

PATHFINDER



AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN

Issue 1, June 2004

Welcome to the first issue of a fortnightly bulletin from the Air Power Development Centre. We have chosen to call it 'Pathfinder' as a tribute to the Pathfinder Force which operated within RAF Bomber Command from August 1942. The original Pathfinders were an elite navigational group with the role of preceding each raid and accurately lighting up the target area with incendiary fires to permit visual bombing by the main force. The first commander was Group Captain (later Air Vice-Marshal) D.C.T. Bennett, a Queenslander who trained with the RAAF in 1930-31 before transferring to the RAF, and many other Australians also flew with the force.

The emblem we have adopted is 'Fiery Mo', the unofficial insignia carried on No. 6 Squadron's Hudson aircraft in New Guinea during 1943.

IRAQ - THE FIRST TIME AROUND

Australia's off-and-on military involvement in Iraq over the past decade or so has given that country a focus in public awareness that it never had before, yet 2003 (or even 1991) was not the first time that Australian Defence personnel had an active role in warlike operations there. In fact, Iraq was the scene of the very first campaign undertaken by Australian airmen nearly 90 years ago.

Back in 1915, Iraq was known as Mesopotamia and the country was under the control of Turkey, a German ally in World War I. After British forces seized Basrah to secure the oil pipeline terminal there, authorities in India planned to mount an invasion to drive the Turks out of Baghdad. Because the home government in London was preoccupied with the Western front, raising and equipping such an expeditionary force would have to be done locally. For this reason Australia and New Zealand were asked to assist in raising an aviation unit.

Although Australia had recently opened a military flying school, it then had only a few qualified pilots and no aircraft to spare. It nonetheless agreed to supply a contingent of four officer pilots and 41 other ranks, including 18 mechanics. On arrival at Basrah in May 1915, this group—dubbed the 'Mesopotamian Half Flight'—joined an 18-strong party of Indian Flying Corps personnel (just two pilots), and the sole pilot sent by New Zealand. Thus the 'Mesopotamian Flight, Royal Flying Corps' came into being.

The aircraft initially available to get the unit airborne were three frail and under-powered Maurice-Farman biplanes suitable for reconnaissance work, but little else. A month later came two Caudron aircraft, which

had bigger engines but were only marginally more reliable. Later still (August), the Flight received single-seat Martinsyde scouts—still not much better—and was designated 'No. 30 Squadron, RFC'. Some Short 827 seaplanes also arrived, forming a separate flight for artillery spotting. Not until the long-promised delivery of four BE2c machines at the end of October did the squadron finally possess effective aircraft.



Retrieved remains of Caudron destroyed by Arabs after forced landing in July 1915. Both crewmen were killed, making them the first air casualties in Iraq.

During a long advance up the Tigris River that by October brought the British expeditionary force to within 50 kms of Baghdad, the Australian pilots flew repeated reconnaissance missions. On some of these a limited bombing role was added, as during the battle of Qurna (31 May-1 June), when 2-pound hand-bombs were thrown out over the side to cause panic among the enemy. When 20-pound (9kg) bombs were duly received, it was found that the bomb-racks supplied were useless, so that on later occasions bombs were generally dropped through a hole cut in the cockpit floor.

Ground-fire proved to be a lesser danger to the airmen than the heat and sand-laden winds, which created constant risk of engine failure. Forced landings behind the Turkish lines resulted in the capture of several pilots, including one Australian on 16 September. An earlier such incident, on 30 July, resulted in the death of another Australian and his New Zealand colleague at the hands of hostile Arabs near Abu Salibiq. Yet another Australian was captured on Baghdad's north-western outskirts on 13 November, during a daring mission that involved landing to blow up the main telegraph line out of the city.

Landing accidents also reduced the number of aircraft that were available to keep check on enemy movements and map their positions. By the time the British made the attempt to turn the Turks out of Ctesiphon on 22 November, just two serviceable aircraft remained.

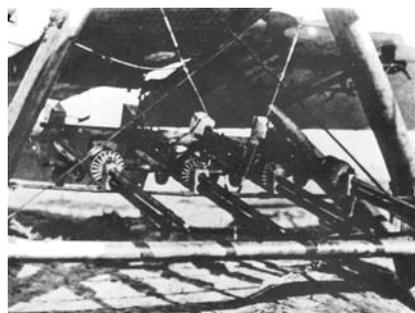
When the British attack failed, the expeditionary force was obliged to fall back to Al Kut where the bulk of it was duly surrounded by more numerous Turkish columns. After the town had been invested, all undamaged aircraft were ordered away; one of the two remaining land planes that left on 7 December was flown by the last Australian pilot, Captain H.A. Petre. Left behind were several pilots and observers, and 44 NCOs and men of No. 30 Squadron—including nine Australian mechanics.

Throughout the siege, attempts were made to keep the garrison resupplied by air, despite the limited payload possible with the available aircraft. Captain Petre was among the pilots who flew such missions, and the air bridge was ably supported by the Australian mechanics back at the Basrah base who made linen parachutes for the safe dropping of medical supplies and other breakables. One Corporal also worked out how to mount multiple machine-guns to an aircraft undercarriage, an arrangement which became especially important after German Fokker machines appeared from the end of December and helped tighten the Turkish stranglehold.

Kut surrendered in April 1916, after a five-month siege. Only two of the nine Australians who fell into Turkish hands there survived their ordeal, which was as bad as anything endured by a later generation of prisoners on the Siam-Burma railway. Indeed, of the 13,000 troops who went into captivity at Kut, only 2000 were eventually recovered alive. Both officer pilots captured before the fall also made it home to Australia after the war.

Early in 1916, while the Kut siege was still underway, the Australian mechanics at Basrah were sent—with Petre—to Egypt to join a new unit of the Australian Flying Corps that had been raised for operational service. The Mesopotamian campaign continued, without any further Australian involvement in air operations, but with the presence of Australian Army signallers. These ensured that the number of Australians who served in the theatre during World War I eventually reached around 670.

The trials of the Mesopotamian Half Flight have since entered the annals of the Royal Australian Air Force, principally on account of its members who subsequently achieved senior rank in the new air service formed in 1921—men such as the future Sir Thomas White (a RAAF group captain and federal government minister) and Air Vice-Marshal G.J.W. Mackinolyt. In a sense, the experiences of No. 75 Squadron in Iraq during 2003 is a modern replay of the Air Force's first operational deployment.



Undercarriage gun mount devised by CPL Jack Stubbs.

The destinies of all people will be controlled by air power.

Major General William 'Billy' Mitchell, 1925



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