

**Lieutenant Colonel Walter Oswald Watt OBE, DSO, LdeH, CdeG.
and
The Oswald Watt Gold Medal.**

The Man

Oswald Watt was a founding member of the Aero Club movement in Australia. After a spectacular First World War career, he became, in 1919, the foundation President of the New South Wales Section of the Australian Aero Club. After two action-packed years in that position and at the age of 43 he tragically died in a drowning accident in Sydney. A wealthy man, he left £500 in his will to the then Australian Aero Club for the establishment of a medal for "the most brilliant performance in the air" in Australia or by an Australian overseas. This award, named the Oswald Watt Gold Medal, continues to this day, administered by the Royal Federation of Aero Clubs of Australia.

Born in Bournemouth, England on 11th February 1878, Walter Oswald Watt came to Australia at the age of one, following the death of his mother. He returned to England after ten years, completing his education at Cambridge University with a Bachelor of Arts degree. Returning to Sydney in 1900, he was commissioned in the NSW Scottish Rifles and in 1902 became the aide-de-camp to the NSW State governor. He married in Melbourne, had one son and divorced in 1913. He bought Howlong Station at Carathool NSW and had interests in other cattle stations in New South Wales and Queensland.

In 1911 he returned to England and on 1st August 1911 he became the first Australian military officer to obtain a pilot's licence, flying a Bristol Boxkite at Salisbury Plain. His Royal Aero Club certificate was number 112.

Back again in Australia in late 1911 he was involved in the early promotion of an army aero corps for military defence, including a recommendation for the location of an appropriate training ground. He recommended an area near the Royal Military College at Duntroon, ACT., but a site at Point Cook in Victoria was later preferred.

Watt returned to England in 1912 and in 1913 purchased a Bleriot XI biplane. He travelled to France in 1914 and from May to the outbreak of war in August he was flying at Bleriot's aerodrome near Paris.

When war was declared, he immediately joined the Aviation Militaire section of the French Foreign Legion. He served with them until June 1915, during which time he earned the respect of his fellow airmen and had many narrow escapes in the air, including one forced landing in "no-man's land" For his valuable and courageous work, he was awarded the Legion d'Honneur and the Croix de Guerre by the French. To the Croix de Guerre were subsequently added three highly-coveted palm leaves, personally presented to Watt by the French military commander, General Joffre.

In late 1914 the first four military officers passed their pilot's licence test at the newly established flying training school at Point Cook. They also formed the Australian Aero Club at that time. In early 1915 some of these officers were posted to lead the first "half-flight" of the Australian Flying Corps and soon saw action in Mesopotamia (now Iraq). Others were posted to Egypt.

In 1916 Watt transferred from the French forces to the Australian Flying Corps and was posted to Egypt under the command of Richard Williams (later Air Marshall Sir Richard Williams, KBE.) Williams was one of the first four trainees at Point Cook.

Watt served through the Suez and Salonika campaigns until October 1916, when he became commander of a new scout squadron in Egypt, the No 2 Squadron AFC. This Squadron transferred to England in January 1917 and after training in DH5 Scouts, Watt again was in service in France, but now his squadron was used as an attack force, rather than as observers for the ground forces.

In February 1918, Watt, now 40, was promoted to Lt. Colonel and placed in command of 1 Wing (Training) AFC, in England.

With the armistice the returning Colonel Watt now came under the influence of E. J. Hart, the editor of *Aircraft*. Hart was a most influential person in the reinvigoration of the Australian Aero Club after war's end and the establishment of the individual sections in all States. In 1918 Hart travelled to Melbourne, sought out the club Secretary and established that it was still financial although barely

functional. He was admitted a member of the club, following which he sought and obtained permission to establish a New South Wales section. Later in 1919 he was most instrumental in the establishment of sections in Queensland, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia. The personnel of the Australian Aero Club in Melbourne formed or became the Victorian Section.

Hart organised a general meeting for May 23, 1919 in Sydney, the result of which was the establishment of the Australian Aero Club New South Wales Section. Six weeks later Watt returned to Australia in the *Kaisar i-Hind* in command of a large contingent of returning members of the AFC. Hart, on behalf the NSW Section, organised a special gala performance at Her Majesty's Theatre, Sydney, in honour of the returning NSW airmen. At this performance Watt agreed to join the Club and at a later date agreed to Hart's request that he become President.

