

## THE FIRST AUSTRALIAN AIRMEN ON SERVICE THE AUSTRALIAN FLYING CORPS

The Australian Flying Corps was the branch of the Australian Army responsible for operating aircraft during World War 1. The AFC owes the beginning of its career of service to an inquiry from the Indian Government for Australia to provide trained Airmen, flying machines and motor transport to protect the oil pipeline in Mesopotamia, Iraq as we know it today. The Australian Government replied that it could provide some Airmen, mechanics and transport but no Aircraft. Four pilots and 41 other ranks including 18 Air Mechanics were selected.

Few had any experience of aircraft but the mechanics and riggers were carefully chosen for their good credentials and under the guidance of skilled instructors were soon able to undertake the repair and maintenance of aircraft.

This became known as the Mesopotamia half flight. They departed by ship and arrived at Basra on 26 May 1915. They had 2 Maurice Farman Shorthorn Biplanes bought by the Raja of Gwalior and a Maurice Farman Longhorn which had seen considerable service and spent most of its time in the workshops.

The aircraft were not fitted with machine guns as there were none available. The bombs that were dropped on the enemy were initially 2lb infantry hand bombs thrown over the side by hand. When 20lb bombs ultimately arrived they were frequently found to have been damaged in transit and bomb racks supplied from England would not fit the aircraft or were unserviceable and had to be repaired locally. In some instances the only way to drop the bombs was through a hole cut in the floor of the cockpit.

In general the sole service to which these machines could be put was reconnaissance, consequently they were mainly used to scout the lines of the Turkish Army and report their defences. They were disbanded in December 1915.

After the outbreak of WW1 in 1914 the Australian Flying Corps sent 1 aircraft to assist in capturing the German colonies in Northern New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, however German forces in the Pacific surrendered quickly and the aircraft was not unpacked from its crate.

In January 1916 Number 1 Squadron was formed consisting of 12 aircraft and served in Egypt and was subsequently assigned to the Royal Flying Corps. In mid June it began operations against the Ottoman Empire and Senussi Arab forces in Egypt and Palestine. 1 Squadron remained in the Middle East until the end of the war. The squadron undertook reconnaissance, ground liaison and close air support operations as the British Empire Forces advanced into Syria. One of the squadron's pilots Lieutenant Frank Mcnamara received the only Victoria Cross awarded to an Australian airman during the war.

His citation reads ;

On 20 March 1917, Mcnamara was 1 of 4 number 1 Squadron pilots taking part in a raid against a Turkish railway junction near Gaza. Owing to a shortage of bombs the aircraft were armed with 6 modified howitzer shells. Mcnamara had successfully dropped 3 of his when the 4<sup>th</sup> exploded prematurely, badly wounding him in the leg with shrapnel. Having turned to head back to base he spotted a fellow squadron member, Captain David Rutherford on the ground beside his downed aircraft. Allied airmen had been hacked to death by enemy troops and Mcnamara saw that a company of Turkish cavalry was fast approaching. Despite the rough terrain and the gash in his leg Mcnamara landed in an attempt at rescue. As there was no spare cockpit in the single seater the downed pilot jumped onto Mcnamara's wing and held onto the struts. Mcnamara crashed while attempting to take off because of the effects of his leg wound and Rutherford's weight overbalancing the aircraft. The 2 men who had escaped further injury in the accident set fire to Mcnamara's crashed aircraft and dashed back to Rutherford's BE2. Rutherford repaired the engine while Mcnamara used his revolver against the attacking cavalry, who had opened fire on them. Two other 1 squadron pilots overhead began strafing the enemy troops. Mcnamara managed to start the

engine and take off with Rutherford in the observers cockpit. In severe pain and close to blacking out from loss of blood, Mcnamara flew the damaged aircraft 70 miles or 110 km's back to base where he collapsed from blood loss. He remained in the Australian Flying Corps and later the Royal Australian Air Force and retired in 1946 with the rank of Air Vice Marshal.

Three other squadrons Numbers 2,3 and 4 were formed in 1917 in Egypt and Australia and were sent to France. These Squadrons subsequently undertook operations along the Western Front .

