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## **(Australian): Challenges of the Australian Flying Corps During World War I**

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**(AUSTRALIAN): CHALLENGES OF THE AUSTRALIAN  
FLYING CORPS DURING WORLD WAR I**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of  
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, History

By

Patrick Joseph Blizzard

December 2021

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# **(AUSTRALIAN): CHALLENGES OF THE AUSTRALIAN FLYING CORPS DURING WORLD WAR I**

History

Missouri State University, December 2021

Master of Arts

Patrick Joseph Blizzard

## **ABSTRACT**

The air forces of the Great War faced many challenges. These challenges included integrating air power into established military doctrine and coping with the ever evolving airplane technology. The hurdles identified had to be overcome in order for the belligerent nations to wage a successful aerial campaign and control the skies above both static and dynamic forces. For the members of the Australian Flying Corps, these shared challenges were augmented by being the lone British dominion to operate an independent air arm. But what were these additional challenges and how were they overcome? The goal of this thesis is to explore the unique challenges that faced the AFC, both the organization and the individual men of the corps. The majority of these challenges were the product of Australian nationalist and military goals. These dual goals centered on waging a successful military campaign while at the same time maintaining a distinct dominion identity. In achieving these goals, the dominion sought to raise its standing within the British Empire, a footing on par with that of England. While other nations with an independent air arm sought similar goals to various degrees, none were an imperial possession in the same manner as Australia. Unfortunately for the Australian military and government, these nationalist and military goals were not always compatible and often were at odds with each other. As the majority of the AFC historiography focuses on the combat experiences of the Australian airman, this paper focuses and explores the social and cultural challenges with the Great War as the context and catalyst. While it is impossible to quantify each nation's unique obstacles, it is safe to assert that in overcoming their cultural and social challenges the AFC faced the one of more challenging paths to achieving its military and cultural goals in the First World War.

**KEYWORDS:** World War I, Australia, Australian Flying Corps, The Great War, aviation

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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## INTRODUCTION

As with all technology, be it the machine gun, tank, or airplane, nations and commanders prepared to fight their current war the ways that proved victorious in the previous war, wars in which these technologies played a minimal if any role. In integrating the airplane into modern warfare, the dominion forces of the Australian military and its Australian Flying Corps (AFC) faced similar problems to those of the other nations, however, its budding nationalism while operating as a British dominion created unique challenges for the AFC. The difficulties facing AFC were unique even among the other British dominions of Canada, South Africa, and New Zealand. The primary reason for the development of an independent flying corps was desire to defend the nation's borders from Pacific threats.<sup>1</sup> With the British Royal Navy protecting a global empire, the Australian military relieved that their home defense would fall on their own shoulders and a way to prepare for the future was an independent air service. Unlike the other dominions, who sent men to England to be trained by and serve in the Royal Flying Corps, the Australian government decided to train their pilots in country and send complete flying squadrons to operate under British direction.

The obstacles presented by the development of an independent flying corps were numerous and as the war progressed new hurdles manifested themselves. Despite developing an independent air force the AFC was under the operational control of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) in terms of war administration and training. In addition to the operational and training challenges were the nationalist and cultural challenges the AFC and its members faced. Nearly

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Molkenin, *Australia and the War in the Air* (Victoria: Oxford University Press, 2014) 9. "Australia's Danger: Eight Day Sail." *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 30, 1911.



all of the men who served in the AFC trained at various bases in England and Scotland, often RFC officers were in charge of overseeing this training. The training of Australian men and units in England under British officers, brought with it its own set of problems, namely enduring the British military's formality and insistency on strict parade ground discipline. Outside of the aspects of military operation, Australia and its men in uniform had dual identities to reconcile, that of an imperial subject and an Australian. As this thesis will show, successfully maintaining these two identities was not always possible. In several ways including recruiting and training, the AFC and the Australian military had to choose between supporting the British and Allied war effort or push their own cultural and nationalist objectives. The challenges discussed in this thesis, both the cultural and administrative, were either the result of or a response to the necessities brought on by seeing the achievement of one or both of these goal. The balance of supporting dual aims was a challenge not only to the military and governmental organizations but also for the individuals that made up the flying corps.

The goal of this thesis is to explore the unique challenges that faced the AFC, both the organization and the individual men of the corps. In addition to discussing and identifying these hurdles, this examination will outline the steps taken to overcome these difficulties. Identifying both the challenge and the resolution are just as important today as they were during the Great War, as many of the obstacles are still encountered by today's modern air forces. Like the AFC, air forces across the globe, including the United States Air Force and Royal Australian Air Force, face the difficulties of operating in a joint service and/or multinational operational environments, as well as interacting with the various cultures they find themselves operating within. Be it the establishment of an aviation training school in Australia or maintaining good relations with the English citizenry, this paper argues that all of the challenges facing the AFC

made their path to achieving the dominion's military and cultural war objectives unique among all the belligerent nations.

In examining these challenges and their resolutions, this thesis fills in a gap in the current historiography dealing with the AFC, that is focusing not on the combat of the unit but its nationalist and culture challenges. With that said, the AFC has not, until more recently, had a large number of works devoted to the organization as the stand alone topic. As is discussed later in this thesis, a reason for the lack of early histories centering on the AFC may be the cultural differences between the men of the flying corps, an educational and professionally elite unit, and the average AIF soldier. In the case of the leading Australian World War I historian Charles Bean, the elite social make-up of the AFC tarnished his idea of the AIF being a force made up of equals with no unit standing above the others socially. For the AIF's history, the cultural backgrounds and behaviors of the fighting men are examined in detail, not only by Charles Bean's official history of the year but also in both Peter Stanley's *Bad Characters* and Bill Gammage's *The Broken Years*.<sup>2</sup> In these two works the authors examine in the men of the AIF, both in their pre-war lives as well as the changes brought on by the prolonged war. However, when dealing with the men of the AFC there is no volume that focuses purely on the same issues as Gammage and Stanley without being merely the chapters proceeding the story of the AFC's combat operations. The dearth of an AFC historiography is made even more apparent by the vast number of volumes exploring the RFC, RNAS, and RAF, beginning with Sir Walter Raleigh and H.A. Jones' 6 volume *The War in the Air* published between 1922 and 1937.<sup>3</sup> Just a year

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1974). Peter Stanley, *Bad Characters: Sex, Crime, Mutiny, Murder, and the Australian Imperial Force* (NSW: Pier 9, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Walter Raleigh, *The War in the Air: Being the Story of the part play in the Great War by the Royal Air Force* (London: The Clarendon Press, 1922).

later, the first history of the AFC was published in the form of F. M. Cutlack's volume eight of the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18* entitled *The Australian Flying Corps in the Western and Eastern Theatres of War 1914-1918*.<sup>4</sup> In this work Cutlack follows the operations of the four AFC squadrons, with the book arranged on theaters of war lines. For example the earlier sections of the book deals with the Half-Flight and 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC in the Middle East from 1914 all of the way to the conclusion of the war before shifting its focus to the fighting on the Western Front by the three remaining squadrons.

The major impediment to Cutlack's work is its narrow focus, that of the individual combat operations of the AFC without integrating them into the larger British and Allied war effort or limited discussion of themes not centered squarely on individual battles.<sup>5</sup> This is in large part due to the sources available at the time of its publishing, a time when few other official histories were available. However, despite few histories to draw from, Cutlack had access to a vast range of primary sources including correspondence between the military and government agencies.<sup>6</sup> At this point, it is important to note that while Cutlack wrote the AFC's official history, he was not a historian by trade but instead a journalist, which may have been a deciding factor in the sources used to write his volume. Despite the abundance of governmental documents and correspondence, Cutlack relied almost completely on the war diaries and pieced together histories prepared by the flying squadrons.<sup>7</sup> To supplement the squadron war diaries, Cutlack interjected the personal accounts of the individual officers of the AFC.

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<sup>4</sup> F.M. Cutlack, *The Australian Flying Corps in the Western and Eastern Theatres of War, 1914-1918* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson Ltd, 1933)

<sup>5</sup> Michael Molquentin, "Australia, The Empire and the Great War in the Air" (Doctoral Thesis, University of New South Wales Canberra, 2013), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Molquentin, "Australia", 21.

The reliance on these two sources raises additional questions regarding the volume. Firstly, the AFC war diaries were substantially incomplete, especially with regards to the 1915 “half flight” and the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron.<sup>8</sup> One of the main causes for these gaps was the war-time commissioning of civilian aviators and installing these new officers in command of the squadrons. In a 1976 interview Sir Richard Williams, CO 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron Australian, implies that these new officers, for example Major Thomas Foster Rutledge who commanded 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron during its first year of operation, did not establish unit war diaries as they were unfamiliar with military doctrine and tradition requiring a diary.<sup>9</sup> The AFC’s “half flight” suffered from a similar fate, as its CO Captain Henry Petre had no military training or service prior to commanding the flight. An additional problem is presented by the use of personal narratives, Cutlack only used the stories and recollections of the officers serving in the units and not the narratives of “other ranks”, who were more numerous and played an immensely important role in the AFC’s successes.<sup>10</sup> Both sources have a tendency to replace objective fact with the posterity, emphasizing the glories of the combat without providing an objective view of the events.

A driving force for the limited number of histories examining the AFC was the inaccessibility of official RFC/RAF documents to the public. Until the early 1970’s, the majority of records remained sealed within the British Air Ministry and out of the hands of historians.

The lack of official records meant that the telling of the AFC’s history was provided almost

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<sup>8</sup> The AFC “half flight” was the detachment of men sent to Mesopotamia in response to the Viceroy of India’s call for military assistance. The unit’s small size of the unit garnered the nickname “half flight” as it consisted of only 4 pilots and various ground crew. “Half flight” operated from May 1915 until its disbanding after the surrender at Kut in April 1916. Molkentin, “Australia”, 181.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Williams, Interviewed by Fred Morton in the Australian Aviators in World War I oral history project, National Library of Australia, 1 January 1976.

<sup>10</sup> Molkentin, “Australia”, 21.

entirely by the memoirs of pilots and other servicemen who served during the war. Some of the most popular examples of these narratives are *Aces and Kings* by Leslie Sutherland, Harry Cobby's *High Adventure*, and George Jones' *From Private to Air Marshal*.<sup>11</sup> The drawback to these works is that, while still providing great insight to the tactical and day-to-day life, they have a very narrow scope or are rife with anecdotes, that are interesting but do provide historical insight into the operation of the AFC units. As thesis is concerned these narratives provided limited insight to the non-war fighting challenges of the AFC, as they usually begin after the writer is in the AFC and focuses more on the shenanigans and combat of the squadrons. One autobiography stands out amongst the other narratives provided by AFC pilots and that is Sir Richard Williams' *These are Facts*.<sup>12</sup> Williams' work stand out for various reason, the most important being due to his being with the AFC from 1914 – 1918 and relative high rank within the AFC/RFC, he provides a prospective and detail not available or expressed by many who left their stories behind.

With the exception of S.F. Wise's *Canadian Airmen and the First World War*, it was not until the last few decades that the First World War's air campaigns have been examined beyond the tactical level, and beyond the role of the "fighter pilot".<sup>13</sup> Two of the more notable works that focus on the full spectrum of the air war, ranging from the various operational roles to the various aircraft industries are John Morrow Jr's *The Great War in the Air* and Lee Kennett's *The*

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<sup>11</sup> A. H. Cobby, *High Adventure* (Melbourne: Kookaburra Technical Publications PTY. LTD., 1981), L. W. Sutherland, *Aces and Kings* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1935), George Jones, *From Private to Air Marshal: The Autobiography of Air Marshal Sir George Jones, KBE, CB, DFC* (Richmond Victoria: Greenhouse Publications, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> Richard Williams, *These Are Facts: The Autobiography of Air Marshal Sir Richard Williams, KBE, CB, DSO* (Canberra: The Australian War Memorial and The Australian Government Publishing Service, 1977)

<sup>13</sup> S.F. Wise, *Canadian Airmen and the First World War: The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

*First Air War*.<sup>14</sup> Both of books take a global view of the air war, examining how these various powers and how they dealt with the development and evolution of aerial combat. Most notably the authors focus on the various tactical and strategic roles the First World War air forces performed and not simply that of the white scarfed fighter “ace”, among who most post-war fiction focused. Unfortunately Morrow and Kennett focus on the larger Entente and Central Power air forces and make little mention of the AFC. One reason for this omission is the large amount of areas and information these books undertake, resulting in proportions of the Allied war effort had to remain unexamined. Additionally, the fact that the AFC operated within the structure of the British military may also contribute to the AFC only being mentioned in the “further reading” sections of the books, its contributions wrapped in the successes and tactics of the RFC and RAF.

The gaps in the AFC’s history have been filled by recent authors, notably Michael Molkentin, Mark Lax, and Chris Clark. Molkentin’s three monographs, *Fire in the Sky*, *Australia and the War in the Air*, and *ANZAC and Aviator* have greatly increased our knowledge concerning the AFC over the past decade.<sup>15</sup> In his first two works *Fire in the Sky* and *Australia and the War in the Air*, Molkentin explores not only the tactical engagements the in which AFC squadrons’ were involved but also how the men handled and endured service in the AFC. Molkentin focuses more on the AFC’s integration within the conflict, showing its place in the larger picture of the war and not merely in an Australian vacuum. Both books tell the story of

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<sup>14</sup> John Marrow Jr, *The Great War in the Air* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), Lee Kennett, *The First Air War, 1914-1918* (New York: The Free Press, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Michael Molkentin, *ANZAC and Aviator: The Remarkable Story of Sir Ross Smith and the 1919 England to Australia Air Race* (NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2019), Michael Molkentin, *Fire in the Sky: The Australian Flying Corps in the First World War* (NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2010), Michael Molkentin, *Australia and the War in the Air* (Victoria: Oxford University Press, 2014).

the AFC throughout the entirety of the war, one volume histories of the Australian air war. In taking on the whole of the First World War both earlier books' main focuses become a recount of the combats and campaigns of the AFC, with a much wider focus and reach than Cutlack's 1923 history. In *ANZAC and Aviator*, Molkentin tells the story of Sir Ross Smith one of the early pioneers of Australian military and civilian aviation. In telling Smith's story Molkentin is able to focus on details seemingly missing from his previous AFC histories, namely on the social and personal interactions of the men and how officer and enlisted ranks co-existed. This thesis differs from these previous works on the AFC as its focus is not the fighting of the war, but examining cultural and national issues with the war as the background and/or the catalyst of the examined issues. In addition to filling in a gap within the AFC's historiography, it is important to understand the cultural and military backgrounds and objectives as they both directly impacted the Australian military's ability to wage a successful military campaign. Finally, to better understand the cultural and social goals of the Australian government and military, an examination of the Australian airmen and his relation to the dominion population.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Throughout this thesis the term "airmen" is used, it makes reference to all the members of the AFC, not merely the aircrews. The aircrew are referred to as "flying officers" or pilots and observers, while the non-commissioned members are referred to as either "other ranks" or ground crew.

## PART I: THE CORP

### Chapter 1: “Why the Australian Flying Corps?”

As stated in the introduction, Australia was the only dominion to establish its own independent air corps, while the others such as Canada and New Zealand simply provided pilots to train serve in the RFC. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a growing desire for increased autonomy within Australia and one of the vehicles for achieving this autonomy was the military, namely the AFC. The task balancing a successful war and nationalist goals was a problem not faced by nation's air service. Nations such as England, France, and Germany could focus purely on doing whatever they could to win the war as they were all established independent military powers. This, however, was not the case for the AFC, who had to consider preserving their dominion identity, not being merely amalgamated into the imperial forces while at the same time contributing the war effort. Striving to achieve this balance generated additional issues that the AFC would have to face to meet both its military and nationalist goals. Before examining the challenges involved with this imperial/national duality, it is necessary to briefly look at British/Australian relations in the years leading up to the outbreak of war.

From its establishment as a British penal colony in 1788 to the 1901 federation into the Commonwealth of Australia, the white population of Australia was almost entirely made up of British settlers or their children. In addition to the British population were the island's Aborigines, German immigrants, and Chinese and American workers brought to the colony in search of gold.<sup>17</sup> The make-up of the white population meant that the colony was loyal to the British Empire and until 1870 British regular troops were garrisoned in Australia. Regarding

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<sup>17</sup> Ron Cooper, “Why the Australian Flying Corps?” *The '14 – '18 Journal* (1974): 4.



the perception of the British by the Australians Ron Cooper, founding member of the Australian Society of World War One Aero Historians, states, “Possibly distance made the heart grow fonder but certainly tended to isolate the population from any shortcomings of the British Government and engendered a national form of homesickness.”<sup>18</sup> This isolation from the British ended for many when the individual colonies rushed off locally raised troops to South Africa to fight alongside the British in the Boer War of 1899-1902. The Australian units excelled in their use of irregular unit tactics, mirroring that of the Boer Komando units. It was the actions of one of these irregular units, the ‘Bush Veldt Carbineers’ and its leader Lt. Harry “Breaker” Morant and the response by the British military that further opened a rift between the Australian and British governments over control of the Australian military forces.

In October 1901, Lt. Morant and three other soldiers were arrested for the killing several Boer Komando’s who had surrendered to Morant’s patrol. Morant defended his actions by stating that he was following the orders of British Chief of Staff Herbert Kitchener which stated that any Boer wearing British uniform should be summarily shot.<sup>19</sup> The Australian feeling was that Morant was merely carrying out the orders put forth by the British military and his execution left many in the Australian military feeling that Morant was a scapegoat of the British military’s brutal handling of civilians and prisoner during the Boer War. When the Australian Government requested the trial documents and record of the proceedings, they were informed that the information had allegedly been destroyed.<sup>20</sup> Closing his article on British/Australian pre-war relations Cooper states,

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<sup>18</sup> Cooper, “Why the Australian Flying Corps?”, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 6.

The Australian Government was thus left in serious doubt as to the bona fides of the case moved to ensure that the control of the Australian Forces would never again be surrendered to absolute British control, passing legislation to prevent the British from committing an Australian soldier to the Death Penalty without reference to the Australian Government. Thus in both the 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 wars, the Australians insisted their forces fight as integrated units and refused steadfastly to allow their units to be absorbed into British regiments.<sup>21</sup>

This idea of refusing to allow Australian units and soldiers to be wholly absorbed into the BEF was a major driving force for an independent air wing, not merely Australian pilots filling the ranks of the RFC. The goal of the Australian military leadership was developing an independent air force despite being isolated from established aircraft production centers and flight training.

Another important factor that set apart Australia from other dominions such as Canada was its relative isolation from England and the might of the British military forces. Before the request of the Viceroy of India on February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1915 asking for trained airmen to be deployed to the Tigris Valley in support of the Palestine campaign, the goal of the Australian military was to use its air forces for coastal defense.<sup>22</sup> The main threat to Australian peace in the years before 1914 was Japan, with its powerful navy, which had recently defeated Romanov Russia in the Russo-Japanese war. Unlike Canada, who had a powerful ally in the United States close by, the Australians felt that with the tensions in Europe and Africa increasing they would have to rely on their own military strength to defend their island. This perceived Japanese threat kindled the Australian government's desire to establish a military flying program in 1910-1911 and building of the Central Flying School at Pointe Cook in 1913. At the same the time that German troops were invading Belgium, the first course at Pointe Cook was taking place. Even as the first four cadets were training at the flying school, there was no plan in place to use these pilots for

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<sup>21</sup> Cooper, "Why the Australian Flying Corps?", 7.

<sup>22</sup> Cutlack, *The Australian Flying Corps*, 422.

overseas service. After completing their training course, the four pilots returned to their previous AIF units. Additionally, whereas the Australian population was overwhelming of British descent, Canada maintained a large French population who saw this as a British conflict when the empire requested to form dominion squadrons.<sup>23</sup> After the outbreak of war, the threat shifted from Japan to the Central Powers, the prevailing thought being that if the British Empire were defeated, Dominions like Australia and New Zealand would be part of the post-war settlement enlarging German Pacific possessions. All of these above mentioned factors weighed in the decision of the Australian government to accept the RFC's request to form independent squadrons to work within the British operational structure.

## **Chapter 2: Operations and Administration**

The first obstacle facing the AFC was how it planned to function under of the agreement made between the Australian government and British military. According to the agreement, upon entering the war the Australian military had offered a fully formed squadrons for independent action, as oppose to the Canadian and New Zealand forces who sent men to train and serve as RFC officers. Under this scheme the AIF would recruit, pay salaries, and provided administrative oversight of the AFC squadrons. On the other hand, the RFC would provide the Australian squadrons with aircraft and technical equipment required for operations, with the understanding that the Australian government would pay the British for the used equipment at the end of the war. While this agreement allowed the Australians to form their own squadron, the development was almost entirely on British and imperial terms. With no Australian aircraft

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<sup>23</sup> Geoff Ruddock, "Canada's Contribution to the 1914-1918 Air War", *The '14 – '18 Journal*, (1988): 89.

industry, the AFC was completely at the mercy of the RFC and European airplane manufactures, who were busy meeting orders for RFC Western Front forces, for their machines.

