

THE SCHOOL AND THE RAAF

The RAAF had its genesis in the Australian Flying Corps which, in 1914, was an off-shoot of the Australian Imperial Force. In March 1921 it was re-named the Australian Air Force and in June 1921 King George gave permission for it to be named the Royal Australian Air Force. The School and many Past Grammarians have had a long and, at times, tragic association with the RAAF.

Four past students flew with the Australian Flying Corps during World War One while 134 male past students and 5 female past students enlisted in the RAAF during World War Two. Of the 134 old boys who joined, 22 were killed, many of them while on a raids over Germany. Between 1942 and 1944 the RAAF took over the school grounds and what is now the Maurie Blank Building was occupied by the WAAF who used the top floor as a control centre for shipping and air movements in the Coral Sea. The School ovals were set aside for the building of barracks to accommodate serving personnel while School House also housed airmen.

This article From the Archives will concentrate on the past students who served as pilots during World War One. **Alexander Leighton MacNaughton** served in Palestine before transferring to England to take command of the 29th Training Corps. He also enlisted in the RAAF in World War Two. **John Richard Bartlam** spent 1905 at Grammar. Little is known of what he did on leaving school except that his war record states that he was a motor driver before enlisting in late 1915. He was transferred to England in 1916 as a member of C Company, 41st Battalion. From there he was transferred to an air school in Reading where he undertook flight training and was promoted to lieutenant. He went to France in September 1917 and flew several missions before being hospitalized in November suffering from vertigo, certainly not a neurosis wanted by any pilot. He was moved back to England in January 1918 and then repatriated to Australia. **Walter Ferdinand McDonagh** enlisted in the Air Corps in late 1918 but did not serve overseas.

Lawrence James Wackett (pictured) was a District Scholar and attended the School in 1910-11. He was later to tell the then Headmaster, P.F.Rowland, that leaving school was the best decision he had ever made. Not the Latin, Greek and French encouraged by the School but rather the more practical aspects of engineering were his preference. Nicknamed 'Linky' by his friends, Wackett spent most of his time at school inventing a variety of gadgets including a dynamo for his bicycle light. He was always designing bigger and better balloons which his friends at school would throw stones at while they floated over the School oval.



Wackett entered the Royal Military College at Duntroon in 1913 and soon impressed the authorities with his probing mind. In 1915 he became Duntroon's first graduate to join the fledgling Australian Air Corps. He was shipped to England in 1916 for further training and then flew many missions over France. His flying exploits were to win him the DFC and AFC and also to be Mentioned in Despatches. The citation for his DFC states, in part, that "the officer also devised and perfected the ammunition dropping parachute, rack and gears, which have proved so successful in recent operations." Wackett's probing mind was noted by the authorities and he was moved to a section called 'Aeronautical Innovation'. It was the beginning of a career that was to have an enormous effect on the RAAF between the two world wars.

After World War One Wackett remained with the newly formed RAAF but soon realised that aviation design was his predominant interest. He entered Melbourne University where he completed a B.Sc [Hons] in one year. The first plane he designed was called the Warbler but it wasn't a success. In 1924, concerned at Australia's isolation in the world, he designed the Widgeon, a flying boat. In 1927 the Widgeon made history with a non-stop flight from Sydney to Melbourne, the flight taking over five hours. At that time he was also instrumental in the design of Kingsford Smith's plane 'Southern Cross'.

The Depression curtailed the aviation industry but it did not stop Wackett making governments aware of Australia's isolation and predicting that, in times of war, our allies would not be able to supply it with aircraft for defence. Heeding Wackett's warnings the then Prime Minister, Joe Lyons, invited Wackett to form the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation and become manager and a director of that corporation. It was a position he was to hold until his retirement in 1960. He was also promoted to Wing Commander in the RAAF at that time.

The aviation industry, led by Wackett, experienced a boom period. In 1937 he designed the Wirraway which he handed over to the RAAF as a training plane. This was followed by the Wackett Trainer in 1941 and the Boomerang in 1941. The remarkable fact about the Boomerang was it took just fourteen weeks from the first designs on the drawing board for the plane to be airborne. The Boomerang was to play a vital role in the holding back of the Japanese advance in Papua New Guinea. Towards the end of the war Wackett redesigned the American Mustang to suit local conditions. The last plane he designed was the Winjeel which went into service in 1955 and it remained in service for forty years.

Wackett received many awards for his work. He was knighted in 1954 and in 1959 was honoured by the University of Melbourne. His life was not without adversity. He lost a son in World War Two and became a quadriplegic in 1970 following a fall in his garage. This did not stop his innovative mind as he spent the rest of his life designing better equipment for paraplegics and their carers.

It is not surprising that one prominent Townsville historian has stated that she believes that Lawrence Wackett can be regarded as our most famous citizen.

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