

# PATHFINDER



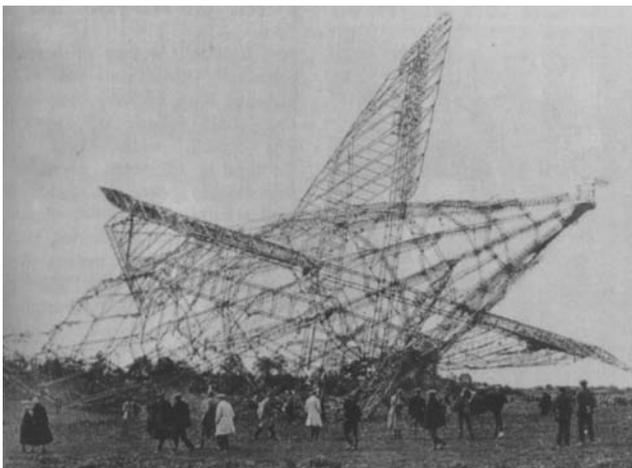
AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN

Issue 11, November 2004

## THE DIFFERENCE ONE MAN MAKES

Inevitably, air forces 'lose' people in the course of their activities—either to combat in war, or to accidents in the air and on the ground at other times. One of the most unusual fatalities ever suffered by the RAAF was Squadron Leader William Palstra, who perished in the 1930 crash of the British airship *R101*. His death was not only unique but carried profound consequences for his service back in Australia, albeit a fact little realised at the time or long afterwards.

The *R101* was one of a pair of giant new rigid-frame lighter-than-air craft with which British hoped to answer the challenge of airship development programs being undertaken by Germany and the United States for international trade. It was making the inaugural flight of a new air service from England to India when, shortly after 2 am on 5 October, it ploughed nose first into the Beauvais Ridge in northern France and exploded in a hydrogen fireball. Only eight of the 52 people on board were spared. Among the dead were Britain's Secretary of State for Air, Lord Thomson, and the Director General of Civil Aviation, Air Vice-Marshal Sir Sefton Brancker.



Remains of the *R101*

At the time, the RAAF had been in existence barely ten years and comprised less than 100 officers and little more than 700 other ranks. The loss of one of its members in such high profile and sensational circumstances not unnaturally sent shock waves around the service, and indeed the country. But in a sense that was surprising, since Palstra himself was not a very well-known figure—even to his fellow officers.

The reality was that Palstra only joined the RAAF in August 1925 and had spent nearly all of the next three years at RAAF Headquarters in Melbourne, rather than at any of the service's three airbases. From the end of 1928 he had been out of the country, attending the year-long course at the RAF Staff College at Andover, and on finishing that he was posted to the staff of Australia House in London as the air liaison officer (ALO) to the British Air Ministry.

In fact, though, Palstra *deserved* to be better-known around the RAAF, because he was plainly a man destined for bigger and better things. The staff appointments he held at headquarters, even in the junior ranks of flying officer and (from March 1927) flight lieutenant, were the important posts of Deputy Director of Personnel Services (or Director of Manning as it was renamed in March 1928) and Director of Personnel Services. From April 1927 until June 1928 he was also Staff Officer to the Chief of the Air Staff, Group Captain R. Williams.

Reports on Palstra's performance make clear that he was a highly capable officer whose abilities deeply impressed his superiors. Perhaps this ought not to have been the source of any surprise, since he came to the RAAF with an educational and administrative background unmatched at the time within the service. He was, for a start, the first (and, for several years, only) university graduate in the officer ranks, having received a BA degree from the University in Melbourne in December 1924. During the period that he was studying from 1920, he had also been employed as an assistant to the university's Registrar and assisted the future Professor Sir Douglas Copland in establishing the Commerce Faculty at Melbourne.

