

The first Aussie flyboys come home

THE AUSTRALIAN FLYING CORPS OF WWI by Tony James



Palestine. Mejdal, Jaffa area, Bristol Fighter F2B, pilot Captain Ross Macpherson Smith MC and two bars DFC (left), visiting No 1 Squadron AFC 25/28 February 1918. Image Wikimedia Commons – original is in the Collection Database of the Australian War Memorial under the ID Number: P03631.013

THERE are still treasure troves to be discovered in Australia and that is no pun intended on the *Trove* website, which has a vast array of information on the history of Australia. Yet again my northern friend Shane, has come up with the goods, discovering some historical items that leave me salivating. The interesting part is that he phoned me about the find just after I had finished April's story on some WWII blood chits of the South West Pacific Area. So while the timing was out for inclusion in that story, it leaves room for a fascinating account of some WWI happenings.

The founding of the Australian Flying Corps

The Australian Flying Corps (AFC) was established in 1912 but flight training did not commence until 1914. The Mesopotamian Half Flight was the first Australian force to see action in WWI. This was in the Tigris valley of Persia assisting the Indian Army to protect British oil interests, and the first operational flight took place on May 27 1915. The first complete Australian squadron was committed for service in Egypt in June 1916, under the command of the British Expeditionary Force. Initially designated the British No. 67 Squadron, this became No. 1 Squadron AFC.

Both the British and German military found that the best raw material for developing airforce pilots were accomplished horsemen. The *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918* says 'the



Mirror with leatherette pouch.

good heart, hands and quick eye of a horseman, combined with what might be called "devil" judgment of the risks of the moment, were to be found in the Australian Light Horse regiments' and both officers and men of the Light Horse looked skywards and saw a better life from the depths of their trenches.

Leaving for Egypt

The No. 1 Squadron was raised at Point Cook near Melbourne in January 1916, in response to a request by the British to serve as part of the Royal Flying Corps. The squadron, consisting of three flights of aircraft, arrived in Egypt in April and was assigned to operate against the Ottoman Empire and Senussi forces in Egypt and Palestine. It served in this theatre of operations until the end of the war. One



A night shot of the RE8 aircraft flown by the 69th Squadron (3rd Squadron AFC) being rearmed. Taken by Frank Hurley at Savy aerodrome near Arras, October 22 1917

of the pilots - Lieutenant Frank McNamara - received the only Victoria Cross awarded to an Australian airman during WWI, for rescuing a fellow pilot who had been shot down behind Turkish lines on March 20 1917. Landing beside Captain Dunn Rutherford and his downed plane, McNamara sustained damage to his own aircraft and had to set it on fire to prevent capture by the Turks. Both pilots escaped the advancing Turkish forces by flying Rutherford's damaged plane 70 miles (112km) back to their base.

Goolie chits

On this occasion the two pilots did not need to use their escape kits that each carried while flying over enemy territory. This kit consisted of maps, a pistol, mirror for signaling rescuers and a pamphlet written in Arabic and English. This last document was officially known as a Ran-



Goolie chit issued by the British Government, with coat of arms.
Inside, the request in Arabic and English to give assistance to the bearer. On the back, 'Useful words.'

som Note, Protection Certificate or Safety Chit, written in English and Arabic and depending upon the region being patrolled, also in Urdu, Farsi and Pashto. The pilots called this pamphlet a "goolie" chit, the reason being that if a pilot was shot down and captured, unless he could persuade the Arabs or Turks that it was to their advantage to accept a reward, he was usually handed over to the women of the tribe or village who would first mutilate him by castration and then kill him. The only exception was if the pilot was fortunate enough to have red hair, he might live a little longer, as red hair was prized by Arab women!

After WWI and the operations in the North West Provinces of India during the 1930s this term was gradually replaced by the term "blood chit", which sounded better when in the company of ladies.

Western Front and Red Baron

The other three squadrons of the AFC (2, 3 & 4) were raised in 1917 in Egypt (No. 2) and Australia (No. 3 & 4) and were sent to France to undertake operations on the Western Front under the British High Command. While serving on the Western Front, No 3 Squadron achieved fame for providing the honour guard at the funeral of Baron Captain Manfred Von Richthofen – the legendary "Red Baron." Von Richt-hofen, the highest ranked German ace with 80 kills to his credit, was shot down by Canadian Captain A. Roy Brown RFC, a claim disputed by Australian ground



10 centime Officers Mess chit 3rd Squadron AFC, France 1917/18

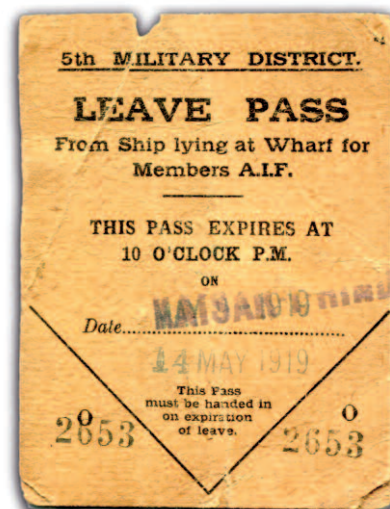
forces who claimed the Red Baron scalp for themselves.

While this article needs no numismatic embellishment, the Officer's Mess of 3 Squadron AFC issued 10 centime and ½ franc chits while stationed in France. Printed by Mark and Lee of Aylesbury in England, the existence of these mess chits gives an indication of the relatively comfortable conditions enjoyed by officers of the AFC while operating in France.

