SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

CAPTAIN HENRY JOHN BUTLER RFC 1889-1924

Captain Harry Butler RFC

After a distinguished Great War service with the Royal Flying Corps, Captain Butler returned to Adelaide to found the first commercial aviation company in the State. He established its first two pre-eminent airfields, the second of which became South Australia's first Commonwealth aerodrome. He became the State's best known aviator for his time and flew the first airmail flight over water in the State.

'Captain Harry Butler' was born Henry John Butler on the 9th November 1889 at Yorktown in South Australia. His parents, John and Sarah Butler owned a small farming property at Koolwurtie near the town of Minlaton, and it was at this farm that Butler, at a very early age, had been influenced with stories concerning aviation. An article published in the *York Peninsula Country Times* mentions how the young Harry was obsessed with the exploits of the pioneer aviators. (York Peninsula Country Times 1999).

One of the most important events in Butler's life was when he became aware of the work being done at Smithfield in Adelaide by Carl (Bill) Wittber. Wittber, in the early decade of the Twentieth Century, was one of South Australia's true pioneer aviators. Like Butler and his motorcycle, he had purchased a Bleriot monoplane and thought not only could he improve and build a better airframe, he would also build an aircraft engine to go with it. The Harry Butler Story mentions that Wittber's aircraft was the first real aircraft that Butler had ever seen, let alone climbed into the cockpit and tried the controls. A strong friendship developed between Butler and Bill Wittber and it was uncommon for Butler not to travel, every Saturday, the 120 miles from Minlaton to Smithfield to work and learn from Wittber. In those days prior to World War 1, Butler spent his weekdays working as a farmer and his weekends learning to be an aviator. (*The Harry Butler Story* 1989)

The First World War changed many lives, some for the worse and others for the better. To Butler, it was the opportunity he had been waiting for the chance to fly. In February 1915 he travelled to Point Cook to join the Air Force. Angered by what he saw as unnecessary delays, he borrowed money and used what savings he had to travel by ship to England to join The Royal Flying Corps.

In 1916 he enlisted as an Air Mechanic, and it was obvious to those in authority that Butler's abilities were far in advance of the requirements for this position. He had that rare talent of being a natural flier. With his mechanical background and his undoubted aeronautical knowledge he was gazetted second lieutenant within three weeks of service with the RFC. As time passed it became obvious that his true talent was in instructing others in the art of piloting and understanding what flying was all about. Butler was no ordinary instructor: not only did he have an uncanny instinct in the air he had that ability to pass that knowledge to others. He became a Captain and a Flight Commander and throughout his time at the training school 2,700 pupils were passed out to serve with the RFC. Even for those wartime days this was a remarkable record. Perhaps what made Butler different from many others doing similar instructing duties was his decision to fly to France, attach himself to a fighter squadron and fly in combat against the German air force. He made notes as to what the German fighter tactics were and to work out how such tactics could be countered. Sometimes his stay in the front lines would stretch to an eight week period. On returning to England he would pass that information to others, and through that knowledge the lives of many of his pupils may well have been saved.

His front line combat ended over Douai on February 1918 when he received a head wound but he remained with the RFC until Armistice Day in 1918. It was in December of that year that he received the Air Force Cross for his service with the RFC.

Butler returned to Australia convinced he could achieve two things: one was to be able to impart his extensive aviation knowledge to benefit the aviation world in South Australia, and the second was to develop a method of message distribution he had learnt during the war, using aircraft. This idea stemmed from the fact of being able to drop weighted messages from his aircraft to the ground when speed was essential and the normal communication channels were unusable. It could be assumed that Butler was thinking about what later became known as an airmail system.

Butler arrived home on the 5th July 1919, and a short time later, the two aircraft he had acquired in England arrived. One was a Bristol M.1.C monoplane and the other an Avro 504K biplane. He also imported three 110 hp Le Rhone rotary engines which could be used in either aircraft. Both his aircraft and engines came to Australia under the care of Lt H.A. Kauper, Samuel C. Crawford and Leslie. J. Lucas.

Soon after the arrival of his Bristol aircraft, Butler was giving air displays which included aerobatics he had used in combat on the Western Front. His daring displays as well as his personality and obvious love of flying, did much to encourage many South Australians to show an interest in aviation. To quote from the Harry Butler Story:

History shows that he was a little before his time, but single-mindedness
and determination roused latent enthusiasm in many South Australians
and throughout the country he encouraged and inspired men to cling to their
belief in the future of flying.

