



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

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# 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

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# **‘QUITE THE RIGHT TYPE’: RECRUITING AND REINFORCING AUSTRALIA’S EFFORT IN THE AIR, 1914–1918**

**MR MICHAEL MOLKENTIN**

In mid-November 1917, Australian newspapers ran an article by official war correspondent Charles Bean titled ‘Australian Airmen – Marvellous Work – A Fascinating Life’. His first dispatch devoted to the topic, it explained that there were, by this time in France, ‘two bodies of Australian fliers’. On the one hand, there were those ‘scattered through’ the RFC and RNAS devoting themselves ‘ungrudgingly to the general cause’ and, on the other, the units of the AFC. Nos 2 and 3 Squadrons had arrived on the Western Front in September 1917 after training in Britain, while No 4 Squadron would join them two days before Christmas. In Britain, four training squadrons were forming and would in early 1918 comprise an Australian training wing, while in Palestine No 1 Squadron, AFC, continued to serve with the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, as it had since April 1916. Already contemplating the monumental *Official History* he would write on Australia’s involvement in the conflict, Bean predicted in his article that the AFC’s work ‘will always be easy to identify for their country’s history’. Indeed, as he wrote, the Australian War Records Section in London was arranging to receive from RFC authorities duplicates of all records produced by the Australian squadrons. On the contrary, predicted Bean, it would ‘be most difficult to collect and record’ evidence relating to Australians in the British flying services.<sup>1</sup> British administration did not differentiate them as colonial pilots, making it challenging today to even identify them in official records, to say nothing of evaluating their contribution or experiences.

This paper examines Australia’s involvement in history’s first great air war from the perspective of what, in contemporary terms, might be called ‘human resources’. Its concern is how Australia, a dominion of less than five million on the far side of the world from Europe, with practically no aviation infrastructure in 1914, supplied men to serve in the AFC’s four training and four service squadrons and throughout the British flying services. Although the AFC squadrons were part of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), they were also very much part of the RFC; as well as having unit numbers in the British sequence for much of the war and serving in RFC brigades and wings, they also comprehensively relied on British authorities for equipment, training and policy. Nonetheless, for clarity this paper deals with how Australia provided men to these two organisations in turn, focusing first on Australians in the British flying services and then on the AFC. As well as highlighting an issue that has received little attention in the literature, this research suggests that although fielding a nationally distinct flying corps made political sense, it presented Australian military authorities with difficulties and ultimately may have limited Australia’s part in the Great War in the air.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Australian Airmen – Marvellous Work – A Fascinating Life’, in *The Advertiser*, Adelaide, 15 November 1917, p. 6.

## **‘TO BEST SERVE THE EMPIRE IN HER TIME OF NEED’: AUSTRALIANS AND THE BRITISH FLYING SERVICES**

Shortly before the beginning of the war the AFC had been established as part of the Citizen Forces, the Defence Department planning to gradually train a squadron over the coming several years.<sup>2</sup> While the war rapidly accelerated these plans, firstly with the raising of the Mesopotamian Half Flight in February 1915, it was early 1916 before the establishment of the first complete AFC squadron with another three not following until late that year. The Australian Government could accept the War Office’s invitation to raise these flying squadrons for overseas service because of the six courses the Central Flying School (CFS) at Point Cook had run between the beginning of the war and the end of 1916. Yet even at their peak, these courses remained small and, until December 1916, restricted to officers of either the permanent or citizen forces.<sup>3</sup> For the first half of the Great War, service with either the RFC or RNAS provided the best, and in many cases, only prospect for young Australian men seeking to fight in the air.

The beginning of the war found a few Australian expatriates already serving with the RFC’s military and naval wings. These were career officers in the British regular Army and Navy, men such as George Raleigh, born in Melbourne and educated at Geelong Grammar and Melbourne University; he served in the Essex Regiment for 11 years before learning to fly privately in early 1912 and joining the Air Battalion. He commanded No 4 Squadron during the war’s opening campaigns but died in an accident at the beginning of 1915.<sup>4</sup> The British flying services also attracted Australian civilians living and working in Britain at the beginning of the war. Like numerous middle-class children born in Australia around the turn of the century, Charles Booker’s childhood was split between living in Britain and Australia. When war started he was at boarding school in Bedfordshire and in 1915 he joined the RNAS. Others such as Roderic Dallas started the war in Australia; after failing to gain entry into the AFC he paid his own passage to Britain and topped the RNAS entrance examination.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, future civil aviation pioneers Norman Brearley and Patrick Gordon Taylor both went to Britain independently and joined the RFC in 1915 when it became clear that the AFC had so few places.<sup>6</sup> Some went in groups, such as the self-styled ‘Queensland Volunteer Flying Civilians’, a group of nine flying enthusiasts who the Defence Department refused to take into the AFC in mid-1915; and a dozen Geelong Grammar boys and their science master who sailed to Britain in early 1916 to, as their headmaster put it, ‘best serve the Empire in her time of need’.<sup>7</sup> All enlisted in British regiments, with two, George Kay and James Fairbairn, joining the RFC.

As these examples suggest, ideology, enthusiasm, ambition and pragmatism all figured in an Australian man’s decision to trade service in his native force for a British commission. An ambition to fly that could not be accommodated in Australia during the early part of the war

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<sup>2</sup> Military Order No. 382 of 1914, National Archives of Australia (NAA) A2023, A38/6/70.

<sup>3</sup> Chief of the General Staff, Colonel H.J. Foster, minute, 29 November 1916, NAA A2023, A38/7/434.

<sup>4</sup> Biographical notes on Major George Hebdon Raleigh, AWM43, A714.

<sup>5</sup> Adrian Hellwig, *Australian Hawk over the Western Front: A Biography of Major R S Dallas DSO, DSC, C de G avec Palme*, Grub Street, London, 2006, pp. 14–22.