In addition to the RFC controlling the operations and strategy of the AFC, the British were in charge of assigning, transferring, and promoting personnel within the Australian squadrons. Often, flight and squadron commanders had little to no say on the men coming into and leaving their squadrons. Upon the arrival of the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, AFC in Egypt, many of the pilots and observers who had received little to no training at Pointe Cook were sent to England for training. As both Richard Williams and Alan Fraser point out, few of the pilots and none of the observers trained in England returned to the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC.<sup>24</sup> The ones who did not return to the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron were either absorbed into RFC squadrons or diverted to the newly forming 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron AFC.<sup>25</sup> To cover for these losses, the AFC had to accept the attachment of RFC officers as well as AIF men to fill out the ranks of the squadron, severely curtailing the hopes of keeping the AFC a strictly Australian venture.

In May 1917, of the 36 officers serving in the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, 21 were AFC men, while the remaining 15 were RFC officers, including the squadron's "CO, Recording officer, six of the 17 pilots and seven of the 12 observers."<sup>26</sup> In serving under so many commands, the men of the AFC faced an administrative nightmare. Alan Fraser describes this tangled web of leadership,

The Australian unit was in rather an awkward position. It was part of the AIF and therefore subject to direction in personnel matters by the General Officer Commanding the Australian field Force, the Anzac Mounted Division, and by the Commandant of the Australian Headquarters in Cairo, a branch of the AIF Administrative Headquarters in London...And then, the other way, they were subject to directions from the RFC Brigade.

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<sup>24</sup> Alan Fraser, "You can be lucky: The RFC/AFC relationship in the Middle East in 1916/17", *The '14 – '18 Journal*, (1994): 75.

<sup>25</sup> Fraser, "You can be Lucky", 75.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

There were no AFC headquarters staff personnel in the Middle East or even an Australian staff officer in the area familiar with aviation matters.<sup>27</sup>

Some if not all of these early administration stumbling blocks may have been avoided if AFC officers had been appointed to the local AIF or RFC headquarters, helping to facilitate and advocate for the AFC. Retired RAAF Air Commodore and author Mark Lax suggests in his essay on AFC/RAAF leadership that a problem with having an AFC officer attached to the RFC headquarters in Egypt is that the AFC lacked senior officers that could have made an impact at the various headquarters.<sup>28</sup> He continues by stating, “In hindsight, it is unfortunate that none of the headquarters posts had anything to do with operations and even training was directed by higher RFC authority. One reason for this was the relative lack of seniority of the Australians...Being a colonial did no help either. The best we could manage was four officers promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel; Williams, Watt, Brinsmead and Reynolds.”<sup>29</sup> In the rush to form the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron into service in Egypt, the Australian military had not developed any superior AFC organization or hierarchy outside of the level of squadron.<sup>30</sup> Until mid-1917 when a small air force staff was attached to AIF HQ, the AFC operated along army organizational lines.<sup>31</sup>

The lack administrative “top cover” manifested itself at the squadron and flight levels in many ways. As with the case of absorbing the Australian observers who trained in England, RFC directed personnel allocation was accomplished in an arbitrary manner. Regarding the

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<sup>27</sup> Fraser, “You can be Lucky”, 75.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Lax, “A Hint of things to come...Leadership in the AFC”, *The '14 – '18 Journal* (2000): 5-14.

<sup>29</sup> Lax, “A Hint”, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 8.

transfer of AFC personnel Fraser states, “The RFC posted whoever it pleased into and out of 1AFC. While this was not inconsistent with the inter-government agreement, the movement of Australians to and fro, often without consultation, was a source of on-going friction.” Other similar sources of friction were the result of combining troops from the different dominion as well as RFC troops, “The RFC Brigade....made decisions regarding the complements of the squadrons that ignored national distinctions which might have been appropriate...to consider. On training, they even failed at times to distinguish between Australians and New Zealanders. And there were personnel anomalies which created problems in a composite unit; rate of pay, for instance, varied between the British and the Australians.”<sup>32</sup> Matters were made worse for the AFC when in July 1916 the Secretary of the War Officer offered to commission 200 men of the AIF into the Special Reserve of the RFC.<sup>33</sup> Despite both sides having agreed the previous year to halt transfers between the nations’ forces, the Australian agreed to the offer. In the end, 183 of the 197 that applied were transferred to the RFC, this at a time when the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC was in its third month of operations and working with a mixed bag of AFC and RFC members.<sup>34</sup> The challenges brought on by operating as a dominion flying corps within the British system, one that did not necessarily recognize the cultural differences among its imperial forces, seems to be the price the AFC paid to striking out on its own. In the end, overcoming these challenges resulted in recognition of the accomplishments of the Australian airmen as a distinct fighting force.

Despite the post-war benefits of an independent air arm, the pressure to overcome these challenges was placed squarely on the squadron and flight commanders, as well as the men in

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<sup>32</sup> Fraser, “You can be lucky”, 76.

<sup>33</sup> Cutlack, *The Australian Flying Corps*, 421.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

units. Much like the Australian military at large, individual AFC flight and squadron commanders faced obstacles not shared with their British and French contemporaries, especially in terms of squadron make-up and manning. Responding to the commissioning of AIF men into the RFC, 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron CO Major Thomas Rutledge commented, “Should this sort of thing continue...my unit will very soon have no officers left. It seems to me that Middle East Brigade transfer AIF personnel to the AFC, or vice versa, just as they wish. I request something definite be laid down as soon as possible regarding transfers and appointments in the AFC in Egypt.”<sup>35</sup> Rutledge, himself a Victoria born RFC officer, identified that AIF men with RFC commissions serving in the AFC was a source of tension, as the new Australian RFC officers outranked their AFC counterparts and drew 7/6d per day more in pay.<sup>36</sup>

It is easy to understand the friction that the higher pay rate and higher level authority of Australian born RFC would cause in an AFC unit. The Australian born AFC and RFC pilots often joined the war at the same time but due to from which country they held their commissions, one outranked and out-earned the other. At a time when the Australian government was trying to obtain a more equal footing with England, examples such the RFC/AFC pay rate most have reinforced a feeling dominion/colonial inferiority. Why should an RFC officer of equal rank maintain more authority than his AFC counterpart? This would prove to be a difficulty when it came to AFC officers formally disciplining RFC officers under their command. The situation of the early years of the war created a situation for the AFC/RFC unlike any of those facing other nations. In the other nations such as France and Germany, the colonial troops brought into the war were non-white colonials. Their race put them clearly under the command of the white

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<sup>35</sup> Fraser, “You can be lucky”, 82.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

officers appointed under them and the same is true of the British colonies. Australia's desire for great autonomy and military self-sustainability created hastily put together command structure which impacted the morale of the men and commanders of the AFC. Despite their push for maintaining their dominion identity they faced the reality that they were still a part of the British Empire's military structure.

A resolution to a large number of the administration problems came about in the end of 1917 in response to what the Australian Prime Minister George Pearce labeled a "largely growing feeling within the Commonwealth that officers and men of the Australian Imperial Force should have priority command appointments."<sup>37</sup> Pearce explained to the AIF military leaders that this new policy meant that wherever possible AIF officers should be command of Australian units. A casualty of the policy of installing AFC officers in squadron and flight commands was Major Rutledge of the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC. Regarding his transfer out of the AFC Alan Fraser writes, "After fighting so strongly for his squadron to become wholly Australian in personnel, it was ironic that following the direction from London that the squadron be manned by AIF officers, Rutledge, an Australian in the RFC, was withdrawn from command on 22 May...a victim of his own endeavors. He was replaced by Captain R. Williams, 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC, the senior flight commander, who promoted to the rank of Major for the new command."<sup>38</sup> Prior to accepting command of the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, both RFC headquarters in London and Rutledge himself requested he be transferred from the RFC to the AIF. However, this offer was rejected on the terms of the 1915 agreement that troops would not be transferred within imperial forces, an agreement that was waived when the RFC offered its 200 commissions.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Molckentin, *Australia and the War in the Air*, 23.

<sup>38</sup> Fraser, "You can be lucky", 82.

<sup>39</sup> Clark, *High Life*, 176.



In securing the guarantee that AIF officers would lead Australian units, the AFC pushed out an Australian who took command of a squadron that “was in no way a functioning unit” and turned it into an operational three flight squadron.<sup>40</sup> It seems possible that the AFC and AIF could have found a way to retain a commander like Rutledge, an Australian who had travelled to England to take a commission with the RFC because the AFC had not existed when war broke out in 1914 and had served with the RFC since 1914. With the case of Rutledge the balance of nationalist goals and successful military action is quite clear. In an effort to create a unit fully manned by AFC officers, it removed an Australian born RFC officer who turned the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron into a fighting force, had overcome the stresses of having men transferred in and out haphazardly and sought to transfer his commission from the RFC to the AFC. The case of Rutledge demonstrates that the success or failure of the war effort would rest solely with AFC officers and men.

Additional administrative relief was provided in 1917 when the Director of Air Organization RFC convened a conference of dominion and British leadership to lay down a more definite policy on how these individual groups would handle personnel issues.<sup>41</sup> The conference was extremely fruitful for the Australians and the RFC authorities agreed to nearly all of the AFC’s requests.<sup>42</sup> Among the agreed requests was that the “AIF clarified its authority to promote and transfer personnel and achieved a moratorium on the employment of AFC officers in British units.”<sup>43</sup> With the arrival of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron, AFC in France in August 1917, the AIF HQ continued to work to establish concrete procedures for the command and administration of

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<sup>40</sup> Clark, *High Life*, 178.

<sup>41</sup> Molkentin, *Australia*, 30.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

AFC squadrons in the field. In a meeting between General Birdwood GOC AIF and Brigadier-General Hugh Trenchard OC RFC in August 1917, it was agreed that AIF would retain complete control of its reinforcements and that AFC officers be allowed to serve temporarily in RFC units but only upon Birdwood's consent. This agreement provided the AFC and AIF with more independence of action and autonomy in personnel actions. After operating under a convoluted command structure, one in which the AFC maintained limited autonomy, the RFC and AFC established a more balanced command hierarchy, one in which AIF commanders gained more control over their own flying corps.

The final challenge to the officers, especially the commanders of the AFC, was their inability to formally discipline RFC officers. In his autobiography, Richard Williams states, "In those days before the passing of legislation clearing the relationship between Dominion and British officers, Dominion officers could not exercise powers of punishment over British personnel."<sup>44</sup> As has already been discussed, the majority of the time that the AFC was operating, both in France and Egypt, the Australian squadrons were a combination of RFC and AFC men. Williams estimated that not until January 1918 that the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron was fully manned by "slouch hats."<sup>45</sup> This leaves the impression that from June 1916 until January 1918 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron CO's and flight commanders were unable levy formal disciplinary action against the RFC men under their charge.

The inability to discipline British officer posed an additional challenge to Williams when considered to command the 40<sup>th</sup> Wing RAF in Egypt, which was made up of two RAF scout squadrons, one RAF bomber squadron, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, AFC. Williams describes the

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<sup>44</sup> Williams, *These are Facts*, 87.

<sup>45</sup> Molkentin, *Australia*, 27.

resolution to this problem, “Consequently to exercise the command of the 40<sup>th</sup> Wing RAF I was granted a supplementary commission in the Royal Air Force. I then found myself holding three commissions – as a captain A and I staff...as a lieutenant colonel, Australian Flying Corps AIF; and as a lieutenant colonel (later wing commander) Royal Air Forces.”<sup>46</sup> For the men of the AFC this had to, in some, degree reinforce the idea of dominion inferiority, especially considering that Australians serving in the RFC could not be disciplined by the Australians of the AFC until they themselves held a RFC/RAF commission. Here were men like Oswald Watt and Richard Williams in command of flights and squadrons made up of both RFC and AFC men, but these commanders can only discipline and hold accountable the AFC troops. Similar to the issue of pay rates, the inability to hold British pilots accountable good order and discipline with the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron must have been impacted by these irregularities.

### **Chapter 3: What is in a Name?**

As previously described, the British government’s promise in 1915 of leaving the Australian squadrons “wholly Australian” did not come into being until the later years of the war. The same can be said of providing the dominion units with “distinguishing designation[s].” The numbering of the Australian squadron may seem like a trivial matter but for the Australians it was a major point of contention. These men and units were not satisfied with being a cog in the British flying service but wanted their units to stand out as Australian units, not as imperials serving in the Empire. Sir Hudson Fysh, a member of the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, described the importance of “distinguishing designations” to the men, “One of Sir Richard’s [Williams] greatest fights was for an Australian Force, and it all started when the British Command insisted on our squadron in

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<sup>46</sup> Williams, *These are Facts*, 87.

Palestine being No. 67 Squadron RFC while the Australian Authorities insisted we were No. 1 Squadron AFC and part and parcel of the Australian Imperial Force.”<sup>47</sup> When the squadron arrived in Egypt they were designated *No. 1 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps* by Routine Order No. 1 dated 17 January 1916.<sup>48</sup> Given that a major goal of the Australian government was maintaining its dominion identity, the fight for “distinguishing designations” was a battle for that very identity.

However, on 14 September 1916 the War Office issued Squadron Routine Order No. 211 changing the ordering system for all current and future AFC units.<sup>49</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC became the No. 67 (Australian) Squadron RFC, placing Australian units “within the numerical sequence of the formation of squadrons of the RFC and by the insertion of ‘Australian’ in brackets the titles were no doubt considered to fulfil the undertaking to give the units a distinguishing territorial designation.”<sup>50</sup> According to Alan Fraser, “Evidently there was no consultation with personnel of 1AFC in Egypt who strongly resented the implication that the squadron was a unit of the British Royal Flying Corps rather than an Australian national unit.”<sup>51</sup> Not only was this change resented by the men on the ground but it also caused administrative problems as orders were still routinely issued to the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC from both Australia and London causing orders and transfers to become delayed or lost. These change appeared to the men as a betrayal of the terms in which the AFC joined the war, having been promised to maintain a distinct identification. Instead of retaining their identity as an independent flying

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<sup>47</sup> Hudson Fysh. *Qantas Rising*. (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1963), 45-46.

<sup>48</sup> Fraser, “Numbering the Squadrons of the Australian Flying Corps,” *The '14 – '18 Journal* (1992): 28.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>50</sup> Fraser, “Numbering”, 29.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

corps, they were now folded up into the RFC structure and assigned a RFC squadron number, damaging the dominion pride and identity.

In his autobiography Richard Williams, a flight commander in the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron during this time, provides context to the name changes, “There was no more authority for calling us a squadron of the Royal Flying Corps than there was, for example, for calling the 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion AIF the 23<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment.”<sup>52</sup> These words from Williams make the point very clear, one of the reasons for the Australian military agreeing to provide full units to the RFC was in part to maintain their distinct identity and ensuring the accomplishments of the AFC were not absorb into those of the British. Like the case of the RFC caps given to Pvt. Knuckey and the men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron AFC, the battle over the numbering of the AFC squadrons is a pushing back of the “red coat” and putting on the slouch hat. It is to insist for simplicity sake that the AFC should have simply adopted the RFC numbering system, RFC uniform, and comply with the transferring of pilot of AFC in and out of RFC/RAF squadrons, however, this would have put aside all of the aspirations for increased military self-sustainability and identity of the Australians. The Australian government wanted a fully formed flying corps to help them increase the dominion’s military capability for when the war ended, not merely possessing trained pilots but the whole command structure and leadership experience.

As subsequent Australian squadrons were formed they found themselves receiving squadron numbers within the RFC operational system, No. 67 (1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC), No. 68 (2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron AFC, No. 69 (3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron) and No. 71 (4<sup>th</sup> Squadron), No. 70 Squadron being a British unit formed in Farnborough in 1916.<sup>53</sup> The Australian government objected to this

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<sup>52</sup> Williams, *These are Facts*, 88.

<sup>53</sup> Shore, *Above the Trenches*, 38.

numbering scheme and in February 1917 Lieutenant-General Commanding Birdwood met with Sir David Henderson, Director of Air Services, expressing the nation's wishes that Australian squadrons maintain their "AFC" designation no matter into what formations they were incorporated into.<sup>54</sup> Regarding this communication between military leaders Alan Fraser write, "This exchange between two very senior officers is indicative of the importance placed by the Australian Government on adequate public recognition being given to the war effort of Australians, recognition which had not always been accorded to other Australian efforts which were concealed within references to the successes of 'British' forces."<sup>55</sup> In April 1917, all Australians were now identified as No. 1-4 Squadron, AFC, and finally in January 1918 changed to their final, original in the case of the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, to the ordinal designation, 1st – 4<sup>th</sup> Squadron AFC. Summing up the myriad of changes Fraser concludes, "The AFC service squadrons, at various times, were titled Nos 1, 2, 3, and Squadrons, AFC, changed to Nos 67, 68, 69, 71 (Australian) Squadrons, RFC, then to Nos 67, 68, 69, and 71 Squadrons, AFC then back to Nos 1, 2, 3 and 4 AFC and finally to the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> Squadrons AFC."<sup>56</sup> Aside from troubling historians and squadron diaries, the battles over the squadron's numerical designations is a microcosm of the struggles facing the Australian military in their quest for military and dominion distinction.

As stated at the beginning of the designation discussion, this may have seemed like a trivial matter to fight over, but for the Australians, especially the military and government, this numbering was a step along the path towards Australian military autonomy. With the Great War the Australian government saw military accomplishments as the vehicle to increase autonomy,

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<sup>54</sup> Fraser, "Numbering", 30.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 33.

and part of that achieving that goal was ensuring that its military units, like the AFC squadron, were recognized for the accomplishments and not having their deeds wrapped up into the successes of the empire like the other dominion forces. In addition to developing an identity and history independent of the British Empire, the Australian military and government understood that their distance from England and the vastness of its holdings meant that they could not solely rely on the power of the BEF or Royal Navy to protect their island from Pacific threats. The men carrying out the AFC's air sorties were not only fighting a war but also carrying the hopes for greater equality within in the empire on their backs and post war security, a burden they could not be oblivious to.

#### **Chapter 4: Point Cook's 'Rag-Time Show'**

The final aspect of this idea of balancing nationalist goals and waging a successfully war was the issue of developing an Australian flying school. Part of Australia's prewar self-defense planning was the establishment of a Central Flying School located at Point Cook. In December 1911 the Australian government advertised at home and in England for two "competent mechanists and aviators" to serve as instructors for the yet to be built flying school.<sup>57</sup> The Defense Department received no applications from inside Australia and in the end selected two aviators from England, Henry Petre a British solicitor and Eric Harrison an Australian living in Britain.<sup>58</sup> Similarly to the importing of aviation expertise, lacking a homegrown aviation industry, all aircraft and technical equipment for the school had to be brought from England and

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<sup>57</sup> *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette*, no 97, 30 December 1911. "Advertisement for Mechanists and Aviators".

<sup>58</sup> Steve Campbell-Wright, *An Interesting Point: A History of Military Aviation at Point Cook 1914-2014* (Canberra: Air Power Development Centre, 2014), 9.

France, which were the main centers of aircraft and parts production for the Entente forces. The problems associated with obtaining aircrafts and parts would be a factor that would greatly undermine the ability of the Central Flying School to produce adequate numbers of pilots. Finally, on 26 September 1912 the Australian government approved the funds and formation of the Australian Flying Corps and Central Flying School in Army Order 132/1912.<sup>59</sup>

When the school conducted its first course of four cadets in the fall of 1914 only Richard Williams was full-time soldiers, while the remaining three were part-time soldiers in the citizen militia.<sup>60</sup> Richard Williams' autobiography provides excellent details and descriptions of the early camp itself and the type of instruction received at Point Cook. Williams' first impression was that, "There was no air of an army establishment, apart from the tents, and the ground was in the same condition as it was when purchased—a sheep grazing area, now covered with long grass."<sup>61</sup> Working from the RFC training syllabus, the students were required to complete training on: the art of flying, meteorology, observation from the air, flying by compass, photography from aircraft, signaling, and identification of warships and aircraft.<sup>62</sup> Due to the lack of equipment at the school, only a few of these learning objectives were covered before completing the course. Regarding these objectives Williams states,

Ground instruction was almost nil—a little on the theory of the internal combustion engine...The seemed to have no other aim than to teach us to fly the Boxkite. Certainly it was giving us some 'training in the art of flying but this aircraft was quite unsuitable for cross-country flight...Nor was the Boxkite suitable for 'Air navigation—flying by compass'. As to photography, signaling and observation from aircraft, there was neither

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<sup>59</sup> Mol Kentin, *Australia*, 11.

<sup>60</sup> Mol Kentin, *Fire*, 8.

