

**On
Target**

Who was Richard Williams?

By Brian Weston



After several mutually supportive years with *Australian Aviation*, the *On Target* column, written on behalf of the Sir Richard Williams Foundation is now to be published in ADBR.

As background, the Sir Richard Williams Foundation is an independent research organisation whose purpose is to promote the development and effective implementation of national security and defence policies as they impact on Australia's ability to generate air power appropriate to its unique geopolitical environment and values.

The Foundation aims to strengthen Australia's national security by advocating the need for forward-looking policies which take full advantage of the potential for air power to shape and influence regional security, and by promoting constructive debate regarding the implementation of such policies.

The Foundation is pleased to take the opportunity offered by the ADBR, and felt an appropriate place to start for this first *On Target* column would be to answer the question, 'Who was Richard Williams?', and why is there a foundation bearing his name.

Richard Williams was born at Moonta Mines, roughly halfway up the eastern coast of the Spencer Gulf in South Australia, on 3 August 1890. After enlisting in the Australian Military Forces, he was commissioned in 1911 and attended the first 'war-flying' course at the Central Flying School at Point Cook in 1914.

Following the raising of the Australian Flying Corps (AFC) in 1915, Williams was posted as a Flight Commander to No 1 Squadron AFC, and accompanied the squadron to Egypt where the unit was to serve with the Royal Flying Corps (RFC). For the next two years, Williams served with distinction and gallantry, rising to command No 1 Squadron.

In June 1918, shortly after the merging of the RFC and the Royal Naval Air Service to form the Royal Air Force (RAF), Williams was appointed to command the RAF's 40th (Army) Wing which comprised No 1 Squadron, and the RAF's Nos 111, 144 and 145 Squadrons. To enable him to command the RAF wing, Williams - already commissioned as a Lieutenant Colonel in the AFC - was also commissioned into the RAF.

At the end of World War I and after spending time in London investigating how Australia might follow Britain in establishing an independent air force, Williams returned to Australia. There, he became the driving force behind the merging of the aviation elements of the Army and Navy into the Australian Air Force

Then WGCCDR Richard Williams escorts HRH The Duke of York at Point Cook in 1927. RAAF



on 31 March 1921 which, soon after, became the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF).

Wing Commander Williams was appointed to head the RAAF, and it fell to him to establish the new service. He was considerably aided by the gifting of a quantity of war surplus aircraft and equipment from Britain.

For the next 17 years - apart from periods of absence to serve with the RAF - Williams fought tenaciously to keep the small independent Australian air service alive in an atmosphere of hostility and severe financial stringency. Therefore, it was inevitable that during those years, Williams made some powerful enemies, especially when in 1929 and 1932 he convinced government not to abolish the RAAF. Subsequently, Williams went on to lay the foundations on which the RAAF was

built to become a mighty force of almost 175,000 personnel during World War 2

Richard Williams never got the opportunity to command the RAAF in war, as following Prime Minister Menzies' decision in 1939 to appoint Englishmen as the Chiefs of the three Australian services on the basis that no Australian service officer had leadership experience of a service in war, Williams was duly despatched to London and later to Washington to see out World War 2.

Williams' autobiography records his views on this; 'Menzies himself was facing a task beyond his experience but he was not calling for an Englishman to solve it.'

But Williams was not done with Australian aviation as, following his retirement from the RAAF in September 1946, he was appointed as Director General of Civil Aviation, leading that department until 1955.

As all Australian aviators know, our country is a nation made for aviation - both military and civil. But who was to build the essential, widespread national aviation support infrastructure on which Australia's civil aviation could prosper? Certainly, Australia's infant civil aviation operators could not as it was a task far beyond them. But it was a task the Department of Civil Aviation undertook under Williams' leadership.

Sir Richard Williams is the greatest figure in Australian military aviation history, and someone who stands tall in the pantheon of great Australians.

His 1977 autobiography, *These are Facts - The Autobiography of Sir Richard Williams, KBE, CB, DSO*, is a must-read for any Australian aviator with an interest in the history and development of Australian aviation. ■