Under Watt's control and enthusiasm the Club flourished and membership grew. He was instrumental in securing the establishment of government controls on aircraft air-worthiness and the licensing of pilots. At one stage the NSW Section issued its own certificates of airworthiness and was the sole recognized authority on aviation in NSW. Watt had raised his Club to a prestigious and influential organisation in the State of New South Wales. And he was instrumental in the passing of the first Air Navigation Act by the Commonwealth parliament.

In the book, *Flying High, the story of Hudson Fysh and Qantas*, the author, Timothy Hall speaks of Watt as follows:-

"And indeed, in the two years since the (1914-1918) war ended, the state of civil aviation in Australia had become chaotic.

There were at least sixty aircraft flying and frequently crashing in Australia, all completely uncontrolled by any government authority. The formation of the Aero Club movement in 1919 had been rather a faltering step in the right direction, but the movement had no mandatory powers. One man in particular, Colonel Oswald Watt, who had come back from the war a hero, led a campaign in Australia for better air safety. He had the support of the Chief of General Staff, but only lukewarm enthusiasm from many politicians, particularly in the states.

Although Prime Minister Billy Hughes insisted that the Constitution did not allow him to intervene in civil aviation, it was clearly absurd for the states to maintain that they had the right to sign the International Convention for the Regulation of Air Navigation in Paris, the signatories to which undertook to bring law and order to their civil aviation. But inevitably there were many state politicians who did insist that it was a state prerogative, and that if the states could not control aviation, then the Commonwealth government would certainly not be allowed to.

Oswald Watt had his own technique for dealing with politicians who he thought were recalcitrant or obstinate. One of the most bitter opponents of national control of aviation was the New South Wales Premier, William Arthur Holman, and Watt quickly converted Holman by taking him for a flight and frightening him so badly that the wretched man was willing to agree to control by anybody.

The Australian government passed the Air Navigation Act on 2nd December 1920"

Tragedy struck on the 21st of May 1921 when Oswald Watt was found drowned at Bilgola Beach, about a mile north of Newport, NSW. This beach is approximately half way between Mona Vale and Palm Beach on the ocean side. The following is the report in the Sydney Daily Telegraph on 23 May 1921.

"Colonel Watt was staying at his week-end residence there, and went down to the beach alone, evidently for the purpose of collecting wood. He had taken off his bath robe, which he was wearing over his bathing costume, and this, together with his towel, was found on the beach. A number of sticks were piled in a heap close by. These were close to a point where a number of slippery rocks run down to the water's edge, and not at the place where Colonel Watt usually entered the water when swimming. When the body was examined on Saturday afternoon a bruise was found at the back of the head and a cut in the middle of the forehead. There were also some scratches on one cheek, and these signs suggested that Colonel Watt slipped on the rocks referred to, and fell, striking his head. It is believed that the fall stunned him, and that he was drowned in comparatively shallow water, into which he rolled after the fall.

Mr. Sydney Jones, a caretaker at Colonel Watt's residence, was the first to notice the body floating in the water. He hurried to Newport to obtain assistance. From there some fishermen proceeded in a boat, and recovered the body. Constable Grant, of Mona Vale, and Mr. Bulfin made strenuous efforts to restore animation, but it was realised from the beginning that there was no hope of success, and after half an hour's work they had to admit failure. Dr. Richards, of Narrabeen, pronounced life extinct."

Thus ended a life of such great promise at the age of 43. His funeral, with full military honours, was carried out by the "Australian Aero Club" at St. Jude's Church, Randwick on 23rd May 1921, exactly two years after the inauguration of the New South Wales Section.

The Medal

In his will Oswald Watt left a sum of £500 to the Australian Aero Club to be used to finance the purchase of a gold medal for aviation feats in Australia. In *Aircraft* dated June 20, 1921, E. J. Hart reported as follows:-

"Under his will the late Colonel Watt directed that the sum of £500 be paid in trust to The Australian Aero Club, this sum to be invested in such securities as the Council of the Club thinks fit; the income thus derived to be used by the said council in purchasing a gold medal to be presented each year to the aviator who, in the opinion of the council, achieves the most brilliant performance in the air during each year in the Commonwealth of Australia, or to the Australian-born aviator who performs the most brilliant feat outside Australia."

