916
TO THE MEMORY OF
5746 OF THE GARRISON
WHO DIED IN THE SEIGE
OR AFTERWARDS IN CAPTIVITY
Erected by their surviving comrades

THE END OF THE HALF FLIGHT

It was the end of the Australian Flying Corps contribution to the air war over Mesopotamia, although Australians later served with the RFC and ground forces that eventually repelled the Turks. On 23 May 1916, Captain Petre was invalided to India after a bad bout of enteritis,

⁵³ AWM224, MSS513, 'Operations from Time of Leaving Base'.

⁵⁴ British officer POWs were: Captain (later Major) Stephen Winfield Smith, Captain Stan Munday, Captain Tom Wells, and Second Lieutenant C. Munro. British casualties included: Sergeant F. Read (d. 31 May 1917), Corporal Alf Reid (d. 5 May 1915), and Air Mechanic 2nd Class William Keefe (d. 7 May 1916).

⁵⁵ Corporal Thomas Soley (d. June/July 1916), and Air Mechanics Frank Adams (d. June/July 1916), William Lord (d. 13 July 1916), James Munro (d. 13 October 1916), William Raiment (d. 11 November 1916), Leo Williams (d. 13 July 1917) and David Curran (d. 16 June 1917).

where he recovered, eventually to take command of No 75 (Home Defence) Squadron, RFC, back in his English homeland. Awarded a Military Cross for his efforts in resupplying Kut, and after several RAF postings, upon discharge, he resettled in England as a solicitor, before passing away in April 1962.

As to the other members of the Half Flight, of the remaining 49, two were invalided prior to the fall of Kut, at least 22 went to Egypt to join Nos 1 and No 2 Squadrons, AFC, and the remainder were dispersed to other units or returned to Australia later in 1916. Stress, poor food and extreme living conditions no doubt all contributed to the ill health of many of the survivors. In October 1916, the Half Flight was officially disbanded.

After Kut, there was a lull on both sides and eventually, the British brought up reinforcements and prepared a new offensive beginning in November 1916. With newer aircraft types and the cooler conditions, they quickly regained control of the air, but it would be a long fight before Baghdad was captured and the victory won.

As a postscript to the Half Flight story, on 5 June 1915, the Australian authorities received a further call from the Viceroy of India for reinforcements. They subsequently commissioned a second Half Flight of another four officers (commanded by Lieutenant Richard Williams with Alan Murray Jones, David Manwell and Vince Hall) and 20 mechanics, but in the end it was not required. Apparently, the first reinforcements and No 30 Squadron's arrival sufficed and so, after doing some advanced flying training in preparation, the second Half Flight was disbanded at the end of 1915, allowing Williams to go to Egypt with No 1 Squadron in early 1916 and on to greater things.⁵⁶

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