<sup>6</sup> Norman Brearley and Ted Mayman, *Australian Aviator*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1971, p. 4; and Sir Gordon Taylor, *The Sky Beyond*, Cassell Australia, Melbourne, 1963, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> George Pollard Kay, ‘Letters from Bob’ (Captain George Pollard Kay): Flight Commander, 46th Squadron, Royal Flying Corps, Melville & Mullen, Melbourne, 1917, p. viii.

undoubtedly motivated some but for others, securing an imperial commission took precedent over flying. The influence of growing up in a society that venerated the British Army and its celebrated, empire-winning deeds—what Craig Wilcox describes as ‘red coat dreaming’—was all pervasive in Australia; indeed, before Gallipoli, Australians looked wholly and enthusiastically to Britain for martial inspiration.<sup>8</sup> Peter Drummond apparently felt this way, applying first to a British artillery regiment. Likewise, Scotch College graduate Rupert Hoddinott, who ‘wish[ed] above all to have a commission in the British Army’, failed to secure appointment to a British regiment, joined the AIF in 1914 and transferred to the Royal Field Artillery shortly after arriving overseas. From there he went into the RFC in 1917.<sup>9</sup>

Alongside abstract notions of imperial nationalism, more pragmatic considerations compelled men to choose service in the British over the Australian flying service. In March 1915, John Wischer, a 19-year-old Citizen Forces subaltern from Melbourne was at No 2 Officer Training School at Broadmeadows when the Defence Department determined that officers under 23 years of age could not serve in the AIF. Deciding ‘to proceed to England to offer his services’, his first preference, the Royal Garrison Artillery, commissioned him in June 1915 and a year later he transferred to the RFC and trained as a pilot.<sup>10</sup> Another Australian who joined the RFC, Bob Kay, considered transferring to the AFC when he became lonely for Australian company but decided to remain with the British service where he perceived better prospects of ‘get[ting] into a fine squadron, [and] flying the very latest and best thing in scouts ...’.<sup>11</sup> Most pragmatic are the attitudes of those, like Geoffrey Sulman, a 22-year-old engineering student from Sydney who secured his parents’ consent to join the RFC by arguing that it was safer, more comfortable and offered better prospects than ‘trench work’. He died in a training accident the following June.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to those who enlisted in the British flying services as civilians, the AIF granted around 200 discharges to men (and occasionally officers) so they could join the RFC or RNAS.<sup>13</sup> The majority went to the RFC in two special drafts permitted by the AIF’s General Officer Commanding, Lieutenant-General Sir William Birdwood, before the expansion of the AFC in late 1916. The first occurred in response to a call from Sir Hugh Trenchard commanding the RFC on the Western Front in November 1915, for 1500 other ranks to transfer from ‘the Armies in the field’ to the flying corps to meet a shortfall in ‘suitable’ civilian recruits.<sup>14</sup> The War Office apparently extended this invitation to the AIF, and with Birdwood’s approval some two dozen Australian men left Australian units during late 1915

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<sup>8</sup> Craig Wilcox, *Red Coat Dreaming: How Colonial Australia Embraced the British Army*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2009. Especially relevant here is Chapter 9, ‘England’s bugler’, pp. 108–122, in which Wilcox examines the influence of W.H. Fitchett’s *Deeds that Won the Empire*, first published in 1897.

<sup>9</sup> Squadron Leader Rupert Uriah Hoddinott, ‘Years that have flown’, manuscript memoir, p. 17, AWM MSS0791.

<sup>10</sup> John Victor Wischer, personnel file, The National Archives of the UK (NAUK): WO 339/53587.

<sup>11</sup> Kay, ‘Letters from Bob’, p. 85.

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Sulman to mother and father, 31 July 1916, ‘Florence Sulman and Geoffrey Sulman letters from England and France in war time, 1916–1917’, pp. 183–185, State Library of New South Wales (SLNSW): A1378.

<sup>13</sup> Roll of officers and other ranks discharged from the AIF to accept British commissions, 1915–1918, AWM27 361/16.

<sup>14</sup> Minutes from wing commanders conference, 4 November 1915, NAUK AIR 1/920/204/5/884.

and early 1916 for commissions in the RFC.<sup>15</sup> Most, like 21-year-old Private Alexander ‘Jerry’ Pentland of the 12th Light Horse Regiment were convalescing in Britain from wounds or illness contracted on Gallipoli.<sup>16</sup>

The War Office asked Birdwood for another 200 volunteers in July 1916.<sup>17</sup> By this time, RFC authorities had cooled to the idea of distinctive colonial squadrons, preferring the RFC to develop a heterogeneously imperial character.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, RFC Training Brigade’s staff perceived the dominions as an excellent source for pilots. In a hierarchy of the most desirable candidates created in early September 1916, colonial recruits rated second after observers who had around 200 hours of active service flying.<sup>19</sup> With the Australian Defence Minister’s endorsement, Birdwood agreed, but considering it ‘hardly right’ that the Commonwealth pay for officers ‘to all intents and purposes ... in the English service’, recommended the 200 volunteers ‘be permanently transferred from the AIF to the English service’.<sup>20</sup>

The special drafts of AIF volunteers, alongside Australian civilians who continued to join the British flying services in 1916, produced over 200 trained pilots for British service squadrons in the early part of 1917. Considering that the RFC in all theatres did not exceed 60 service squadrons during that year, it would be reasonable to suppose that by mid-1917, there were few British squadrons without at least one or two Australians on their increasingly heterogeneous flying rosters. ‘Essentially an Empire unit’, is how Eric Dibbs, a clerk from Sydney, described No 11 Squadron, which he joined in June. ‘We had in it three Australians [two of them flight commanders], a number of Canadians, two South Africans, a Newfoundlander, as well as representatives of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales’.<sup>21</sup> Joining No 5 Squadron in May, Jack Allport likewise found himself among three fellow Australians.<sup>22</sup> Going to No 2 Squadron, RFC, in August he came under the command of Major Wilfred Snow, a metallurgist from Adelaide.<sup>23</sup> Bob Kay joined No 46 Squadron at the beginning of the year, one of four Victorians in that unit.<sup>24</sup> Promoted in June, he succeeded

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<sup>15</sup> This request from the War Office has apparently not survived. Birdwood refers to it in a July 1916 letter to the Minister for Defence, Sir George Pearce, as having come to AIF Headquarters ‘some little time ago’, Birdwood to Pearce, 14 July 1916, AWM 3DRL/3376 7/2.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Schaedel, *Australian Air Ace: The Exploits of ‘Jerry’ Pentland, MC, DFC, AFC*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1979, pp. 16–17.

<sup>17</sup> Secretary, War Office, Bertram Cubbitt to Administrative Headquarters AIF, 11 July 1916, quoted in 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*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1984, p. 421.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Dominion Squadrons, 1915–1918’, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), Canada, 75/514, file D1.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Notes on training of Pilots by Training Brigade, Royal Flying Corps’, 2 September 1916, NAUK AIR 1/676/21/13/1773.

<sup>20</sup> Birdwood to Pearce, 14 July 1916, AWM 3DRL/3376 7/2; and Pearce to Birdwood, 14 September 1916, AWM 3DRL/3376 2/13.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Eric Dibbs, *The 14–18 Journal*, 1967, p. 91. Dibbs identifies the other Australians as Captains Geoffrey Hooper and Edye Manning, both flight commanders.

<sup>22</sup> Second Lieutenant Jack Allport to family, 24 May 1917, Australian Society of World War 1 Aero Historians newsletter, March 1971, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Second Lieutenant Jack Allport to family, 3 October 1917, Australian Society of World War 1 Aero Historians newsletter, April 1971.

