

## SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

### SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

---

#### **GROUP CAPTAIN REGINALD MAX RECHNER CBE DFC AE**



*Pilot Officer Reg Rechner Western  
Desert RAF No.11 Sqn  
Photo courtesy AWM*

'Reg' Rechner was born in Edithburgh, Yorke Peninsular, South Australia on the 30<sup>th</sup> January 1913. His Father was Alwin Rechner and mother Elizabeth Hedwig Hoffman. He was the youngest of five boys and one girl. He was educated at Edithburgh and Kadina Primary Schools and Adelaide Boys High School.

His lifelong fascination with flying began when he was 7 years old. At that time, World War I pilot, Harry Butler, was barnstorming around the countryside and the young Rechner prevailed upon his father to drive the whole family in a horse and trap 28 miles to Minlaton to see Butler and his Bristol fighter. From that day on his ambition was to fly. He had to wait more than ten years to realise his dream. His first flight was in a Gipsy Moth, piloted by Jack Buckham of the Royal Aero Club of South Australia at

Parafield.

Reg started work for Holden's Motor Body Builders (eventually taken over by General Motors) in 1929, initially in the Personnel Department and later in the Sales Division.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> September 1939, the day after war was declared, he filled out his application for the RAAF. In May 1941 he was called up to enter the No. 1 course Empire Air Training Scheme<sup>1</sup> at Somers in Victoria. He trained on the Tiger Moth at Archerfield and was then posted to Wagga Wagga where he gained his wings. It was here that he first met Wing Commander (later Sir) F.R.W. Scherger, who was his Commanding Officer at the time. Reg was very impressed by Scherger who he thought was an inspirational leader and excellent pilot. Reg was to cross paths with him in later years when Reg was a member of the Air Board and Scherger was Chief of the Air Staff – again when Reg worked for TAA and Scherger was Chairman of the Australian National Airlines Commission.

Reg's initial posting was with the RAF's No. 223 squadron, which was equipped with the Martin Maryland aircraft. This squadron was soon after reformed as a training unit. He was transferred to 11 squadron based in Lebanon operating Mark IV Bristol Blenheim aircraft. He remarked that his new crew was from the UK. His Navigator was from Yorkshire and his Wireless Air gunner was from the Highlands of Scotland.

He could not understand a word from the Scotsman and had to devise a system of communication with numbers. For instance: if the Gunner required the Hydraulics to operate his turret it was "Number 1" and so on. The squadron's main role was reconnaissance in support of the Syrian campaign against the Vichy French. Once this campaign ended his squadron was moved to the Western Desert to fight against Rommel's forces.

In the early hours of one morning 11 Squadron's airfield was attacked and the blast from a bomb knocked Reg unconscious. He also fell awkwardly on his back, injuring his spine. He was taken off flying duties though under orders he made a ferry flight in a Blenheim to Ceylon where his Squadron had been posted. He was then repatriated back to Australia.<sup>2</sup>

Reg was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for "*skill in flying operations against the enemy*"<sup>3</sup> while serving in the Middle East.

On return to Australia the first thing Reg did was to get married. He was engaged in 1940 just before going to war. With the rank of Squadron Leader he was made an instructor at the Operational Training Unit at Bairnsdale and then Commanding Officer of the Beaufort Training Squadron at East Sale. Initially he was on non-flying duties though after a short while was declared fit and resumed flight duty. In 1944 he was promoted to Wing Commander and appointed Staff Officer, Operations, North Western Area, based at Darwin. This was ground position.

*A Bristol Blenheim Mark IV of No. 11 Squadron RAF takes off from Racecourse airfield, Colombo, Ceylon. Photo Courtesy Air Ministry Second World War collection*



After the war ended Reg continued his association with the RAAF. From 1949 to 1951 he was State Commandant of the Air Training Corps. In 1951 he was appointed Commanding Officer of the City of Adelaide No. 24 (Fighter) Squadron<sup>4</sup>. The City of Adelaide Squadron was a flying unit, operating Tiger Moths, Wirraways and P51 Mustangs. Reg was very fond of the Mustang and once led a formation over an ANZAC march in Adelaide. He led the Citizen Air Force section of the RAAF contingent to the Coronation in 1953, and from 1954 to 1960 was the Citizen Air Force member of the RAAF board, with the rank of Group Captain. In 1957 he was appointed Honorary Aide de Comp to the Queen. He was awarded Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 1960 for his services to the Citizen Air Force.