<sup>61</sup> Williams, *These are Facts*, 24.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.



the personnel nor equipment at Point Cook. It was apparent to all of us that we were not adding to our knowledge or skill by simply going on flying the Boxtite in flat and calm.<sup>63</sup>

Williams labeled the whole setup as a “ragtime show”, one that had to change gears quickly to meet the commitment of providing squadrons to the RFC in 1915.

By 1915 when the RFC proposed that dominions provide complete squadrons to fit into the British organization, the Central Flying School was finishing its third course and had graduated 19 pilots.<sup>64</sup> As part of the original 1915 proposal, the RFC offered to train squadrons and men in England before sending the men and units to the various fronts, however, seeing the “inestimable benefit for the future training of the Australian forces,” Chief of the General Staff Colonel Godfrey Irving made the decision that the men making up what would become 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC would have been trained at Point Cook.<sup>65</sup> The Australian government believed that the training received the same level of training as their RFC counterparts. While the AFC had added an additional aircraft to its collection at the school since opening, students like Lt. Lawrence Wackett, graduate of the third Point Cook course stated, “The flying equipment consisted of four very primitive aeroplanes housed in three small hangars... We learned to fly straight and level, to turn right and left, to glide straight and in a spiral to land. When we could do this well, and execute a figure-of-eight course we were pronounced qualified to wear the pilot’s badge.”<sup>66</sup> In 1916, Harry Cobby was among a class of 30 beginning their course at Point Cook. He states that for these 30 students and the 30 before there were only two full-time

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<sup>63</sup> Williams, *These are Facts*, 28.

<sup>64</sup> Molkenin, *Australia*, 20 & 217.

<sup>65</sup> Molkenin, *Australia*, 20.

<sup>66</sup> Lawrence Wackett, *Aircraft Pioneer: An Autobiography* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1972), 41.

instructors, one assistant instructor and three airplanes.<sup>67</sup> For many of these Australians, training started from scratch when they arrived in England and began the RFC style training.

In England pilots went through multiple levels of training, from university style lectures on aeronautics and theory of operation to weapons and advanced “finishing schools.” Regarding the British thoughts on the newly arrived Point Cook graduates Molkenntin states, “The arrival of the first Point Cook graduates in Britain with the new AFC squadrons in early 1917 alarmed British and AIF authorities. The RFC’s leadership considered them so poorly trained that they needed to start the British course from scratch and suggested that Australians authorities abandon training to ‘save time and expense.’”<sup>68</sup> The Australian government had three options at this juncture, close down the Central Flying School and send the complete units to England for training, establish AFC training units in England or greatly expand the Point Cook training. The initial decision was to expand the training infrastructure at Point Cook and in November 1917 renovations to the Point Cook school began. The driving for the choice of expansion was the fear that closing down the Central Flying School would hamstring the post-war development of military aviation in Australia, leaving the island weak to aerial attack and invasion.<sup>69</sup>

In an act of compromise with British War Office, the Australian government broke with its policy of allowing the RFC to permanently assign AFC members to RFC squadrons, with the condition that the pilots would be trained at the Point Cook School. The British War Office rejected this proposal outright stating that the quality of pilot coming from the Central Flying School were not “sufficiently up to date to enable pilots to be used in war without very considerable further instruction with [the] Royal Flying Corps would find great difficulty

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<sup>67</sup> Cobby, *High Adventure*, 21.

<sup>68</sup> Molkenntin, *Australia*, 41.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

arranging.”<sup>70</sup> For the sake of post-war goals the AFC was providing redundant and out of date training to pilots desperately needed at the front casualties mounted. The Central Flying School remained open but the vast majority of the operational training now took place in England in the AFC training squadrons established at the end of 1917 and operational in the last year of the war. These squadrons would provide lower tier flying training for the AFC pilots but training for observers and higher level pilot training would still take place at RFC training schools. Additionally, technical equipment and aircraft were almost completely provided by the British War Office.

In the end, the Central Flying School conducted 11 courses with 132 airmen graduating from training.<sup>71</sup> The legacy of Point Cook during the war is mixed. While it provided Australian airmen flying training, that training was elementary at the best of times. Due to the lack of a domestic airplane industry, the Central Flying School was able to field only a handful of obsolete aircraft. Additionally, the limited number of staff and large demand for students trained meant that men received their pilot’s wings after completing as little as two hours of solo flying.<sup>72</sup> The desire to keep the Central Flying School open caused the Australian government to accept AFC pilots being permanently attached to RFC squadrons, something that it railed against in the earlier days of the AFC. Once the majority of training moved to England, the main focus of the AFC’s training was to develop personnel experience that would provide the backbone for the post-war aviation push. In this regard, the AFC’s training scheme worked, as many of the pioneers of the AFC formed the nucleus of the country’s military and civilian airplane industry and development.

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<sup>70</sup> Long to Ferguson Letter, 10 September and 25 October 1917, NAA A11803 1917/89/69.

<sup>71</sup> Campbell-Wright, *An Interesting Point*, 43.

<sup>72</sup> Molkentin, *Australia*, 40.

Even without the training school at Point Cook, Australian airmen would have still formed the backbone of post-war military aviation, especially given the amount of time spent in the RFC training system. The November 1919 issue of *Sea, Land, and Air* identifies many of those Australians who served in the RFC/RAF and laid the foundations for Australian civil and military aviation, including Colonel Stanley Goble, RNAS who became Air Adviser to the Royal Australian Navy and Captain Herbert Larkin RAF, General Manager of Larkin-Aviation Company.<sup>73</sup> While author Scott Campbell-Wright states that, “Most importantly, Point Cook was the launching place for many who went on after the war to make their in Australian and international aviation”, an example being Richard Williams, many others like Oswald Watt and more famously Ross-Smith were not products of the Point Cook or AFC training squadrons.<sup>74</sup> Unlike the other challenges discussed in this thesis, the hurdles encountered in regards to establishing an independent self-sustained training school and system was only overcome when the AIF and AFC put aside their desire for distinction and adopted the RFC/RAF training system as well as British equipment and facilities.

In the end, the men on the ground were able to shoulder the challenges brought on by the agreements made by the Australian government. Describing the advantages in forming an independent flying corps Richard Williams states,

Of course, had Australia agreed in 1915 to the request of the British Government to recruit personnel in Australia for service in the Royal Flying Corps, such personnel would have served in the RFC and the whole cost of their transport, training, pay and operations as well as repatriation would have been met by that Government. This was done in the case of Canada and New Zealand, but the identity of those Dominions

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<sup>73</sup> *Sea, Land, and Air*, “Australien”, 481.

<sup>74</sup> Campbell-Wright, *An Interesting Point*, 57.

disappeared in the Royal Flying Corps. We had retained our Australian identity with our own AFC.<sup>75</sup>

In a rush to provide an operational squadron to the RFC, the AIF failed to properly define an organizational structure above the squadron level or lay down specific guidelines on the handling of personnel matters. However, it is to the credit of the AIF leadership that they were continually advocating for more clearly defined lines of responsibility and providing more of the military “top cover” missing from the earlier years of AFC operations. Until the Australian military began to expand the AFC structure and clarify the AFC/RFC relations in terms of administration and personnel, it was officers like Major Rutledge, Capt Watt and Capt Richard Williams that kept the AFC operational and serving with distinction on a level to rival their British contemporaries.

Unlike the administration problems that came from not having a clear higher level command structure, Australia could not simply develop and expand a domestic aircraft industry nor decrease its distance from the production centers of England and France. The lack of heavy industry and homegrown aviation expertise greatly hampered the efforts of Point Cook to produce fully trained pilots capable of making up for the wastages encountered on the Western and Middle Eastern fronts. Refusing to forgo training at Point Cook and sending pilots straight to England for training further hampered the ability of the AFC and RFC to keep squadrons at full strength and maintain proper reserves. The challenge of balancing military operations while at the same time working towards the goal of increased military autonomy divided time and resources, both critical to a military campaign. Within the war, little battles were waged for maintaining the distinct Australian identity of the AFC, these battles were more or less

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<sup>75</sup> Williams, *These are Facts*, 110.

administrative in nature but made themselves evident at the aerodromes of the AFC. Whether it was the numbering of the squadrons or ensuring the AFC flights were completely made up of Australians, no other air force faced the difficulties of the Australians.

## **Chapter 5: Intensely British and Absolutely Australian**

Similar to the way in which the dominion had to reconcile the goals of war and identity, a reconciliation of imperial and Australian was a challenge facing the individual airmen of the AFC. Additionally, it is important to understand how pre-war cultural and educational factors influenced these decisions. The import of these choices impacted more than the future of the individual soldier but effected the Australian and Empire's ability to make war. Before understanding how the individual airmen dealt with his commitments to country and empire, it is necessary to understand the history and relationship between the Australian people and the British military and role it played at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The vast majority of the men of the AFC were often 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Australians with many still having family in England and Scotland. In both their schools and at the home, Australians were told of the glorious British military's past. These tales of British history were often handed down by older British settlers, many of them veterans, as well as popular literary works. These works, such as *Deeds that Won the Empire: Historic Battle Scenes* by W.H. Fitchett, John Richard Green's *A Short History of the English People*, and Charles Kingsley's *Westward Ho!*, were written for the average Australian citizen and recounted stories of both British military trials and tales of exploration.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> W.H. Fitchett, *Deeds That Won the Empire: Historic Battle Scenes* (London: John Murray, 1921); John Green, *A Short History of the English People* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1875); Charles Kingsley, *Westward Ho!, or, the voyages and adventures of Sir Amyas Leigh, Knight of Burrough* (Public Domain Book, 1855).

In the case of the Australian W.H. Fitchett's *Deeds*, the main goal of the author was to combat a modern era of Australian patriotism arising at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Originally printed as articles in Australian magazines, Fitchett recounts military victories and defeats of the Empire, from 1797 to the war against Napoleon, focusing on the brilliant and heroic deeds of the British forces. The simple writing style and storytelling, coupled with the stories first appearing in popular magazines, sought to capture the widest readership possible and not merely the university educated or historian. In his book's preface Fitchett outlines the propose of his work,

The tales here told are written, not to glorify war, but to nourish patriotism. They represent an effort to renew in popular memory the great traditions of the Imperial race to which we belong. The history of the Empire of which we are subjects...is the best legacy which the past has bequeathed to us...There is real danger that for the average youth the great names of British story may become meaningless sounds...And what a pallid, cold-blooded citizenship this must produce!<sup>77</sup>

For many like Fitchett, the shared history of the white, British race was the one of the few forces holding back the uncivilized races over which the Empire held dominion. The development of individual colonial and national histories would, in Fitchett's mind, lead to the Empire's downfall. To Australians like Fitchett, Australia must have seemed merely an outpost of British power in the Pacific, supporting the empire in whatever ways were required and not as an independent nation or identity.

Any fissures in imperial unity could threaten the racial hierarchy enjoyed by the white subjects of the British Empire.<sup>78</sup> Fitchett, like other conservative educators at the turn of the century, felt that, "The dual identity was bound to erode a little of the pride in being British and

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<sup>77</sup> Fitchett, *Deeds*, location 2.

<sup>78</sup> Craig Wilcox, *Red Coat Dreaming: How colonial Australia embraced the British Army* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 111.

the sense of inheriting British history, including British military history.”<sup>79</sup> In his one volume history of Australian involvement in the First World War historian Charles Bean stated that, “The old British military tradition was cited by Australians soldiers as proudly as by the British Army itself. Australians, almost as much as the English, had been brought up on tales of Crecy and Agincourt, Trafalgar, Waterloo, the Indian Mutiny and the Crimean, Afghan, Zulu and other British wars; and bound volumes of the English illustrated papers, with pictures of some of these campaigns, were in constant use in many homes.”<sup>80</sup> Though never part of the official curriculum of Australian public schools, Fitchett’s simple recounting of British battles inspired a “redcoat romance” among the Australian youth.<sup>81</sup> However, literary works like *Deeds* were not the sole factor responsible for creating a strong sense of imperial unity in Australia.

In many of these British wars described by Bean, Australians had not merely watched from afar but had fought in the Empire’s armies, including the Crimean and Boer Wars as well as the Waterloo campaign in which Andrew Douglass White, the sole Australian in the conflict, served in Wellington’s as a junior engineer.<sup>82</sup> Craig Wilcox identifies three major influxes of veteran settlers between 1823 and 1835. Many of these veteran settlers would go on to form the backbone of colonial government and education systems, including several colonial governors.<sup>83</sup> Along the same lines, it is hard to overlook the reminders of British triumphs and grandeur visible in everyday life. From the individual colony, later state, names such as Queensland and Victoria to bays and mountains, Australians were reminded of British history and triumphs. In

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<sup>79</sup> Wilcox, *Red Coat*, 111.

<sup>80</sup> C.E.W. Bean, *ANZAC to Amiens* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1946), 9.

<sup>81</sup> Wilcox, *Red Coat*, 120.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 36. Andrew White was the son of a convict servant born in Australia, he later returned to England and was commissioned as a military engineer.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.



fact, author Craig Wilcox's childhood home sat at the intersection of Waterloo Street and Wellington Street.<sup>84</sup> The ideas fostered by Fitchett and described by Bean, in addition to constant reminders of British history seen around the community created within the generation at the turn of the century a sense of what Craig Wilcox describes as a state of "red coat dreaming".<sup>85</sup>

To Wilcox, "red coat dreaming" was the desire by young Australians to celebrate and glorify the British victories at battles such as Waterloo and/or the suppression of the Indian mutinies in variety of ways. The same redcoats venerated by Australians were responsible for imperial triumphs, as well as acts of aggression and violence towards the Australians themselves, namely the Rum Rebellion of 1808 and the shooting of gold miners in Eureka in 1854. This was the pre-war environment that many of the men of the AFC, including men like Richard Williams, Ross Smith, and Oswald Watt were raised within. Given the economic and educational background of the flying officers of the AFC, many fell into the groups most susceptible to "red coat dreaming", those men raised in cities and their suburbs as well as the social elite of Australia.<sup>86</sup>

Given the social and educational background of the AFC majority of the men fell into the "highly susceptible" categories identified by Wilcox. The vast majority of airmen, unlike the AIF, came from the larger cities and had usually completed secondary and university educations. In his examination of Sir Ross Smith, Molkenntin describes the education Smith received at the Queen's School in Adelaide, "The school's prospectus claimed that it existed to emulate... 'the lines of an English public school'. The 'thorough grounding in all elementary subjects' it offered was underpinned by the pillars of Victorian public (non-government) school education: an

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<sup>84</sup> Wilcox, *Red Coat*, xii.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

imperial worldview, self-discipline, sport, and Protestant Christianity.”<sup>87</sup> More interesting in terms of the dual-identity facing young Australians, is way Smith’s classmates described the school’s Head Master Jacomb Hood. To the boys at the school Hood was “‘a strict disciplinarian who gave a cut of the cane for every spelling error’...Another recalled Hood as being ‘very English in his manner’ and condescending to native-born Australians like Ross.”<sup>88</sup> The Queen’s School and others like it were geared towards preparing its students for secondary school and university before pursuing careers such as the law, business, or medicine, careers that brought social status with them.

If Ross Smith’s experience was shared by many of the AFC, which given their common backgrounds it most likely was, it is easy to understand why many of the AFC men had a strong imperial identity. As Molkentin states, “A private school education, sport, British-born parents and relatives...had all conditioned Ross to see war as part of the natural order of things...Further like most Australians of his generation, Ross perceived himself as part of Britain’s global empire; he was as much a Briton as an Australian, with no apparent tension between these two complementary identities.”<sup>89</sup> As is made clear by Molkentin, for many, Ross Smith and Oswald Watt included, the reconciliation of imperial and national identities proved to not be an obstacle to overcome. Smith and Watt are interesting cases in themselves, as both had spent large amounts of time aboard, Smith as a member of Adelaide’s mounted cadet squadron’s world tour and Watt on trips with his family to England and Europe.<sup>90</sup> Unlike the majority of the AIF and AFC who had never left the country, these experiences had to ease the acceptance that both of

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<sup>87</sup> Molkentin, *ANZAC*, 13.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

Imperial and Australian identities coexisting. For many in the AIF and AFC, as well as the Australian population at large, the “red coat dreaming” of the pre-war era began to disappear of Australian and British Forces began fighting side by side and the AIF made its landing at ANZAC.

During the landings and subsequent fighting at Gallipoli, the AIF began to develop a growing disdain for the British regulars of Kitchener’s “New Army”. Many of the AIF saw the British troops as excellent parade ground soldiers but weak and indecisive in the trenches. One Australian officer complained that, “I wish Kitchener would send us *soldiers* not boys to do the business. If what I have seen (with a few glorious exceptions) are training soldiers—we’ll pack up and leave the Empire...This war has made me intensely British and absolutely Australian.”<sup>91</sup> While no AFC units served at Gallipoli, many men who would go on to serve in the flying squadrons, including Les Sutherland and Ross Smith, cut their teeth at Gallipoli. Unlike the accounts left behind regarding the BEF’s officers and troops inability to pull their own weight in battle, the records and narratives of the AFC do not belittle the fighting skills or courage of the RFC/RAF pilots and men. However, interactions with British troops, especially its officers, in the Middle Eastern theater, took away some of the glamour associated with the condition of “red coat dreaming.” As more and more Australians airmen traveled to train in England and Scotland, the prestige of the motherland, its military, and citizens were further diminished in the eyes of the AFC, increasing the level of national individuality within the units. This increase in holding onto one’s distinct identity caused problems for the AFC men and their British training officers.

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<sup>91</sup> Gammage, *The Broken Years*, 107.

One of the more apparent points of contention between the AFC and British forces was their definitions of troop discipline. The AFC valued the ability to perform in the air or on the ground while granting some level of latitude to airmen and troops when behind the front lines. The men in the AFC that had transferred in from AIF units could not put aside the fact that when the shooting started, the valued British parade ground discipline had little to impact on how soldiers or airmen performed. This parade discipline even extended to the front lines as Gammage describes,

A man of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion indicated a Tommy in the lines of the next camp tied to a wooden cross...Everybody crowded around and started asking questions, it transpired the poor devil had abused a Lance Corporal and had to do 2 hours morning and afternoon for his trouble...Somebody suggested cutting him free, the suggestion was no sooner made than carried out...Having destroyed the cross, pelted the officers Huts with bricks and jam tins.<sup>92</sup>

Even with an understanding the strictness of British discipline, this example of medieval field discipline must have come as a shock to the Australians. In addition to the strict discipline was the frosty to non-existent relationship between British officers and the enlisted men. The strict formalities fostered by the officer social class restricted any type of informal relationship between the two groups of military men and proved to be another aspect of the British military Australian could look past. Regarding this formal relationship Douglas Sloane states, “Some Tommy officers talk to their men like dogs, and all their flash little first lieutenants (pilots) live like lords and dress for dinner every night, and the tales you hears about them roughing it with the men, are only manufactured for newspapers.”<sup>93</sup> Whatever his pre-war thoughts of England,

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<sup>92</sup> Gammage, *The Broken Years*, 233.

<sup>93</sup> Alexander and Ann Sloane, *To Fly Like an Eagle: The vision, achievements and War Service of Australian pioneer aviator Douglas Sloane 1890-1917* (Victoria: A & A Sloane, 1996, 33.

Sloane was not impressed with the society he found while training with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron, AFC. The experiences of Sloane and those interacting with the BEF both on the Western Front and in Turkey had to call into question the images put forth by both works like Fitchett's *Deeds* and their school lessons.

Outside of the military aspect of the British culture, some AFC airmen like 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Mechanic Douglas Sloane were disappointed in the society and the state of people found in England. Sloane, the son of sheep station manager and graduate of Geelong College, described to his family his view of the British people, "We are not at all impressed with the way things are run in this country, and there is no doubt that it is an excellent paradise for the idle rich; because the working people drink so much beer that their brains don't appear to be capable of grasping the fact that they are being bluffed and played with."<sup>94</sup> George Mitchell, an AIF soldier on leave in London shared a similar opinion to Sloane's, "They [Londoners] all bore the hall mark of the Cog. Pale faced and undersized, they appeared quite passionless, these people who work year in and year out beyond the reach of sunshine and out of touch with nature. They seem to have been moulded to a definite pattern machine-like, artificial existence."<sup>95</sup>

It surprising to hear London and its people described in this way, especially given that London was the center of the British Empire. It is important to point out that this is way white dominion troops viewed the capital, troops who, due to their skin color, were held in higher regard than non-white colonial troops. Unlike imperial colonies such as India and Pakistan which were ruled by local British officials, dominions such as South Africa and Australia were self-governing bodies. The distance between England and Australia hid some of the "cold and heartless" nature

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<sup>94</sup> Sloane, *Fly like an Eagle*, 61.

<sup>95</sup> Gammage, *The Broken Years*, 207.

of London and its citizen, a distance removed by the introduction of dominion troops into the capital.