<sup>24</sup> Kay, ‘Letters from Bob’, p. 98.

Australian tennis champion Rodney Heath to command 'A' Flight while Clive Brewster Joske, a Melbourne Grammarian, led 'B' Flight. 'So', reported Kay to his father, 'Australia is not doing so badly, and is keeping her end up in this part of the line'.<sup>25</sup>

As these examples also suggest, being colonial proved no impediment in itself to promotion in the RFC, while the numerous Australians who commanded squadrons and flights in the RNAS imply the same for the naval arm.<sup>26</sup> 'We got a very fair go' recalled Pentland.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, it appears Australians in the British flying services earned promotion on the usual grounds of seniority and distinction in combat. During 1917 Australian officers led a dozen of the 50-odd British service squadrons on the Western Front, including the AFC squadrons.<sup>28</sup> In 1918, Australians commanded at least 16 of the 99 squadrons with which the RAF finished the war in Europe.<sup>29</sup> Some of the relatively few formation commands in the British flying services

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, pp. 137–138. Another example comes from the diary of Lieutenant Geoffrey Forrest Hughes from Sydney; he notes that at the beginning of February 1917 the three senior pilots in his flight of No 10 Squadron were Australians—himself, Wilfred Snow and Ewart James Garland: Hughes, diary, 1 February 1917, SLNSW MLMSS 1222/6.

<sup>26</sup> The Canadians discovered likewise when investigating allegations that Canadians in the British flying services progressed slower than their counterparts from the British Isles: S.F. Wise, *Canadian Airmen and the First World War: The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force, Volume I*, University of Toronto Press in cooperation with the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Government Publishing Centre, Supply and Services Canada, Toronto, 1980, p. 585.

<sup>27</sup> Jerry (Alexander August Norman Dudley) Pentland interviewed by Fred Morton, 1976, National Library of Australia TRC425/6.

<sup>28</sup> These included (though this list may not be exhaustive) Major Alfred Barton Adams (born in London but attended Sydney Church of England Grammar School and worked in Sydney before the war, he commanded No 1 Squadron, RFC, from 20 June 1917 until 3 August 1918); Major Richard Blomfield (born in Sydney, commanded No 56 Squadron, January 1917 to October 1917); Major Hugh Champion de Crespigny (born in Melbourne, commanded No 29 Squadron, March to July 1917 and September to October 1917); Major Kelham Kirk Horn (born in North Walkerville, South Australia, commanded No 54 Squadron, November 1916 to c. December 1917); Major Rupert Henry Mealing (born in Hobart, commanded No 46 Squadron between December 1917 and July 1918); Major W.R. Snow (born in Adelaide, commanded No 2 Squadron between August 1917 and August 1918); Major David Stodart (born in Gobur, Victoria, commanded No 3 Squadron between September 1916 and May 1917); Squadron Commander Bertram Charles Bell (born in Boonah, Queensland, commanded No 10 Naval Squadron from April 1917 until the end of the war; the unit became No 210 Squadron RAF following the 1 April 1918 amalgamation of the Services); and Squadron Commander Stanley Goble (born in Melbourne, commanded No 5 Naval Squadron from 18 July 1917 until mid-1918).

<sup>29</sup> COs of Australian squadrons on the Western Front in 1918 were: Major D.J.V. Blake (commanded No 3 Squadron, AFC, from 10 September 1917 until 28 October 1918); Major W.H. Anderson (commanded No 3 Squadron from 28 October 1918 until 7 January 1919); Major Wilfred McCloughry (commanded No 4 Squadron, AFC, from 17 December 1917 until 30 November 1918); Major Oswald Watt (commanded No 2 Squadron, AFC, from 21 September 1917 until 16 February 1918); Major W. Sheldon (commanded No 2 Squadron, AFC, from 16 February 1918 until 22 May 1918); and Major Allan Murray Jones (commanded No 2 Squadron, AFC, from 5 May 1918 until after Armistice). Australian officers in the British flying services on the Western Front in 1918 (not mentioned in the 1917 list above) include Major Victor Douglas Bell (born in Boonah, Queensland, brother to Bertram Bell; Bell



also went to Australians; examples including Lieutenant-Colonel William Mitchell, a prewar British regular from Sydney who commanded 12th (Corps) Wing on the Western Front during 1917 and 18, and Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Blomfield who after leading No 56 Squadron in 1917 commanded 51st Wing during the war's final months.<sup>30</sup> Somewhat ironically, it appears that Australians actually had better prospects of attaining command experience in the British flying services than in their own corps, where such positions were limited by the small size of the AFC and AIF policy that reserved AFC officers for use exclusively in the Australian squadrons.<sup>31</sup>

Following the expansion of the AFC to four service squadrons plus training units in the second half of 1916, transfers from the AIF to the RFC practically ceased, despite further appeals for men from the War Office in 1917 and 1918.<sup>32</sup> In early 1917, Australian political and military authorities had become, 'much averse to transfers from the AIF to the Imperial Forces' and particularly wary 'of the eyes being picked out of the Australian Squadrons for the RFC'.<sup>33</sup> The Canadian attitude, by contrast, could not have been more different. In May 1917 the Canadian Expeditionary Force's leaders agreed to provide the RFC with up to 90 candidates for flight training a month, successful applicants being seconded to the RFC and retaining their Canadian commissions. At least 5022 Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) personnel served with the RFC.<sup>34</sup>

It is impossible to determine exactly the number of Australians and other colonials who served in the British flying services. There are only incomplete lists, from which it is possible to identify just over 600 individuals who might reasonably be considered 'Australian', that is,

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commanded No 80 Squadron from January 1918 until the Armistice); Squadron Commander Charles Dawson Booker (born in England but educated at Melbourne Grammar, commanded No 1 Naval Squadron/No 201 Squadron RAF from 18 March until his death from wounds on 13 August 1918); Major Arthur Coningham (born in Brisbane, commanded No 92 Squadron from March 1918 until the Armistice); Major Roderic Dallas (born in Esk, Queensland, commanded No 1 Naval Squadron until March 1918 and commanded No 40 Squadron from April 1918 until killed in action, 1 June 1918); Major Rodney Wilfrid Heath (born in Malvern, Victoria, commanded No 11 Squadron in mid-1918); Major Edric Percival Henty (born in Toorak, Victoria, took command of No 152 Squadron in October 1918); Major Barry Fitzgerald Moore (born in Monegeetta, Victoria, commanded No 60 Squadron between December 1917 and July 1918 before being graded a wing commander and given command of No 1 Aeroplane Supply Depot at Marquis); Major Arthur O'Hara Wood (born in Melbourne, commanded No 46 Squadron from July 1918 until killed in a midair collision, 4 October 1918); Major Frederick Esk Sandford (born in Redfern, Sydney, commanded No 2 Naval Squadron from December 1917 to February 1918); and Major W.R. Snow (born in Adelaide, commanded No 2 Squadron, RFC/RAF, between August 1917 and August 1918).

