

Leading Aircraftman Alex Taylor

One of South Australia's first Aboriginals to join the RAAF

NB. This document contains imagery of Aboriginal people who have since died which may cause sadness and distress.

Alex Taylor was born on 10 June 1925, the third child of Richard Taylor and Molly Niningaya in Pertame country in southern Northern Territory along the border with South Australia. His father initially worked as a stockman before becoming a cameleer working with camel trains in southern Northern Territory and northern South Australia. Life was hard.

According to enlistment papers, Alex was born at Charlotte Waters, a small telegraph station and settlement in the Northern Territory of Australia located close to the South Australian border, established in the late 19th Century. As technology improved, the telegraph station at Charlotte Waters was abandoned and by the mid 1930s, the small settlement comprised just a small police station serving the pastoralists and local Indigenous people before being abandoned in 1939. However, Taylor's younger sister, Myra, wrote that he was born at Horseshoe Bend on the Finke River about 245km northwest of Charlotte Waters. Like Charlotte Waters, Horseshoe Bend was first established as a small overland telegraph staging post, further developing into a small settlement with a hotel, post office and police station to support pastoralists.

In the late 1920s the family moved to Oodnadatta in search of better work and life. The family settled on the fringes of the town living in the bush in a *Watuti*, a bush shelter of branches, leaves and grass in the Yankunytjatjara language. Dick Taylor also built a shack constructed from a tree, galvanized corrugated iron and fence posts. The family largely lived on bush food, flour, rice, basic vegetables such as onions and potatoes with basic

meat (salted, tinned or fresh if possible). Alex's father had his own camel train by this stage and when not transporting goods via camel, worked as a stockman on local stations. During this period, Alex Taylor attended the local Oodnadatta Primary School which comprised not more than 20 children but where Alex prospered as a student, excelling beyond many of the others. His sister recalls "Alex was the really brainy one. He was too brainy. We called him Alex the bookworm." Realising Alex's capacity to learn, Dick Taylor arranged for him to attend the Colebrook Children's Home at Quorn, located 750km south of Oodnadatta where he would have a more stable life and obtain a stronger education at better schools. The Colebrook Home was previously the Oodnadatta Children's Home, established by the United Aborigines Mission (UAM) in 1924, under the supervision of missionary Miss Annie Lock. In 1927, the home was moved to Quorn and was renamed Colebrook Children's Home. In 1933, the Colebrook Children's Home moved into a larger house with better access to water. Managed by Matron Ruby Hyde and Sister Delia Rutter, Colebrook Home was one of the noted South Australian aboriginal homes between the wars and post-World War 2 up to the 1970s. During the late 1920s and 1930s,



LAC Alex Taylor in RAAF uniform. (SLSA)



The small settlement at Horseshoe Bend in the 1920s where Alex Taylor was reportedly born in June 1925. (SLSA)

Alex was at the school at the same time as George Tongerie and Reg Barnes, two other young Indigenous children who like Alex would later serve for their country in the RAAF during World War 2.

Living at Colebrook Children's Home, Alex obtained his Qualifying Certificate from the Quorn Primary School and then completed several years at Quorn High School where he performed very well.

Leaving school, Alex moved to Adelaide, gaining employment as a storeman with Gerard and Goodman Ltd, an electrical engineering company. The company was established by Alfred Edward Gerard (11 August 1877 – 13 October 1950), known as "A. E. Gerard", a South Australian electrician and businessman who was at the forefront in founding and financially supporting the United Aborigines'

Mission (UAM), which operated Colebrook Children's Home in Quorn. In Adelaide, Alex lived with his guardian, Miss M Wiley, at 57 Pulsford Road, Prospect, and George Tongerie, who he had attended school with at Colebrook Children's Home.



The Colebrook Home in Quorn that Alex Taylor attended during the 1930s. (SLSA)

Two Young S.A. Aborigines For Air Force

Two 18-year-old aboriginal trainees have been called up for the Royal Australian Air Force.

They are George Tongerie and Alec Taylor, both of Pulsford road, Prospect. George went into the R.A.A.F. a fortnight ago and Alec will go in on Tuesday.

The only other aboriginal to enter the R.A.A.F. from South Australia is Jeff Barnes, who enlisted two years ago and is still on active service.

