

# Central Flying School and RAAF Base East Sale

## *Creation of Central Flying School 1909-1914*

On 7 March 1913 the Australian Government announced the formation of the Central Flying School (CFS) at Point Cook, Victoria. As such, the CFS is the oldest military aviation unit in Australia and one of the oldest in the world. It is possible to trace the beginnings of CFS back to 1909, when the Department of Defence began to recognise the potential of developing aviation as an instrument of war



On 26 January 1961, the RAAF base at Point Cook received a nostalgic visit from Major Henry Petre, DSO, MC—the man who selected the area as home of Australia’s first military airfield.

Petre was a solicitor in England when appointed during 1912 to become instructor at Australia’s future flying school. Arriving at the end of January 1913, he inspected various sites before recommending Point Cook on 13 March. Lieutenant Petre commanded the school when it commenced operations a year later, and was promoted honorary Captain shortly before the first pilots graduated in November 1914.

Petre saw war service with the Australian Flying Corps (AFC) in Iraq in 1915–16, before returning to England and the Royal Flying Corps (RFC). He remained in British service, flying with the RFC and RAF, until September 1919. He resumed legal practice and remained in that profession until retiring in 1958. Not long after his return visit to Australia, he died in London on 24 April 1962.

## *Formation of No 1 Flying Training School 1918-1925*

At war’s end CFS continued its existence at Point Cook with its employees enlisted into the Australian Air Corps, however little if any flying training took place. When the Royal Australian Air Force was formed in 1921, a military order renamed Central Flying School as Flying Training School, its

employees became RAAF personnel and the training aircraft were taken on charge by the new school. On 1 July 1925 Flying Training School was renamed No 1 Flying Training School.

## ***Reformation of CFS During the Second World War 1940-1945***

Following the outbreak of the Second World War, in 1939, there was a huge demand for aircrew. To meet this increased demand, the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS) was established to train approximately 11 000 aircrew in Australia each year. The training requirement expanded rapidly shortly before the war, and there were only 27 flying instructors in Australia in 1939. To fill the training void created by EATS, the Air Board reformed CFS on 29 April 1940 from 'C' and 'D' flights of No 1 Flying Training School. CFS was to conduct Service Flying Instructor Courses. CFS lodged briefly at Point Cook before relocating to RAAF Station Camden in May 1940.

An advance party arrived in Camden on 14 May 1940 to prepare a camp for the arrival of the main party. The move to Camden was completed on 23 May 1940. On 28 March 1942 the Air Board directed CFS to vacate Camden to make room for a United States Army Air Force (USAAF) formation, and Tamworth was eventually chosen as the next location for the RAAF school. A small road party drove to Tamworth in April 1942 to establish a camp and CFS completed the move on 21 April 1942.

## ***Some Personal Reflections***

### **The Start of a Family Association**

Air Commodore 'Phil' Ford and his three sons, Tony, Nick and Simon were all members of the RAAF, and all pilots. Air Commodore Ford and Tony and Simon, but not Nick, each had a long association with CFS and RAAF Base East Sale. A comprehensive suite of Oral History interviews with all four RAAF members is held by the Office of Air Force History and excerpts are included in this Snippet.

## ***Relatively early days:***

*"... This by the way was when I was at Central Flying School Camden and I took Mr Edward Macarthur Onslow for a flight around Camden to find forced landing paddocks. Macarthur Onslow owned the paddocks and the two houses which the RAAF chose for the home for Central Flying School and of course forced landing was still very much to the fore in our training.*

*... A day later I went to Laverton to pick up a new Wirraway, this of course again Central Flying School to pick up a new Wirraway. I spoke to the engineers, the chaps who'd be on junior course with myself, about the undercarriage and the flaps how they worked and what you did to make them work. I flew it back and landed at Point Cook with the undercarriage down, taxied it in and told my troops to put it up on jacks and we would find out exactly how the undercarriage and the flaps worked and from then on we had no trouble..."*



On 3 September 1937, the NA-16-1A, the fixed undercarriage variant of the monoplane designed by North American Aviation, undertook its maiden flight in Australia at Laverton, with Squadron Leader F.R.W. Scherger at the controls.