<sup>30</sup> Biographical notes on Lieutenant-Colonel William Mitchell, AWM43 A600; and biographical notes on Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Blomfield, AWM43 A82.

<sup>31</sup> Commandant, Administrative Headquarters AIF, Colonel Thomas Griffiths to the Secretary, War Office, 3 August 1917, AWM10 4343/4/2.

<sup>32</sup> Roll of officers and other ranks discharged from the AIF to accept British commissions, 1915–1918, AWM27 361/16.

<sup>33</sup> GOC AIF Middle East, Major-General Henry Chauvel to Commandant, AIF Headquarters, Egypt, 9 April 1917, AWM22 31/2/2004.

<sup>34</sup> R.V. Armes to Griffiths, 9 July 1917, AWM10 4343/9/3; and Wise, *Canadian Airmen and the First World War*, pp. 594–95.

either born or educated here.<sup>35</sup> The vast majority are pilots and observers; few Australian mechanics apparently joined the British flying services given that wages in the AFC were more than double those in the RAF.<sup>36</sup> Research into the other dominions' involvement, with the exception of Canada, is thin. From available figures, however, it appears that Australia provided substantially fewer personnel per capita to the Empire's air effort than either Canada or South Africa, even if we include AFC personnel (see Table 1).

	White male population, 1911 <sup>37</sup>	Number of personnel engaged in the British flying services	Number of personnel engaged in the flying services 100 000 head of white male population
Australia	2 470 000	4 325 (incl. AFC) <sup>38</sup>	175
Canada	3 400 000	20 000 + <sup>39</sup>	588
South Africa	685 000	3 000 <sup>40</sup>	438

**Table 1: Dominion involvement in the air war relative to population**

### RECRUITING AND REINFORCING THE AUSTRALIAN FLYING CORPS

From before the war, the Australian Government had different priorities to those of its dominion counterparts when it came to defence matters and, in particular, military aviation. Although all dominions considered establishing flying schools before 1914, only Australia actually did so. South Africa and New Zealand, as well as the British Government in India, decided to send soldiers to Britain to learn to fly at the RFC's schools—this they planned

<sup>35</sup> These sources include an incomplete nominal roll of AIF personnel discharged to accept imperial commissions, AWM27 361/16; the Australian War Memorial's Commemorative Roll, [https://www.awm.gov.au/research/people/commemorative\\_roll/](https://www.awm.gov.au/research/people/commemorative_roll/), accessed 8 November 2012; the Commonwealth War Graves Commission database (searching for RFC/RNAS/RAF burials with an Australian next of kin), <http://www.cwgc.org/search-for-war-dead.aspx>, accessed 8 November 2012; Service records and correspondence concerning Australians serving with other Imperial forces, World War 1', NAA MT1487/1; 'Official History, 1914–18 War, biographical and other research files' AWM43; and assorted memoirs, letters and diaries that mention individual Australian airmen serving in British squadrons.

<sup>36</sup> 'Pay and allowances of the Royal Air Force (Provisional) 1918', NAUK AIR 10/4; and AIF Records Circular No. 39, AWM25 81/18.

<sup>37</sup> The War Office, Statistics of the military effort of the British Empire during the Great War, 1914–1920, The London Stamp Exchange, London, 1992, p. 363.

<sup>38</sup> After the war the Defence Department reckoned that 880 officers and 2840 other ranks had served abroad with the AFC during the war: H.N. Wrigley to C.E.W. Bean, 28 April 1924, AWM38 3DRL/8042 Item 64. Research for this paper has identified 605 personnel of the British flying services who could reasonably be considered Australian. Sources for this are listed above.

<sup>39</sup> Wise, *Canadian Airmen and the First World War*, p. xi. See also pp. 593–94 regarding calculations for this figure.

<sup>40</sup> James Ambrose Brown, *A Gathering of Eagles: The Campaigns of the South African Air Force in Italian East Africa June 1940–November 1941 with an Introduction 1912–1939*, Purnell, Cape Town, 1970, p. 5.

would provide a foundation for future flying corps.<sup>41</sup> Canadian authorities meanwhile showed even less interest in flying and had no formal plans in place by August 1914.<sup>42</sup> For their part, British military and political leaders engaged in the prewar development of flying did little to encourage military aviation outside the British Isles. Indeed, the first mention of aviation in an imperial context is not found in Committee of Imperial Defence minutes until May 1921.<sup>43</sup> During the war, whereas the Australian Government willingly raised national squadrons, the other dominion governments were, for the most part, satisfied to provide manpower for the general cause. Notwithstanding the service of a nominally South African squadron of the RFC in 1915 and the establishment of a Canadian flying service in mid-1918 that never saw combat, the AFC represented the only distinct dominion contribution to the British effort in the air.

Each dominion's approach to early military aviation reflects its strategic priorities at the time of the Great War. The decision by Australian authorities to make an early and comparatively earnest start in military aviation, and particularly to establish a somewhat independent capability with its own flying school, resulted from a recognition that Australian and British strategic interests were diverging. While British policymakers became more anxious about their position in Europe, their Australian counterparts looked nervously at the rise of new powers in the Pacific, particularly Japan.<sup>44</sup> This resulted, in the decade before the Great War, in the most significant period of military growth in Australian history; the establishment of the AFC resulted from the same political forces that also saw the birth of the Royal Australian Navy and the introduction of compulsory service, all measures to give Australia a more independent defence capability. The war provided Australian military authorities the perfect opportunity to spend on local defence infrastructure and draw on the mother country's expertise and materiel resources.

This is crucial for understanding why the Australian Government accepted the War Office's invitation to form complete squadrons for overseas service and why it persisted in keeping the Central Flying School at Point Cook open throughout the war, despite clear indications by

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<sup>41</sup> J.M.S. Ross, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939–45 – Royal New Zealand Air Force*, War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1955, p. 1; Dick Silberbauer, 'The Origins of South African Military Aviation: 1907–1919 from South African Archives', in *Cross and Cockade Journal Great Britain*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1976, pp. 174-175; Commonwealth representative on the Dominions Section, Imperial General Staff, Lieutenant-Colonel J.G. Legge to Secretary, Department of Defence, Samuel Pethebridge, 28 November 1912, NAA MP84/1, 1849/8/287; and 'Military Aviation in India', in *Flight*, 10 May 1913, p. 522.

<sup>42</sup> Wise, *Canadian Airmen and the First World War*, pp. 3–18.

<sup>43</sup> Committee of Imperial Defence meetings Nos 83–119, 1 February 1906 to 1 August 1912 NAUK CAB2/2; and Committee of Imperial Defence meetings Nos 120–175, 2 December 1912 to 23 July 1923, NAUK CAB 2/3.