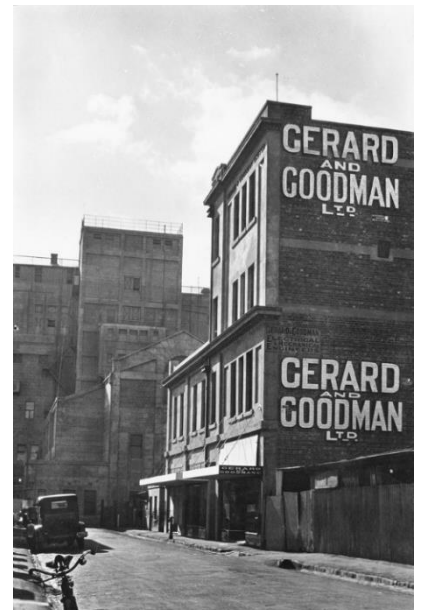
Alec Taylor is going into the air force as an electrician. He was employed for more than three years by Gerard and Goodman, of Adelaide. Mr. Hubert Gerard, a director, said that Alec was smart and capable. He had been an enthusiastic church worker.

Mr. W. R. Penhall, of the Aborigines Department, said that after much difficulty in Adelaide, he had applied to the Air Board, Melbourne, which finally gave consent for Alec's acceptance into the air force.

Alec and George were for a number of years inmates of the Colebrook Mission Home for aboriginal children at Quorn.

Completing three and half years with Gerard and Goodman, Alex enlisted in the RAAF as a Trainee Technician on 13 July 1943 at No 5 Recruit Centre, Adelaide just after turning 18 in June. Interestingly, he enlisted just after George Tongerie. Both the George Tongerie and Alex Taylor enlistments were reported in the local Adelaide newspaper, The Mail, on Saturday 10 July 1943 with the title "Two South Australian Aborigines for Air Force" suggesting Alex and Tongerie were among the first South Australian Aborigines to enlist in the Air Force

Left - press report from Adelaide's The Mail of 10 July 1943 noting Alex Taylor's enlistment as one of South Australia's first Aborigines to enter the RAAF (Trove)



The Gerard and Goodman Ltd building in central Adelaide in the 1930s.

Alex was immediately posted to No. 1 Recruit Depot at Shepparton, where he completed basic training. No. 1 Recruit Depot was established in Melbourne in 1940 to conduct basic recruit training including drill, weapons, and aircraft identification. The unit moved to Shepparton at the Shepparton Showgrounds in February 1942. Accommodated in tents, the training and conditions were tough. In addition to conducting basic recruit training, the unit also trained drill instructors, guards, aerodrome defence instructors, Air Defence Officers and Warrant Officers (disciplinary).

Completing a short attachment at No. 1 Aircraft Park at Geelong from August to September 1943, Alex then attended No. 4 School of Technical training from September to November

1943 completing No 279 Technical Trainee Course. Located in Adelaide's central business district on North Terrace, No. 4 School of Technical training had been formed in April 1940 as one of seven technical schools around Australia to assist in

training the thousands of airmen required to sustain what became the fourth largest air force in the world in late 1944. Accommodation and training was provided in the one area. The school conducted training for maintenance personnel, service police, storekeepers, trainee technicians, electricians, cooks, stewards, fitters, armourers, and dental staff. By late 1945, almost 22,000 trainees had passed through the school.



No 4 School of Technical Training on North Terrace, Adelaide, during World War 2. (SLSA)

Alex Taylor was then attached to No. 1 Engineering School at Ascot Vale, Melbourne, where he completed No. 333 Flight Rigger Course and remustered to Flight Rigger on 20 February 1944.

As a trained flight rigger, Alex Taylor was trained to work on the control mechanisms of aircraft. This involved the adjustment and maintenance of all movable flight controls attached to an aircraft's operational surfaces such as wings and the vertical and horizontal stabilisers on the tailplane. In addition, he would have also worked on engines and undercarriage components. The work was important and mission critical, with any problems potentially resulting in the aircraft experiencing problems in the air and possibly leading to accidents. His completion of such training reflected his successful education, capacity to learn complex mechanical trades and trust by the Air Force to work on vital aircraft components.

Having completed his flight rigging training, Alex was posted to his first operational unit, No. 2 Air Observers School (2AOS), at Mt Gambier, South Australia. No. 2 Air Observers Squadron was formed at RAAF Station Mt Gambier in February 1941 under the command of SQNLDR Shaw, an RAF Officer who had come to Australia in June 1940 to assist in establishing the Empire Air Training Scheme. The Empire Air Training Scheme Agreement required Australia to train thousands of aircrew for the war. Schools were established around Australia in regional towns within flying distance of large cities. In July 1939, the Commonwealth purchased the airfield at Mt Gambier with the intent of establishing a RAAF base. In September 1939, it was announced that a training base would be established at Mt Gambier and during 1940, construction was underway to build the base including barracks, classrooms, storage facilities, hangars and aircraft aprons and an extended runway.