The distance between the two countries went a long way in helping hide the realities many of the men encountered when that distance was reduced. Gammage sums up the feeling many had coming face-to-face with the British military and society, “Though they continued to admire much in the Imperial system, during the war Australian soldiers learnt their own worth, which formerly they had doubted, and saw faults and cankers at the heart of their Empire, which once they had imagined great above every imperfection. The war dealt the affections of Empire a mortal blow, and men never returned to the adulation of 1914.”<sup>96</sup> The glorification of the Empire’s triumphs and the way they were portrayed in the pre-war Australian culture proved a far different reality for the Australian soldiers and airmen serving overseas. Discovering that the British military was not the same force that they had been led to believe strained tensions between the men of the AFC and their British commanding officers and RFC command, while at the same time closing the gap between the two people in the minds of the Australian airmen. The question for the AFC airmen must have centered on, “what made these British soldiers and airmen any better a fighter or more civilized a man?” In fighting and flying the Australian had proven an equal to any imperial force, so why should they be treated any different from their British counterparts? Unlike Ross Smith and Oswald Watt who found a way to operate within the British structure, airmen like Pvt Knuckey and Douglas Sloane struck back at the system whenever they felt that their distinct dominion identity was being encroached upon. The AFC faced a more concrete problem created by “red coat dreaming”, that being the loss of homegrown talent to serve in the British military over the national forces.

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<sup>96</sup> Gammage, *The Broken Years*, 236.

Throughout the course of the war, around 880 officers and 2840 other ranks served overseas with the AFC.<sup>97</sup> However, an additional 600 officers either born and/or educated in Australia served in one of the flying branches of the British military.<sup>98</sup> There were many reasons these men chose imperial in lieu of national service. As Molkentin states, “Empire nationalism, interest in aviation, ambition and pragmatism all figured in an Australian man’s decision to trade service in his native force for a British commission. Aspirations to fly that could not be accommodated in Australia during the early part of the war undoubtedly motivated some, but for others securing an imperial commission took precedence over flying.”<sup>99</sup> Whatever their motivations, these men were a valuable resource that became trained pilots for the imperial air forces instead of the fledging AFC’s numbers. In these cases, the “red coat dreaming” and glorification of military exploits, hurt the war effort of the very nation who did the venerating.

An example of an overwhelming desire to fly outweighing a sense dominion loyalty is that of Major R. S. Dallas, an Australian gold assayer from Queensland.<sup>100</sup> Similar to the backgrounds of men like Richard Williams and Ross Smith, Dallas grow up in a rural community but attended boarding school in the large town of Mount Morgan.<sup>101</sup> At the outbreak of war, Dallas was granted the rank of lieutenant due to his prior military service in the local volunteer regiment.<sup>102</sup> Dallas hoped to become part of the newly organized AFC but was told by the AFC’s Organizing Officer and future CO of the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC, Major Reynolds that he

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<sup>97</sup> Molkentin, *Australia*, 26. ‘Other Ranks’ refers to non-commissioned ground staff (mechanics, riggers, fitters, etc) with the most common rank held being that of Air Mechanic. Molkentin, “Culture”, 8.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Molkentin, *Australia*, 24.

<sup>100</sup> Adrian Hellwig, *Australian Hawk over the Western Front: A Biography of Major R S Dallas DSO, DSC, C de G Avec Palme*, (London: Grub Street, 2006), 10.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

had little chance of being offered a flying billet with the AFC. Having been told his best option to join the AFC was as a mechanic or transfer later from the AIF, Dallas left Australia for England.<sup>103</sup> After achieving the top score among all applicants, Dallas joined for the RNAS where he achieved the second highest number enemy aircraft destroyed among all Australian airmen. The Australian with the highest number of enemy kills was Captain Robert Little, who was born in Melbourne and like Dallas flew in the RNAS until his death in May 1918.<sup>104</sup>

Dallas and Little are two of more famous examples of men who chose imperial commission over those of the Australian armed forces. In his examination of the recruiting and training of the AFC forces, Molkentin highlights a plethora of groups and individuals who choose paying their way to England when rejected by the AFC. Further draining of the native talent pool came in July 1916 when Australian government agreed to a request submitted by the RFC for 200 volunteers from the AIF to transfer to the RFC, where they would receive commissions as pilots or observers. In the end, nearly all of the volunteer commissions had been filled by Australians, this at a time when the AFC was having difficulty supplying squadron completely manned by AFC officers.<sup>105</sup> The example of Dallas and Little illustrate the detriment in maintaining both a dominion and imperial identities for Australia in terms of military strength. Waiting for openings in the AFC was not an option for men whose education was so imperially centered. These men did not put aside their dreams of flying to simply serve Australia in a different capacity, but instead fulfilled their desire to serve the empire and fly in the British flying services. In the cases of the men who travelled to England to gain RFC commissions, the

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<sup>103</sup> Hellwig, *Australian Hawk*, 13.

<sup>104</sup> Norman Franks, Russell Guest, and Christopher Shores, *Above the Trenches: A complete record of the fight aces and units of the British Empire Air Forces 1915-1920*. (London: Grub Street, 1990), 240.

<sup>105</sup> Molkentin, *Australia*, 25.



martial spirit and military history cultivated in Australia denuded the AFC of native talent and manpower.

Like many of the challenges facing the men of the AFC, the reconciliation of dominion and identities was unique to the AFC. For England, France, and Germany, all possessing established air forces, there was not the same issue of balancing nation and empire, as these nations was the head of their empire. On the one hand, they wanted to don the red coat and serve the Empire the way that their community and family elders had before them. On the other hand, the recently federalized and unified dominion sought to be more than a junior partner in the Empire. The ability to reconcile these two identities and desires was not possible for anyone was it was for men like Ross Smith and Oswald Watt. Others pushed the bounds of the established military structure, ensuring they retained their distinct national identity, causing an additional set of obstacles.

For others like Major Dallas, the nation was not able to support their martial aspirations to serve in the AFC, forcing them to seek additional opportunities. Also in the case of Dallas and Hughes, the Australian Central Flying School's inability to keep up with training was a deciding factor in their choices to serve in the RFC/RNAS. The decision to deviate from the course taken by the other Dominions, that of sending its men to England for training and service in the RFC, was part of Australian government's determination to form a fully independent like service. This a decision left the Australian serving two, not always compatible objectives, pushing for further autonomy and waging a successful military campaign. The unique situation of serving as an independent air service within the imperial structure generated additional challenges that would further tax the AFC and its airmen.

## PART II: MILITARY CULTURES

### Chapter 6: Diggers and Airmen

C.E.W Bean, editor of the 12-volume series *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, described the units of the AIF as a group in which “the rough and the case hardened, poor Australians, rich Australians, went into the ranks together, unconscious of any distinction.”<sup>106</sup> Additionally felt that there were no special units within the AIF where the university and public school Australians enlisted apart from other Australian units.<sup>107</sup> Though this idealized view of the AIF paints a positive picture of Australian equality and unity, this picture is not the reality. While the AIF and AFC did not have the socially distinct officer class of the BEF and RFC, the requirements and standards of the flying corps. A reason for Bean’s unified view of the AIF was his, what L. L. Robson labels, pro-bush and anti-city focus of his histories. Robson states that Bean had a “semi-mystical” view of the purifying bush life, one away from the corrupting elements of urbanization and industry.<sup>108</sup> This view leads Bean to possess an essentially anti-urban view, one in which “almost completely disregards urban life and values.”<sup>109</sup> Molkenkin takes the idea of Bean’s anti-industrial/urban stance one step further when he states that the urban middle to upper-class professional make-up of the AFC “could well explain the cold shoulder that Australian military history has traditionally offered the Australian

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<sup>106</sup> C.E.W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, Volume I: The Story of Anzac, 8<sup>th</sup> Edition (Sydney: Angus & Roberson, 1938).

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> L. L. Robson, “The Origin and Character of the first A.I.F, 1914-1918: Some Statistical Evidence,” *Australian Historical Studies* 15, no. 61 (1973): 744.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

Flying Corps.”<sup>110</sup> Despite its focus on the AFC’s role in the war, F. M. Cutlack’s volume in Bean’s official history does not touch on the backgrounds or upbringings of the members of the AFC. This lack of detailing is in direct contrast to the generous amount details regarding the culture make-up of the AIF found in the early volumes of the same official history.

While it is impossible to paint all of the members of the AFC with a broad brush, the majority of the airmen of the flying units were in fact university or privately educated. Contrary to Bean’s claims of egalitarian military force, the AFC was a special unit in relation to the general make-up of the AIF both in terms of pre-war education and professional training in specialized trades and what would be now considered white-collar employment. Despite sharing traits commonly associated with Australians as a whole, namely a sense of initiative and adaptability, the men of the AFC resembled their contemporaries in the RFC more so than the men of the AIF.<sup>111</sup> For example, 47 percent of the AFC’s flying ranks specialized in professional industrial background with 21 percent of those possessing a background in mechanical or electrical engineering.<sup>112</sup> Among the non-commissioned other ranks of the AFC, 74 percent had industrial work experience prior to the war with 16 percent of those with industrial background serving as engineers.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Michael Molkenntin, “Culture, class & experience in the Australian Flying Corps.” Master’s thesis. Accessed September 28, 2020.

<https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5202&context=theses>,19.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 14. The 1911 Census describes “Industrial” as working in mechanic productions; textiles; construction of building, roads, railways; and working with fuel, light, and other forms of energy.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

According to *The 1911 Census of the Population of Australia*, only 1 percent of the male working population were engaged in either mechanical or electrical engineering.<sup>114</sup> Compared to the populations of Britain and Germany, which were both much more industrialized, these men were a minority among men of their ages. For example, by 1914 Germany was largest producer of steel in Europe and only 40 percent of its population lived in rural areas.<sup>115</sup> Outside of the southern states of New South Wales and Victoria, the country's population remained spread out in rural communities with limited industrialization. Finding the numbers to meet the needs of the nation's air services proved an easier task for nations such as England and Germany, this is especially true in terms of ground mechanics and fitters, as these more industrialized countries had a larger pool of men to absorb into the military. What also made the recruitment of men for the AFC different from that of Britain and Germany was that men with private or university educations made up a larger portion of the male population. While the percent of the population for males possessing a higher level of education and/or professional may have been similar between Britain and Australia, the former's male population dwarfed that of the later. Retaining training ground mechanics proved to be difficultly for the AFC specifically, often Air Mechanics would be denied the ability to train as observers or pilots due to the limited numbers of trained mechanics. Unlike Britain, however, Australia did not have an empire to resources from nor did the government institute drafts or labor laws requiring Australians to join the military or work in a war related industry. In regards to recruitment and industry, Australia's population and mainly rural citizenry presented roadblocks not experienced by the other air forces.

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<sup>114</sup> G.H. Knibb, *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia: Taken for the Night Between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> April, 1911*. Volume 3, Table 16.

<sup>115</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/place/Germany/The-economy-1890-1914>, accessed January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

In the AFC, the percentage of officers coming from professional occupations was 39 percent, compared to 11 percent in the AIF and 5.8 percent of the Australian male population. While 30 percent of AIF's officers and NCO's came from the industrial and professional occupation, 32 percent of the junior non-commissioned ranks held pre-war occupations such as laborers or miners.<sup>116</sup> The comparison between AFC and AIF 'other ranks' leads Molkenntin to suggest that "a significant proportion of AFC airmen were drawn from the upper-middle class, a factor reflected in contemporary cultural constructs of 'the airman.'"<sup>117</sup> The makeup of the AFC set it apart from AIF cultural identity established and celebrated by Australians such as C.E.W Bean. Unfortunately for the AFC, the distinct identity of the Australian airmen prevented his inclusion into the cultural history of the war. The airmen was not given the same breadth of analysis by early Australian historians as the soldier on the ground, the soldier who seemed to embody Bean's pro-bush, purer, and natural existence. The natural and pure state of the Australian made the AIF soldier, in the eyes of Bean, a better and tougher fighter than his industrialized British, and now AFC, counterpart. Sadly for the men of the AFC, there connection to industrial warfare and urban upbringings prevented this purer state of living, thus not enhancing the deeds and place of the Australian digger and reducing the airmen's place in the Australian history of the Great War.

The skills needed for both pilots and observers, as well as ground mechanics, required a higher level of education than possessed by the majority of troops in the AIF. Recruits who had experience riding motorcycles or horses were desired for the physical aspect of flying, as seen by both the AFC and RFC enlisting a great number of light horse soldiers as pilot. More

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<sup>116</sup> Robson, "The Origin", table 6.

<sup>117</sup> Molkenntin, "Culture," 10.

importantly, the level of technical knowledge required by all members of the AFC required a high capacity for learning and innovation. While flying was the main task of the pilots in the AFC, the first part of cadet training within the RFC structure centered on college style lectures on theory of operation of various components as well as practical hands-on lessons during the same period. Lt. James Ross's lecture notebook from time at basic flight training school in Oxford is filled with hand drawn sketches of engine operations, the components of the Vickers and Lewis machineguns, and other lectures dealing with all aspects of the airplane. For example, during July 1917 Ross attended eight lectures over the course of 16 days dealing with the theory and operations of the various engines a pilot may encounter, which during the First War World were numerous.<sup>118</sup> With the volume of knowledge presented to the members of the AFC during training and operations, it is not surprising that 49 percent of the flying ranks and 36 of other ranks possessed a private school education, compared to 13.74 percent of the male population in Australia.<sup>119</sup>

Finally, the members of the AFC differed from the AIF counterparts in places of their birth within the country. The men that filled the ranks of the AFC largely came from the country's urban centers and surrounding areas. The selection of Point Cook as the location for the Central Flying School was largely based on it being in close proximity to the urban center of Melbourne, in addition to its flat land and adjacent Port Philip Bay. Molkenntin states that 47 percent of the flying ranks and 49 percent of the other ranks came from the more urbanized state of Victoria, whereas Robson's states that just 28 percent of the AIF came from Victoria. Given

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<sup>118</sup> James Ross, Notebook, AWM Private Records 3DRL/1298: 53.

<sup>119</sup> Molkenntin, "Culture," table 2.2.

the educational and professional skills required by the AFC, it is unsurprising that more Victorians found their way to the AFC than the ranks of the AIF.

In times of replacing the wastages of war or forming new squadrons, the AFC often turned to the AIF to fill these billets. A popular source of recruiting was among the Light Horse units whose skills of scouting and map reading made them excellent aerial observers. For example, Captain Ross Smith, one of Australia's most famous aviators, served in the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Light Horse and New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade during the Gallipoli campaign and as part of a mounted machine section in Egypt after he was medically evacuated from ANZAC Cove on September 12<sup>th</sup> 1915. The men recruited from the AIF and Light Horse were still required to pass the same screening process as those recruited straight from civilian life; in these interviews men were asked questions relating to their profession, educational background, and family medical history. Despite the replacement of AFC officers and men with members AIF, the overall "eliteness" and high standards of the AFC did not suffer.

The rural backgrounds like that of Ross Smith and Sloane excepted, the members of the AFC hailed from a specific class both professionally and educationally. They were, for the most part, privately educated and were involved in either white collar careers, such as Cobby, or practicing a specialized trade like Bull and Piper. Unlike the officers of the RFC, the men of the AFC did not come from nor form a distinct social class within the AFC, build on an unflinching formality between commissioned and non-commissioned men. These education and professional backgrounds of the AFC stand in stark contrast to those of the AIF, especially among junior enlistment members and the male working population of Australia. Despite sharing certain traits commonly associated with the Australians as a whole, namely a sense of initiative and adaptability, the men of the AFC resembled their contemporaries in the RFC more so than the

men of the AIF.<sup>120</sup> The similarities between the flying ranks and other ranks of AFC and RFC did not mean however, that interactions between these groups would be seamless.

## **Chapter 7: Larrkins**

With the AFC not only operating under the British operational leadership but also training within the British training structure, many within the RFC/RAF's leadership assumed they would be working with rough necked maverick with an apparent distain for convention, or in the Australian vernacular, a larrikin.<sup>121</sup> The men of AFC were expected to lack any form of discipline, both in their military bearing as well as their performance as pilots and mechanics. Even though, as stated above, the airmen and ground crew of the AFC were more akin to their RFC equivalents than their fellow AIF countrymen, they did not fit the prototypical British military mold, in part due to the fact that the vast majority of the men joining the AFC were fresh out of civilian life and joined the AFC, with possibly some experience in the civilian volunteer forces. The minimal amount of military experience was further compounded by the fact that these were dominion troops, who were seen by the as British rough around the edge, bushmen. Additionally, though the officers of the AFC stood above their AIF peers in terms of career and educational background, they were not from distinguished families or societal elite like many of the British officer who supervised them. On the other hand, men like Ross Smith and Sutherland, had been transferred from the various units of the AIF, where they had already experienced war and its strains. With their experiences, it is understandable that these men would know what

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<sup>120</sup> Molкетин, "Cultures," 19.

<sup>121</sup> Oxford Languages, <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>. Accessed on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021.



little value parade ground discipline offered when they were engaged in a battle like those fought at ANZAC Cove or Suvala Bay.

The negative view British officers carried with them regarding the behavior of Australian troops were not based solely on the prejudices toward dominion troops but were often based early behavior and experiences in the war. In his book *Bad Characters*, Peter Stanley catalogs the myriad of transgressions perpetrated by members of the AIF both in Australia waiting for embarkation and aboard.<sup>122</sup> This indiscipline could manifest itself in relatively harmless ways such as slovenliness of dress and not saluting officers. On the other hand, this indiscipline could turn violent, as in the case of the riots in the Wazza district of Cairo.<sup>123</sup> The riots in Wazza took place on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the April 1915, around the same time the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC began operating in the Middle East. With the flow of men and news, it is a certainty that stories of the AIF's behavior had certainly reached the ears of the British officers in charge of training the men of the AFC, meaning that despite the higher standards and conduct of the AFC, these men arrived in England and France with a cloud hanging over their heads. Would the AFC members wreak havoc on the British towns they were training and living in like the Australian soldiers passing through the various bases and depots? The riots in Wazza district did not take place on the battle field or at the front but back in behind in the lines in a civilian area. Due to the storied behavior of the AIF shoulders, the AFC members and commanders were saddled with the additional task of changing the way many British military and citizens viewed the Australians. This task was

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<sup>122</sup> Peter Stanley, *Bad Characters: Sex, Crime, Mutiny, Murder, and the Australian Imperial Force* (NSW: Pier 9, 2010).

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, Location 467. In what the AIF termed the "Battle of the Wassa", roughly 2,500 ANZACs began looting and setting fire to the district's brothels. These acts were described as a retaliation for the spread of venereal disease and the stabbing of New Zealanders.

also a chance for the Australians to demonstrate that they were more than fighters from the Outback but a people as civilized as any of the white races.

As mentioned above, an early point of contention was the British insistence on parade ground drill and discipline. For both volunteers and transfers from the within the AIF, the British focus on parade ground drill was perceived as “especially oppressive.”<sup>124</sup> While serving as Major Oswald Watt’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron, AFC adjutant, Lieutenant Basil (later Liddel) Hart, RFC, left this description of men of the AFC upon his first inspection, “A shock to anyone accustomed to British regimental ideas...hardly any man dressed identically or with uniform complete in all respects.”<sup>125</sup> Lt. Hart does not mention in his description is that the men he was inspecting were made up wholly of Light Horse transfers from Egypt who had recently arrived after a multi-month voyage from Alexandria, to Malta, France, and finally England. What Lt. Hart assumes is simple indiscipline is in reality a group of men who recently completed a multiple week voyage, after before that were serving in the deserts of Palestine. Private Verner Knuckey, previously of the 8<sup>th</sup> Light Horse and now a member of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron AFC described the unit’s arrival in London after their overseas journey,

Can you picture for yourself about 180 Australians getting out of this train, each with a swag of blankets strung over a shoulder like the tramps at home in the bush, every man burnt brown...hair not been brushed for weeks, whiskers an inch long, clothes in rags, twelve different varieties of colours as we were made up out of our twelve Regiments of Light Horse...and to cap it all a weary tired look of physical exhaustion in the eyes of every man.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Molkenntin, “Cultures,” 29.

<sup>125</sup> Chris Clark, *High Life of Oswald Watt* (Newport NSW: Big Sky Publishing Pty Ltd, 2016).

<sup>126</sup> Verner Knuckey, *Diary*, Book 5, page 9, AWM Private Records PR03193.

This arrival in London was a relief to these men, as they spent the previous night on a frozen hill top outside of Le Harve, without any warm food or drink while awaiting transports across the Channel.<sup>127</sup> Given the this description from Knuckey it seems that Lt. Hart took what he saw from this recently arrived group and drew an association with the level of discipline to expect from colonials.

