

= Henry Petre =

Henry Aloysius Petre , DSO , MC (12 June 1884 ? 24 April 1962) was an English solicitor who became Australia 's first military aviator and a founding member of the Australian Flying Corps , predecessor of the Royal Australian Air Force . Born in Essex , he forsook his early legal career to pursue an interest in aviation , building his own aeroplane and gaining employment as a designer and pilot . In 1912 , he answered the Australian Defence Department 's call for pilots to form an aviation school , and was commissioned a lieutenant in the Australian Military Forces . The following year , he chose the site of the country 's first air base at Point Cook , Victoria , and established its inaugural training institution , the Central Flying School , with Eric Harrison .

Shortly after the outbreak of World War I , Petre was appointed commander of the Mesopotamian Half Flight , the first unit of the newly formed Australian Flying Corps to see active service . He led the Half Flight through the Battles of Es Sinn and Ctesiphon , and the Siege of Kut . His actions in the Middle East earned him the Distinguished Service Order , the Military Cross , and four mentions in despatches . Transferring to the Royal Air Force as a major in 1918 , he commanded No. 75 Squadron before retiring from the military the following year . Petre resumed his legal practice in England , and continued to fly recreationally before his death in 1962 , aged seventy @-@ seven . He was married to racing driver Kay Petre .

= = Early career = =

Born on 12 June 1884 at Ingatestone , Essex , Petre (pronounced " Peter ") was the son of Sebastian Henry Petre and his wife Catharine . He was schooled at Mount St Mary 's College , Chesterfield , before following his father into law and becoming a solicitor in 1905 . Inspired by Louis Blériot 's pioneering cross @-@ channel flight in July 1909 , Petre gave up his legal practice , borrowed £ 250 and proceeded to build his own aeroplane , with design assistance from his brother Edward , an architect . Having spent six months on its construction , Petre crashed the machine on its maiden flight . Uninjured and undiscouraged , he borrowed a further £ 25 , took flying lessons at Brooklands Airfield in Surrey , and obtained Royal Aero Club Aviator 's Certificate No. 128 on 12 September 1911 . He became an instructor at Brooklands ' Deperdussin School , and later its chief , prior to taking up employment as a designer and pilot with Handley Page Limited in 1912 . Characterised by official RAAF historian Douglas Gillison as " quiet and academic by nature " , and coming from a long line of Catholic clergy , Petre was nicknamed " Peter the Monk " . On Christmas Eve 1912 , Edward Petre , who was known as " Peter the Painter " , was killed in an accident at Marske @-@ by @-@ the @-@ Sea , Yorkshire , while attempting to fly from Brooklands to Edinburgh .

In December 1911 , the Australian Defence Department had advertised in the United Kingdom for " two competent mechanists and aviators " to establish a flying corps and school . From among fifty applications , Petre was chosen and commissioned as a lieutenant in the Australian Military Forces , his appointment on 6 August 1912 making him the nation 's first military pilot . The other appointee , Eric Harrison , joined him later that year . Petre arrived in Australia in January 1913 , his first task being to choose a site for the proposed Central Flying School (CFS) , which he was to command . After travelling hundreds of kilometres on his motorcycle , and rejecting the government 's preferred location near the Royal Military College , Duntroon , in Canberra , he selected 297 hectares (730 acres) at Point Cook , Victoria , to become , as George Odgers described it , the " birthplace of Australian military aviation " .

Unlike the alternative site near Duntroon , Point Cook was flat , close to the coast and not , in Petre 's own words , " isolated in the bush " . He and Harrison established CFS over the following year with four mechanics , three other staff , and five aircraft including two Deperdussin monoplanes , two Royal Aircraft Factory B.E.2 biplanes , and a Bristol Boxkite for initial training . Harrison made the unit 's first flight in the Boxkite on Sunday , 1 March 1914 , while Petre , taking off in a Deperdussin later that day , registered its first accident when he crashed after snaring his tailplane in telephone wires . Its coterie of personnel by now being referred to as the Australian Flying Corps , CFS

commenced its first flying course on 17 August , two weeks after the outbreak of World War I. The four students included Captain Thomas White and Lieutenants Richard Williams , George Merz , and David Manwell ; Harrison was responsible for initial training and Petre for advanced instruction .

