

MESOPOTAMIAN

WORDS *Dr Kathryn Spurling*

HALF FLIGHT



CFS's beginning was not auspicious; on 9 March 1914, Petre registered Australia's first military flying accident crashing a Deperdussin. The pilot escaped, but the aircraft was destroyed. Elementary three-month training meant flying at 15-60m height as long as there was no wind. The first graduates were Thomas White, David Manwell, George Merz and Richard Williams. White was a Melbourne Scotch College graduate commissioned into the 5th Australian Regiment. Manwell was educated at Queen's College, Maryborough and a Lieutenant in the 16th Light Horse. Merz graduated medicine from University of Melbourne and commissioned in the Melbourne University Rifles.

Merz was dux of the course and one of two pilots selected to accompany the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force to Papua New Guinea at the beginning of World War I. On return, he became an instructor, while also working as a Melbourne Hospital doctor.

Following a request from the British Government of India on 8 February 1915, Australia agreed to provide aircrew and ground staff as Indian Army air support during its attack on the Ottoman Empire in Mesopotamia (now Iraq). Petre volunteered and departed for Bombay on 14 April to command the Mesopotamian Half Flight. White, Merz and LT William Treloar, along with 37 ground staff embarked on RMS *Morea* in late May. Treloar as a Stock, Station and Commission agent became an efficient motor car driver and mechanic and was commissioned in the 70th (Ballarat) Infantry Regiment. He pursued his aviation ambitions in England and, a seasoned pilot, returned to Australia on hearing of the CFS.

When Petre and his men arrived, they found appalling conditions. The airfield was swampland and a mosquito breeding ground, twice daily quinine tablets were required to stave off malaria. Sandstorms tore canvas tents to pieces and the aircraft were obsolete. Two Maurice-Farman Shorthorn biplanes and a Longhorn were

IN 1915, AUSTRALIA SENT AIRCREW AND GROUND STAFF FROM ITS FLEDGLING AVIATION CORPS TO SUPPORT THE INDIAN ARMY DURING ITS ATTACK ON THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

ON 30 DECEMBER 1911, the Australian Government advertised for "two competent mechanics and aviators". A requirement was to advise "if they were married or single"; an indication of the precarious employment, as was, "the Commonwealth will accept no liability for accidents."

One of the candidates chosen was Henry Aloysius Petre, a solicitor who, with help of brother Edward, built his own aeroplane. It crashed on its maiden flight, but Henry took flying lessons and became an instructor. On Christmas Eve 1912, Edward was killed in a flying accident. Rocked by the tragedy, Henry accepted the Australian position. He rode his grief on a motorcycle thousands of kilometres seeking the perfect site for the Australian Army's Central Flying School (CFS) and convinced the government that 730 acres (295ha) at Point Cook, Victoria, was the ideal place. Lieutenant Petre was joined by Australian pilot/instructor Eric Harrison.

The Australian Aviation Corps was established with five flimsy aircraft: two Deperdussin monoplanes, two B.E.2 biplanes and a Bristol Boxkite, in March 1914. There was no shortage of candidates eager to join the corps. All needed to be serving army officers and 'gentlemen'.



ABOVE Half Flight Maurice-Farman Shorthorn biplane.

Photo: Australian War Memorial (AWM).

unsuitable for desert conditions and capable of only 50mph (80kph). As the desert wind (Shamal) commonly reached 80mph (129km/h), the Australians found themselves flying backwards. Added to this, the warm atmospheric conditions “about 110 to 120 degrees in the shade” and oppressive humidity, reduced the lift capability to enable the aircraft to take off.

Military aviation would revolutionise warfare in decades, but at the start of WWI there were few tactics and much to prove. Senior British Army officers had little faith in what they did not, or wished not to, understand. The Mesopotamian Half Flight was, at best, a slightly amusing sideshow.

There was comfort in numbers when the Australians were joined by New Zealander LT William Burn, two Indian Flying Corps English pilots, CAPT Philip Broke-Smith and CAPT Hugh Reilly, and nine more mechanics. Operations commenced 31 May with a reconnaissance flight. Enroute, they attempted to drop three 20-pound bombs on a Turkish paddle steamer, they missed,



LEFT Back row: Richard Williams, Thomas White. Front: George Merz, Henry Petre, Eric Harrison, David Manwell, with a B.E.2a aircraft. Photo: AWM.