From his diary, Knuckey describes the parade drill routine that he and his follow Light Horse veterans loathed, “There was one thing that they objected to and did most unwillingly and that was every morning we had to turn out at 6.30a.m. and do an hour’s drill in the snow. The boys argued that they were a Technical Unit and if they had to commence a day’s work by doubling round the field for half an hour the work must suffer.”<sup>128</sup> Eventually after protesting, Major Oswald Watt, 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron’s CO, delayed the starting time and shortened duration of the drill section, drilled starting at 7 a.m. and shortened to half an hour. Second Air Mechanic Douglas Sloan, now a fitter assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron AFC, in a letter to his mother wrote that, “They [RFC] are sparing no expense to train us to be experts, & we are drilled by a S. Major of the Guards & do the goose step & put on no end of ‘dog’”.<sup>129</sup> It is clear from the episodes of both Knuckey and Sloan, men received training not only in their aircraft related career field but also in military discipline, regardless of the need to churn out fully trained pilots and mechanics. Once the AFC established their training wing, discipline was still part of the training agenda with a major difference being that Australian NCO’s were in charge of the

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<sup>127</sup> Knuckey, book 5, 7.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>129</sup> Sloane, *To Fly*, 36. “Putting on the dog” is an expression similar to “Putting on the Ritz”, a display of wealth and importance. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/put%20on%20the%20dog>

military training. For the Australians they were now being trained by Australians, men that would have a better understanding for the AFC's martial culture and more lax inter-rank relations. It is not too hard to imagine the impact and boost to morale as well as the sense of identity having their own training NCO's and officers had on members of the AFC.

The other ranks within the AFC were not the only members of the units who had to adjust to the British style military culture. Like their other ranks counterparts, AFC pilot cadets had to take part in early morning drill, with similar results as to those described by Pvt. Knuckey. Lieutenant Ernest Jeffree, formerly of the 1st Field Ambulance Brigade, recounts a story of the flying cadet's protest against parade drill,

Every morning, we were marched down to the barrack square to be drilled by a British Army Sgt Major. Most of the Australians soon became fed up with this sort of thing, and so a number of them put their heads together and decided to do something about it. The following morning when the S/m gave the order to '*Quick March*' the whole Company just slouched along, bush style...The spokesman [of the company] said these men were here to learn to fly...But if the drill was cut out, he continued, then the men were all prepared to do extra study at night.<sup>130</sup>

In the end, the Commanding Officer of Queen's College, an Irishman named Major Abdee, decided to accept the Australian's offer, cancelling drill and increasing study hours. While not concerning parade drill, Tom Piper noted that a large portion of his training as an observer and officer was spent learning Navy ward room etiquette.

We [officer cadets] were given lectures on the behavior and discipline expected of us in a Ward Room [naval mess room]. Should you arrive after the President of the Mess had given grace you had to apologize to the President. Loud talking was not permitted...The four [Ward Room] orderlies took notice of such things as poor table manners, how one

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<sup>130</sup> Ernest Jeffree, "Interview with Lieutenant Ernest R. Jeffree Formerly of No. 4 Sqn., A.F.C.," *The '14-'18 Journal*, (1967): 55-58.

held his knife, fork and spoon, whether one took sherry before dinner, what wine you chose, and should you dare to eat peas with a knife. We had four or five days of this, interspersed with learning naval signals, flags and other minor naval doings.<sup>131</sup>

In cases of Knuckey and Jeffree members of the flying and other ranks decided to rebel against British military convention, and with the end result being the rowdy colonials having their demands met in true larrikin fashion. While Piper's tone suggests that Ward Room behavior was of more importance than the other "minor naval doings" he was learning. The stories provided by Jeffree and Knuckey suggest that the battle-trying transfers had more difficulty accepting the British insistence on drill and parade style discipline than his civilian volunteer counterpart.

For these troops, many had been involved with some of the hottest fighting of the war and did not see the value of spending multiple hours a day practicing marching. What makes these aforementioned tales different from a purely veteran vs standard training practice conflict was that men like Knuckey did not loath the drill simply because they knew it had little impact on combat but because these were not training to be combat soldiers but mechanics and pilots. Once again, it was not a lack of discipline that caused problems for the AFC trainees but a realization that their time was limited and that time could be better spent on learning their individual trade. In both narratives of Knuckey and Sloan the British other ranks are described as blindly following the orders and decisions of the officer appointed over them. Unlike British trainees and cadets, the Australians did not accept the training regime out of hand but pushed for a break with convention and focus on the task of creating and operating a flying corps.

Finally, with regards to the discipline of the Australians, it is important to look at the experiences of the men serving in the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC. Richard Williams, member of the

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<sup>131</sup> Thomas Piper, *Prisoner of War in Turkey in World War One*. Accessed December 17, 2020. <http://ww1aero.org.au/members/itw1.html>, 5.

original training course at the Australian Central Flying School and eventual commander of 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC, was seen by many of his subordinate airmen as a strict and unyielding disciplinarian. Unlike the majority of the members of 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC or the AFC as a whole, Williams was a professional soldier prior to the outbreak of war.<sup>132</sup> Studying and training among professional military men, including non-commissioned officers of the British Regular Army and Royal Marines, Williams seemed to have taken the professionalism and discipline learned from his experiences to the AFC. What made Williams's acquired professionalism and high standards acceptable was the level of care and respect he showed, not only the pilots and observers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC but also the ground crews and mechanics. The fiery Knuckey provides his thoughts on what makes a true leader, "Australian soldiers as a rule are not given to worshipping their officers, if he is a good man (and that does not mean to be easy with his men) they will respect him...My experience of the average Australian is that he is very fair and recognizes a leader if that leaders shows himself capable."<sup>133</sup> Many of the traits described by Knuckey are echoed in the words of Sutherland, Ross Smith, and Air Mechanic Joe Bull when describing Williams. Among the members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC, Williams was known a disciplinarian but what set him apart from his British counterparts was the respect he showed the men of whom served and led, irrespective of rank. Unlike the AIF, the men of the AFC were chosen based on their backgrounds, criminal as well as educational, and less likely to be insubordinate for the fun or thrill of it, given that such actions may see them transferred to a ground unit within the AIF.

The example of Richard Williams is one of many in terms of successful Australian leaders among the ranks of the AFC. Men like Oswald Watt, Ross Smith and A.H. Cobby

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<sup>132</sup> Williams, *These are Facts*, 18.

<sup>133</sup> Knuckey, book 6, p. 6.

shared successes along the lines of Williams and these stories demonstrate that the Australian airman were not purely a rowdy bunch of colonials who were unable or unwilling to operate within the discipline of a military unit. The men had a distinct concept of military discipline, one that centered on mission performance, something best understood by fellow AFC leaders. They were white members of the empire, who were seeking an equal footing with their British counterparts through their martial skills and valor. Having volunteered for service, defending the British Empire, the AFC wanted to be treated as equals, not as second class due to either their rank, being dominion troops or social standing. Lt. Col Strange RFC, 80<sup>th</sup> Wing Commander, whose wing contained both the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Squadrons AFC, provides an excellent summation of Australian discipline as it relates to the RFC. When recalling members of the AFC commandeering a village grocer's shop, he states, "I do not want this [grocer's shop episode] to be considered a reflection on Australian discipline, which was good—good enough, in fact, to ensure the highest efficiency in their work, but it was a different standard of discipline to that in force in our own squadrons."<sup>134</sup> The standard of discipline the AFC maintained can in part be attributed to, what Peter Stanley refers to as, "the nation democratic outlook in Australia" which in turn made the Australians military members "personally independent and in many cases...not easily submissive to formal discipline."<sup>135</sup> As much as strict discipline was engrained into the British military, the same can be said about independence in the largely rural Australian culture. Despite developing urban centers in Victoria and New South Wales, the identity of Australia remained one centering on the bush traits self-preservation and personal initiative.

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<sup>134</sup> Louis Strange, *Recollections of an Airmen* (Oxford: Casemate Publishers, 2016), 155.

<sup>135</sup> Peter Stanley, *Bad Characters*, Location 755.

The isolation and harshness of Australia and life in the bush required its population to possess a greater degree of independence and self-reliance to be survive and be successful, a degree similar to that of early United States settlers travelling west towards the Pacific. Despite the AFC being made up of a more urban population, many like Sloane, Smith and Williams came from a rural background, later moving to larger cities. Combining the independence mentioned by Stanley with the desire to be seen as equals to the RFC members, the AFC faced a challenge not encountered by air force in the Great War. The AFC was pushing the bounds of its dominion status, no longer willing to be seen as an auxiliary force simply waiting for England to mobilize the squadrons when it saw fit. Unlike other colonial forces used by Britain, France, and Germany, the men of the AFC were white and on the whole well educated, which in terms of the race hierarchy set them above those non-white colonial troops which also made up the European empires. As discussed previously, given the finite resources of time, money and manpower, the dual Australian objectives of identity and war greatly impacted each other. The tasks of waging a war, one in which they were seen as a junior partner, and strengthening their dominion's identity and security was a challenge faced by the AFC alone.

## **Chapter 8: Swank and Glad Rages**

Similar to the shock the introduction of British drill and discipline produced, the AFC's flying ranks found themselves in quite a crash course of what it meant to embody the image and values of the British officer class. In some respects the image and status of being a pilot allowed the men of the AFC to feel that had achieved the desired level of equal footing mentioned in previous sections. By sharing a similar rank and uniform to those enjoyed by the RFC, the Australian airmen were able to downplay whatever feelings of being an outsider they may have harbored from dominion status. On the other hand, the RFC frosty relationships between



commissioned and non-commissioned members and the financial expense of maintaining the image of a British officer called up feelings of inequality towards their English counterparts. While these changes and challenges did not directly win or lose a battle they still impacted many of the AFC's member's feelings of self-worth and morale. These highs and lows of their newfound status was on the mind of many of the airmen flying within the AFC, directly impacting their morale and ability to focus completely on the military task at hand. While a unit's and individual's morale is difficult to quantify, it directly contributes a group/person's ability to handle the stresses of war.

One of the benefits of the status as a flying officer are described by Lieutenant James Ross, who enlisted as a wireless operator but was later accepted as a pilot. After arriving in England, Ross described the surreal change from other rank to pilot cadets, "A couple of weeks ago we were poor, dirty air mechanics, pushers from pill to post, now it's 'Gentlemen will you do this please', 'Very well sir.'"<sup>136</sup> In addition to the mess, each tent, occupied by two cadets, was assigned a batman that cleaned and organized the living quarters and laid out that days flying attire. Not only was this a pleasant change for prior non-commissioned men, now tasting the fruits of officer life, but these were Australian cadets being served by RFC NCO's, a fact that certainly was not lost on these dominion troops. For a culture that glorified British military history, their acceptance as English styled officers is certain to have made many boyhood dreams come true. Because of their station, they were being afforded the same privileges and respect as the officers of the RFC. With the donning of this modern day "red coat" the men of the AFC now resembled their British contemporaries in appearance as well as educational and career backgrounds.

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<sup>136</sup> Ross, Letters 24<sup>th</sup> July, 1917.

The cadet's flying corps uniform and the status it brought opened up previously restricted privileges outside of the aerodrome's mess and tents. One of these opened doors was admittance and, more importantly, social acceptance in establishments usually frequented by the upper class of London elite. In a letter to his parents Ross states, "Lee and I had a bonza weekend, stayed at the Regent Palace Hotel. It's a rather swanky place full of officers & flash people but as we had out 'glad rags' [Flying Corps uniform] on we were quite able to keep our end up."<sup>137</sup> These experiences, like the 4 course meals and socializing with the upper echelons of London society, most have been eye opening to Australian like Ross, who hailed from the small dairy and oyster farming town of Moruya, NSW.<sup>138</sup> Thanks to their new uniforms and status, these men were not back country dominion troops but flying officers able to frequent places denied to RFC/BEF other ranks. In their individual way these cadets were seen as social equals the British, and in the case of British non-commissioned men they were socially superior.

It was not just the uniform that was the embodiment of playing the role of fighter pilot but also the expensive lifestyle that came with it. In a letter to his parents before transferring to France, Ross wrote, "There's an awful lot of gear to buy. You've got to be well dressed and when out have to patronize the best places. It's not like being in the ranks – it's compulsory to travel first class etc."<sup>139</sup> Unfortunately for Ross and other AFC cadets, keeping up these appearance exacted a heavy financial toll. The financial debts incurred by the AFC cadet travelled with them as they moved throughout the RFC training structure, causing an additional worries to an already stressful time in a pilot's career. Cadets like Ross were required to purchase the required items for their "glad rags", (tunic, slacks, hats, dress shoes) with their "kit

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<sup>137</sup> Ross, Letters, 10<sup>th</sup> July, 1917.

<sup>138</sup> Molkenkin, *ANZAC*, 35.

<sup>139</sup> Ross, Letters, 10 December 1917

allowance” and personal funds. The cadets of the RFC, once they completed the basic aeronautics school at Oxford or Reading, they received their commissions and full officer’s pay.<sup>140</sup> For Ross and the other AFC cadets, commissions and corresponding officer’s pay were withheld until they fully earned their wings. For example, Ross arrived Queen’s College on July 10<sup>th</sup> 1917 and did not receive his commission until October 28<sup>th</sup> 1917 after completing the “Higher Instruction” course at Turnhouse Aerodrome.<sup>141</sup> Of course, this time could be increased if exams were failed or weather delayed a cadet’s ability to conduct the required solo flying hours.

Shortly after his selection as pilot cadet Ross details the quest to outfit himself prior to reporting to Oxford for training, “We were given £8 to get a kit. This I may say goes nowhere as everything in the clothing line is very expensive. We have to get officers clothes – the tunic alone costs £4.4.0. I was very glad that I had my £25 [personal savings].”<sup>142</sup> In the case of Lt. Forsyth, he states that the AFC cadets of his class were told they would receive their commissions in three weeks from the start of their training. Being accepted as “probationary officers” on 4 July 1917, it would not be until November that Forsyth would receive his commission. The time in between he was expected to live as an officer on enlisted AIF’s soldiers pay.<sup>143</sup> Despite the fact that AIF/AFC were among the highest paid non-commissioned troops at six shillings a day, the AFC trainees were not able to afford the lifestyle of a cadet.<sup>144</sup>

Additionally, at the time that Ross went through training, cadets were required to procure many of the items for their flight kit not issued by the RFC. The flying attire mentioned in letters consists of a trench coat, fur lined boots gloves, cap, jacket, tunic, woolen underpants shirts,

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<sup>140</sup> Ross, Letters, 24 July, 1917.

<sup>141</sup> Ross, Letters, 28 October, 1917.

<sup>142</sup> Ross, Letters, 10 July, 1917

<sup>143</sup> James Forsyth Diary, 9 July, 1917, AWM Private Records MSS1276.

<sup>144</sup> Molkenin, “Culture”, 32.

revolver, goggles and camp gear.<sup>145</sup> In a letter to his mother Ross itemizes the list and cost for one pilot's flying kit, "There's a tremendous lot of kit to get now as officers...Tunic £4.4.0, upward breeches from £2. Boots £2, puttees 9s. Trench coat...from £3.3.0. That's just for one suit and then there are suit cases, camp equipment (bed etc.) big brown canvas holdalls etc. The camp equipment run into about £7.7.0."<sup>146</sup> In another case, Lt. Forsyth had to reach to family in England pay for pieces of his kit, "Ordered pair of breeches and have not enough cash to pay for them. Have sent to Chickens [family in London] for £5."<sup>147</sup> Ross's letters home often contain notices to his family to accept wires requesting money for his expenses. Many of these requests are accompanied by assurances that he not wasting the money sent, "I sent a cable the other day for £20. Don't think that I'm extravagant—I'm not wasting a bean. We have an awful lot of gear to buy."<sup>148</sup> The amount of entries involving the concerns of the cadet's ability to finance the required items for flight service are numerous and clearly an issue that worried them. These concerns added an additional stress to the cadets, either purchase the items and maintain the image of an officer or make due with what could be scrounged up and risk the loss the coveted flying officer swank and lifestyle.

To cover the additional cost of the officer's kit mentioned by Ross, AFC cadets were granted an additional £7 upon receiving their commission.<sup>149</sup> However, as stated previously, the period of time before receiving their commission could take months and was still a far cry from full covering expenses. On the other hand, RFC cadets were afforded a £50 kit allowance upon graduating from the aeronautic schools at Oxford and Reading, ensuring they were granted

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<sup>145</sup> Molquentin, "Culture," 32.

<sup>146</sup> Ross, Letters, 23 August 1917.

<sup>147</sup> Forsyth Diary, 12 July 1917.

<sup>148</sup> Ross, Letters, 9 August 1917.

<sup>149</sup> Molquentin, "Culture," 33.

enough funding to purchase everything required.<sup>150</sup> Molkentin states that the cost of the pilot's kit and accessories would cost around £44/8, leaving the RFC cadets with a little extra while the AFC came out £29 short.<sup>151</sup> The manner in which the AFC cadets exalted their flying corps uniforms and everything it represented, the only choice for the cadets was to scratch an existence allowing him to embody the mystic of the fighter pilot until receiving their full commissions. As mentioned previously, the "glad rags" of cadets like Ross, Nunan, and Forsyth helped to relieve the sense of colonial inferiority they may have felt, especially allowing them to fit in with the officer social class that persisted in England. The trade-off for these men was that, in order to maintain this image, they were forced to use their savings, request money from family, or ignore the debts completely. While the AFC's pilots shared similar professional and educational backgrounds as British flying officers, they did not have the same social standing of the RFC officers, many of who came from old established families and looked down on their own nation's new non-commissioned pilots.

The flying gear and officer's uniforms were not the only strain placed on the AFC members by the British officer's lifestyle, officer's mess fees also had to be considered. Lieutenant Nunan expressed his frustration in a letter home when he writes that it was "rotten being a cadet...Our mess bills are 35/- weekly on an A.I.F 24/6 allowance."<sup>152</sup> Eventually enough of protest was received by the AFC H.Q and the mess allowance was increased to £35/- a week.<sup>153</sup> Lieutenant Forsyth carried with him a debt of £10 as he moved along the RFC training path. In his diary Lt Forsyth writes, "Mess here is 5 shillings per day, wonder what will happen

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<sup>150</sup> Molkentin, "Cultures," 33.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Stanisla Nunan, Letters, AWM Private Record 3DRL/6511.

<sup>153</sup> Molkentin, "Cultures," 32.

when I am supposed to pay it up.”<sup>154</sup> A few months later Forsyth was obviously depressed about his financial situation, “I have no money and have also a bill from Retford for £10 hanging around my neck. I am getting fed up with this.”<sup>155</sup> At the time of this diary entry, five months had passed since beginning pilot training. AFC cadets, who attended training in RFC squadrons with British cadets, were on an equal footing with their British classmates as far as skill and ability, however RFC cadets received their full commission, with its accompanying pay and authority, after the completion of the three week aeronautics course concluded at the beginning of training. Whatever equal footing the Australians shared with their British peers was removed as the former continued through training as a cadet while the latter were fully commissioned officers, outranking their dominion counterparts before even entering operational units. Once again, the experience of the AFC in terms of their British counterparts proved a tug-o-war between social self-worth and dominion inferiority. These cadets found themselves in cultural black-hole, they were neither part of the AIF digger culture nor the RFC British officer class.

As to the impact of these low allowances and high costs Molkenin states, “The meagre allowance created a rather difficult and potentially embarrassing situation for Australian cadets, who were required to dress and live as officers...These Australians then, faced an impoverishing and culturally belittling experience.”<sup>156</sup> Whatever amount of equal footing the AFC must have felt by donning the King’s uniform had to be tainted by the constant worry about financing their new life as pilots. While they dressed the same as their British counterparts, for many there was the nagging embarrassment of asking friends and family for assistance to keep themselves clothed and fed. As seen in the diary entries of Forsyth and letters from Ross, the concern over

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<sup>154</sup> Forsyth Diary 20 September 1917

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 November 1917.

<sup>156</sup> Molkenin, “Cultures,” 32.

being able to afford the tools of the pilot trade were ever present throughout the months of their pilot training. With few pilots maintaining personal or family wealth, a key exception being Oswald Watts, many faced the problems outlined by Forsyth. Given the dangerous nature of flight training during the Great War, and limited number of training flights, financing ones meals and uniforms added an additional stressor. In spite of the cost and possible embarrassments of being able to maintain the cost of the flying officer image, this was the price to pay to bring the Australian airmen to the social level of the English. If the AFC wanted to demonstrate their cultural and social worth to the British, they had to do so on British terms as the senior imperial partner.

