

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR & AVIATION EVENTS PROFILES

Warrant Officer Robert Graham Williams MBE

Navigator, Prisoner of War, First Class Cricketer

South Australian 1st Grade Cricketer serving as a Navigator in RAF Squadron in World War 2 is shot down and captured serving four years in captivity before playing in the Victory Tests



Warrant Officer Robert Graham Williams

During May, we acknowledge the Victory in Europe Anniversary which recognises the official surrender of German forces on the 8 May 1945. Only two weeks after, the first of five 'Victory Tests' were played between a Combined Australian Services Cricket Team and an English National side.

The Australian Services side had a large RAAF contingent including Flying Officer Keith Miller, the future great Australian all-rounder, and five South Australians including: FSGT Jim Workman, FLTLT Ross Stanford, FLGOFF Eddy Williams, FLGOFF Reg Ellis and WOFF Robert Williams.

The story of Robert Graham Williams is particularly noteworthy as he had only just been repatriated from a German Prisoner of War in April 1945.

Robert Graham Williams was born in Adelaide on 4 April 1911. His father, Spencer Williams, was a wool expert. Growing up in St Peters, Williams attended Prince Alfred College from 1922 to 1927. After school, he completed a Diploma of Wool Classing at the Adelaide School of Mines and Industries, graduating in 1934. He was employed by the Adelaide firm Goldsbrough Mort and Company as a wool classer. Living with his parents he was a good sportsman representing his school and clubs in athletics, football, swimming, squash and particularly cricket.

Williams was selected in the South Australian 11 in 1932-33 season and went on to represent South Australia in the 1935-36, 1936-37 and the 1937-38 seasons. He was a tall fast-medium bowler and useful lower-order batsman. He had his best season for South Australia in 1937-38, when he took 24 wickets at an average of 24 and made 233 runs at 21 while also recording his best bowling figures when he took 6 for 21 against Queensland on Christmas Day 1937. During 1938 he worked and played in Bradford, Yorkshire, England, where he played with some success for Bradford in the Bradford Cricket League.

Williams enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force on 29 April 1940 at No 5 Recruiting Centre, Adelaide, as trainee aircrew. Completing air observer training at No 1 Air Observer School at Cootamundra from May to September 1940, Williams then attended No 1 Bombing and Gunnery School from September to November 1940 and No 1 Air Navigation School from November to December 1940. Graduating as an Air Observer (Navigator) on 17 December 1940 with the rank of Sergeant, Williams was identified for deployment to the Middle East, serving with a Royal Air Force Squadron.

Williams arrived in Egypt on 24 March 1941 and at 39 Squadron (RAF) on 5 April 1941. The squadron had just transitioned to the Martin Maryland bomber aircraft which it used for long range reconnaissance missions. At the time, the North African campaign was going poorly for the allies with the Germans advancing on Tobruk.

On 16 June 1941 he was on only his 12th mission, a reconnaissance mission over northern Libya in RAF Maryland aircraft AH300. Williams and his three other crew, a South African Air Force pilot and a RAF rear gunner and wireless operator, took off from Fuka at 5:50am. Flying at 16,000 feet they were conducting a reconnaissance mission capturing imagery along the route from Darnah to Gazala to Bardia, incorporating Tobruk. After egressing the Bardia target, their aircraft was attacked by a Me109 German fighter with cannon fire destroying the Maryland's radio precluding any internal communications in the aircraft. The pilot took violent evasive action but the Me 109 continued its attack repeatedly striking the Maryland bomber. The pilot crash-landed the aircraft with the crew abandoning the aircraft while the Me 109 returned to strafe the aircraft setting it alight and wounding the pilot.



*A Martin Maryland Mk II *AH284) of No 39 Squadron (RAF) undergoing servicing on an airstrip in North Africa as another aircraft returns from a reconnaissance flight.(IWM)*

They crash landed about 70 miles behind German lines. While Williams, and his South African Air Force pilot and a RAF rear gunner survived the crash, the RAF SGT wireless operator was killed in the action, reportedly bailing out and never being found. After walking 5 miles, Williams and his two colleagues were captured by a German patrol, destined to serve the remainder of the war as prisoners of war (POW).

In early July 1941, the RAF and RAAF learned that Williams was captured and a POW and thus able, to remove him from the missing in action list and advise his family accordingly.