<sup>44</sup> Chris Coulthard-Clark, 'Australian Defence: Perceptions and Policies, 1871–1919', Chapter 9 in John A. Moses and Christopher Pugsley (eds), *The German Empire and Britain's Pacific Dominions, 1871–1919: Essays on the Role of Australia and New Zealand in World Politics in the Age of Imperialism*, Regina Books, Claremont, CA, 2000, p. 171; and Neville Meaney, *A History of Australian Defence and Foreign Policy, 1901–1923, Volume I – The Search for Security in the Pacific, 1901–1914*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1976, *passim*.

mid-1916 that its course had been made redundant by the rapid development of air warfare overseas.<sup>45</sup>

Historians have criticised Australia's military authorities, and particularly the Defence Minister, Sir George Pearce, for the AIF's somewhat haphazard expansion as volunteers became available and with little consideration of whether enlistment rates could sustain units in the field.<sup>46</sup> The case of the AFC thoroughly supports this idea, Australian authorities raising four service squadrons during 1916 in an apparently opportunistic manner as partially trained personnel became available through Point Cook and with little consideration of recruiting and training reinforcements. Indeed, Pearce's decision during the second half of 1916 to raise three service squadrons when Point Cook was struggling to procure new aircraft and when he was fearing that voluntary recruitment would not be able to sustain the AIF beyond the end of the year seems cavalier, or to be fairer, at least reflects the inexperience of he and his colleagues in matters concerning military aviation.<sup>47</sup>

The Australian Government accepted the War Office's invitation to form No 1 Squadron at the end of 1915 despite lacking an adequate pool of trained personnel.<sup>48</sup> CFS graduates were only bound to four years in the militia so had to volunteer for overseas service and several early graduates enlisted in other AIF units, apparently foreseeing no opportunity of flying overseas with the AFC. In the event, only 12 Point Cook graduates of the required 18 pilots volunteered for No 1 Squadron.<sup>49</sup> The shortfall forced the Government to commission every available civilian aviator it could find, and in doing so, severely compromise the criteria by which it selected candidates for Point Cook.<sup>50</sup> The requisite seven observers came from

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<sup>45</sup> Military Board minutes, 13 July 1917, NAA A2653, 1917; Department of Defence minute, 21 November 1916, NAA A2023, A38/7/333A; and Griffiths to Assistant Adjutant General, AIF, Lieutenant-Colonel John Whitham, 16 May 1917, AWM10 4343/32/1.

<sup>46</sup> Christopher Pugsley, *The ANZAC Experience: New Zealand, Australia and Empire in the First World War*, Reed, Auckland, 2004, pp. 69–70; and John Connor, 'Senator George Pearce as Defence Minister', PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, 2004, p. 96.

<sup>47</sup> For correspondence regarding Point Cook's difficulties procuring new aircraft see NAA A1952, E524/10/408. For Pearce's fears about enlistment rates, even as he was authorising the formation of new squadrons, see Pearce to Prime Minister William Hughes, 20 July 1916, AWM 3DRL/2222 4/2.

<sup>48</sup> According to the War Office's outline of the establishment strength of a squadron, sent to the Department of Defence in September 1915, the required personnel included: 18 pilots, 7 observers, 3 non-flying officers and 181 air mechanics. 'A Squadron – Royal Flying Corps (12 Aeroplanes) War Establishment', c. September 1915, NAA A2023, A38/8/542.

<sup>49</sup> The CFS course graduates who volunteered for No 1 Squadron included: Captain William Sheldon, Lieutenant Allan Murray Jones, Lieutenant Alexander Macnaughton, Lieutenant Charles Brookes, Lieutenant David Manwell, Lieutenant Eric Roberts, Captain Richard Williams, Lieutenant Lawrence Wackett, Lieutenant Roderick Ross, Lieutenant Frank McNamara. Lieutenants Charles Merett and Alfred Ellis, who had enlisted in the RNAS in January after graduating the CFS, also volunteered. The third flight commander was Australian Captain Oswald Watt, who secured a transfer from the French flying service to the AFC.

<sup>50</sup> To be accepted for training at Point Cook, applicants needed to be 26 years or under, an officer from the citizen or permanent forces with at least two years commissioned service and competent in a range of military fieldcraft skills such as map-reading and field sketching (Military Order 381/1914, NAA A2023, A38/6/70). To make up No 1 Squadron's establishment strength, the Department commissioned three civilians who had learned to fly privately. None had any prior military experience and all were over CFS' age limit, Andrew Badgery and Arthur

volunteer permanent forces officers who received a crash course at Point Cook before embarking. Finding experienced tradesmen in the AIF's camps proved relatively easy with the exception of riggers and wireless operators, whom the Navy also eagerly sought.<sup>51</sup>

Australian military authorities initially assumed that Point Cook could sustain No 1 Squadron and possibly another unit with adequate pilot reinforcements.<sup>52</sup> Regarding mechanics, authorities in Melbourne anticipated a bimonthly reinforcement of 16 tradesmen (of specific types: two fitters, one electrician etc.) sufficient.<sup>53</sup> As Richard Williams noted however, the 'basis of this reinforcement appeared to be a general Army rule' and did not correlate with the unique requirements of a flying squadron.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, shortly after arriving in Egypt, No 1 Squadron's CO requested a reinforcement of completely different size and composition, which took the general staff almost two months to muster and embark.<sup>55</sup> This appears in hindsight an early indication of the inefficiencies associated with reinforcing a unit in the field from Australia and the lack of experience Australian military authorities had in administering a flying service.

To raise two new squadrons in Australia in the second half of 1916 and a third in Egypt, the Department changed the CFS' entrance criteria to make graduates liable for overseas service and shortened the course to increase the School's output. Nonetheless, the Government had to concede in October 1916 that the new service squadrons would embark incomplete and partially trained.<sup>56</sup> No 3 Squadron left Australia that month with half its establishment of officers. No 4 Squadron embarked in January 1917 with a full establishment, but only because civilian graduates from the New South Wales Aviation School at Richmond made up the deficit. In both cases, ample mechanics could be found in AIF camps, although they received minimal training at Point Cook before embarkation.<sup>57</sup> The Defence Department intended raising No 2 Squadron in Egypt from volunteers in AIF units and a few experienced officers from No 1 Squadron. Here too, authorities struggled to procure enough volunteers, Light Horse commanders being reluctant to lose good men.<sup>58</sup> In December 1916, No 2 Squadron left Egypt for England 79 men short.<sup>59</sup>

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Geere being 27 years old and William Hart being almost 31 years old when the squadron embarked.

<sup>51</sup> Sir Richard Williams, *These Are Facts: The Autobiography of Air Marshal Sir Richard Williams, KBE, CB, DSO*, Australian War Memorial and Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1977, p. 42.

