

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

WALTER HENRY SHIERS – A brief biography

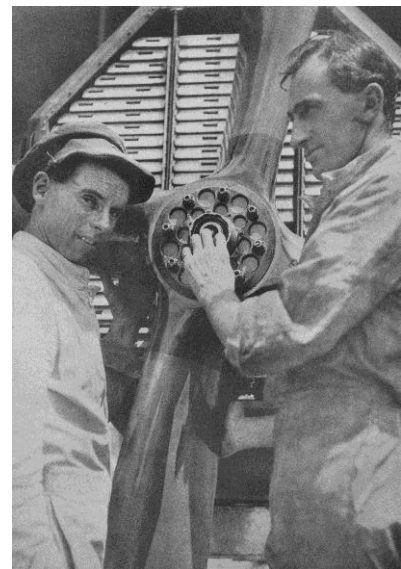


*Wally Shiers after the historic Vickers Vimy flight England-Australia in 1919
[Photo – SAAM Collection via Mike Milln]*

Walter Henry "Wally" Shiers was born on 17 May 1889 at Norwood in SA and educated at Richmond Public School in Adelaide. He began working in a market garden in 1902 and learnt the basics of mechanical maintenance, but in 1904 his mother died so he went to live with a brother at Broken Hill and was employed at Broken Hill North Mine until December 1912.

Shiers moved to NSW and from 1913 worked as an electrical contractor at Leeton in NSW. After the outbreak of the First World War he enlisted in the AIF at Liverpool on Easter Monday 9 April 1915, and embarked as Trooper in the 4th Light Horse Brigade Ammunition Reserves on the troop transport *Vestalia* on 22 June. Promoted to Driver, he served with the Australian Light Horse in Egypt until he was attached to No.1 Australian Flying Corps squadron in October 1916, before being taken on strength as 2nd Class Air Mechanic in March 1917 (it has been published that he was transferred to the AFC in July 1916, a probable confusion with his transfer to the Light Horse 1st Double Squadron at that time. These were units formed with dismounted Light Horsemen for protection of the Suez Canal).

Remustered as Fitter and Turner, Shiers served with 1AFC throughout the war and was promoted to 1st Class Air Mechanic. Experience in the maintenance of the various aircraft types operated by the squadron included the single twin-engined Handley-Page O/400 C9681 bomber allotted to the unit in time for the September opening of the final Allied offensive which culminated in the 31 October 1918 Armistice in the Middle East war zone.



Wally Shiers and Jim Bennett at work

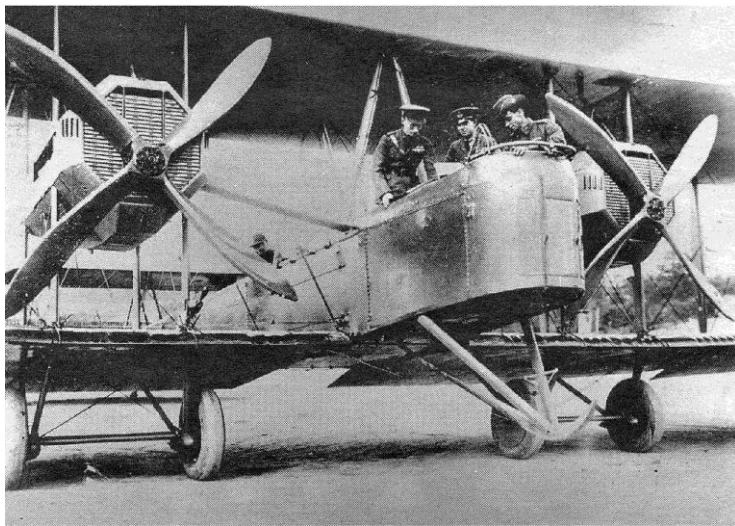
[Photo – from 14,000 through the Air, Ross Smith, via Mike Milln]

After the general Armistice on 11 November 1918 which brought the Great War to an end, Major Gen W. G. H. Salmond, the GOC RAF Middle East, and Brig Gen A. E. Borton, OIC RAF Palestine Brigade, left Cairo on 29 November 1918 in Handley Page O/400 C9700 with Captain Ross Smith as pilot and Sergeants J. M. Bennett and Acting Sergeant W. H. Shiers as mechanics. The plan was to explore the possibility of an air route from England to

Australia, the first step being to fly to India. They reached Delhi on 12 December 1918 and then flew on to Calcutta, having completed one of the longest survey flights in the world up to that time.