The aircraft was received in Australia in early August, to serve as a template for local production under licence. A version with retractable undercarriage, the NA-16-2K, arrived late the following month. It was actually the second aircraft, often known as the NA-33, which went into production with the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation as the Wirraway (Aboriginal for 'Challenge').

Although only an advanced trainer, orders for the Wirraway eventually ran to 755 aircraft, making this a key element in the development of Australian industry. The locally-produced model flew for the first time on 27 March 1939, and when war began the RAAF had its first seven on strength.

*"... You will see in my log book that we were training civilians, our own officers, and in some part at this time you're talking about I was the Chief Flying Instructor of Central Flying School hence I was traveling around with a team to reexamine the instructors that we had graduated*

*..... That's what I thought. 16<sup>th</sup> of January 1941.*

*..... But when we started Central Flying School, I was one of the original pilot instructors and we set out to make it as perfect as we could. I was only the CFI of CFS, there was a CFI at every flying school there would have been at the bombing school, the gunnery school, elementary service flying training school, there was a Chief Flying instructor in all those.*

*.... In February 45 you returned to Australia and one of the entries was a flight in a B25. The Central Flying School had a B25. Our central flying school, at Point Cook at the time, had a B25 and a bit further on they had a Ventura, Oxford as well, a Spitfire, reading in my log book, a Vultee Vengeance, Beaufort, Beaufighter, Boomerang, a Wackett Trainer a Hurricane, - there's the Hurricane again.*

*.... The reason for that was, in late 44 it must have been, our operational conversion units, and I can vouch for it on a personal basis, were having a terrible time. The RAAF just*

*didn't have the experienced pilots to put into the operational conversion units to fly with, and teach, the pilots straight off their flying course to fly these aeroplanes.*

*.... It was a great jump from a Wirraway to a Spitfire or a Kittyhawk and because they were having so many deaths, and frankly caused mostly by poor discipline and added to it was not having much experience on the part of the instructors at the Operational Conversion Units.*

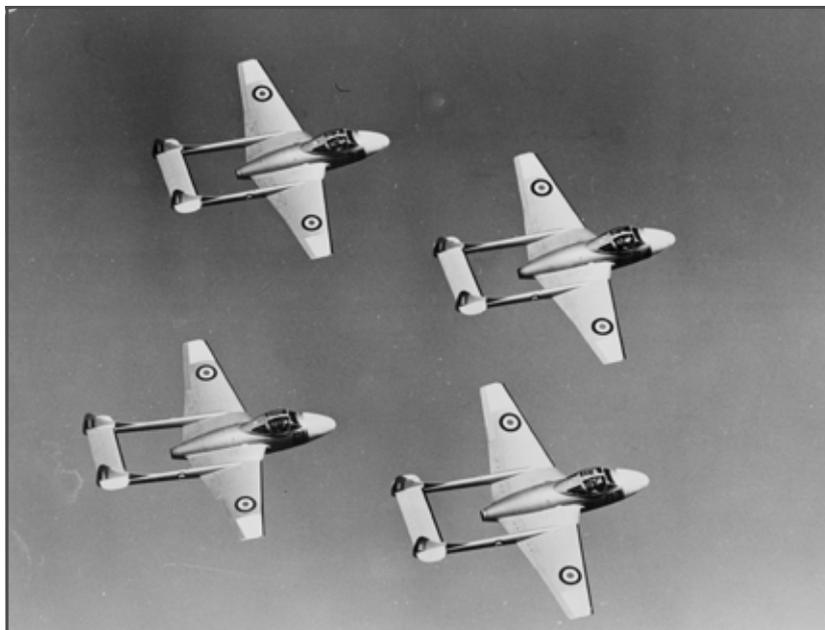
*.... The Air Board decided that the Central Flying School would go around, not only to elementary and the advanced flying training schools, but would also go around to test the pilots in the operational conversion units and to do so of course they had to know something about how to fly the aeroplane. Central Flying School was given one of every type the Air Force had..."*

