

**On  
Target**

## The Birth of an Australian Air Force - Pt. II

By Brian Weston



**T**he On Target column in the previous edition of *ADBR* – written on behalf of the Sir Richard Williams Foundation – provided a brief outline of the man who is generally regarded as the person responsible not only for establishing an Australian Air Force, but also for establishing a sufficient and robust enough foundation on which it could later expand into a credible Australian Air Force.

This column will further expand on the huge task Richard Williams faced when the Australian Air Force was established on 31 March 1921

– with the prefix Royal being added in August 1921.

The genesis for the establishment of independent air services lay in the rapid advances in military aviation during World War I, accompanied by much theorising about how military aviation might be used in future conflicts to provide alternative strategies to the stagnant, industrial-scale, attritional trench warfare of World War I.

But there was no consensus in this debate about the future strategies, roles and organisation of military aviation, with claim and counter-claim vigorously prosecuted and with navies and armies generally showing little enthusiasm, indeed often outright hostility, for the concept of independent air forces.

Britain, with massive personnel losses in World War I, was at the forefront of the development of new concepts for air operations with a view to finding new ways of winning future conflicts without suffering the huge human losses incurred in World War I. In a watershed decision, Britain decided to establish an independent air force by merging the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) and the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS), on 1 April 1918, to form the Royal Air Force (RAF) – seven months before World War I concluded.

With Australia tied into the British Empire, and with the raising of the Australian Flying Corps (AFC) in 1915 and its subsequent employment with the RFC in the Middle East and the Western Front, Australia soon gained exposure to the employment of military aviation in war. AFC personnel also witnessed the establishment of the RAF as the world's first independent air service, as well as understanding the reasons why the RAF was established.

The debate about the future of Australian military aviation was decided by the Australian Government on 9 September 1920, when speaking in the House of Representatives the Prime Minister, Mr Hughes said:

"It may be confidently expected that aviation and those



scientific methods of warfare which developed so rapidly during the war, and which, particularly during the latter period of the conflict, were resorted to so freely, may develop still further. No doubt that development will completely revolutionise warfare and let us hope that it will make war impossible...

The air, that new element which man has now conquered, is but the sea in another form and it is on the sea and in the air that we shall have to look for our defence..."

We believe too that in the air we may hope to create a force which will be of incomparable service in defending us from an enemy. The Government therefore are placing on the estimates a sufficient sum for the building up of an efficient air force. It is proposed to afford such inducements as are hoped will encourage manufacturers to make engines and aeroplanes in this country and the Government will not hesitate to give a very substantial bonus for that purpose."

To give effect to the government decision, the Air Board was constituted on 9 November 1920, to provide for the governance of the new air force. It comprised four members:

- First Air Member – Director of Operations and Intelligence
- Second Air Member – Director of Personnel and Training
- Third Air Member – Director of Equipment
- Fourth Air Member – Finance Member

Wing Commander Richard Williams was appointed as First Air Member although his position was not as a chief, but as a 'first among equals'.

The task for Williams, and the Air Board he chaired was immense. There was no legislative governance framework unlike the Navy and Army, to which the Naval Defence Act and Defence Act applied. Then there was the matter of the gifting, by Britain, to the new fledgling air force, of 128 aircraft – indeed, the new air force had more aircraft than personnel – including spare parts, engines, motor transport, tenders, motorcycles, tools, ammunition, bombs, cameras, wireless equipment etc, for which there was no process to receive, receipt and account for the gift equipment, nor to store and maintain the equipment.

A not insubstantial task for a new Air Board led by Wing Commander Richard Williams, then 30 years of age. The fact that he did succeed is why he is held in such high regard today. ■