In August 1919 Butler and Kauper formed a company which they called The Harry Butler and Kauper Aviation Co Ltd. This company was formed at an air strip at Northfield in Adelaide. By October 1920 the company operated from an airfield at Albert Park, Adelaide, which Butler had purchased out of his own money. These airfields proved to be very significant to aviation history in the State of South

Australia. Butler made his Northfield aerodrome available to the Smith Brothers for the arrival of their Vimy aircraft (G-EAOU) on the 23rd March 1920. This airfield was selected because it met the requirements for the personal safety of Ross Smith and his aircraft. It also had the necessary pre-requisites for controlling the massive crowds which attended his arrival. Butler's other airfield at Albert Park was deemed the best airfield available by the Civil Aviation Branch to become the site of the first Adelaide Commonwealth aerodrome. It was compulsory purchased on 5th July 1922and later became the centre of aviation activity in the State.

The company business was to be "manufacturers and importers of aircraft, motor cars and merchandise". Despite the Articles of the business, the company's most profitable pursuits were in: Harry Butler exhibiting himself and his aircraft, pleasure and business flights for members of the public, motor and general engineering services, and when the occasion arose, advertising. It was the first commercial aviation company in South Australia.

Harry Butler (right) with Harry Kauper posing in front of Butler's Bristol M1C monoplane (Red Devil) July 1919.

On August 6th 1919 Butler flew his red painted Bristol monoplane (the Red Devil) from Adelaide to his home town at Minlaton. What made this flight significant was that it was the first flight ever made over the Gulf St Vincent, a distance 67 miles (108 logram bag containing postcards and letters for the people of Yorke Peninsula. Butler had carried the first airmail from Adelaide to Yorke Peninsula. Besides exciting approximately 6000 people who were there to greet him, many of whom would never had seen an aircraft, let alone one in flight, he returned to Adelaide carrying two mailbags which he gave to the members of the postal service.

In the years 1920 and 1921 Butler was often forced to use unserviceable paddocks to land his aircraft. He also had to face all weather conditions in his quest to satisfy the demands of his business and his desire to pioneer aviation. He was noted as saying: "if it was good enough for all you people to come out, it's good enough for me to go up" (The Harry Butler Story. 1989)

It was said of him that he loved a challenge and one which could test his powers as a pilot. Such a challenge was provided at Australia's first Aerial Derby, held on September 8th 1920 at Adelaide. Flying against Captain Frank McNamara V.C and Lt F.S. Briggs, Butler won the race and further enhanced his reputation as a very skilled aviator.

He also took some of the first aerial photographs ever taken above the streets of Adelaide, which were published by the newspapers of the time.

As the months of 1921 passed it became obvious that the company could not support both Butler and Kauper. It was decided to put the company into liquidation on September 24th. Butler purchased the assets of the company and continued to operate alone. He only had a little over four months as the sole operator, before January 11th 1922. This was the day he had taken off in the Avro

504 with Mr Miles as passenger when just after takeoff the engine failed. The aircraft dropped its nose and flew straight into the ground. Mr Miles was uninjured but Butler sustained serious head injuries. During the months following this crash Butler underwent numerous operations to restore some of the damage. He never fully recovered and died on July 9th 1922 aged 34 years.

Captain Harry Butler AFC was respected and honoured in his own lifetime. Shortly before his death it was recorded that he was emotionally overcome by the tributes paid to him by so many people heralding his achievements as a pioneer, an exceptional airman, and his fine qualities as a man. (*The Harry Butler Story* 1989).

His memory has been perpetuated with a memorial unveiled on Sunday 6th August 1989 in his home town of Minlaton. It was built to house his old, but refurbished Bristol monoplane 'The Red Devil'. There is also an oil portrait of him currently held by the Art Gallery of South Australia.
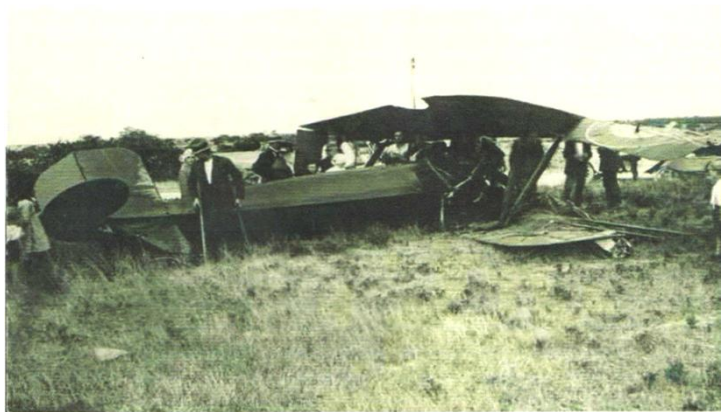
Crash of Capt Harry Butler's Avro 504 January 14th 1922

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