## ***Some 15 to 20 Years later:***

*"... So CFS came out. Three things happened, CFS came out, they assessed me as a grade A2 instructor which is the highest instructor grading I could get which was not being immodest I was really proud which was bloody hard to get.*

*Then I won a lottery it was 165 tickets at five quid and the winner takes all. Remember it was just only two years ago I was being paid 1500 pounds a year.*

*And the third thing that happened was I got posted to Butterworth....:*



On 15 August 1962, the newly-established 'Red Sales' aerobatic team from the Central Flying School, East Sale, crashed while rehearsing for a performance at the base's Air Force Week display the following month.

Four Vampire T.35 jet trainers, two carrying passengers, took off from East Sale at 1.44 pm. Disaster struck about 20 minutes later, during recovery from a formation barrel roll at low level. All four

aircraft ploughed into a timbered rise some 12 kilometres south-west of the base and exploded on impact, killing instantly the six men on board. Debris was scattered over a wide area, and the wreckage cut telephone and power lines in the area.

On 18 May 1968, the 'Telstars' gave their final public performance of formation flying over Yallourn, Victoria, after five years as an official RAAF aerobatic team. Established six months after disaster overtook the first team formed at the Central Flying School in 1962, the Telstars began using Vampire Mk 35A jet trainers.



Over the period December 1967 to January 1968, the team converted their sequences onto the Aeromacchi MB-326H with which the School was then re-equipping. Slippages in deliveries of Macchi aircraft meant, however, that flying hours for purposes other than new pilot training had to be restricted, and approval for display flying by special aerobatic teams was withdrawn by the Chief of the Air Staff on 19 April 1968.

The Telstars were formally suspended on 23 April. Their final display went ahead under provisions that allowed continuation training within allotted flying hours, but was not publicised as an official exhibition.

### ***Sometime later:***

*"... How about a posting as CFI at CFS? Because the tradition was you could never be CO or CFI at CFS unless you'd been to CFS before, catch 22. It had been like that ever since dad was at CFS in 1938-39 which is where we started. And as I said he said that would mean you would be the leader of the Roulettes.*

*.... So it was a good posting as in, let's go to be CFI..."*

## ***Later still:***

*"... Yes CFI, Chief Flying Instructor for training Flying Instructors. Of course, my father was very proud because he was CFI and then CO of CFS, so it was a good posting in most respects.*

*Yes, we ran it like a Squadron. There was A Flight, B Flight and C Flight. The A and B were two Flying instructor courses and C Flight was the Dakotas and test flying and things like that. And it really ran very very well.*

*And over the two years I think I did most weekends, we did shows. We traveled all over the countryside from Pearce to Mount Isa, Darwin, Townsville all over Australia basically at least two sometimes three weekends a month.*

*What about the other side of the job, the regime of producing flying instructors in that era? Did we do well?*

*Yes I think so. As a sort of reflection on myself, although, thinking back and a lot of the tests, I didn't think the product was particularly good a lot of the time.*

*I had to agonise a lot over whether passing or failing someone. But when I did pass someone that I thought was a bit marginal, I used to keep an eye on him through my CFIs at Point Cook and Pearce and the COs to see how he went because I used to talk to them informally saying he's very marginal..."*

## ***Even later:***

*"... So did you know that you were going to Central Flying School at Sale? Did you know that you were going to do QFI on helicopters?*

*No, there was a fixed winged instructor's course. Obviously in the longer term there's a good chance of a likelihood of going back to helicopters.*

