

# PATHFINDER

AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN



Issue 144, October 2010

## WHO WAS THE 'FATHER OF THE RAAF'?

When Air Marshal Sir Richard Williams died in February 1980 at the age of 89, his passing was hailed as the 'end of an era' for the Air Force and many commentators referred to him as the 'Father of the RAAF'. This was not the first time this appellation had been applied to him, as it was recorded in the jacket blurb of his autobiography *These are facts*, published in 1977, that he was 'widely known' as such even then. In one sense this was ironic, because although twice married Williams never left any children of his own. Use of the title, however, gave clear recognition to a popular view that Williams had both brought the Air Force into being and provided strong parental guardianship and guidance during its early years.

Over his 25-year career in the RAAF (1921-46) Williams had indeed been among its leading figures, though not always to the extent depicted in his autobiography, or as was sometimes claimed for him by others. For instance, there is no evidence that he had been formally selected to lead the Service upon its formation in March 1921. In fact, when the Board that was to run the new Air Force was first constituted in November 1920, Williams was but one of two uniformed officers appointed to its membership—both with equal rank and identical authority.

For the first two years of the Air Board's existence, Wing Commander Williams shared the management of the Service with Wing Commander S.J. Goble—Williams as Director of Intelligence & Organisation, Goble as Director of Personnel & Training. Not until 2 October 1922 was the appointment of Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) brought into existence, which Williams technically held for the next 17 years. Even his accession to the prestigious CAS title, however, was matched by Goble's appointment at the same time as Chief of the Administrative Staff—a post which endured until December 1927. Moreover, two months after Williams became CAS he relinquished the chair to Goble to proceed overseas for the next 26 months; Goble also filled in for Williams for another 18-month period in 1932-34. It was, therefore, never the case

that Williams had sole parental custody of the Air Force, or alone fought the 'turf wars' which the infant RAAF faced within the Defence family until World War II.

Also muddying the waters when weighing the validity of the 'Father of the RAAF' title is the fact that Williams was not the first person to whom it was applied. When Douglas Gillison wrote the air volume in the Official History series on Australia in World War II titled *Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942* (published in 1962), he revealed that the 'Father' title had initially been accorded to Eric Harrison (1886-1945), one of the two pilots employed by the Australian Government to establish the first military flying school before World War I. It

was not the question of whether the appellation properly belonged to Harrison or Williams that concerned Gillison, but rather that the other pilot appointed in 1912—this being Henry Aloysius Petre (1884-1962)—had equal entitlement to it.

Gillison appears to have had no special reason for discounting or ignoring any claims that Williams might have had to the title, apart from the fact that he was writing before Williams attained 'Grand Old Man' status in Air Force circles. He was a journalist who served in the RAAF in 1942-45, performing duty at various times as public relations officer (PRO) in New Guinea and

London. After returning to civilian life after the war, he served as PRO in the Department of Civil Aviation 1953-59—which, perhaps significantly, Williams then ran as Director-General. In any event, Gillison was regarded as Australia's foremost aviation correspondent at the time that he wrote his volume of the Official History, and can be adjudged to have thoroughly understood his subject.

For Gillison, the issue that mattered most appears to have been the different relative legacies that Australia's first two military aviators bequeathed to the Air Force. Petre had been appointed, along with a second pilot, in July 1912 to start up the Australian Government's military flying school, but when the second man withdrew



*AIRMSHL Sir Richard Williams*

his application in October, it was Harrison who was then appointed to fill the vacancy on 16 December. Unlike Petre, who was English-born with no Australian connection, Harrison was an Australian who had gone to England in March 1911 expressly to learn to fly. Having achieved that goal, he found employment with the Bristol Aircraft Co. as a flying instructor and was still with that company when he applied for the Defence job back in Australia.

Petre, it seems, arrived first in Australia during January 1913—in time to persuade the Defence authorities to change the proposed site of the new flying school from Canberra to Point Cook, Victoria, because of concerns over the terrain height of the national capital site. Harrison joined him at the new location in January 1914 and helped to set up the school. On 1 March Harrison made the first flight from Point Cook in a Bristol Box-kite. He was the principal instructor of the eight wartime flying courses conducted there after World War I broke out in August. Among the students he taught on the very first course was Lieutenant Richard Williams, who became the first to qualify as a pilot under his instruction.



*WWI picture of Eric Harrison, often thought to be of CAPT (later AVM) Henry Wrigley*

Although Harrison was in charge of a small air detachment sent to New Guinea in September 1914, his party was back in Melbourne the following January without having even taken their aircraft out of their crates, and he stayed at Point Cook for the rest of the war. Petre, on the other hand, took the Half-Flight of the Australian Flying Corps on flying operations in Mesopotamia during 1915 and did not come back to Australia for the rest of the

war. In fact, he only returned to Australia half a century later, when in retirement.

Promoted to Major in June 1917, Harrison went to England at the end of the war, after training commitments at Point Cook had undergone severe reduction, on attachment to Britain's Aeronautical Inspection Directorate. On the formation of the RAAF he transferred

to the new service in the rank of Squadron Leader but stayed in England as liaison officer with the Air Ministry in London until 1925. When he finally returned to Australia he became assistant director of RAAF technical services until July 1928, when he was promoted director with rank of Wing Commander. His duties included membership of the Air Accident Investigation Committee, which probed the causes of accidents around Australia, and also the inspection of RAAF equipment. In January 1935 he was promoted to Group Captain.

Two years later Harrison visited Britain to study accident investigation procedures and aircraft production methods. He retired in March 1938 but continued on as director of aeronautical inspection in a civilian capacity, including during World War II when his technical staff had increased to over 1200 personnel. The strain of his position very likely contributed his death on 5 September 1945 from hypertensive cerebro-vascular disease. Although his impact in guiding the course of the RAAF had been very different to that provided by Williams, it is at least understandable why the first generation of Air Force personnel might have come to view him, rather than Williams, as the real 'Father' of the Service.

- *Although widely known as 'Father of the RAAF' during the 1970s, AIRMSHL Sir Richard Williams was not the first person accorded the title.*
- *GPCAPT Eric Harrison was first recorded as being known as such in 1962, after an association with military aviation in Australia even longer than Williams.*
- *A third contender was Major H.A. Petre, whose appointment to flying duties in Australia preceded Harrison's but only lasted two years.*

*Sir Richard was truly the 'Father of the RAAF', having fought and won the battle for its formation as an independent Service. He remained in close contact with the RAAF and was unfailingly interested in its modern development.*

ACM Sir Neville McNamara, 1980



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