RAAF Station Mt Gambier in World War 2 with its extensive barracks, hangars, flightline with aircraft and two runways. (AWM)

2AOS was established to train aircrew trainees in navigation and air observation. It was one of the first training schools established under the EATS in Australia. The first course, comprising 46 navigator trainees commenced in March and courses commenced monthly from then on. By April, the base had 26 Officers and 519 airmen. During the war period, the unit trained over 4,000 trainees in navigation and air observation.

The main aircraft based at 2AOS were Avro Ansons but the unit also operated DH-84 Dragon aircraft and Fairey Battles and several small aircraft for communications roles. The unit had over 50 Avro Ansons. Being a Flight Rigger at 2AOS, Taylor would have been working on all of these aircraft on routine servicing or whenever flight control problems were encountered. In June 1944, Taylor was promoted to Leading Aircraftman.

Completing eight months at 2AOS, Taylor was posted to No. 4 Personnel Depot in Adelaide before moving shortly thereafter to No. 2 Reserve Personnel Pool, Northern



2AOS Anson and DH-84 Dragon aircraft on the Mt Gambier flightline. (AWM)

Territory from which he was posted to No 7 Repair and Salvage Unit at Darwin on 20 December 1944.

Originally formed at RAAF Richmond in June 1942, No. 7 Repair and Salvage Unit relocated to Pell in the Northern Territory. By February 1944, it was based at Darwin once the threat of Japanese air attack had subsided. The unit's primary role was to maintain Supermarine Spitfires, but it also serviced Mitchell and Wirraway aircraft from the fighter airfields at Sattler, Strauss and Livingstone. It also operated three mobile repair and salvage detachments that travelled across the north including Pine Creek, Humpty Doo, Cape Shield, Millingimbi, Bathurst Island, Melville Island, Wyndham and Daly Waters.

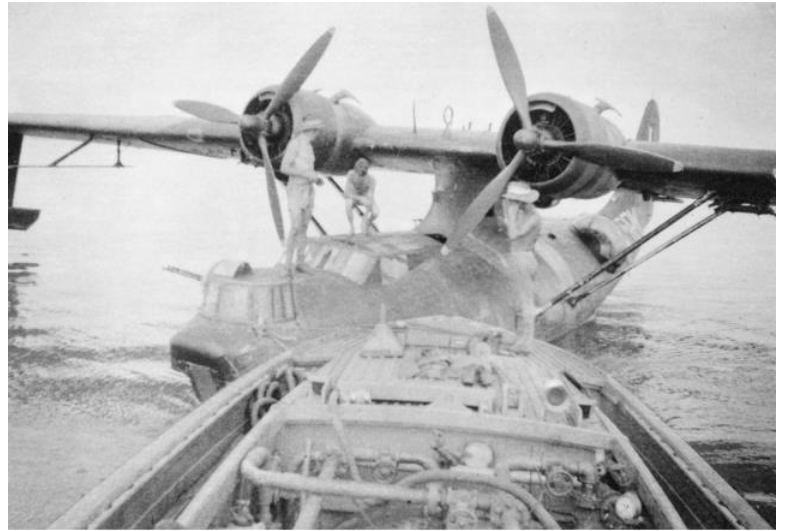


No 7 Repair and Salvage Unit personnel working on fighter aircraft in the field in the Northern Territory in 1943. (AWM)

Taylor remained with 7RSU for over nine months until victory was secured on 15 August 1945, when the unit was disbanded. In October 1945, Taylor was posted to No. 20 Squadron. Formed in August 1941 at Port Moresby as a maritime reconnaissance unit equipped with Catalina and Empire flying boats, 20 SQN saw distinguished action in World War 2. The unit flew missions against Japanese landing forces at Kavieng and Rabaul in late January 1942 and conducted night bombing operations against the two areas throughout the year. Surprise Japanese aircraft attacks on Port Moresby during March resulted in the loss of several Catalinas and the squadron was forced to relocate to Bowen in Queensland in May 1942. For the remainder of 1942, the unit conducted maritime reconnaissance throughout the New Guinea area, the Solomons, and New Caledonia.

Squadron crews were increasingly ordered to perform night attacks on enemy bases and in mid-1943 they mined enemy harbours and dropped supplies to Allied coastwatchers. During 1943 the unit conducted regular attacks across New Britain, in support of Allied plans to recapture the island. The following year, four aircraft were detached for operations from Manus Island. The rest of the unit continued with extensive mine-laying operations in the Caroline Islands, New Ireland, Surabaya, Manokwari, Kaimania, and Sorong.