Combined with these superior credentials, Palstra also possessed two other qualifications which were critical for any ambitious officer in Australia's air force of the period: pilot training, and war service. During World War I he had enlisted as a private in the 39th Battalion, AIF, and by early 1917 had been commissioned. In the Battle of Messines he not only survived (being the only officer left in his unit, apart from the CO and adjutant, when it was relieved), but also won the Military Cross and was twice mentioned in dispatches. Later that year he transferred to the Australian Flying Corps, and by September 1918 was flying R.E.8s in the corps reconnaissance role with 3 Squadron, AFC, over the Western Front.

With everything going so strongly for him, Palstra probably knew his prospects in the RAAF were outstanding. In 1928 he was selected for the prestigious and career-enhancing course at Andover, without having to sit the obligatory entrance examination. The other RAAF officer selected to attend the 1929 course there was Squadron Leader George Jones, who noted rather sourly in his 1988 autobiography *From private to air marshal* that Palstra had been exempted from this requirement as a 'special case'—one presumes on the basis that his BA had already established his capacity to handle the educational side of the Staff College course.

Palstra's rapid progress nearly came unstuck at this point, however, when a question arose over whether or not he was a British subject. Although his father was English-born (Yorkshire), he himself had been born at Zwolle, Holland, in 1891—as a consequence of his father being a prominent figure in the Salvation Army who moved around while running that organisation's operations in various countries. Young 'Bill' had accordingly lived for five years in Belgium, followed by nine years in Transvaal (South Africa) and three years in England, before finally arriving in Melbourne in October 1914. Although he had taken a New Zealand-born wife in 1920, and had three children born in Victoria, it was to clarify his nationality that Palstra hurriedly sought and was granted British nationality in November 1928.

Ironically, as part of a program of industry visits by Staff College students, during the last months of 1929 Jones and Palstra had toured the Royal Airship Works at Cardington where *R101* and its sistership *R100* were being built. On completion of their course, it was usual for the new graduates to stay in Britain for another year of duty. In Jones' case this meant a series of training appointments to RAF units, while Palstra went to the ALO job with promotion to squadron leader rank in July 1930. It was while here that the question arose of him accompanying the *R101* on its maiden flight to India.

According to Williams, this was a decision in which he had played some part as CAS. In his 1977 autobiography *These are facts*, Williams recorded that because the new air service was planned to be extended to Australia he was prompted to suggest 'that our liaison officer in London, ... Palstra, travel on the first flight. It is possible that we were offered a place in it but I cannot remember this with certainty.' For his part, Jones was greatly miffed by this,

and wrote in his autobiography that he (Jones) 'fully expected to be chosen since I was the senior officer in England at the time'.



Palstra (second from left) as staff officer to CAS Williams (third left), shown here with other Air Board members during the 1927 visit by the Duke and Duchess of York.

That Jones was not aboard the *R101* when it struck the French hillside was his great fortune. He went on to become a famous figure in RAAF history, retiring in 1952 as an air marshal after ten years as CAS—a term only second to Williams' own record in the post; he was knighted a year later. Whether Jones deserved such a distinguished part in history, and whether his legacy for the air force was worthwhile, will long be debated. But at least he lived to fulfil his potential—unlike Palstra.

Although it is impossible to know to what heights Palstra might have risen, it seems clear that he had the capacity to reach the top ranks of his service. This is not to say that he might have become CAS instead of Jones, but of one thing there is no doubt. If it had been Jones who died in the *R101* instead of Palstra, the history of the RAAF from the 1940s might have been very different indeed.

***The aeroplane comes to us in Australia as a gift from the gods, for it places in our hands and within our resources an agency so exactly suited to our circumstances that we might well regard it as designed for our special benefit and protection.***

- William Morris Hughes  
(Australian prime minister 1915-23), 1934



**Air Power Development Centre**  
Level 3, 205 Anketell Street  
TUGGERANONG ACT 2900

Ph: 02 6266 1355 Fax: 02 6266 1041  
Email: [airpower@defence.gov.au](mailto:airpower@defence.gov.au)  
Web: [www.raaf.gov.au/airpower](http://www.raaf.gov.au/airpower)