<sup>52</sup> Department of Defence minute, 21 November 1916, NAA A2023, A38/7/333A.

<sup>53</sup> Foster to Commandant 3rd Military District, 29 March 1916, NAA A2023, A38/8/810.

<sup>54</sup> Williams, *These Are Facts*, pp. 53–54.

<sup>55</sup> AIF Headquarters Egypt to Department of Defence, 5 July 1916, NAA A2023, A38/8/810; and Foster to Acting Secretary, Department of Defence, Thomas Trumble, 24 July 1916, NAA A2023, A38/8/810.

<sup>56</sup> Governor-General of Australia, Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson to Secretary of State for the Colonies, Andrew Bonar Law, 3 October 1916, NAA A11803, 1914/89/54.

<sup>57</sup> H.N. Wrigley, *The Battle Below: Being the History of No. 3 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps*, Errol G. Knox, Sydney, 1935, p. 20.

<sup>58</sup> Commandant, AIF Headquarters Egypt to Chauvel, 11 November 1916, AWM22 31/2/2005. The experiences of Trooper Verner Knuckey corroborate with this. His application to transfer to the flying corps was delayed by the CO of his Light Horse unit. Private Verner Knuckey, diary, book 4, pp. 11, 17 and 18, AWM PR03193.

<sup>59</sup> Paine to Headquarters, Anzac Mounted Division, 16 December 1916, AWM22 31/2/2005.

The effort to raise and train three new squadrons during the latter part of 1916 and early 1917 appears to have completely consumed the attention of the Department and AIF authorities overseas.<sup>60</sup> Neither considered the provision of reinforcements for No 1 Squadron, which, since commencing operations in Egypt in June 1916, had received no pilot or observer reinforcements from Australia.<sup>61</sup> Attached RFC officers initially made up the shortfall but in April 1917 the squadron received orders emanating in principle from the Australian Government that 'all Imperial officers' needed to be replaced from the AIF.<sup>62</sup> This rapidly consumed the few AFC officers undergoing flight training in the Middle East and it took over three months for AIF staff in Egypt to convince Administrative Headquarters in London of the need to have a reserve of pilots in training for No 1 Squadron. It was the beginning of 1918 before the AFC in the Middle East had a sound system for recruiting and training reinforcements and an adequate reserve; in the meantime, things had become so bad that in mid-1917 RFC staff had written to AIF authorities warning them that the shortage of pilots threatened to 'altogether cripple' No 1 Squadron.<sup>63</sup> As it happened, the squadron supported the Third Gaza campaign short of pilots and with several long overdue for a rest.<sup>64</sup>

Two factors had coalesced to create this unacceptable neglect of an Australian unit in the field. Firstly, there was the 'administrative void' (as John Connor has described it), into which AIF units in the Middle East fell following the move of Administrative Headquarters to London in April 1916.<sup>65</sup> It left No 1 Squadron at the mercy of what the AIF's staff in Egypt described as a 'chaotic position of control', in which local commanders best placed to appreciate their units' needs lacked the authority to meet them.<sup>66</sup> Also at play however, neither the military authorities in Australia, nor the AIF's administrative staff had considered the unique personnel requirements of flying units; namely, their high wastage rates and the length of time required to train replacements.

Indeed, the AIF's leadership in Europe only gradually came to appreciate this during 1917 as Nos 2, 3 and 4 Squadrons trained in Britain. In February, to fill vacancies in the new squadrons arriving from Australia and raise four AFC training squadrons from scratch, AIF Headquarters called for 291 volunteers from the 'combatant arms in England and France' and put them into training in British schools.<sup>67</sup> This put the new squadrons in Britain at establishment strength but did not provide reinforcements to replace future 'wastage'. AIF Headquarters first considered this issue in May, four months before the first Australian squadron deployed to the Western Front and at the height of No 1 Squadron's reinforcement crisis. The catalyst was an offer from Australia of a permanent monthly draft of four flying officers and 86 other ranks trained at Point Cook.<sup>68</sup> Checking this figure with the War Office,

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<sup>60</sup> Whitham, memorandum, 12 February 1917, AWM10 4301/10/81.

<sup>61</sup> Australian Flying Corps, No 1 Squadron 1st to 3rd Reinforcements Nominal Roll, AWM8 8/4/3.

<sup>62</sup> Pearce to GOC AIF, Lieutenant-General Sir William Birdwood, 2 February 1917 and 3 February 1917, AWM 3DRL/3376 2/13; and Officer Commanding No 1 Squadron, Major Foster Rutledge to Commandant, AIF Headquarters, Egypt, Lieutenant-Colonel David Fulton, 14 April 1917, AWM22 31/4/2000.

<sup>63</sup> SO1, Middle East Brigade RFC to AIF Headquarters, Egypt, 17 July 1917, AWM22 31/9/2000.

<sup>64</sup> GOC RFC Middle East, Brigadier-General Geoffrey Salmond to AIF Headquarters, Egypt, 14 October 1917, AWM22 31/9/2000.

<sup>65</sup> Connor, 'Senator George Pearce as Defence Minister', p. 102.

<sup>66</sup> Fulton to Headquarters, Middle East Brigade, RFC, 24 April 1917, AWM22 31/2/2004.

<sup>67</sup> Whitham, memorandum, 12 February 1917, AWM10 4301/10/81; and AIF Circular 77/63, 27 February 1917, AWM27 303/13.

<sup>68</sup> Ferguson to Long, 21 February 1917, NAA A11803, 1917/89/96.

Australian staff in London found this figure grossly inadequate. Wastage in RFC squadrons was then around 240 per cent per annum for flying officers and 10 per cent for other ranks—a figure that Birdwood considered ‘startling’ and, evidently, far in excess of what the Defence Department had anticipated.<sup>69</sup>

More alarming perhaps was an admission by Administrative HQ’s Commandant Colonel Thomas Griffiths that the AIF had taken ‘no steps’ to meet wastage of this kind among flying officers. The three squadrons currently preparing for active service had, in fact, just 10 flying officers additional to their combined establishment strength in training. Given the British statistics, the Australian squadrons might need 120 reinforcements by the year’s end. As it took a minimum of six months to train a pilot, Griffiths considered it ‘most urgent and important’ that the AIF organise a system for recruiting and training flying officers at once.<sup>70</sup> As a stopgap he promoted 120 mechanics to begin training as pilots immediately.<sup>71</sup> To meet the AFC’s longer-term requirements Griffiths calculated that 35 new pilots needed to begin training each month.<sup>72</sup> Believing Point Cook graduates to be under-trained and sometimes medically unfit, and mechanics generally unsuited to be officers, he convinced Birdwood to provide a monthly draft of volunteers from AIF units overseas.<sup>73</sup> The AIF and War Office both advised the Defence Department that it was no longer necessary for Point Cook to train pilots.<sup>74</sup> Fearing that closing the school might stunt the development of postwar aviation, the Department kept it open and continued training pilots, though these had to complete the entire RFC course from scratch upon arriving in Britain.<sup>75</sup>

Griffiths’ best, if belated, efforts narrowly prepared the AFC for service on the Western Front and only because the first cohort of reinforcements were rushed through their courses.<sup>76</sup> By the end of 1917, the situation was better in hand. Despite suffering 50 per cent casualties during the Battle of Cambrai, No 2 Squadron finished the offensive at full strength.<sup>77</sup> During

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<sup>69</sup> Griffiths to Whitham, 2 June 1917, AWM10 4343/32/1; and Birdwood to Pearce, 20 August 1917, AWM 3DRL/3376 7/1.