RIGHT Preparing a Half Flight Caudron. Photo: AWM.





ABOVE George Merz climbing aboard a Bristol Boxkite aircraft. Photo: AWM.



RIGHT Half Flight Bombay, May 1915. Captain Thomas White front centre left and Lieutenant William Treloar front centre right. Photo: AWM.



ABOVE Captain William 'Harold' Treloar. Photo: AWM.



but the bombs exploded forward and aft. The Turkish crew was terrified and promptly surrendered to a British ship.

Within months, two Caudron G.3 aircraft, though not modern, improved operability and enabled more reconnaissance flights and dispatches carried between the front and Basra.

On 30 July 1915, Merz, and his NZ observer, Burn, flew 160km from Basra to support ground forces during the Battle of Nasiriyeh. On the return leg, mechanical failure forced them to land in enemy territory. With only pistols to defend themselves, they engaged in a running battle with well-armed Arab tribesmen. Their bodies were never found. Merz, 23, was accorded the unenviable title of the first Australian military pilot killed in action.

In August, four Martinsyde single-seat Scouts reinforced the unit, by then known as 30 Squadron, Royal Flying Corps. Petre test flew the first and was disappointed that even at maximum speed of 80kph it took 23 minutes to reach an altitude of 2,000m, the barest improvement on Maurice Farman and Caudron. This first Australian Flying Corps unit to see active service was quickly caught up in an ill-conceived campaign, as were

their Australian Imperial Force brethren elsewhere from April 1915. In both, British hierarchy overestimated their aptitude and underestimated the enemy. In this precarious early chapter of war aviation, the Australians suffered high casualties, with worse to come.

On 16 September, CAPT William 'Harold' Treloar and his Indian Army observer CAPT Basil Atkins were on a reconnaissance flight when the engine died. Treloar managed to guide the Caudron to the ground, unfortunately close to Turkish lines. They were captured and incarcerated in numerous prisoner-of-war camps until Turkey surrendered on 30 October 1918. Half Flight members were struggling to stay alive in the air and on the ground.

On one photographic reconnaissance flight, White and Indian Army observer Yeates-Brown flew at 2,414 feet (1,500m) trying to evade Turkish anti-aircraft fire, when the engine lost power. White opened the throttle and dived steeply. The engine coughed but not with sufficient revolutions to avoid gliding to the ground. Enemy troops were sufficiently surprised for White to taxi the aircraft across the cracked earth while his observer stood

with a rifle at the ready. White had dropped bombs on this very column of soldiers so had no wish to fall into their hands. He agreed it was pure luck that two men in their flimsy aircraft bumped along a road for 16 miles (25km) before an engine obstruction cleared and they became airborne. They returned to their airfield in time for breakfast.

White and Yeates-Brown's next operation was as exciting. Volunteering on 13 November to destroy telephone lines west of Bagdad required a round trip of 125 miles (200km) over Turkish lines, landing nine miles (14km) from the city, between telegraph poles close to a main enemy thoroughfare. A gust of wind pushed the wing of the aircraft against a pole as a column of Turkish horsemen galloped in their direction. With White firing a rifle at approaching troops, Yeates-Brown successfully set charges destroying poles and wires. They were overpowered roughly and taken prisoner.

By December 1915, the Indian Army was defeated. Nine Australian Half Flight ground staff were taken prisoner with only FSGT J. McKenzie and Air Mechanic K.L. Hudson surviving captivity. Henry Petre, the remaining Australian pilot, escaped in the only airworthy aircraft and flew to Egypt on 7 December. He and the eight Australians at Basra joined the newly formed Australian Flying Corps in Egypt in early 1916.

Lieutenant Eric Harrison had taken charge at Point Cook and he and his staff strived to fulfill the demand for pilots in a war engulfing the world. Like Harrison, several Australians had followed their flying ambitions to Britain and were now part of British squadrons.

As members of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps bled and died in the rock and sand of a Turkish peninsula, flying overhead was Australian Royal Navy Air Service Captain Arthur Harold Keith Jopp, spotting and bombing Turkish positions. **W**

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