In addition, an entry in the Troopship Orders for 26 May 1919 for the *Kaiser-i-Hind* (mentioned below) notifies the troops that "A Representative from the Repat. & Demob. Dept. (Transport Branch) assured the OC Troops at Southampton that all English notes would be cashed free of exchange on arrival in Australia." This set me to wondering if any English 10/- or £1 notes with Gallipoli overprints were included in these exchanges. Just a thought!

Going Home – Kaiser-i-Hind

Shane's treasure trove included not only a set of leather coat, gloves and helmet



5th Military District, Leave Pass for the Kaiser-i-Hind dated 14 May 1919

of a WWI airman but also a leave pass for the 5th Military District. Issued "From Ship lying at Wharf for Members AIF," the pass expires at 10 o'clock pm on date 14 May 1919 and is stamped "Kaiser-i-Hind" in the space for the date. There is also a serial number printed on the pass with the instruction that the pass must be handed in on expiration of leave. The P&O shipping line placed an order for the Kaiser-i-Hind liner in 1913 and took delivery after fitting out was completed on October 1 1914. She sailed for India on her maiden voyage just 24 days later. After being requisitioned by the British government as a troop transport, the ship carried large



The set of aviator leathers as worn by pilots of the AFC during WW1

numbers of troops during the next five years, to and from the Mediterranean, Middle East and Australia.

It was this ship that, at the conclusion of the war, carried the majority of the Australian Flying Corps back to Australia. It sailed from Southampton on May 6 1919 and arrived in Sydney on June 19.

The Melbourne *Argus* of Wednesday 14 May 1919 advised this forthcoming event "Australian Flying Corps. By the s.s. [sic] *Kaiser-i-Hind* practically the whole of the members of the Australian Flying Corps are returning to the Commonwealth. It is proposed to discharge the men in the ordinary way, and to bring under their notice the proposals for the formation of the Australian Air Service."

Answers in the Archives

Thanks to the National Archives of Australia digitising most of the records regarding this voyage of the HT *Kaiser-i-Hind*, I was able to discover some interesting details about the voyage and also possibly place the leave pass.

Troopship Orders by Lt-Col W. O. Watt OB, OC troops HMAAT *Kaiser-i-Hind* for 14 May regarding the entry into Port Said, Egypt on 16 May, included that the canteen would be closed during the ship's stay in port.

Orders for 15 May included a warning against throwing refuse or money to natives engaged in coaling, as well as a ban on hanging washing on deck or about the ship.

17 May Daily Orders published a message to officers and men thanking and congratulating them on "the splendid example, which they gave today in their

bearing and discipline when parading on the deck upon the ship's arrival..." The Colonel also advised, "I regret sincerely, that my instructions allow me no discretion upon the point of Troops in transit, disembarking in this Port. These instructions were given owing to the discreditable behaviour on board HT *Castalia* and HT *Kyreema*," signed by Lt-Col Elgood, Base Commandant Port Said.

It seems that some earlier transport ships had allowed shore leave in Port Said and the troops misbehaved, after all there was a precedent in the Wazza riots in the red light district of Cairo during 1915.

The most interesting information gained from these records is the fact that administration on the transport was defined along the lines of the Australian Military Districts (1st Qld and northern rivers district of NSW, 2nd NSW minus Northern Rivers and Broken Hill, 3rd Victoria, 4th SA plus Broken Hill, 5th WA, 6th Tasmania). All military personnel were organised and paid by the Military District at which they were going to disembark. So this 5th Military District Leave Pass was issued for a member of the AMF who was due to disembark at Freemantle on 9 June and would be discharged at Headquarters 5th Military District Perth.

My conclusion, drawn from the embarkation and District listing for the *Kaiser-i-Hind* plus the ship's orders indicating that no Other Ranks were permitted to disembark at Port Said, is this pass could only have belonged to an officer and been prepared prior to arrival in port. The 5th District listing shows the following officers belonging to the AFC: Major R. C. Phillips DFC. MC & Bar, Lieutenants W. W. Duff (who actually disembarked in Sydney), J. H. S. Lawton, E. J. Richards, J. J. Wellwood (Weliwood) DFC, P. H. Wright and 2nd Lieutenants C. E. Littler and T.H. McGlinn.

More evidence

Of course, just to add interest to this mystery, the leather coat, helmet and gloves do not have a name in them. The pocket of the coat did, however, disclose a Victoria 50th Jubilee badge with a lock of hair in the back of it.



Does this mean the owner of the leathers came from Victoria? Was it a lucky charm? A reminder of a girl left behind? There are several contenders: Lt J.J. Wellwood of No. 2 Squadron from Drouin Vic (who actually disembarked in Melbourne), Lt. P.H. Wright, born in St Kilda, Lt. E.J. Richards of No.4 Squadron, from Tyrendarra VIC and Lt J.H. Lawton of Lancefield VIC. Conjecture, certainly, and a trail of information that will probably never have a conclusion.

The *Kaiser-i-Hind* docked at Freemantle, Adelaide and at Melbourne on the 16th of June 1919 and ended her voyage in Sydney on the 19th June. Members of all but the No.1 Squadron AFC, which had sailed on the SS Port Sydney on 5 March 1919, were on board, including the three training squadrons that had been based in Gloucestershire during the latter part of the war. The end of the voyage closes a chapter that is not recorded in the official history of the AFC and as usual, leaves more questions than answers.

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Victoria 50 Year Jubilee 1837-1897, badge with lock of hair in the back.