In civilian life, after hostilities ceased, he returned briefly to his previous position at General Motors. Reg felt that he was never welcomed back to General Motors – he felt that they thought he had somehow abandoned the company when he went to war. He resigned from the company and then took the position of Aviation Representative with Commonwealth Oil Refineries Ltd. (Now BP).

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1946 TAA operated its first scheduled service on the Adelaide – Perth route. On the same day the then General Manager of TAA, Lester Brain, offered Reg the position of South Australian Branch Manager. Reg accepted and commenced the role in January 1947. It was to prove a happy choice both for TAA and South Australia, for Reg was to prove himself a magnificent leader of men and women during that period of rapid expansion by TAA, which included the introduction of services to Alice Springs and Darwin. The Territorians liked a colourful character and Reg Rechner was able to fulfill their keenest demands in this direction. Six feet five tall, he became as familiar a figure in the Territory as he was in King William Street. He worked for TAA for the next 26 years until his retirement in 1973. During this period he witnessed the spectacular developments and advancements that took place within TAA and civil aviation in general. He played a large role in TAA's development of routes from South Australia to the Northern Territory. He had a hands – on approach, which had him make 187 trips not only to Darwin and Alice Springs, but also to all of the smaller ports on the way. <sup>5</sup>



*Lester Brain, Doug Laurie, Reg Rechner and  
Captain John Chapman on the tarmac prior to the  
first T.A.A. service to Darwin  
Photo courtesy Challenge in the Skies Ian Sabey*

After retiring in January 1973 he continued to serve on many committees:

- Chairman of the Ross and Keith Smith Memorial appeal.
- Vice President Adelaide Rotary Club
- Director YMCA
- Heart Foundation Appeal Committee
- St John Ambulance Appeal Committee
- Anti Cancer Foundation Appeal Committee
- Chairman South Australian Arthritis/Rheumatism Association
- Chairman Institute of Transport South Australia
- Chairman South Australia Tourist Development Council
- Chairman Probus Club of Stirling
- President Commonwealth Club

Also of significance, Reg Rechner accepted the position of Patron of the South Australian Aviation Museum in 1991. The then President of the museum, Brian Houlson noted at the time, *"I cannot think of a higher compliment to the Museum than to have such a person as Mr Rechner as our Patron"*.<sup>6</sup>

Reg Rechner died on the 7<sup>th</sup> September 1993. His wife of 51 years, Jean and their daughter Mrs. Jenny Cleland survived him.

Paul Divett  
History Group  
South Australian Aviation Museum  
May 2017

---

<sup>1</sup> At the outbreak of the Second World War the British government realised it did not have adequate resources to maintain the Royal Air Force (RAF) in the impending air war in Europe. While British factories could rapidly increase their aircraft production, there was no guaranteed supply of trained aircrew. Pre-war plans had identified a need for 50,000 aircrew annually, but Britain could only supply 22,000.

To overcome this problem, the British government put forward a plan to its dominions to jointly establish a pool of trained aircrew that could then serve with the RAF. In Australia the War Cabinet accepted the proposal and a contingent was sent to a conference in Ottawa, in Canada, to discuss the proposal. After several weeks of negotiations, an agreement was signed on 17 December 1939, which would last for three years. The scheme was known in Australia as the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS).

Source AWM website accessed 16<sup>th</sup> Feb 2017: <https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/raaf/eats/>

<sup>2</sup> Australian War Memorial Interview with Reg Rechner 6<sup>th</sup> July 1993 Ken Llewelyn

<sup>3</sup> Australian War Memorial

<sup>4</sup> On 30 April 1951 No 24 (City of Adelaide) Squadron was reformed at RAAF Mallala. The aircraft flown were the same as the other squadrons. With the exception of replacing the Wirraways with CAC Winjeels, these were operated throughout this squadron's flying life, which ended in 1960. Website accessed 16<sup>th</sup> Feb 2017: [https://www.airforce.gov.au/Our-People/Careers/Air-Force-Reserves/Reserves\\_History/?RAAF-eiaHMPrq0BkkXql4FSgfemhHUFbsvVam](https://www.airforce.gov.au/Our-People/Careers/Air-Force-Reserves/Reserves_History/?RAAF-eiaHMPrq0BkkXql4FSgfemhHUFbsvVam)

<sup>5</sup> Challenge in the Skies Ian Sabey

<sup>6</sup> Props and Mags (newsletter of The South Australian Aviation Museum) Volume 6 Number 11 1991