*I was posted to CT4s the Air Trainer Classic Parrot and we were the very first course on the CT4 the previous courses were on Winjeel. The course in those days and I think these are still split. In our case about half the guys were on CT4s and half were on Macchi.*

*What was the sort of style of the course?*

*The style was a style that I enjoyed. It was more self-learned, there wasn't a lot of lecturing going on, but more importantly we had a system and the system went for some years in where we had more tutorials and that. That is, we'd have a crash buddy and that was what we called it and one instructor and we'd sit down and run a tutorial on the next sequence to be around, so we developed our own way of wanting to do things.*

*And did you find it challenging intellectually or professionally?*

*Yes. Certainly the first part of the course you had to learn to fly the aircraft to expert level if you like, because you need to be able to demonstrate as perfectly as you can during the teaching sequence of any sort. And there was a bit of advanced theory dynamics and all that sort of stuff that kept us studying at night.*

*They gave the helicopter pilots an additional half a dozen rides in the beginning to get our hands back into actual fixed wing flying, but otherwise it was all the same.*

## ***Even later:***

*“... But after about two and a half years, it was two and three quarter years it was, not quite three and I was posted to Central Flying School on the staff as an instructor of the instructor courses, train the trainer.*

*It proved to be one of the fantastic postings and I was selected in the Roulettes in the Macchi.*

*It's almost a silly question, but what did you think of that? Were you chuffed about that? Yes I guess chuffed, but again, for a very small period, a very few minutes it's the most demanding flying I've ever had, but it only lasts for 15 minutes, but very rewarding.*

*What was the standard of airmanship like generally? Defence Force wise pretty good.*

*I've got to say one of the most interesting deployments we did as examiners was up to the Singaporean Air Force. The Singaporeans had the RAF come in and do all their instructor ratings. The POMS were insisting on business class flights and living in five star hotels and that sort of stuff.*

*So they wanted to scare the POMS and they said. We don't need you this year; we're going to get the Australians to do it.*

*So we went up there probably about six or eight of us and because of my helicopter background I did all the helicopter exams. I flew something like all their instructors.*

## ***Even later:***

*“... I was posted to back to CFS which was good.*

*Did you ask for it, did you want to be CO? Yes definitely I asked for it and wanted to be CO.*

*And what did you find at CFS in the sense of a culture? You know the role of CFS,*

*Pretty well, a well-functioning well-oiled machine, pretty much how I remember when I left it in its internal operation. A different type of an aeroplane we'd gone onto the PC9 from Macchi's, but we still had the air trainer there, the maintenance arrangements were slightly different, but generally speaking pretty much the same.*

*The only thing I found that CFS again with the growing power of the Groups and Wings CFS was losing its influence becoming, in the view of some of the groups and wings, becoming irrelevant.*

*In the case of one Group, some people thought they could do it. We don't need CFS we can do this ourselves sort of thing. Other groups saw a huge value in having people externally walking in and asking questions.*

*And of course that had been CFS's historic role since my father was there in 1938.*

*It had standards of pure flying skills. We weren't trying to tell them how to operate, but pure flying skills and then instrument ratings and most importantly their instructor skills within the Squadrons. We had arguments with the fighter world. They wanted to make non QFIs basically QFIs saying that we're not really QFIs they're just sort of instructors..."*

## ***Now and to the future:***

CFS continues to conduct its operations at RAAF Base East Sale, its Vision and Mission are:

“To be the world’s best flying instructor training school that enables ADF Aviation to be “One Team” swift, decisive, resilient and respected.”

“Train and check instructors in the Navy, Army and Air Force; Demonstrate aerobatic, formation and balloon flying skills in a safe and efficient manner. Apply Defence values, ethics and morality in the conduct of all activities”.



CFS possesses a wealth of ‘historic’ material including graduation pictures of Flying Instructors Courses.

Today, some 100 years since the formation of the Central Flying School, the RAAF continues to be proud of the school’s contribution to Australian military aviation.