

## SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

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### AIR MARSHAL SIR RICHARD WILLIAMS KBE CB DSO

#### Pilot, Chief of Air Staff – World Wars I and II

*The son of a Moonta Miner becomes the most significant figure in the history of the RAAF*



**Figure 1 - Air Marshal Richard Williams in 1942.**



**Figure 2 – The first Point Cook pilot's course, November 1914. Sir Richard Williams is front row, third from the left. Images from AWM.**

Richard Williams was born on 3 August 1890 in Moonta, the son of Richard Williams, a miner, and his wife Emily Hodge. Richard grew up in Moonta, attending the Moonta Public School and completing education up to university entry at age 14. Initially employed in the Moonta Post Office as a telegraph messenger, he joined the Union Bank in Kadina in 1906 and then transferred to Adelaide from 1911.

He joined the South Australian Infantry Regiment in 1909 and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in 1911 before joining the permanent forces in 1912. Posted to Victoria in 1913, he successfully applied for the first ever pilots course run at Point Cook, graduating as Australia's first trained military pilot on 12 November 1914. He then completed an advanced flying course in 1915.

Promoted to Captain in January 1916, Williams was appointed Flight Commander No. 1 Squadron (AFC) and left with the squadron in March 1916, arriving in Egypt in April. The squadron initially operated as dispersed elements throughout Royal Flying Corps units but in December 1916, came together as one discrete unit. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order in August 1917, for showing conspicuous gallantry for attacking and dispersing an enemy force, flying at low level through intense anti-aircraft fire, and for landing behind enemy lines to rescue downed fellow pilot, LT Adrian Cole.

Promoted to Major in May 1917, he was given command of No. 1 Squadron. In June 1918, he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and appointed Commander of the RAF's

40<sup>th</sup> Wing, comprising of No. 1 Squadron and three other RAF Squadrons in Palestine. This was a significant achievement for a young AFC pilot.



**Figure 3** - *Sir Richard Williams while CO of 1 SQN AFC.*

for the creation of the Royal Australian Air Force as an independent service in 1921. Showing immense political acumen, Williams fought to not only preserve but to expand the fledgling RAAF over the next two decades, serving initially as the First Air Board Member but then as the service's initial Chief of Air Staff (CAS), at Wing Commander rank. He would go on to serve in the position three times throughout the interwar years, rising to the rank of Air Vice-Marshal in 1935 and finally gaining equivalent rank to the other service chiefs.

During the interwar years, Williams completed the British Army Staff College and Royal Air Force Staff College in 1923, followed by study in Canada and the USA in 1924, as well as the Imperial War College in London in 1933. Displaying considerable intellectual ability, in 1925 he produced a major warfare study for the defence of Australia that identified Japan as its greatest military threat and advocated the development of air power to protect Australian's northern approaches.

In 1926, he led a three-person major pioneering endurance flight, flying a De Havilland DH50A seaplane over 10,000 miles to the Solomon Islands and back, visiting New Guinea and other islands to evaluate the area for air operations, demonstrate the utility of aircraft and the new RAAF and achieve some personal recognition, noting the increasing interest in long range flights at the time. It was the first international flight undertaken by a RAAF aircraft and led to him being appointed a Commander of the British Empire (CBE) in January 1927.

Ironically, being the pre-eminent RAAF leader at the start of World War II, Williams spent most of World War II overseas in England and the United States, and largely kept away from the CAS position, from which he had shrewdly guided the development of the RAAF between the wars. The decisions for this were largely political, where his more than twenty years of playing all his political acumen had finally lost support at the highest level of the Australian government, despite being made the RAAF's first Air Marshal in 1940.

Retiring from the RAAF in 1946, to make way for younger senior officers from World War II, Williams continued his public service by being appointed Director-General of Civil Aviation; a position he served in for almost ten years. He was knighted in 1954.

The Wing achieved great success in the Palestine campaign, where reconnaissance, interdiction and close air support provided was instrumental in the defeat of the Turkish forces. Further recognition came with Williams being Mentioned in Despatches twice and made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire. By the end of the war, he was the AFC's foremost operational commander.

It was between the wars, however, where Williams' impact really came to the fore. Appointed Director of Aviation Services in the Australian Air Corps, a position from which he was instrumental in pushing

Passing away in 1980, Sir Richard Williams is commonly regarded as the 'Father of the RAAF', having been the single person most responsible for the establishment and development of the RAAF between the two World Wars. He remains the RAAF's longest-serving head of service, totaling thirteen years over three terms: October to December 1922, February 1925 to December 1932, and June 1934 to February 1939. He is without a doubt, the most significant figure in the history of the RAAF, but one whose immense capacity as an operational commander during World War I is often overlooked.

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