### **Chapter 9: The Strictest Formalities**

The final aspect of RFC and British military culture examined is that of the established officer social class. This last aspect may be the most important as it directly impacted the respect Australians showed their British officers and in turn the level of discipline these officers were able to achieve amongst their AFC subordinates. The existence of an officer class within the British military, one based on social status in addition to their military rank, prevented inter-rank communication and less formal relationships within the whole of the aerial squadrons. Even amongst the pilots of the RFC, the social status and background associated with officer class, was seen as being under attack by social inferiors with the commissioning of British NCO's, known as "temporary gentlemen." The pre-war British officer corps was made up of the sons of gentlemen and/or military professionals and due to the high cost of living expenses and

low military pay independent wealth was an essential element.<sup>157</sup> As previously described, both the RFC and AFC drew members from the NCO and ‘other ranks’ to fill billets, form new squadrons and provide reinforcements for wastage. While the AFC formed a distinct social unit within the Australian military, the majority of its members came from the middle classes or the non-commissioned ranks and never formed the strict inter-rank formalities as the British system. This relationship fostered a level innovation and mutual-respect not as readily embraced by the RFC and RAF and a distinct aspect of the developing AFC culture.

In discussing the British pilot and mechanic relationships, Denis Winter describes a reality quite to the contrary of that previously offered by Pvt. Knuckey, “Devotion would certainly not be based on a personal relationship with the pilot, for peacetime conventions of caste proved stronger than any new unit formulation in war...The worlds of mechanics and officers thus remained distinct in the air service throughout the Great War and not just because of the social distinction between gentlemen and labourer.”<sup>158</sup> This idea seems to be a complete turn-about from the mutual personal respect described by Knuckey, respect for the person and leader, not merely the rank. Given the independence and democratic view of the AFC/AIF the view of officers being superior to the ‘other ranks’ would most certainly be a point of contention as Australians not only trained under British NCO’s and officers but were also in composite squadrons with British pilots throughout most of the war. As the AFC was the only dominion to create an independent flying corps, other groups such as the Canadians and New Zealanders would not have had a similar experience, as their pilots were absorbed into the RFC piecemeal, and distinct identity put in the background to the British cultural traditions. The separation of the

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<sup>157</sup> Laura Root, “‘Temporary Gentlemen’ on the Western Front: Class Consciousness and the British Army Officer, 1914-18,” *The Osprey Journal of Idea and Inquiry* (2006).

<sup>158</sup> Denis Winter, *The First of the Few* (London: Penguin, 1982), 119.



officer and ‘others ranks’ relationship in the RFC is seen in the way mechanics communicated to their officers. Winter provides an example of this in a letter of congratulations from a mechanic to his pilot, “May I congratulate you on your well earned promotion. Perhaps I am not quite in order here as there is such a vast gap between an ordinary corporal and a captain but in civilian life, I believe we are not so far apart...asking you to overlook any statement in this letter which you may think too familiar. Jolly good luck, I remain your faithful mechanic.”<sup>159</sup> Standing in stark contrast to this level of formality, Mol Kentin describes the relationship Ross Smith had with his mechanics,

When not in the air, Ross spent a lot of time in the hangars supervising the maintenance of his Martinsyde. He had a ‘jolly good’ pair of mechanics...The fact that Ross was an officer and dined in a different mess did not prevent them forming a warm and productive working relationship. The mechanics were the same age and shared a similar background to Ross...Ross expressed his gratitude to Bull and Luxton [Ross’s mechanics] by asking his mother to send them food parcels.<sup>160</sup>

What makes this passage stand out is the mention of Ross recognizing that he and his mechanics come from the same background and both highly specialized in their war work and there is a mutual respect from both ranks towards the other not a servant and master state.

To provide context to the entrenched nature of the officer class in the RFC, Winter describes the experience of an NCO pilot, “On leave in London, NCO pilot Butcher wrote of going to see *Chu Chin Chow* in the Haymarket and of being literally kicked out by officer cadets who insisted that all NCOs should use the side door regardless of what they might be doing at the front.”<sup>161</sup> Even during the bloody year of 1916, the introduction of enlisted infantry and cavalry

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<sup>159</sup> Winter, *The First*, 119.

<sup>160</sup> Mol Kentin, *ANZAC*, 126.

<sup>161</sup> Winter, *The First*, 20.

members led a RFC pilot to comment, “What a mixed crowd” the RFC had become.<sup>162</sup> It is important to remember, this “mixed crowd” was not caused by the addition of dominion officers but the raising of previously non-commissioned British to the officers ranks. An even harsher examination is found in the June 1915 issue of *Aeroplane* in which the editor attacks pilots with “plebeian origins”,

He [young plebeian pilots] will never make an officer and will never fly after a bad smash in the way the better class of man will do. Blood tells in a man as much as it does in a horse or dog...Many a better officer aviator can be found in the ranks than among the brats of the well-to-do shopkeepers and business-like merchants such as are now entitled to swagger round in uniform and draw salutes from their social, mental, and moral betters.<sup>163</sup>

What these actions and comments suggest is that for many, respect among many RFC pilots and observers was founded in social, family, and financial status. The “temporary gentlemen” receiving commissions in the RFC were allowed to do so due to the high wastages in the first years of the war, a military necessity as oppose to a cultural shift. Unlike the British military, from its formation the AFC consisted mainly of men with little military experience and who often came from humble and rural origins. This cultural make up meant that despite training with the RFC and admiring the swank and flash of the British officers, the social division between the commissioned and ‘other ranks’ never took root within the AFC.

For many, including Winter and Molkentin, the less formal rank structure provided the AFC with advantages which were unavailable or undesired by the RFC. Regarding the issue of class Winter states, “Probably more important [to AFC success] was the lack of social

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<sup>162</sup> Winter, *The First*, 19.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

preconceptions, the absence of a belief in the unique fighting qualities of an ‘officer’ class.”<sup>164</sup>

Winter goes further by quoting Sir James Edmonds, compiler of the 28-volume *History of the Great War*, “To my mind the great advantage the Australian Corps possessed was the provision of officers by promotion of experience and tried men from the ranks. The British to a great extent kept up class distinction and sent out many inexperienced lads from home as officers.”<sup>165</sup>

The formal relationship confused AFC cadets training in British squadron including Lieutenant Hoddinott, an Australian attached to the RAF who stated, “Life in the R.A.F was very different. One lost personal responsibility for, and contact with ‘other ranks’ and did not share with them the risks and hardships of war.”<sup>166</sup> In this situation, less formal relationships, the maintaining of their Australian democratic identity directly impacted, not only good order and discipline, but allowed a man’s value within the AFC to be based on their merit and ideas and not hampered by any lingering ideas of class. By doing maintaining this distinct aspect of their dominion culture, the AFC directly increased their ability to successfully wage war in the air.

Regarding the nature of inter-rank relations Mol Kentin states, “The suggestion here then is not that the RFC man was less skilled than his Australian counterpart, but rather, that the aircraft mechanic was perceived differently, reflecting Australian and British attitudes towards class...As a result, the AFC was less likely to employ the discourse of class and caste when perceiving its air mechanics- a significant feature of both the Australian aircraft mechanic’s experience of war and AFC squadron culture.”<sup>167</sup> As discussed earlier, the ‘other ranks’ of the AFC were made up of educated and professional men similar to the RFC ‘other ranks, the major

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<sup>164</sup> Winter, *The First*, 22.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>167</sup> Mol Kentin, “Culture”, 58.

difference was their value to the different flying corps. Much like the importance of the AFC squadrons' numbering, maintaining this equalitarian view is another way the AFC maintained their distinct part of the young Australian military culture, one that included a more democratic view than that of the British. Once again, the members AFC found themselves in a cultural "no man's land." While they maintained similarities with both the AIF and RFC there remained cultural differences in the services to remain at arm's length from each group. Out of this "no man's land" the AFC developed a distinct culture, one of high personal and professional standards and maintained an openness between the ranks. Like the many of the challenges discussed in this thesis, the maintaining of a culture within a culture was a task unique to the AFC, especially with a British military trying to fold the AFC into its established structure.

## **PART III: CULTURES AND SOCIETIES**

### **Chapter 10: Aussies and the English People**

The AFC's interaction and operation under the RFC command structure introduced a military culture foreign to the AIF and AFC. Another example of two distinct cultures meeting took place in the British communities in which the AFC trained. These training aerodromes were often adjacent to cities or towns, bringing the members of the AFC into frequent contact with the British citizenry. Given the behavior and want of discipline displayed by the AIF both in Egypt and in Europe, the AFC had to ensure good relations with its British hosts to ensure it produced the most effective combat unit possible. In many ways the bonds and relationships formed between units and neighboring towns, as well as individual AFC members and British citizens and families provided benefits to all involved. Despite sharing a language and shared imperial history, the peaceful coexistence of British citizens and Australian service members was far from certain. For many areas in the British countryside, bordering an AIF training base or depot brought robbery, sexual assaults, and even murder. As a result, many neighboring English towns and communities were placed "out-of-bounds" and soldiers caught in these areas would face disciplinary action. From the diaries and letters from the men of the AFC and stories of their British hosts, establishing a positive relationship between the British community and the AFC was priority for the Australian commanding officers. In fact, if the relationships with the British community did not flourish as they did, it is clear that the AFC's men and training wings would have not have been as successful, and in the case of the British communities themselves, much of the social and economic benefits of hosting the AFC units, namely commerce and fundraising, would have been lost.

It is important to first understand the apparent reasons behind the appreciation felt by the British toward the colonial units. With the AFC and AIF, the British citizens saw an all-volunteer force that had left their homes to travel over 12,000 miles, through rough and enemy infested seas, to help fight for their nation and empire. While Australia was still part of that empire, it was under no obligation to dispatch troops to fight overseas to aide in British conflicts. Regarding that obligation C.E.W Bean states,

According to the free principles upon which the British Empire grew, the question whether any of the forces of an oversea dominion should take part in one of the Empire's wars remained a question for that dominion alone...From the moment when the Australian began to organize his own national army and navy, they became forces of serious size and efficiency. But whether he sent these or any force to participate in any war, was a matter for his free decision when the occasion arose.<sup>168</sup>

As it happened, the Australian government in power and the party in opposition, the Labor Party at the outbreak of war, both agreed it was in the nation's best interest to send a force overseas. The initial number decided upon the government and agreed to by the British War Council was 20,000 men, with Canada and New Zealand suppling 20,000 and 8,000 respectively.<sup>169</sup> The desire to enlist in the AIF was so strong that men were paying for passage to England to enlist when Australian district quotas (each of Australia's six states forming a military district) were met. This force, coming to the aid of the British and their empire, were not conscripts but volunteers from the other side of the world. For many of the AIF and AFC's men, they had never left Australia, let alone seen their British homeland, yet took up the nation's call to arms. One of the obvious challenges in answering this call was extreme distance between the men and

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<sup>168</sup> Bean, *The Story of ANZAC*, 9-11.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

their Australian home and families, in other words their support system. Like the other culture challenges facing the AFC, the separation and isolation from support systems directly impacted their mission capability, as the morale and strain of the Australian airmen was seriously taxed.

Unlike the English stationed on the Western Front, Australians could not simply cross the English Channel to enjoy the respite provided by their homes and family. In addition to the casualty rate among wastages, pilot strain was another condition that could remove a pilot from service, and the best remedy for this strain was leave taken at home. Even letters from home, when they were not lost to submarine attacks, could take up to four to five months to arrive. The interval between letters was longer when units were moving from aerodrome to aerodrome as operations dictated. It is not hard to imagine the reason for this lengthy delivery time, as letters from Australia had to travel some 12,000 miles by sea and land, compared to the 3,100 miles letters from Canada had to travel, for example. Another factor increasing the feeling of isolation, is that upon their arrival in England for training, the individual pilots and mechanics were split up and transported to whatever aerodrome had training space. When Ricard Howard attended flying school at Netheravon, he was one of three Australians on the whole aerodrome and the only Australian in his training squadron.<sup>170</sup> For these pilots and mechanic, despite being in a country that spoke a common language and a shared history, the AFC men were still foreigners in a land many had never visited prior to the war. What this meant for the men of the AFC was that they had to look elsewhere for that sense of home and belonging, what author Denis Winter labelled as the best stabilizer for pilots.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Alan Fraser and Eric Watson, "The Personal Letters of Capt R.W. Howard, MC Australian Flying Corps" *The '14-'18 Journal*, (1997), 70

<sup>171</sup> Winter, *The First*, 189.

The stabilizing force provided by a sense of home was especially vital to men like Knuckey and Ross-Smith who had served in the AIF's Light Horse Divisions in Egypt and Gallopli in the early stages of the war. Regarding home leave Knuckey states, "Another thing is the fact of our coming away from home so early in the war and keeping on without seeing our own country. The French man goes home to his people every four months, the Tommy at least once a year but our chaps on leave go back to England amongst strangers and then once more to the front. Never any hope of really going home."<sup>172</sup> However, one of the goals of the British, and in the future the French, was to make England and Europe feel less foreign and its citizen less like strangers to the Australians. By doing this the British citizens were helping the men that had volunteered to fight on their behalves, a way to pay back in whatever way available to them. Many of the families caring for the Australian airmen had sons away fighting on the front or had lost loved ones in the war.

It is interesting to question whether these act did not have a political undercurrent attached to them, that being a desire to cement Imperial unity among the white Anglo races. As there were more pushes towards Australian autonomy, could these acts have been a way to forestall Australian independence? This political motives seems more possible at the governmental level, i.e. the concessions made to the dominions on how they raised their forces, but seems less likely with the smaller families residing in the English countryside. From the Australian point of view, while the gifts of a warm home and fellowship contributed to the well-being to the airmen on an individual and day-to-day basis, it is possible a larger goals was being achieved by the AFC. Though it is not stated by the men in their personal narratives, an underlying goal of the AFC and its civil relations seems to be showing a level of civility not

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<sup>172</sup> Knuckey Diary, Book 6, page 14.



previously associated with the Australians and their military. In rebranding the Australian airmen as more than an uncivilized bushmen, the goal of bring Australia onto a more even imperial footing with the British was a little closer to being.

For many of the AFC, their first experience in England was a warm “homecoming” after arriving by steamer or train into the various cities at which they were stationed. Knuckley, whose earlier accounts provided a description of the dismal condition of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron AFC on their arrival in London, describes the squadron’s reception at Waterloo Station London,

As soon as our Major could get us into formation again we were marching down stairs to a huge Buffet run by English women where huge mugs of steaming tea and coffee was served to us together with sandwiches, buns, cake and other things...I reckon if ever Australians took the heart of the good, homely and kind hearted English civilian it was that 68<sup>th</sup> on this winter night at Waterloo Station.<sup>173</sup>

For the men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron who had just finished a long journey from Egypt via a cattle steamer, spent the frozen night on a hill in Le Havre, and slept near their channel steamer’s boiler for warmth, this welcome must have been a god send. Additionally, these encounters where the foundations of building up positive relations between the AFC members and their British hosts. It showed the Australians that they were appreciated for their commitment and as well as showing the British that not all Australians were like those rioting and causing unrest in the Cairo. It is important to note that not all dominion and colonial troops were afforded this similar welcome, as the Australian’s status as white dominion placed them in a higher social status to those non-colonials who found themselves in England.

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<sup>173</sup> Knuckley, Book 5, 9.

In addition to the welcome they received upon debarkation, the personal accounts of the men of AFC are filled with stories of unfamiliar English families, whose houses were near the aerodrome, inviting the Australians to their homes for weekly dinners or holidays. While visiting Edinburgh on leave, Knuckey befriended the Mochrie family, who invited to visit their home whenever he was on leave. When describing the family's reasons for their kindness Knuckey states, "Miss Mochrie...was a friend I became acquainted with, a lady chemist, met her people and [they] wanted only one thing, that I as an Australian soldier should see as much as possible and enjoy my stay in their city, nothing was too much trouble. Now I have left England we will never meet again but always I will have a warm spot in my heart for the people of Edinburgh."<sup>174</sup> The AFC knew the overarching idea of why they were at war, but these personal interactions and connections surely provided the men with more intimate reasons for winning the war. Despite the disappointment many of the AFC airmen faced with the England they found, be it the cold/mechanical cities or the strict British military, the relationships they formed in their time in England must have relieved some of the disappointment. To these people they were not dominion troops, on a lower social level within the empire, they were men and boys away from their homes fighting to protect England from the Hun. In a small way, the connections made with the British citizens helped them come out of that cultural no man's land, allowing them to take care of and being taken of.

When Richard Howard moved to Reading in 1917 to attend the Military School of Aeronautics, he was billeted with a British family for over a month until moved into officer's barracks. Describing his experience he stated, "I was informed that I was to make my abode at the home of Mr. Cordery of 13 Donnington Road. I forthwith went to this place and made

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<sup>174</sup> Knuckley, Book 6, 5.

myself 'one of the family'...I was given a small room with a bed which, after not having slept in a bed for so long, went 'A.1'.<sup>175</sup> In a letter to his mother, Howard stated he was treated as one of the family by the family and was in fact sad to be moved into the RFC barracks.<sup>176</sup> In addition to providing these airmen with a place to stay outside of the aerodrome, they gave the men of the AFC somewhere to escape the war and flying, besides the mess hall or on base living quarters. Visiting these families and being welcomed in their homes provided the Australians with a small piece of home in a land, though similar to their own, still foreign to them. Not only did the Cordery family give Howard a room to stay in, a common practice when barracks were being built or were too full, but the family made Howard feel like he was one of the family. To the Cordery family and many others, these men were not just cogs into the imperial war machine or second class citizens due to their dominion status, the AFC members were simply people with needs. Given the conduct of the AFC in terms of discipline, British families and communities felt comfortable accepting and caring for the Australian airmen. The alternative was which faced the AIF members, due the army's indiscipline, often local towns and communities were put "off limits" leaving the off-duty soldiers bored and stuck on base with no appropriate way to distress. Leaving the men to sneak off their training base into the towns to blow off steam, usually leading to problems with the local community. In causing problems the AFC airmen would not only face possible disciplinary action but more important would reinforce the idea of the Australian being a larrikin, a group of people rightfully assigned to the lower rungs of imperial status.

While the Australians received a little piece of home from the British acts of kindness, the British citizens also benefitted from this relationship as well. Knuckey describes a

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<sup>175</sup> Fraser, "Howard Letters (1997)," 67.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

conversation he had with one of the women serving the unit at their arrival at the Waterloo Station. He recounts the interaction, “There was plenty for all and lots over, one lady told me she only had to look at the way our clothes hung on us to understand everything, she told me that her son was out at the front and in feeding us she felt she was doing something for him.”<sup>177</sup> The exchange highlights another motive for the British citizens, being unable to help their loved one at the front, they could help the one in front them. The interaction with the woman helping serve the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron was not an isolated episode. In fact Knuckey states that “it was the same story everywhere you went” British citizens would tell them about a son that was fighting at the front or that had been killed in the fighting.<sup>178</sup> Knuckey’s story of the older lady and others like it demonstrate that both the AFC members and the individuals taking care of them had something both to give and to receive from this cultural interaction.

Another source of a “home away from home” came in the form of distant family relations living in England and Scotland. Many of the AFC members were first or second generation Australians, Richard Williams’ parents had lived in Cornwall before moving to Moonta and Ross-Smith’s father had emigrated from Scotland and married the daughter of an established Scottish Macpherson family in South Australia.<sup>179</sup> With families having only recently moved to Australia, many extended families still remained in the United Kingdom. Often when embarking for overseas families would provide their soldier or airmen with a list of British family members and their addresses to look up if they found themselves in England. While in Reading, Richard Howard visited his “spinster aunt” Beatrice who he stayed with whenever he was in London, as

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<sup>177</sup> Knuckey, Book 5, 9

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Williams, *These Are Facts*/Molkentin, *ANZAC*, 7.

well as an additional source and destination of letters.<sup>180</sup> Harry Cobby described some of the advantages of having family in London for his leave periods,

I was much more fortunate than most ‘colored troops’, as Dominion armed citizens were known, in the fact that I had several lots of relations in and around London. The difficulty of making one’s pay meet the cost of activities that one desired to indulge in was much easier for me, as hotel bills were things that I did not have to worry about. Quite a number of fivers...also came my way from an aunt at whose place I generally stayed. We were always most welcome and my aunt was a second mother to my brothers and I any time we could get to London.<sup>181</sup>

As was previously discussed, the costs of uniforms and the posh image of the RFC and AFC drain the resources of many airmen making it is easy to understand the advantages of having family in the local area both as a cost cutting expense and for the closeness of family. With family so close, these fortunate airmen were able to relieve stresses of disconnection and the ability to afford the lifestyle associated with an imperial pilot. It is interesting here that Cobby makes the reference to not being in the same situation as the ‘colored troops’, reinforcing the idea that the Australian was a white people within the Empire and not on the same social footing as the colored colonial troops.

Even after the AFC units moved out of the immediate area and to the front, many of the families and relations the airmen met in England continued to write letters and provided a mailing address for the AFC men to write them allowing them to stay updated on their progress through the war.<sup>182</sup> Given the length of time it could take for Australian mail to reach England, the correspondence with British families certainly eased the difficulty of serving so far from

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<sup>180</sup> Fraser, “Howard Letter (1997),” 67.