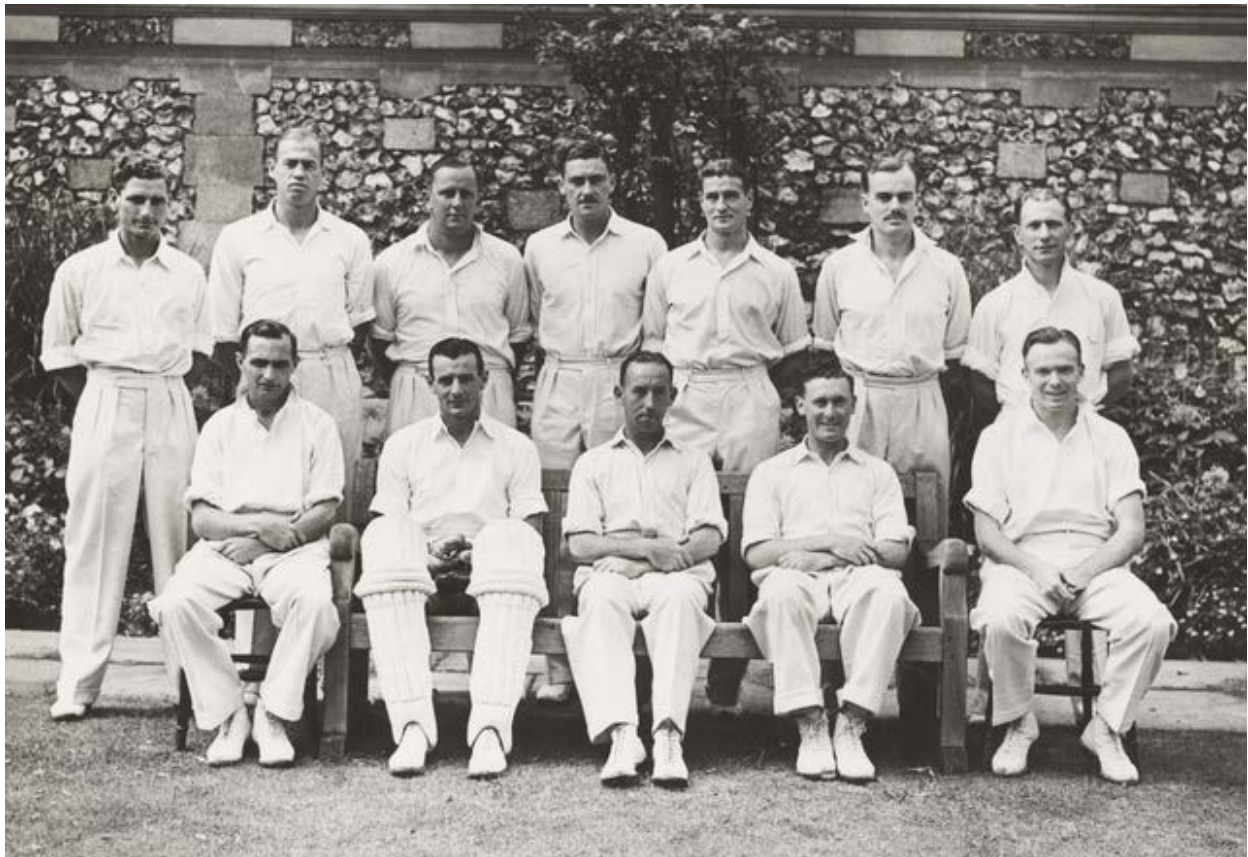
Williams was interred in three POW Stalag camps for the remainder of the war in various locations across Europe. While imprisoned he took on the duties of being a prisoner support officer. He regularly communicated with the Red Cross on POWs and their needs and even learned Braille so he could teach it to blind prisoners. He also taught agriculture, economics and touch typing in the prison camps. Williams was promoted to Flight Sergeant and then Warrant Officer during his interment. He was finally liberated in April by advancing allied forces and arrived back in England on 11 April 1945.



Portrait image of Warrant Officer Robert Graham Williams, taken at Gloucester, England, on 2 June 1945, in between the famous Victory Tests. (AWM)

Several weeks later, Williams was selected to play in the Australian Services XI cricket side against England in the famous five Victory Tests, played from mid-May to mid-August 1945. The first match was played only two weeks after the surrender of the German forces on 7 May. Williams, the Australian's primary strike bowler was significantly underweight and still recovering from his internment. He was an incredible 31 kg or 68 pounds below his pre-war playing weight.

In between overs he drank glasses of glucose and water to keep his energy up, but at one stage, was unable to continue bowling and the now famous Australian Keith Miller, a former fighter pilot himself, took his place. When it was Williams turn to bat at the fall of the seventh wicket, the 15,000 strong crowd gave Williams a standing ovation which Keith Miller later noted as "*the most touching moment I have ever seen or heard, almost orchestral in its sound and feeling*". According to Miller, it was "*a great ovation that compares with anything ever given Bradman, Lillee or Richards. But it was not the sort of clapping and cheering that greets a hundred. This is different. Everyone stood up. They all knew about Graham's captivity. He was a big fella, but he was gaunt from his experience, and he just walked round for a while as if in a trance.*" Williams went on to score 53 off 57 balls in that innings after taking 2-for 56 in the first English innings.



The Australian Services Victory Test Team for the third match at Lords on 17 July 1945. Williams is second from the left in the back row. The great Keith Miller is third from the right in the back row. (AWM)

Ironically, although being called the 'Victory Tests' and being played against a near full strength English side, the matches were not given Test match status by the participating Boards of Control, because the Australian Cricket Board feared their side was not strong enough to compete with a near Test-strength England. Accordingly, Williams was never recognized as an Australian test cricketer.

Returning to Adelaide in late 1945, he was discharged from the RAAF on 3 December 1945. On 28 December 1945, he was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) for distinguished service as a POW. Tragically, he never played first class cricket again after his return to Australia.

Williams married Josephine Simpson in Adelaide in January 1946. His Services XI teammate, Albert Cheetham, was his best man. He resumed working as a wool classer with Goldsbrough Mort after the war.

Robert Graham Williams MBE passed away in Adelaide on 31 August 1978 and was interred at Centennial Park Cemetery, Adelaide.

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