No 2 Squadron was the first to see action in Europe. The Squadron made its debut around St Quentin fighting a short action with a German patrol and suffered the loss of 1 aircraft. The following month the squadron took part in the battle of Cambrai flying combat patrols, bombing and strafing missions in support of the British 3<sup>rd</sup> Army suffering heavy losses in dangerous low level attacks that later received high praise from the Commander Royal Flying Corps.

No 3 Squadron operating reconnaissance Aircraft entered the war during the final phase of the battle for Passchendaele in November 1917 during which time they were employed largely as artillery spotters.

No 4 Squadron entered the fighting last and equipped with Sopwith Camels they were dispatched to a relatively quiet sector around Lens initially and did not see combat until January 1918.

Two main types of aircraft were used by the Australian Flying Corps: 2 seater reconnaissance planes in which the observer, armed with machine guns sat behind the pilot and could not fire forward without hitting the propeller and the other were single seat fighters. The latter dominated the popular imagination, they were the aces the fastest aircraft fighting duels with men like themselves. In reality aerial combat was a difficult skill to master requiring split second timing and complete mastery of aircraft and weapons.

An airman in 1 Sqn described a dog fight as:

Every man for himself. We go hell for leather at those snub nosed black crossed buses of the Germans and they at us. Hectic work. Half rolling, diving, zooming, stalling, split slipping and by inches you miss collision with friend or foe. Cool precise marksmanship is out of the question.

Towards the end of WW1 in 1918 No2 & 4 Sqs were designated circus Squadrons, that is offensive action roaming groups to engage and harass the enemy at will. Number 4 Sqn became the most famous and successful fighter Sqn of the front, all told downing 199 German aircraft. No 2 Sqn was also successful downing 185 enemy aircraft however the Australian Flying Corps casualties were heavy with the loss of 78 killed 68 wounded and 33 taken prisoner.

Following the Red Baron Rittmeister Manfred Von Richthofen Commander of the flying circus being shot down on April 21 1918 the German air service went into decline but the German Airmen fought on regardless of the lack of equipment, fuel and ammunition. With the German lacking vital spare parts many were caught on the ground and on 17 August 1918 Captain A. Murray-Jones led 19 aircraft of 2 Sqn on a raid of German airfields near Lille in France resulting in 37 aircraft being destroyed. The next day 2 Sqn attacked the German airfield near Lomme destroying a further 17 aircraft. The AFC kept up the pressure on the German Air Service until the last days of the war. This is shown by the last 3 casualties occurring on 14 November one week before the armistice was declared.

During the final Allied Offensive that eventually brought an end to the war- The 100 days Offensive- the AFC flew reconnaissance missions around Amiens in August as well as launching raids around Ypres, Arras and Lille. Operations continued until the end of the war with some of the fiercest air to air fighting coming on 29 October 1918 when 15 aircraft of 4 Sqn fought an engagement with a group of Fokkers that outnumbered them 4 to 1. In the ensuing fight the AFC shot down 10 Germans for the loss of 1 of their own. During their time along the Western Front the 2 fighter Sqn's accounted for 384 German aircraft. In addition 33 enemy balloons were destroyed or driven down. Meanwhile No 3 Sqn operating in the corps reconnaissance role accounted for another 51 aircraft.

The AFC remained small throughout the war and opportunities to serve in it's ranks were

limited. A total of 880 Officers and 2840 other ranks served in the AFC 410 as pilots and 153

observers. A further 200 men served in the RFC or the Royal Naval Air Service including Charles Kingsford Smith and Bert Hinkler.

Casualties included 175 killed 111 wounded 6 gassed and 40 captured. The majority of these were on The Western Front and represented a casualty rate of 44 percent. The high casualty rate was attributed to the policy of not issuing pilots with parachutes and most patrols were low level over enemy lines.

Following the armistice the AIF returned to Australia in stages with some remaining including No4 Sqn and returned in March 1919. During 1919-20 most units were disbanded and in 1920 the name Australian Flying Corps was discontinued and in 1921 the Royal Australian Air Force was established.