<sup>181</sup> Cobby, *High Adventure*, 58.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

home. This need for home was especially felt during the Christmas holiday season. While deployed to France with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron AFC, Knuckey recalls the parcels received on Christmas,

Word had already been received from our Headquarters in London that our Christmas Comforts from the Australian Patriotic Funds were delayed and we would not received them until after Christmas, this load of parcels proved to be purely English mail, so only those who had left friends and relations in England were the favoured ones. I was fortunate as one came from Gosforth South full of cakes and chocolate, almonds, raisins and other things. My second parcel came from a Mrs. Neale in Grantham... Apart from the parcels my Christmas Eve was none too brilliant.<sup>183</sup>

As of this entry into his diary, Knuckey had only received two letters from home since leaving Egypt almost a year ago and none of the Christmas parcels his family mentioned in those letter.<sup>184</sup> For Knuckey and others like him, the relationships they made both with new relations and kind families in England helped strengthen their mental resilience while at the front. Given the separation from home experienced by the men of the AFC, it is certain that without the relationships fostered in England and France that toll of combat strain would have exacted a heavier toll on the Australian flyers and mechanics than it did, especially during the German Spring offensives of 1918. The morale boost of being seen as men, not as dominion or colonial troops, and the connections made in England and France directly impacted the ability to put airplanes in the sky and effectively carry out aerial combat. The reduction of any additional stressors could be the difference in life and death, especially in a military unit where concertation and precision were essential elements for both ground crews and pilots. While the feeling of disconnection from was something felt by all soldiers and airmen involved in the fighting, the

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<sup>183</sup> Knuckey, Book 7, 3.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

AFC had to work harder to surmount the detachment they faced because of their distinct Australian flying culture.

## **Chapter 11: Larrikins and the Peerage**

It was not only the families in the towns that bordered the aerodromes that provided these acts of kindness but also the established, estate owning families as well. Lieutenant John Wright, like many other transfers to the AFC, had served in the Light Horse division of the AIF, his wartime experience including service in Egypt before his application's approval to join the AFC. While serving as a pilot in France where he was wounded and hospitalized in England and after recovering he was transferred from the English hospital to a convalescent home to finish his recovery.<sup>185</sup> The establishment he was sent to was the Australian Convalescent Hospital for Officers at Cobham Hall in Kent.<sup>186</sup> Cobham Hall was the ancestral home of the Earls of Darnley, and apart from the wing of house the family occupied, the house had been opened up for the recovery of Australian officers.<sup>187</sup>

These large estates provided a place for officers to regain their strength, surrounded by brother officers from their own country, and just as important, freeing up beds in the nation's hospitals for the more seriously wounded casualties. Wright states that while at Cobham, the convalescing officers were invited to dinner with the family, including the Earl and Countess (an Australian herself) Darnley and their children.<sup>188</sup> Officers at these homes often entertained

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<sup>185</sup> John Wright, *Horses to Horsepower: From the Light Horse to the Flying Corps, Experiences in World War I*, Australian Society of WW1 Aero Historians, <http://www.ww1aero.org.au/members/itw2.html>, accessed December 22, 2020, page 5.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

themselves by forming sports teams to compete against other Australian units. After two weeks convalescing at Cobham, Wright was put before the medical board and declared fit for duty but, before he returned to France he describes another way the landed families of England availed themselves to the Australians.

Before returning to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron AFC, both Wright and George Jones, the mechanic Dickie Williams had berated in Egypt who was now a pilot himself, were granted a month of leave. They spend this month moving around England visiting various noble houses throughout the country, part of a larger scheme developed by the Countess of Harrowby of Lincolnshire. Recounting George Jones' and his experience Wright states, "Under this scheme George Jones and I spent equal periods of our month, first at Parnham with Sir Walter and Lady Napier, and later at Penzance in Cornwall, with Mr. and Mrs. W. Bazeley. We were right royally looked after and entertained at both places."<sup>189</sup> Another house open to the men of the AFC was the 16<sup>th</sup> century Chavenage House, whose history stretched back to the English Civil War.<sup>190</sup> The Lowsley-Williams family owned the house for generations and the current owner Colonel David Lowsley-Williams and his family opened up their house to Australians stationed at the No. 1 Australian Training Wing in Gloucestershire.

The importance of these episodes is that these experiences provided comfort and relief to the recovering airmen and more importantly, they were being housed and entertained by the social elite in the country, treated the same respect if they were English officers. As one of the Australian goals for entering the war was a more equal standing among the Empire, in a small way these men achieved this goal. Being accepted into these houses to have to certainly put at

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<sup>189</sup> Wright, *Horse*, 25.

<sup>190</sup> David Goodland and Alan Vaughan, *ANZACS Over England, The Australian Flying Corps in Gloucestershire 1918-1919* (Stroud UK: Allan Sutton Publishing, 1992), 32.



ease some of the lingering feelings of colonial inferiority the airmen had carried with them, proving a boon to their self-confidence and dominion pride. From the Australian perspective, these officers showcased that despite being from a dominion, they were no less cultured than their British hosts.

The difference treatment of white dominion troops and non-white colonials while recovering from injuries demonstrates that while the Australians were not seen as equals to the British, their white skin provided them with privileges withheld from others. As discussed, Australian officers like Lt.'s George Jones and John Wright were allowed to convalesce at posh country estates, where they were guests of the family and even ate dinner with the lord and lady of the house. They were also free to visit the nearby towns and cities whenever they desired. In contrast to this experience, Indian soldiers residing in British hospitals in Southhampton, Brighton, and Brockenhurst, found their situation resembling that of a prisoner. These hospitals had guarded perimeters and were enclosed with barbed wire fencing and Indian patients were not permitted to leave hospital precinct unless accompanied by male white British personnel.<sup>191</sup>

While the Indian ran hospitals in England aimed to prevent cultural interactions with the general citizenry, it must be stressed that this did not mean that the care received by the Indian patients was lacking or inferior. In fact, in his examination of the Indian war effort in 1914 and 1915, George Jack notes the state-of-the-art medical facilities caring for the Indian soldiers. In describing these facilities Jack states, "The sepoys also had use of six hospital ships supplied with the latest equipment...During 1914 and 1915, 14,185 sepoys were treated in seven state-of-the-art hospitals on the English south coast...All notices were in Urdu, Hindi, and Gurmukhi,

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<sup>191</sup> Santanu Das, *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 163.

and the wards, drinking taps, washrooms, and recreation rooms were appointed in respect of religious identity.”<sup>192</sup> Jack also points out that at the Royal Pavilion Hospital in Brighton, the included nine separate kitchens to cater to the needs of the religious dietary needs. What this attention to detail and care demonstrates is that while the British feared subverting the racial order, they were still able to respect the culture and health of the Indian colonials. Whether this attention to culture and religious tradition was merely to keep the Indian soldiers content with their situation or out of pure respect for their culture is unclear, however the British hospitals maintained respect for the cultures housed in their facilities. As this respect did not impact the imperial racial hierarchy dynamic, there was little to no disadvantage to these acts.

## **Chapter 12: The Exotic Australian**

A byproduct of these cultural interactions, be they with local families or noble landed families, was a fascination of the British people with exotic land of Australia. Many of the men of the AFC had been told stories about their families home land be it Scotland, Ireland, or England. The members of the AIF knew that the culture in Britain was not that far removed from that found in Australia, especially in the more populated states of Victoria and New South Wales where the majority of airmen hailed. However, in terms of the British citizens’ understanding of Australia, there was much that was not known and the often it fell to the AFC men to fill the role of ambassador and educate the British public. Cobby leaves behind an account describing the education of a British priest in the ways of the Australians,

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<sup>192</sup> Gordon Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches: The Indian Corps on the Western Front 1914-1915* (Stroud: Sharpe Books, 2018) Location 355.

The stories we told of the dangerous kangaroos and the savage ‘bush’ goats, would have shocked the home folk. We told him how the male kangaroo’s bite was one of the most deadly in the world, that they would sneak into our ‘lean-to’ houses at night and bite the unsuspecting slumberer, who would be found dead in his blankets in the morning. How the wild goats would visit the towns at night and chew down everything of wood they could get teeth into.<sup>193</sup>

In a similar vein to Cobby’s deadly kangaroo story, upon arriving in Lincoln for training with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron AFC, Air Mechanic Sloane wrote to his father that, “The people about here have never seen Australians before; and were surprised when they found we spoke decent English...The farmers have never seen any Australians and expected them to speak some strange lingo.”<sup>194</sup>

In a letter to his father, Sloane tells of an experience he had while exploring the local community, “My mates and I have been out exploring the villages around here and have found some very queer old places where Australians have never been seen before and all the women look at you through the front blinds and cracks of the doors.”<sup>195</sup> It is unknown whether these villagers were sheltering from the range riding Bushmen or simply from the appearance of strangers but Sloane seems to imply the former. Despite these examples, in the private records reviewed, none of the members of the AFC stated that they were put off or offended by the lack of knowledge regarding Australia culture. In general, they were more amused and surprised than anything else. However, while the stories told by Cobby, Knuckey and Sloane are of a light-hearted nature, on some level they may have sparked the colonial inferiority felt by members of the AFC. As Bean states, “To many young Australians Great Britain was a fabled country, of which they had learned at their mother’s knee, the home of wonderful things...In the common

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<sup>193</sup> Cobby, *High Adventure*, 27.

<sup>194</sup> Sloane, *To Fly Like an Eagle*, 32-33.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

language the motherland was still often spoken of as ‘home.’”<sup>196</sup> The men of the AFC were on the whole well educated and from the middle to upper-middle class, yet to many they were still seen as rural and uncivilized Bushmen. For the Australians, their experiences in England presented them with a roller coaster ride of social acceptance and colonial inferiority, providing a different experience for the individuals that made up the AFC’s ranks. In the dual overarching goals of military power and maintaining a distinct dominion identity, one equal to the British, it was rarely certain if the Australian airmen were achieving success in the culture struggle they were waging.

Despite the cultural and hierarchical challenges facing the AFC, they did have the advantage of a being white dominion and not darker colonial troops. The New Zealand, South African, Canadian, and Australian forces were from Dominions of the British Empire, which is they were consciously European and self-governing populations. This is contrasted by the imperial colonies like India, Pakistan and the British African territories, which were ruled directly by the British colonial officials, with little to no self-government. Due to the size of the war and wastages of the BEF in the early months of the war non-white colonials were put into action on the Western Front.

In past wars, the British had used non-white colonial troops for imperial defense but not when facing a European or white enemy.<sup>197</sup> As Santanu Das states in the introduction of *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, “If a ‘coloured man’ was trained to raise arms against another European, what guarantee was there...that he would not one day attack his own white master?”<sup>198</sup> For example, during the Boer War British forces only employed units from the

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<sup>196</sup> Bean, *The Story of ANZAC*, 17.

<sup>197</sup> Das, *Race*, 10.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

white colonies, New Zealand and Australia. However, during the Second Afghan War (1878-80) soldiers from the Punjab, Kashmir and Garhwal regions were recruited into the Indian Army to fight the Emirate of Afghanistan.<sup>199</sup> The underlying fear for this duality is based on the desire to maintain a clear racial hierarchy within the various European empires. Despite the heavy losses, the BEF only deployed Indian divisions to fight on the Western Front, other non-white British colonials were used for transport or labor duty. Even among the British Empire's non-white colonials there was a racial hierarchy, one in which lighter skinned Indian troops were thought more capable of following and understanding military orders than their darker skinned African counterparts. As a result Indian troops were used for combat in both Europe and the Middle East while the British African troops were mainly restricted to labor duties, duties more suited to their suited to the racial status.

Finally, it was not only the BEF and French officials who worked to maintain the racial hierarchies of their empires but also the men of the AIF as well. Under the Defence Act of 1903, only white volunteers would be allowed to serve in the Australian armed forces, making the AIF almost completely a white force of predominately British ancestry. Despite this legislation some 400 Aborigines served in the AIF during the war.<sup>200</sup> For many in the AIF and AFC, the natives they encountered at the African ports along their voyage to England were the first black men they had met. In Peter Stanley's essay "Aussie": race and empire in revisiting the Anzac legend", Stanley offers many accounts of the Australian soldiers degrading and taking advantage of the natives, almost as if affirming their superior as white members of the Empire.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> George Jack, "The Indian Army on the Western Front, 1914-1915: A Portrait of Collaboration", *War in History* 13, no. 3 (July 2006), 333.

<sup>200</sup> Das, *Race*, 221.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 223

Australian soldiers docked in the ports of Durban South Africa and Colombo Sri Lanka were reported to pay young locals to box for the soldiers' amusement, and on other occasions soldiers would make wrist-watch straps out of Manchu pigtails forcefully cut from the head of Chinese labor units in France.<sup>202</sup> On several occasions drunken Australians were caught undressing in public, forcing French non-white colonial police to arrest them and then forcefully return the men to their troopships. Recalling a particular arrest in Dakar in 1916, an AIF member stated, "There is nothing that hurts the pride of an Australian more than to be...roughly handled by a coloured man."<sup>203</sup> These behaviors led BEF and government official to fear that the men of the AIF did not "maintain the prestige of the imperial race."<sup>204</sup> While some of the AFC and AIF men may have felt a level of inferiority based on their dominion status, they were still a member of the Empire's white race and expected to maintain the racial hierarchy. The higher racial status meant that a certain image and civility must be maintained when travelling in the non-white British possessions, a task that proved a challenge to the more rowdy Australians. As the majority had never left their home island, this was a challenge that many of the Australians had not considered as part of their role in the war. Not only were expected to fight a foreign war but they were also expected to represent the superior traits of the white men. While these accounts come from the journals and diaries of AIF members, some of these same activities were witnessed on the transports ferrying recruits of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron AFC from Africa to England, so it is not beyond reason that members of the AFC took part in these activities despite the higher standard of men recruited to the flying corps.

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<sup>202</sup> Das, *Race*, 225.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

## **Chapter 13: The Invasion of Gloucestershire**

Thus far, the examples of the two cultures interacting have illustrated how the British provided care and comfort to the members of the AFC, however the Australians embraced the local communities in which their squadrons were located and gave back to these communities in their own unique ways. Whether these acts of giving were merely driven by kindness or as an effort to demonstrate their cultural and civil equality to the British is unclear, regardless of the true motivation by giving back to the communities, they worked to ensure a mutually beneficial relationship, one that ensured a maximum focus on the mission of pilot training. For the majority of the war AFC members were trained on RFC aerodromes within the RFC training squadrons before entering the pilot and observer pools for assignment overseas. The high casualty rates on the Western Front of both RFC and AFC pilots meant an increased demand for the timely training of reinforcements. This training need pushed the RFC/RAF training system to edge of being unable to keep up with demand. By the end of 1917 it was decided to establish a standalone Australian training wing consisting of the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> Training Squadron AFC to ease this training backlog.

The new training wing was headquartered at Tetbury Gloucestershire, with two airfields at Leighterton and Minchinhampton housing the four squadrons. Unlike units that merely spent their leave in the English countryside, the members of AFC who trained at the Australian training wing spend many months, including six months after the war ended, living in a single British town and community their airfields neighbored. The commander of the No 1 Australian Training Wing was Lieutenant Colonel Watt, who previously served as a flight commander under Richard Williams in the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC before taking command of the newly formed 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron AFC. With this appointment, Watt became the one of only two Australian officers

to command a wing, the other being Williams who took command of the 40<sup>th</sup> Wing in Palestine.<sup>205</sup> The administrative details and importance of this training wing are discussed later in this examination, but this training wing was the first “self-contained” Australian training establishment outside of Australia and the result of months of lobbying by the AIF administration. This opportunity placed training and administration of four newly created training squadrons and airplane repair section in the hands of Australian Officers.<sup>206</sup> Needless to say, the success of this completely Australian training wing would go a long way in helping the AFC achieve more independence of action and post-war autonomy.

Watt and the AFC faced a number of problems with the establishment of running the wing. The problems ranged from pilots like A. H. Cobby unhappy about being transferred from fighting squadrons to roles as instructors, the building of the airfields themselves, to the high casualty rate (the wing suffered its first death while he was in route to take command) associated with the training of pilots at the time.<sup>207</sup> Despite these challenges, largely out of his direct control, Watt’s early goal was to establish a warm relationship with the towns and its citizen. With the British and Australians were close in many ways (race, culture, and language) it may seem that cultivating a good relationship between the AFC and British citizens would be quick work, this was not the case however.

As previously described, the AIF’s reputation for indiscipline in the Middle East did not vanish once they had left Egypt but in fact followed them to Europe. To this point Peter Stanley states, “The Australians’ name for indiscipline in Egypt preceded their arrival...and within weeks of their disembarkation the figures seemed to bear out the authorities’ fears...Australians

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<sup>205</sup> Williams, *These are Facts*, 85.

<sup>206</sup> Clark, *High Life*, 220.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.



soldiers also acquired a reputation as drunken, rowdy, lustful and even dangerous.”<sup>208</sup> This drunken and dangerous behavior manifested itself in a variety of violent behaviors. In Britain, gangs of AIF “sand-baggers” terrorized towns neighboring their training depots.<sup>209</sup> These gangs of soldiers would rob, assault, and even murder citizens, and in a few cases AIF soldiers, who travelled along the lanes outside of the camp.

Additionally, sexual assaults both in France and England sullied the name of the AIF in the eyes of their hosts. Peter Stanley’s work contains a vast numbers of example of these assaults, including the August 1918 case in which several AIF soldiers in Fovant England were found guilty of raping female workers and volunteer nurses. Aside from these extreme examples of criminal behavior, the everyday rowdiness of the AIF caused hardships for the British/Australian relationship. Stanley describes the sort of behavior that wore on the nerves of the British,

Affrays disturbed the peace of villages that had once welcomed Australians as affable and exotic guests. At Weymouth civilians witnessed pitched battles between convalescents and ‘Jacks’. Sutton Veny folk heard of brawls that left men dead. One aged Fovant man supposedly took to stabling his horse in his kitchen ‘in case those Australians steal him’...When the ‘kinematograph’ projector broke down at the ‘Blood House’, a picture show near Sutton Veny camp, the proprietor refused to refund the troops’ tickets. Incenses soldiers piled benches together and set the place alight. A bugler sarcastically played the ‘Last Post’ as the hut burned down.<sup>210</sup>

What these examples point to is that, achieving a harmonious relationship with the local communities was not something AFC could assume would naturally occur. Despite the background of the AFC members, the AIF had done great damage to the reputation of the

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<sup>208</sup> Stanley, *Bad Character*, location 1663

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, location 3240

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

Australian fighting force, and the task of reversing this perception fell to the airmen if they wanted to connect with their local community. As with the other social hurdles, while on the surface community relations may not seem to have an impact on waging warfare, the airmen and leaders within the AFC needed their men focused purely on learning their craft with as few stressors and distractions as possible, including being to maintain a relatively normal rhythm of life local communities proved. In an effort to raise the social standing of the Australians, nothing would be gained by the airmen of the AFC terrorizing the local communities that supported them, damaging both the military and social identity aims of the Australian government.

Watt, now the senior AFC official in England, and the training wing worked to achieve warm relations with the towns his airfields neighbored. The AFC needed the town to provide labor for building and operating the bases, airmen needed good and services provided by the town, as well as entertainment. The needs of the AFC and its men made peaceful cooperation with the community a necessity. Additionally, the cadets and instructors were initially billeted with local family, similar to Richard Williams in Oxford, until barracks could be erected. As Goodland states regarding the moving of the AFC, “From the moment they arrived, the Australians were determined to integrate themselves into the community...With so many young ‘diggers’ on the loose there might have been considerable friction.”<sup>211</sup> One of the first ways the AFC integrated itself into the community was by holding his Australians accountable for the various ‘frictions’ and wayward behavior they found themselves.

The infractions could be simple things, as when on 8 April 1918, the Tetbury Council sent the training wing a bill for £3 for a lamp post damaged by an AFC truck, identified as so by

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<sup>211</sup> Goodland, *ANZACS*, 17.

its number plate.<sup>212</sup> Upon receiving the bill from the council Watt ensured the damage to the light was paid for by the wing. The AFC pilots habit of roof top skimming, namely during church service on Sundays, was answered by letters of complaint from members of the Stroud town council. Much like the incident with the broken street lamp, the training wing issued orders that a height of 2,000 feet be maintained when flying over the towns.<sup>213</sup> Finally, it was not just the local town people that Watt had to maintain warm relations with but also the noble families who had house near Gloucestershire. Unfortunately for Watt, the AFC's angst knew no class boundaries,

The AFC relationship with the gentry of Gloucestershire was placed under a further cloud...after three pilots from the wing joined in a fox hunt on the Duke of Beaufort's estate, in their aircraft, and sent hounds, horses, and riders scattering in all directions...Determined to shield his men, Oswald [Watt] did the only thing he could do and went to see the duke...Watt gently persisted while acknowledging the seriousness of the complaint...'They ended up by shaking hands and enjoying a good laugh over it'. The duke withdrew his letter and left it to Watt to discipline the 'young offender'.<sup>214</sup>

While examples such as the airplane fox hunting could be handled internally by the AFC, this was not always the case. The informal way the matter was handled between Australian officer and aristocrat is interesting to the idea of social standings. The issues were resolved over lunch between the two men, who by their titles were socially unequal, however, the matter was settled as if between two members of the gentry over tea.

