TO the early settlers of Australia, the continent must have seemed harsh and uninviting. In the years following Federation, it became apparent that with its vast outback and great distances between major cities, Australia was particularly suited to the development of both civil and military aviation.

By the second decade of the 1900s, Australia was well on its way to developing its own path to the skies. The idea of a military flying force was first considered by the Government some years before World War I. In 1911, the Minister for Defence, Senator George Pearce, attended an Imperial Conference in London where a wide range of defence issues including aviation were discussed. The Senator returned convinced that Australia needed to develop an aviation corps for Imperial defence.

With the need for an Australian aviation force now defined, the Government moved ahead with plans to establish a military aviation corps, advertising on 30 December 1911 for two competent aviators and four mechanics to form the corps. Though conditions of service were discouraging, two young aspiring aviators, an English barrister Henry Petre (pronounced Peter), and Eric Harrison, from Castlemaine, accepted appointments as pilots in the new corps. Both were living in the United Kingdom at the time of their appointment and in consequence these two newly appointed officers recruited four aircraft mechanics from applicants living in the UK: Richard Chester, Ted Shorland, Cyril Heath and George Fonteneau. All became members of the Australian Army.

Concurrent with the recruiting process, the selection and purchase of suitable aircraft was also carried out. Initially two B.E.2a biplanes and two Deperdussin Monoplanes where purchased. On Petre’s advice, a Bristol Boxkite was also included in the purchase. Meanwhile in Australia, the only Army officer with aviation experience, CAPT Oswald Watt selected a tract of land near the Royal Military College at Duntroon as a suitable location for the soon to be established Australian Flying Corps (AFC) and Central Flying School (CFS). However, on Petre’s arrival in Australia he felt that the altitude of Duntroon too high for regular flying and after an extensive search finally selected Point Cook, Victoria as a more suitable location. Point Cook was easily accessible by sea and close to Army Headquarters in Melbourne. Accordingly a tract of wind swept grazing land was purchased as the birth place of the Australian Flying Corps.

With war in Europe on the horizon, tents were erected as hangars on the plains of Point Cook and test flights commenced in March 1914. The first training courses at CFS commenced in August with four trainee pilots and six trainee mechanics inducted into the school. The pilot trainees were Captain Thomas White, and Lieutenants George Merz, David Manwell, and Richard Williams, the mechanics were Leslie Carter, Norman Dyer, George Mackinolty, Reginald Mason, Hugh McIntosh and Arthur Murphy.

Lieutenant Manwell was the first student to fly solo in the AFC. Upon landing, another student, Richard Williams took over the aircraft for his first solo flight. Williams would later be was the first to qualify for the award of wings. All students graduated successfully, both earning and paying for their winged brevets.
At the onset of World War I, Australia pledged to help Britain but the Government resisted British attempts to absorb AFC members into the Royal Flying Corps (RFC). The Government preferred to operate and maintain their own squadrons using Australian personnel and thus retain a clear Australian identity for the war effort.

The first wartime mission for the AFC was to assist with the campaign in late 1914 to capture the German colonies and naval fleet facilities based in New Guinea. Lieutenants Harrison and Merz along with four technical airmen—Sergeant Shorland, and Corporals Mason, Carter and Pivot—were sent to provide air support for the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force. However, before the ship carrying the airmen and aircraft arrived, a successful landing had already taken place and resistance across the wider area had dissolved. Consequently, the airmen returned home with the two aircraft still in their crates.

In February 1915 a second opportunity to deploy the AFC arose when Australia answered a request from the Viceroy of India to send trained aviators, mechanics and flying machines to support the British army’s push into Mesopotamia (now modern Iraq). The aim was to capture Baghdad and force a Turkish retreat from the region. Australia responded with an offer of air and ground crews but could not supply aircraft. Thus, with Captain Petre in command, the AFC ‘Half Flight’ of four officer pilots and 41 other ranks, embarked on a new mission.

The first mission of the ‘Half Flight’ on 31 May 1915 was really the beginning of Australian military air operations. Equipped with what were intended to be ‘modern’ RFC aircraft but which were actually obsolescent Caudron C.IIs, the men fought with great courage but suffered grimly. Casualties, capture and illness all took their toll. On 30 July 1915, the ‘Half Flight’ experienced the first death in the AFC, when Lieutenant George Merz was killed in action along with New Zealander, Lieutenant William Burn. They were the first Anzac aviators killed in action.

As the war effort expanded across the Middle East, Australia’s commitment to provide more aerial forces required the formation of a full-fledged squadron. No 1 Squadron was formed at Point Cook, on 5 January 1916, with trained pilots, observers and technical airmen. Lieutenant Colonel Edgar Reynolds led the squadron of 28 officers and 195 other ranks to Egypt and eventually, into Palestine. Reynolds departed for London soon after the Squadron arrived in Suez and another Australian from the Royal Flying Corps (RFC), Major Foster Rutledge, took command. At the same time as arriving in Egypt, No 1 Squadron was allocated an RFC squadron designation ‘No 67 (Australian) SQN Royal Flying Corps’, in response to a War Department decree that AFC units would be inducted into the RFC’s organisation of squadrons.

As World War I intensified, the importance of air power as a weapon of war became evident. Initially restricted to reconnaissance and observation, the Australian operations soon embraced air-to-air combat. Fighting against a well-equipped German Air Service, the aircraft of No 1 Squadron were initially no match for the faster and better performing German aircraft types. However, when the squadron was re-equipped with the superior Bristol Fighter in late 1917 they, together with other RFC squadrons, were soon able to take the fight to the enemy and eventually gained air supremacy, enabling General Allenby’s ground forces to sweep across Palestine that eventually led to the Turkish defeat.

Of significance, the Victoria Cross was awarded to Lieutenant Frank McNamara of No 1 Squadron for the heroic and selfless rescue of another Australian pilot, Lieutenant David Rutherford who had just been shot down. McNamara, despite being badly wounded, ‘swooped down’ to pick up Rutherford while under Turkish fire. The incident is now captured for posterity on the No 1 Squadron’s badge, the diving Kookaburra representing McNamara’s remarkable ‘swooping’ feat.

The Squadron rendered stirling service in the Middle East and in its ranks were seven members later knighted for their service to the nation. Among them was Lieutenant Colonel, later Air Marshal, Sir Richard ‘Dicky’ Williams, the father of the Royal Australian Air Force.

[In PT 2, the experience of the Australian Flying Corp on the Western Front will be considered.]

Key Points

- The early airmen displayed the same values that the RAAF holds in esteem today: respect, excellence, agility, dedication, integrity and teamwork.
- Australian military air operations over the Middle East have a long history and have always required innovation and perseverance under difficult circumstances.
- Members of the AFC developed their own operational doctrine and created a strong foundation for growth.