In September 1944, the squadron moved from Cairns to Darwin and for the next month flew sorties over Bangka Strait, the Celebes, and Java. Later in the year, the unit helped mine Manila Harbour in preparation for the American advance on Mindanao. Three 20 SQN aircraft mined the entrance to Hong Kong harbour on 8 April 1945 and, on 26 May 1945, four of its Catalinas mined Wenchow harbour in China, the furthest north that any Australian aircraft infiltrated during the war in the Pacific.



A 20SQN Catalina undergoing refueling in Darwin Harbour in August 1944. (AWM)

Following the cessation of hostilities, No. 20 Squadron crews flew mercy missions through the SW Pacific Area, delivering medicine and other supplies to deployed elements as well as conducting repatriation flights of allied POWs from Southeast Asia back to Australia. Following his arrival in early October, Taylor would have supported this significant operations tempo, by then working on Catalina aircraft; a significantly different aircraft to the fighters he would have been working on at 7RSU. In late November, 20 SQN was relocated to RAAF Rathmines on Lake Macquarie in New South Wales where it continued conducting transport sorties up to Southeast Asia.



Aerial image of RAAF Rathmines in 1945 with Catalina aircraft at moorings and hangars and infrastructure onshore. (AWM)

Taylor moved with the unit to Rathmines but in early February was posted to No 4 Personnel Depot in South Australia for demobilization. He was discharged from the RAAF on 4 March 1946 completing three years of operational service in southern and northern Australia including service at three different operational units. For his service with the RAAF, Alex Taylor was awarded the Defence Medal, the War Medal 1939 – 1945, and the Australian Service Medal 1939 – 1945.

Not much is known about Alex Taylor's life post-war. He initially returned to Adelaide but there are few details on his employment. It is believed he possibly worked as a laborer. Sadly, having been highly trained in World War 2 in a trade working with aircraft, it seems he was unable to secure such work in Australian aviation post-war.

However, it is known he joined up with friends and former Colebrook Home and RAAF veterans George Tongerie and Jeff Barnes. Indeed, during the 1950s, Alex was inspired by the growing Aboriginal reconciliation movement in South Australia and joined Jeff Barnes working with the Aborigines Advancement League of South Australia. The League became very active and influential in the 1950s. People, including the respected Lowitja O'Donoghue and other former Colebrook Home residents, joined the League in the early 1950s to fight for greater Aboriginal equality through legislative and policy reform. They focused on key discrimination issues such as entry into professions such as teaching and nursing for women and apprenticeships for men, and housing. It became an influential model for other Aboriginal advancement organisations at the state and federal levels from the 1950s.

In the early 1950s, Alex Taylor teamed up with Jeff Barnes on an initiative to survey Aboriginals across South Australia on discrimination issues and what needed to be addressed. They rode all around South Australia on motor bikes engaging aborigines and gathering evidence, information and ideas on initiatives and discrimination issues. They then presented a collective report to the President of the League, South Australian Charles Duguid, a noted medical practitioner and Aboriginal rights campaigner. Both Alex and Jeff Barnes played key roles in the planning and conduct of an important public meeting at the Adelaide Town Hall on 31 August 1953, which was addressed by five Aboriginal people including Jeff Barnes, speaking of their personal experiences of discrimination. The meeting resulted in raising the cause of Aboriginal discrimination, a significant increase in membership of the League and a big boost in funding. Further, it directly led to the establishment of the *Wiltja Hostel* in Adelaide to accommodate young Aboriginal people from the country in Adelaide

Sadly, however, there is little more recorded of Alex Taylor's life after the 1950s. In his later years, he moved to Alice Springs where many of his large family had moved to, including parents and brothers and sisters. His father died and was buried in Alice Springs in 1973 when Alex was living there. It is known that Alex never married. His sister, Myra, notes in her book *Nomad Girl* that he suffered from alcohol abuse and poor mental health and that he passed away in the Enfield Hospital at the Enfield Rehabilitation Centre, an institution for serious mental health issues located in the northeastern suburbs of Adelaide that operated from 1963 to 1979. Sadly, Alex Taylor passed away on 1 October 1973 aged only 48.

The lack of information on the end of his life is sad given Alex's achievements and service during World War 2 for his nation. From humble beginnings where he initially grew up on the land in the outback, to prospering at primary school and living in the Colebrook Children's Home in Quorn, he was able to learn a trade and serve his nation, completing three tours with operational units including in northern Australia. Returning to Adelaide, he was then inspired to serve his people in a different way, becoming part of South Australia's significant aboriginal anti-discrimination movement in the 1950s and contributing to some of its successful initiatives. However, tragically, his health evidently declined at middle age to the point where he died suffering alcohol abuse and significant mental health issues at the early age of 48.

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