<sup>70</sup> Griffiths to Whitham, 15 June 1917, AWM10 4343/32/1.

<sup>71</sup> Headquarters AIF circular, 23 June 1917, AWM27 366/47.

<sup>72</sup> Griffiths calculated that the AFC squadrons in Europe needed 30 fresh officers per month. Yet, because of the ‘constant wastage’ of training, he estimated that at least 35 should begin the course each month. Commandant AIF to AAG AIF, 15 June 1917, AWM10 4343/32/1. Griffiths’ estimation was probably a bit low. After the war, official historian H.A. Jones reported that wastage during courses had been around 28 per cent, meaning that to produce 1300 pilots, around 1800 needed to start training. 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*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1935, p. 426.

<sup>73</sup> Griffiths to Whitham, 16 May 1917, AWM10 4343/32/1; Whitham to Griffiths, 22 May 1917, AWM10 4343/32/1; and Griffiths to Director General of Military Aeronautics, Lieutenant General Sir David Henderson, 2 June 1917, AWM10 4343/32/1.

<sup>74</sup> Military Board minutes, 13 July 1917, NAA A2653, 1917; Long to Ferguson, 10 September 1917, NAA A11803, 1917/89/96; Griffiths to Whitham, 16 May 1917, AWM10 4343/32/1; and A.G. Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services in the War of 1914–1918 – Volume III – Special Problems and Services*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1943, p. 413.

<sup>75</sup> Department of Defence minute, 31 July 1916, NAA A2023, A38/7/333A; and Ferguson to Long, 15 August 1917, NAA A11803, 1917/89/96.

<sup>76</sup> Brigadier-General Guy Livingstone for GOC Training Division RFC to Headquarters Southern Training Brigade, RFC, 14 September 1917, AWM25 81/19.

<sup>77</sup> No 2 Squadron war diary, December 1917, AWM4 8/5/5.

1918, Griffith's system would continue to feed an adequate number of pilots into the training system. In February, he reported the AFC's reinforcements 'ample'—302 flying officers in training in addition to 43 in reserve—but, nonetheless, recommended increasing the monthly intake from AIF volunteers to 40, including seven observers, to cope with the heavy fighting anticipated for the summer.<sup>78</sup> Birdwood agreed but was unwilling to increase the burden on combat units; additional candidates needed to come from AIF units in the United Kingdom.<sup>79</sup>

Mechanics, meanwhile, remained in abundant supply throughout 1918. With 47 per month arriving from Australia and negligible wastage in service squadrons, such a surplus existed by midyear that Birdwood asked the Government to stop sending them.<sup>80</sup> Hoping to reduce the drain on his combat units, he suggested Administrative Headquarters train superfluous mechanics as flying officers.<sup>81</sup> As Griffiths had anticipated back in mid-1917 though it turned out the RAF considered few among the mechanics fit to be 'trained as Officers as well as Pilots'.<sup>82</sup> In June, AIF Headquarters ordered the training squadrons to send their 'inefficient mechanics' to the infantry.<sup>83</sup>

Although adequate in its provision of numbers, the AIF's arrangements to reinforce the AFC from units in the field had problems that Griffiths had not anticipated. In February 1918, the RFC's Chief Medical Officer, Major James Birley drew the attention of AIF authorities to the 'somewhat high proportion of breakdowns among pilots and observers of the AFC'. He attributed this to the fact that most of them had previously 'served many months in combatant units' and challenged the popular notion that extensive active service suggested a resilient candidate for flight training.<sup>84</sup> Secondly, in April 1918, Lieutenant-Colonel Edgar Reynolds, Staff Officer for Aviation at Administrative Headquarters noted that selectors were finding it difficult to obtain suitable candidates among those offered by the AIF; those, as he put it 'sent from France did not altogether seem to be quite the right type to hold commissions'. He believed the AFC needed 'public school boys' who had the 'right' characteristics to be leaders, such as keenness, initiative, self-reliance and a strong bearing—men who AIF staff at the front believed to be in very short supply.<sup>85</sup>

Another problem concerned the output of pilots. An Australian training wing had been established in Gloucestershire in February 1918 with four squadrons, two to train rotary engine scout pilots for No 4 Squadron, one to train inline engine scout pilots for No 2 Squadron, and a two-seater unit to provide reinforcements for No 3 Squadron. For training observers and mechanics, and for providing pilots to No 1 Squadron in the Middle East the

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<sup>78</sup> Griffiths to Deputy Adjutant General, AIF, Colonel Thomas Dodds, 22 February 1918, AWM25 81/53.

<sup>79</sup> Dodds to Administrative Headquarters AIF, London, 22 March 1918, AWM25 81/53.

<sup>80</sup> NSW Minister for Education, Augustus James to NSW Premier William Holman, 27 August 1918, State Records Authority of New South Wales, SRNSW 4/6254.2.

<sup>81</sup> Staff Officer for Aviation, Administrative Headquarters AIF, Lieutenant-Colonel Harold Brinsmead to Griffiths, 8 August 1918, AWM10 4343/14/2.

<sup>82</sup> Griffiths to DAG AIF, 20 July 1917, AWM10 4343/32/1; and Brinsmead to Griffiths, 14 August 1918, AWM10 4343/14/2.

<sup>83</sup> No 5 Training Squadron AFC, war diary, June 1918, AWM4 8/8/10.

<sup>84</sup> Chief Medical Officer, RFC Headquarters, Major James Birley to DAAG AFC, Captain Clive Baillieu, 26 February 1918, AWM81/4.

<sup>85</sup> Baillieu to Interviewing Officer, RAF, Captain E. H. C. Bald, 15 April 1918, AWM25 81/53; and Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services in the War of 1914–1918 – Volume III – Special Problems and Services*, p. 414.