From Calcutta the party travelled by steamers through Singapore to the Thailand region. This took three months and in the meantime the O/400 was wrecked back in India, so any plan to reach Australia was cancelled. For their part in the event Shiers and Bennett were awarded the Air Force Medal.

Bennett and Shiers remained in India and were attached during July and August 1919 to No.31 Squadron RAF at Risalpur to supervise the rigging of their new Bristol Fighters. This was in the theatre of operations of the 3rd Afghan Campaign (War) which was waged from 6 May to 8 August 1919, and their attachment to the RAF squadron qualified both Australians to wear the India General Service Medal with Clasp "Afghanistan NWF 1919" (in 1927 Shiers requested confirmation of his right to wear the medal, and finally received the medal itself in 1935. Bennett presumably made no moves to obtain similar recognition before he was killed in 1922). They returned to England in September 1919, and the following month were granted permission to return to Australia as competitors in a machine entered in the England to Australia Aerial Flight.



*Shiers in the front cockpit of Vimy G-EAOU, Ross and Keith Smith behind and Jim Bennett in the rear
[Photo – SAAM collection, via Nigel Daw]*

Between 12 November and 10 December 1919 Wally Shiers and Jim Bennett flew as mechanics with the brothers Ross and Keith Smith in the Vickers Vimy G-EAOU on the £10,000 first England-Australia flight, for which the mechanics were each awarded a Bar to the AFM on 22 December 1919. Shiers was promoted to Sergeant on completion of the flight at Darwin and Bennett became Warrant Officer Class 1 at the same time, while both mechanics were granted the rank of Honorary Lieutenant in the AIF Reserve of Officers on 1 September 1920. The details of the historic flight have been so well documented in various publications that they require no repeating here.

Later that same year Shiers operated a motor garage in Sydney and was elected to the committee of the Australian Flying Corps Association. Sadly, in 1922 he was one of the Chief Mourners at the funeral in Adelaide of Sir Ross Smith, who was killed in England along with Jim Bennett in the crash of their Vickers Viking amphibian during preparation for a round-world flight.

In 1925 Shiers engaged in a barnstorming endeavour with D. A. B. Smith, and in 1928 he joined the company Air Travel Ltd of R. M. King and G. N. Mills as well obtaining his "A" licence in 1929.

The following year he again teamed up with Dave Smith in an attempt to fly from Australia to England in Smith's Ryan B1 Monoplane VH-UIZ *City of Sydney*, which had been operated by New South Wales Airways Ltd of which Smith was a director. On 24 March 1930 the pair left Sydney for a planned start from Wyndham, but became lost and force landed in the Ord River area until found by a land party a week later. After long delays the Ryan was repaired on the spot and finally departed Wyndham to reach Singapore on 22 April, but another forced landing was made in Thailand which



*Ryan B1 Monoplane used by Dave Smith and Wally Shiers in
attempted Australia-England flight
[Photo – PD via Mike Milln]*

by John Dowie at Adelaide Airport which featured the Smith brothers, Jim Bennett and himself, and was displayed adjacent to the original Vickers Vimy that brought them fame. After the Second World War he lived in Sydney suffering deteriorating health until he returned in about 1965 to Adelaide, where on 2 June 1968 he died.

sufficiently damaged the Ryan for it to be shipped home, where it was repaired and used for barnstorming until sold to New England Airways on 3 October 1930.

After his return from Thailand Shiers also went to New England Airways where he became Chief Engineer, and he stayed with the company until the Second World War, by which time it had become Airlines of Australia. During the war from 1939-45 he joined the parachute maker Light Aircraft Co. in Sydney, and was still an executive of the company until around 1960.

In April 1958 Shiers was the only survivor at the dedication of a 1919 England-Australia memorial sculpture

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