



## Air Marshal Sir Richard Williams



Richard Williams is the most significant figure in the history of the Royal Australian Air Force. On a calm morning at Point Cook, Victoria in November 1914, he completed three brief flying tests in a Bristol Boxkite, thus qualifying as the first military pilot trained in Australia. Eight years later he became the first Chief of the Air Staff, a post he held for most of the difficult inter-war years when the Air Force's continuing existence as an independent service was frequently under threat from the Army and Navy.

A thin, intense man whose high forehead and penetrating gaze accurately indicated his probing intellect, Williams was born in Moonta, South Australia in 1890, the eldest child of a copper miner who laboured underground. Educated to junior certificate level in the State school system, Williams worked in a bank and served in the militia before joining the Permanent Forces in 1912. He was selected for pilot training in the nascent Australian Flying Corps in 1914.

Strong minded and confident, Williams rapidly established himself as a leader in the new art of air warfare. After deploying to the Middle East in 1916, he Richard Williams was appointed firstly to command the AFC's No 1 Squadron, and then a wing of the Royal Air Force, a considerable achievement for a 'colonial' in those days. A brave and capable pilot, he was decorated with the DSO and OBE for his valour and leadership in combat and was twice mentioned in dispatches.

The Royal Australian Air Force was formed in 1921 against the express wishes of Australia's generals and admirals, who lacked the vision to foresee the dominant role air power would soon come to play in the defence of Australia. As Chief of the Air Staff, Williams needed all of his considerable political skills to keep his fledgling service from being dismembered by the Army and Navy. Sharp, even waspish in his manner, Williams worked shrewdly to preserve and promote his service. He established a personal correspondence with the British Empire's greatest and most influential airman. Marshal of the RAF Sir Hugh Trenchard; developed a brilliant plan to defend Australia against the emerging threat of Japan by employing air power in the sea and



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air approaches which constitute the nation's natural defensive barrier; and fought tirelessly in the political battle against the Air Force's enemies.

Despite his somewhat puritanical, stiff-necked manner and legendary pedantic attention to detail - the latter characteristic which made his frequent inspection of Royal Australian Air Force units a severe trial for those on the receiving end - Williams' devotion to his service and his manifest intellect made him an admired leader.

Notwithstanding his great responsibilities and demanding administrative workload, Williams found time to burnish his operational reputation with a pioneering flight into the Pacific islands in 1926. He had also become the first Australian Air Force officer to complete staff college training when he graduated from the British Army and RAF courses in 1924; while ten years later he added attendance at the Imperial Defence College to his impressive qualifications.

By the early 1930s all threats to the Royal Australian Air Force's independent existence had been averted. Shortly afterwards the government approved a dramatic expansion of the Air Force, a decision which not only recognised the likelihood of war in the near future but also amounted to a tacit acknowledgment that Williams had been right.

That may have been cold comfort to Williams who in February 1939 was removed from office, ostensibly because of the allegedly high accident rate. A more likely reason for the dismissal was that, after almost 20 years of political in-fighting on behalf of his service, Dicky Williams had simply made too many enemies.

Air Vice-Marshal Williams spent most of World War II overseas, firstly in the United Kingdom and then as the Royal Australian Air Force's senior representative in Washington. He was retired against his wishes in 1946 by the Chifley Government, extraordinarily shabby treatment of a man who had contributed so much to his country. On leaving the Air Force he became Director-General of Civil Aviation. He published immensely interesting and invaluable (if understandably idiosyncratic) memoirs, *These Are Facts*, in 1977.

Air Marshal Sir Richard Williams, KBE, CB, DSO, died in 1980. He is properly remembered and honoured as the 'Father' of the Royal Australian Air Force.