AFC remained reliant on British schools. While this system provided adequate numbers of two-seater pilots, observers and mechanics it failed when it came to reinforcing the two scout squadrons, which suffered the highest casualty rates. Particularly inadequate was the supply of Camel pilots during early 1918, forcing the AIF to relax its policy and accept temporary reinforcements from the RAF.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, between April and July 1918, 19 British pilots flew with No 4 Squadron at one point making up half the unit's flying roster.<sup>87</sup>

These issues prompted Reynolds to propose returning to the original practice of drawing all personnel from 'direct enlistments in the Australian Flying Corps in Australia'. With a revised training system and an RAF medical board, he argued, Australia could produce locally 100 flying officers each month.<sup>88</sup> The scheme had the support of the Air Ministry and the Defence Department, which agreed to overhaul and significantly expand training facilities at Point Cook.<sup>89</sup> With the assistance of experienced AFC and RAF officers who returned to Australia in mid-1918, the Government established a training system in Victoria that it believed capable of 'produc[ing] pilots completely trained and ready for service abroad'.<sup>90</sup> The war ended before this could begin and the new schools were subsequently disbanded with the AFC.

Had the war continued into 1919, it is likely the AFC would have drawn its recruits directly from Australia where there was, it seems, an abundance of men who were 'quite the right type'; that is, not combat fatigued and freshly graduated from good schools. A 'special draft' of 16 Point Cook graduates left Australia on 5 June 1918, providing a foretaste of what the AFC's future pilots may have looked like. All but two had no prior active service and their average age was twenty and a half years. Among them were seven students, three engineers, two electricians, two clerks, a business manager and a carpenter.<sup>91</sup>

As it happened, the AFC continued promoting the majority of its flying officers from the ranks of front-line units. The candidates selected for the September 1918 intake suggest that indeed, by this stage the AIF in France struggled to provide men who fit Reynolds conception of ideal candidates and who stand in stark contrast to Point Cook's June 1918 'special draft'. Among them we find 25-year-old Lieutenant Donald Junner of the 4th Pioneer Battalion, an 'assisting signal adjuster' who had enlisted in August 1914 and been hospitalised four times since; Lance Corporal Frank Mason of the 20th Battalion, a 29-year-old station manager who had enlisted in March 1915 and Gunner Harold Bowler, 25 years old, on active service since mid-1915 and three times in hospital.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> GOC, Training Division, RAF, Brigadier-General Edgar Ludlow Hewitt to Headquarters, Western Group Command, RAF, 13 April 1918, AWM25 81/27.

<sup>87</sup> Tabulated from data regarding flying officer appointments in 'No 4 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps: Records and Statistics', AWM224 MSS520. For an account of one British pilot who flew with No 4 Squadron during the summer of 1918, see J.C.F. Wilkinson, manuscript memoir, 1937, RAF.

<sup>88</sup> Staff Officer for Aviation, Administrative Headquarters AIF, London, Lieutenant-Colonel Edgar Reynolds to the Secretary, the Air Board, 23 May 1918, AWM10 4242/7/5.

<sup>89</sup> Director for Air Organisation, Lieutenant-Colonel Bertie Drew to Administrative Headquarters AIF, London, 29 May 1918, AWM10 4242/7/5.

<sup>90</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. LXXXV, p. 6349.

<sup>91</sup> 'Flying Corps – November 1917 to May 1918, Reinforcements and Special Drafts', embarkation roll, AMW8 15/3.

<sup>92</sup> Baillieu to Dodds, 5 September 1918, AWM25 81/53.

The AFC's reliance on combat veterans for flying recruits despite the emerging medical wisdom of the day might explain a striking contrast between the average life span of pilots in the Australian and British flying services (see Table 2). In the war's final 18 months, AFC pilots served between 47 and 80 per cent of the average time served by British pilots, depending on squadron type.<sup>93</sup> The difference is most marked in No 4 Squadron where pilots had an average service life span of two months whereas British Camel pilots typically served for 4.2 months.<sup>94</sup>

	R.E.8 Squadrons	S.E.5a Squadrons	Sopwith Camel Squadrons
AFC	4 months	4 months	2 months
RAF	6.6 months	5 months	4.2 months

**Table 2: Service life span of pilots by squadron type in the AFC and RAF**

## CONCLUSIONS

The Australian Government ostensibly achieved its aims for military aviation during the Great War. It finished the war with around 4500 men who had overseas experience in the AFC or British flying services, a large number of surplus warplanes and, importantly for Australia's standing in postwar imperial politics, a small but clearly defined role in the Empire's air effort. Indeed, from early 1918 the British press reported the AFC's deeds as distinct from those of the RAF and while in Britain that year, Prime Minister Hughes could proudly cite the AFC's achievements and boast that 'airmen from Australia will hold their own on any battlefield'.<sup>95</sup> His Canadian counterpart, despite having more than five times the number of personnel committed to the air effort, would have difficulty making such a claim. Indeed, until April 1918 Canadian authorities could not even be certain how many of their constituents were serving in the British air services.<sup>96</sup>

On the other hand though, the Australian Government's concern to make a distinct contribution in the air and develop a foundation for future military flying in Australia came at the cost of military efficiency. Throughout the war the administration of the AFC, existing as it did within both the AIF and British forces, proved difficult. The inexperience of Australian staff in matters concerning aviation and the failure of Australia's volunteer system further exacerbated problems of supplying the AFC with trained personnel. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, somewhat ironically, a larger number of Australians might have served in military aviation, from earlier in the war, had Australian authorities followed the example of their dominion counterparts and supplied the RFC with manpower to be absorbed into the general effort. Given that significantly more Australians reached command positions in the

<sup>93</sup> Statistics regarding the service, up to 31 October 1918, of 1437 pilots sent to the Western Front between July and December 1917, NAUK AIR 9/3, folio 5.

<sup>94</sup> Statistics on service life span are in the Australian Flying Corps manuscript unit histories prepared by the units for the Australian War Records Section: No 2 Squadron (AWM224 MSS517), No 3 Squadron (AWM224 MSS518) and No 4 Squadron (AWM224 MSS520).

<sup>95</sup> 'Their Tails Well Up', in *The Times*, 27 March 1918, p. 7; 'Seaplane attack in the bight', in *The Times*, 22 March 1918, p. 6; 'Australians in the Battle', in *The Times*, 19 August 1918, p. 4; and 'Enemy Retreat Cut', in *The Times*, 23 September 1918, p. 9.

<sup>96</sup> Wise, *Canadian Airmen and the First World War*, pp. 592–93.

British flying services than in the small AFC, it is also likely that Australia may have finished the war with not only a larger but a more experienced pool with which to develop a national air force in the future.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Of the AFC's 880 officers, only one commanded a wing, eight commanded squadrons and 57 commanded flights under service conditions. Determining precisely how many of the 600-odd Australians in the British flying services commanded is difficult but it is possible to identify around 35 who commanded at the unit level. At least four were graded as wing commanders.