When infractions were of a more serious nature, airmen were required to make an appearance before the local magistrates or town council. These also varied in nature of their

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<sup>212</sup> Clark, *High Life*, 235.

<sup>213</sup> Goodland, *ANZACS*, 28.

<sup>214</sup> Clark, *High Life*, 235.

seriousness, less serious crimes included violations such as driving an AFC motor vehicle above the posted speed limit or riding a bicycle at night without a headlight. There were also more serious crimes committed by the members of the AFC, and in these cases the leadership of the training wing thought it best for peace to not blindly shield their men. Goodland and Vaughan point out that any crimes involving the theft of local animals were met with harsh punishment. In April 1919, the majority of AFC members did not leave England until May 1919, two air mechanics were accused of stealing a local pig and selling it to a local butcher for the meat. The two mechanics, Henry Williams and Thomas Mitchell, were both due to sail home for Australia on May 6<sup>th</sup>. However, both of the men were found guilty of their accused crimes and despite pleas for leniency were remanded to custody until 12 June when the next Gloucester Assizes could be held.<sup>215</sup> Because of their having to remain in custody until June, both men missed their boat home and at the June hearing both airmen and the butcher who bought the slain pig received three month prison sentences.<sup>216</sup>

While this case seems to be on the extreme of the discipline spectrum, it still illustrates that in the name of peace between the British and AFC, the airmen had to be held responsible for their actions. Instead of closing ranks and protecting the two guilt airmen, the AFC ensured that the men answered for their crimes in the local civilian, non-Australian court and leaving them behind while the rest of the AFC left for Australia. It is also interesting to note that the “pig assassination” took place in spring of 1919, four months after the Armistice. Even after the November 1918 Armistice training was still taking place and maintaining discipline with troops itching to go home and no war to fight must have proved a significant more challenge to the

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<sup>215</sup> Goodland, *ANZAC*, 45. Assizes are English county/shire courts.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

wing's leadership. The high number of training casualties suffered by all Allied air forces meant that the pilot training period of an airmen's career was a stressful and danger time. Even the veteran A. H. Cobby noted that he felt more afraid of crashing and dying as instructor in England than in the skies over France.<sup>217</sup> The leadership of the AFC training wing needed to provide their airmen with as much normality and support as possible and this was achieved in part due to the relationships with the British citizens.

What made the AFC different from army units in the England, is that the flying corps was not practicing and perfecting a long established military discipline, they were at the tip of the spear of aviation. They required the local towns to survive, not only for constructing and maintaining airfields and facilities, but also for the morale gained from being able to visit the town and communities in which they operated, morale and stress relief to combat the stresses of flight training. Additionally, the culture of the AFC was one built on establishing and maintaining high standards of discipline and professionalism, and part of that professionalism was social relations with the British citizens. As a goal of the AFC and Australian government was achieving a more equal social/cultural footing with the British, it was imperative to create warm connections with the English citizens and their communities. Whether these mutually beneficial relationships had a larger goal in mind, be it imperial unity or Australian autonomy, is not articulated in the writings of the Australian airmen. This lack of written accounts of impacting social norms and perceptions does not mean that larger motive was at work but given immediate needs created by the war, these social undertones may have been operating subconsciously.

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<sup>217</sup> Cobby, *High Adventure*, 94.

## Chapter 14: Giving Back

Maintaining the peace and holding members accountable was not the only way in which Watt and his officers fostered warm relations with their British neighbors. The three of unique ways that the members of the AFC interacted with and gave back to the communities that supported them centered on: entertainment, sport, and fundraising. The fundraising consisted of both helping local charities and also aiding the English war effort. In the spring of 1918 the Stroud district, where the training wing was located, needed to raise £23,000 for the purchase of nine new airplanes, helping replace the large wastages of the Western Front.<sup>218</sup> The Australian's fundraising efforts were completed in a purely flying corps manner, consisting of airplanes of the AFC conducting an 'air raid' on the town. Instead of dropping ammunition or bombs, the aircraft dropped leaflets announcing the city's fundraising endeavors.<sup>219</sup> The AFC's mechanics also did their parts to provide entertainment during these fundraising drives, "Edgar Sollars [Stroud resident] remembers vividly the Australian air mechanics assembling an aeroplane on King Street Parade to the delight of the crowds that poured into the town."<sup>220</sup> While in this particular instance the citizens of Stroud were raising money for RFC airplanes, the AFC was also the beneficiary of such fundraisers. On 25 May 1918, Watt travelled east to Hull to attend a ceremony in which the AFC was presented the gift of a scout airplane presented by the Hull Chamber of Commerce. The funds for which were used to purchase the scout were raised by popular subscription, similar to the drives in Stroud.<sup>221</sup>

An additional example of fundraising is provided by the actions of Lieutenant Colonel Watt himself. Before leaving England for Australia in May 1919, Watt was approached by the

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<sup>218</sup> Goodland, *ANZACS.*, 25.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> Clark, *High Life*, 235.

wing's pay sergeant. The sergeant informed Watt that during his entire time serving in the AIF, which dated back to his transfer from the French Foreign Legion's *Aviation Militaire* section in June of 1916, he had not drawn any of his military pay.<sup>222</sup> Coming from great personal and family wealth it is not surprising that Watt had not drawn money against his AIF salary. Needing to clear his books, the sergeant asked Watt, "Shall I make out a cheque for the amount, sir?" to which "'Yes,' replied the Colonel. Then, with a characteristic twinkle in his eyes, 'and make it payable to the War Orphans' Fund.'"<sup>223</sup> What this act of kindness shows is the relationship that the men of the AFC had with the local community and for many, including Watt, their homeland. This act is to have taken place before the AFC sailed for Australia, when there was no longer a worry of maintaining a good relationship with the people of the town. Watt, who was a believer in Imperial unity as oppose to those who pushed for Australian independence, possibly saw this donation as giving back to fellow members of the empire who had a need while at the same time raising the prestige of the AFC. Here was another chance for the Australians to help the British people in a time of need, showing generosity to the less fortunate.

Personal acts like Watt's donation and leaflet air raids were not the only entertaining way the AFC helped raise funds for the local communities. Stage shows and musical concerts produced and starring the men of the training wing were another way of both building relationships as well as raising funds for the community. Goodland states that, "No wartime entertainments could have been more popular than those put on by the AFC in Gloucestershire. These events were so well attended that extra late-night trains along the Chalford to Stonehouse

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<sup>222</sup> Clark, *High Life*, 142.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid*, 245

line had to be laid on when they performed at the Stroud Subscription Rooms. In fact, they put on shows all over Gloucestershire.”<sup>224</sup> Both airfields developed their own performing groups, “The Flying Kangaroos” from Leighterton and “The Gee Whizzers” of Minchinhampton, these groups competed with each other over the numbers of guests in attendance and for the most lavish reviews.<sup>225</sup> What is even more surprising is the level of detail and craftsmanship poured into these performances,

To convert the stage into an Australian gold mining camp was no easy task...but the illusion was cleverly achieved by the brush of W. Merrick Boyd, the Australian artist, and the smart acting and equipment of the dramatic company...it says much for the ability of those responsible that the (sic) brought the Southern Dominion right home to the audience. The singing and acting throughout were delightful, and , as one might expect, were entirely free from vulgarity.<sup>226</sup>

It is interesting note the amount of in unit performing talent the AFC at Gloucestershire possessed. The W. Merrick Boyd mentioned in the excerpt from the *Stroud Journal* above was a ceramicist, studying at the National Gallery School before joining the AFC in Fall of 1917 as an Air Mechanic 2<sup>nd</sup> Class.<sup>227</sup> After the war he continued his art career and is credited as the father of studio pottery in Australia.<sup>228</sup>

Not only did these shows provide entertainment for the people of Leighterton and Minchinhampton but the proceeds from the tickets went back to the towns themselves. The shows usually charged 3s/6d for reserved seating and 2s/6d for general admission, and were

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<sup>224</sup> Goodland, *ANZACS*, 35.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>227</sup> AWM8 8/15/2 – Flying Corps October 1916 – October 1917 – Reinforcements and 1 and 2 Special Drafts (May 1917).

<sup>228</sup> “Boyd, William Merrick”, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/boyd-william-merric-5608>, accessed January 7, 2021.



performed at various sizes of venues for number of different causes. The groups performed not only in Gloucestershire but the surrounding counties, with citizens from those communities not only providing a performance space but also rooms and food for the performers. The money raised from these shows went to a large variety of causes, including a new piano for the Amberley School; Minchinhampton's war memorial; and local hospitals, orphanages and wartime fund raisers.<sup>229</sup> An article from the local paper in the market town of Wotton-under-Edge reviews the November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1918 concert held at the town hall and where the proceeds were directed,

'The Flying Kangaroo' Concert Party from Leighterton Aerodrome gave the greatest delight by their entertainment at Wotton Town Hall on Saturday, each item of the well varied programme receiving well-merited applause, and, in most cases, insistent demands for encores. The concert was arranged in aid of the local Cricket Club funds, and also the extension of the Y.M.C.A. Hut at Leighterton. Crowded as the hall was, to its utmost capacity, the financial result was most gratifying, a profit of over £20 being made from the concert.<sup>230</sup>

In terms of the benefits these community shows provided both the AFC and the British are clear. The AFC was able to relieve their boredom of training, especially once the war had ended, in a positive manner, while at the same time providing entertainment, a little piece of Australia in the case of the "The Welcome Nugget" show's gold mining camp, while also raising money for causes in the communities. While these shows provided entertainment for the men and the community, it was also a way for the AFC to show off different aspects of their Australian life and culture, these were not merely rural bumpkins but a people with a rich culture.

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<sup>229</sup> Goodland, *ANZACS*, 37.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

Much like the shows the members AFC put on, the wide range of sporting events hosted by the wing and community provided entertainment, fundraising, and tension relief. “The innovations brought by Australians to the area” Goodland states, “were not confined to their flying activities. The hallowed turf of the Rugby Union ground at Fromehall was the first in the county to accommodate football the Australian way.”<sup>231</sup> The array of sporting activities were numerous, including Australian Rules football, cricket, tug o’ war, rugby, and boxing. The sporting events were usually coupled with a dance or AFC show to provide a full schedule of entertainment and fundraising. Like the AFC stages shows, spectators were charged a small entry fee, 1s/6d for entry, and the proceeds would to local organizations.<sup>232</sup> For example, the money raised by April 27<sup>th</sup> 1918 Australian Football Final between the Aircraft Repair Section (Leighterton) and 5<sup>th</sup> Training Squadron (Minchinhampton) teams went to the Stroud Volunteer Fire Brigade and the Police Orphanage.<sup>233</sup> This event was followed by a town dance whose proceeds went to support the Stroud General Hospital.<sup>234</sup>

In addition to raising money and providing entertainment for the various spectators, these sporting events and competition helped ease possible tensions on many fronts. A large draw was the Minchinhampton Anzac Day sports meeting, held on April 25<sup>th</sup> 1918, where the various teams competed for the Tetbury Cup, whose monetary prize was donated by Lieutenant Colonel Watt himself.<sup>235</sup> Teams competing included the Stroud Scratch Rugby Team, Australian Trench Rugby Team, Australian and British Tug o’ War Teams, and AFC and RFC cricket teams.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Goodland, *ANZACS.*, 19.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>235</sup> Clark, *High Life*, 245.

<sup>236</sup> Goodland, *ANZACS*, 22-24.

Within the AFC there were often officer versus ‘other ranks’ competitions, such as the previously mentioned Australian Football Final between the Aircraft Repair Section and the 5<sup>th</sup> Training Squadron. Given the absence of the strict formality of the AFC, it is difficult to imagine the men of the RFC competing outside of their rank class. In regards to the inter-rank competition these events provided a source of teamwork and bonding not available or any socially acceptable within the British ranks.

Between the Australian Trench Team, RFC teams, and AFC there were many different military cultures coming together and using the medium of sports to bond. Given the differences in the cultures fostered within the various units, even amongst the AIF and AFC, the sporting events provided a source of constructively letting off steam and connecting in a way that was as common to them as the language they shared. Specifically for the AFC, a group which often found itself detached from other military cultures, the sporting challenges provided a connection with the British military and citizens as well as the Australians of the Army. As ‘other ranks’ were able to form teams and compete against their own officers these competitions were a boon to building inter-rank relationships, which in turn enhanced mutual respect and the adherence to disciplinary standards born from that respect.

In all, the AFC No. 1 Training Wing spent roughly 15 months in Gloucestershire. During that time, 32 members of the wing had died, 17 of which were victims of aircraft crashes while the other dying of sickness or non-flying injuries. Before leaving for Australia onboard the troopship *Kaisar-i-Hind* Lieutenant Colonel Watt penned a letter to the people of Tetbury, which sums up the relationship that had developed between the AFC and the British people. In this letter Watt thanked the people of Gloucestershire for the “never failing hospitality and courtesy” they showed over the last 14 months and ending by saying, “I feel sure that the opportunities we

have all had of obtaining a glimpse of that home life, on the memory of which the foundations of the most distant settlements in the Empire have been so securely based, cannot help but draw yet closer those silken threads which bind us to the Homeland. On behalf of every one of us, I thank you.”<sup>237</sup> While residing in Gloucestershire the men of AFC had worked, trained, and development relationships with the people of the towns in which they lived, connections which brought the empire closer together. Whether that together as in all being socially equal or together in the sense of downplaying Australian identity in lieu of an imperial identity was up to the individual airmen and British citizen. What is certain is that the civilized actions of the Australian airmen endeared them to the British community and contributed directly to the successful training of the AFC men in England.

It is important to note that the benefits of being stationed in England for training and visiting for leave was something not all members of the AFC were able to enjoy. Both the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC and its “Half Flight” predecessor served in the Middle East during the entirety of the war.<sup>238</sup> For leave many of these men spent their time either in Cairo or exploring the area’s sites, the Great Pyramid of Giza and the Great Sphinx of Giza being a very popular destination for the airmen. Despite the landmarks found within Egypt and Palestine, the men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC were not afforded the kindness found by their contemporaries in England. When they were on leave, they were in a land and culture much more foreign to them than the difference experienced the AFC men in England and France. Unlike the feelings of appreciation felt by the English and French citizens over the Australian involvement in the war, many of the

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<sup>237</sup> Clark, *High Life*, 245.

<sup>238</sup> Cutlack, *The Australian Flying*, 26.

Arabs living in the regions in which the RFC and AFC operated saw these groups as invaders of their lands.

The resentment is easy to understand when the realization is made that the Entente forces in the Middle East were not there to free the Arab citizens from Turkish rule, but to ensure the protection of the waterways and canals that fed the English war effort and prevent uprisings in British held lands. In the case of the Middle Eastern theater, the AFC airmen were not protecting British citizens from German attack but were policing the Arab subjects of the empire, they were white dominion troops ensuring non-white colonial populations did not interfere with British military aims in the east. Part of the price of gaining a more equal footing within the empire, it was necessary for the Australians to ensure the less civilized, non-white, peoples of the empire remained loyal to the British system, a role bestowed upon the AFC/AIF by their white skin. This role imperial policemen also meant that the attitude of much of the native population would see the Turkish army more favorably than that of the white imperialist. As a direct result, the comforts and connections enjoyed those serving in England were unavailable to those in the Middle East, and if Arab families were prepared to house and welcome in Australian airmen would the white men have been willing to accept such an offer. The situation was compounded by the fact that the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron AFC had been in operational service since the summer of 1916, almost a year and half longer than the AFC training wing in England. Unlike England where a training mishap may have meant tea and biscuits at country manor, a forced landing Palestine due to mechanical failure anywhere outside the home aerodrome could mean the possible death or capture of the aircrew by unfriendly Arab tribes.

Whether interacting with the British citizens while on leave from the front or spending months in the English countryside training, the AFC and British citizens impacted the lives of

each other. To sustain the war effort the men of the AFC, like those of military members today, needed both mental and social stabilizers. The distance from Australia, whether to England or to Palestine, forced the men of the AFC to either find a substitute for the comforts of home and family, or suffer a war with no external support and source of resiliency. In Britain and her people, the Australians often found a war-time home and family. This support structure provided a place to escape the war when on leave from the front, and friends and distant relations to care for the men. Additionally, the Australians found someone who showed them how much they were appreciated and the sacrifices they were making for their country and empire. Not only did the AFC make connections that allowed them to come in from the culture “no man’s land” they found themselves, but they were also able to demonstrate that socially and culturally they were no different from the British who they sought to be socially equal. In overcoming the social and cultural difficulties of training and fighting away from home the AFC was able to work towards the dual goals of military success, found in the stabilizing forces of community relationships and resiliency, and maintaining a distinct dominion identity, one culturally equal to the British. Finally, the experiences of the AFC’s officers were not afforded to all imperial troops, especially those of the Empire’s non-white peoples.

## CONCLUSIONS

In just over a decade after the Wright Brothers completed the first successful heavier than air powered flight at Kitty Hawk, airplanes were waging brutal struggle above the Western Front, Russia, and the Middle East. The introduction of the airplane into war brought with it a plethora of challenges for all nations standing up flying units and this was no different for the Australian military and their Australian Flying Corps. The AFC had to focus on solving the problems of integrating aircraft into their tactical and strategic planning, recruit and train pilots, and ensure aircraft availability was at peak level despite heavy wastages. These problems are what faced the AFC and most of the belligerent nations that raised flying units. In addition to these shared challenges the AFC had to overcome a unique set of obstacle to achieve the Australian government's and Allied forces' goals. Often these challenges were the direct result of Australia's pursuit of two, not always compatible goals, those being to wage a successful war campaign while at the same time pushing to retain a distinct dominion identity, one that was on more equal footing with the British.

In some instances, such as finding sources of social resilience, both goals were achieved. Forming bonds with the local community provided the men with a source of bonding and sense of home despite being over 10,000 miles from home. In turn this stabilizing force and morale enabled the men to focus on training and operations more fully and for prolonged amounts of time, directly contributing to the war effort. At the same time, the AFC was able to demonstrate through their actions and behavior that they were not merely socially inferior, passion driven colonials, despite the actions of the troops of the AIF stationed in England. Whether conscience or not of the overarching impact of their social relationships and civilized behavior, in everyday

ways the Australian airmen was closing the gap between the dominion and England. Through these actions the dual Australian goals were mutually supportive. However this result was not always the case, as the example of maintaining the Central Flying School at Point Cook. Out of a desire to ensure that the AFC have an established training school and system to provide post-war support, the Australian military pushed back against British requests to have trainees forgo training at Point Cook and come directly to England for training. By requiring Australian cadets to train at Central Flying School, where they received a very rudimentary education, slowed the flow of fresh men to the RFC/RAF training system which feed directly to the units at the various fronts, with pilots from the CFS having no higher standing than brand new cadets. With the example of the school at Point Cook, neither one of the Australian's governments objectives were achieved, the insistence on using the school slowed down getting replacements to the combat units who needed them and did not result in a sustainable, autonomous system to produce trained pilots and ground crew. While hindsight shows that the Australian military's project at Point Cook was unsuccessful to meet war requirements, it was decision made in order to achieve military and security autonomy, security not relying on the might of the British Empire.

In exploring the cultural and administrative hurdles facing the AFC alone and not merely as context for the flying corps' combat operations, this thesis fills in a glaring hole the Australian military's historiography. Despite the publishing of Cutlack's *The Australian Flying Corps in the Western and Eastern Theatres of War 1914-1918*, which focused almost entirely on the tactical exploits of the AFC, and the recent works by Molkenin, no volume in the historiography makes the unique challenges facing the AFC its focal point. The historiography of the Australian airmen does not works like Peter Stanley's *Bad Characters* or Bill Gammage's *The Broken Years*, both of which on the social and cultural traits of the AIF troops with the combat



operations they find themselves in merely the driving force for their evolving ideas of dominion and self. In a small way this is what this thesis attempts to do for the AFC, that is put the focus on the men and dominion as they use the war to define and redefine for some, what it means to be a dominion in the British Empire. Finally, for the AFC it explores the cultural “no man’s land” the Australian pilots and ground crew found themselves, a cultural “jack of all trades.” These men shared just enough traits to make them fit into a specific social/cultural groups, i.e. with the diggers or the RFC officers, however they also possessed ample differences to keep them at arm’s length from those same groups. In the end, the men Australian Flying Corps were forced to form their own distinct culture within a dominion and people finding their place in the world.

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