= = World War I = =

On 8 February 1915 , the Australian government received a request from the British Government of India for aerial assistance in the campaign against the Turks in Mesopotamia . Aircrew and supporting personnel for half a flight only were available so the unit , the AFC 's first to see active service , became known as the Mesopotamian Half Flight . Promoted to captain , Petre was appointed the Half Flight 's commanding officer and embarked for Basra via Bombay on 14 April , later to be joined by fellow pilots White , Merz and Lieutenant William Treloar , along with thirty @-@ seven ground staff . In Mesopotamia , Petre was required to lead the AFC contingent in reconnaissance and sabotage missions , and had to deal with unreliable machines , hazardous terrain , and the threat of incarceration or death at the hands of hostile tribesmen . He took part in operations in the Amara area from 31 May to 4 June , for which he was mentioned in despatches . The obsolete aircraft supplied by the Indian Government , two Maurice Farman Shorthorns and a Maurice Farman Longhorn , were only capable of top speeds of 50 mph (80 km / h) , while the desert wind (known as the shamal) could reach 80 mph (129 km / h) , meaning that the aircraft often made no headway or were simply blown backwards . In July , the Half Flight 's equipment was augmented by two Caudron G.3 aircraft , a marginal improvement on the Farmans , but still prone to mechanical failure . Later that month , one of the Caudrons was forced to land in enemy territory . Its crew , Merz and a New Zealander , were never seen again ; they were later reported killed by Arabs after a running gun battle over several miles .

On 24 August , the Half Flight was augmented by four Martinsyde S1s and redesignated No. 30 Squadron , Royal Flying Corps (RFC) . The squadron moved into Kut following the city 's capture by the Allies during the Battle of Es Sinn in September ; for his part in the operation , Petre was again mentioned in despatches . Over the following two months , however , both Treloar and White were captured and became prisoners of war , leaving Petre as the only pilot remaining from the original Half Flight . Around the time of the Battle of Ctesiphon in November , he devised an implement shaped like a small garden rake that allowed him to accurately measure ground distances from the air in order to better map the desert terrain . During the Siege of Kut between December 1915 and April 1916 , he flew a series of missions using crude parachutes to airdrop grain supplies (and a millstone for grinding) , medical supplies and equipment to the town 's entrapped garrison , which included nine of his AFC mechanics .

Petre was awarded the Military Cross on 14 January 1916 , and was mentioned in despatches twice more over the course of the year . In May 1916 he contracted typhoid and was sent to India for recuperation . He transferred out of No. 30 Squadron in December , and was awarded the Distinguished Service Order the same month . In February 1917 , he was posted to France with No. 15 Squadron RFC , a reconnaissance unit operating B.E.2s. Two months later his youngest brother John , a squadron commander in the Royal Naval Air Service and a Distinguished Service Cross recipient , was killed in a flying accident . Petre subsequently returned to England and took charge of No. 5 Squadron AFC (also known as No. 29 Squadron RFC) , a training unit for Australian fighter pilots , particularly those destined for Palestine . He had hoped to command No. 1 Squadron AFC in Palestine but received an adverse report concerning his leadership abilities , and the position went to Richard Williams . Petre was discharged from the AFC as a major on 31 January 1918 , to take a commission with the RFC . In April that year , he transferred to the newly formed Royal Air Force , establishing and commanding No. 75 (Home Defence) Squadron .

= = Later life and legacy = =

Petre retired from the RAF on 15 September 1919 , and resumed practice as a solicitor in London . He married Kathleen Defries , a Canadian , in 1929 . Petre introduced Kathleen to racing cars and ,

as Kay Petre , she became one of Britain 's leading female drivers of the 1930s . Henry Petre maintained his interest in aviation for the rest of his life , taking up competitive gliding and , more than thirty years after his first flight in 1911 , still delighted in " taking an Auster for a spin " . In 1951 , he received the Royal Aero Club 's Silver Medal for his long record of active flying . He visited Australia for the first time in forty @-@ five years in 1961 , and was photographed sitting in the cockpit of the same Deperdussin ? by then an exhibit at RAAF Museum ? that he had flown at Point Cook in 1914 . Having retired from his legal practice in 1958 , Henry Petre died in London on 24 April 1962 , and was survived by Kay , who died in 1991 .

In a retrospective on the RAAF in November 1939 , Flight magazine described Henry Petre and Eric Harrison as " the fathers of military aviation in Australia " . Though Harrison , through his longer association with Australian service flying as a founding member of the Royal Australian Air Force in 1921 and his career up until the end of World War II , was generally regarded as the " Father of the RAAF " until Air Marshal Richard Williams assumed that mantle , Douglas Gillison considered Petre " equally entitled " to such an accolade . In his volume on the Air Force for The Australian Centenary History of Defence in 2001 , Alan Stephens noted that Petre made " the greater contribution to the establishment of Point Cook and the Central Flying School " , concluding that " perhaps any judgement would not only be moot but also gratuitous , as by circumstance and achievement both men properly belong in the pantheon of the RAAF " .