This criteria has since been slightly altered.

It is somewhat difficult to evaluate what £500 is worth in today's (2007) values, but it is probably in the vicinity of \$80,000. In April 1921 gold was worth approximately £5/5/- per ounce (\$10.50) against a 2007 value of approximately \$AUD900 per ounce. This is an 86 times increase. The cost of daily papers was 1½d (1.25 cents) and in 2007 \$1.10 or 88 times more. An imported Chevrolet car was selling at £495 and casual rates on the waterfront were 2/3d per hour.

The issue of the first medals got off to an extremely slow start, for it would be another seven years before the first winners were to receive their medals. Considerable delays occurred in obtaining the bequest from the trustees of Watt's estate, selecting the winners and designing the medal.

The bequest was made to The Australian Aero Club, but this club as such was somewhat of a phantom at that time. Only one club existed until 1919 and that was the original Australian Aero Club, which was formed in 1914 and located in Melbourne. After the establishment of the six State sections, a "general council" was formed and this was loosely referred to as The Australian Aero Club. At least one meeting was held in 1920 in Sydney, but by the time probate had been granted regarding Watt's estate, only the NSW section remained functional.

In legal terms, the NSW section was a completely separate entity in that it was incorporated as a company on 10th November 1920, prior to Watt's death, albeit with the name "Australian Aero Club, New South Wales Section". From the trustees point of view this was not the organisation to which Watt had made the bequest.

Nothing happened for three years until the Victorian Section was revived. E. J. Hart had resigned from the NSW Section and moved to Melbourne. There he was instrumental in organising the November 1924 revival meeting of the Victorian Section and became its Secretary. He immediately set about overcoming the difficulties concerning the Oswald Watt Gold Medal.

The first meeting of the NSW and Victorian sections, now referred to as the "Federal Council," was held on March 6, 1926 in the editorial office of *Aircraft*, Peacock House, Melbourne. Present were Major T. W. White, D.F.C. (Victoria); Sir Keith Smith, K.B.E. (New South Wales); Mr. E.J. Hart (Victoria), and, by proxy, Capt. R.W. Perkins (New South Wales). At this meeting resolutions were passed concerning the design of the medal and the making of awards. Sir Bertram Mackennal was invited to submit a design for a medal or plaque. E. J. Hart submitted details of outstanding performances for the years 1921 (3 names), 1922 (5), 1923 (0), 1924 (2), and 1925 (4). These names were to be considered at a subsequent meeting. A copy of these minutes and details of the nominees under consideration are held in the archives of the Royal Victorian Aero Club.

Sir Bertram Mackennal was one of Australia's greatest sculptors. Born in Melbourne, more than 60 of his sculptures are on display in the National Gallery of Victoria. Spending much of his life overseas, he was the first Australian to be elected to the Royal Academy and to be knighted. He died in 1931.

But the £500 had still not come through from the estate trustees due to legal difficulties and formalities. On 7th May, 1926 the Trust Officer wrote to the Secretary of the Australian Aero Club stating that under the terms of the codicil to the will there was no officer of the Club able to give a satisfactory receipt, but that if a bank account were opened in the name of the Club, the legacy could be deposited there under direction or resolution of the Council. There was also a requirement that proof be provided of the formation of the Australian Aero Club and advice that this could be achieved by inspection of minutes of meetings of the Council or by a statutory declaration made by the General Secretary.

On 10th June 1926, the Council secretary in Sydney wrote to the Chairman, Thomas White, in Melbourne asking that these matters receive the necessary attention. In due course the legacy was received into the new bank account, but further delays were now to occur regarding the selection of recipients and the production of the medal.

It was not until 16th March, 1927 that the first six recipients were approved by the Federal Council. The following report appeared in E J Hart's magazine *Aircraft* dated April 30, 1927.

First Awards

At a meeting of the Federal Council of the Australian Aero Club held in Melbourne on March 16, the following was minuted;-

Oswald Watt Medals – Considerable discussion and consideration was given to the question of the distribution of medals made available under the will of the late Colonel Oswald Watt. Under this will the Council has authority to present one medal each year to the Australian born pilot who puts up the most brilliant performance in the air either in Australia or overseas.

The records of pilots were made available (by "Aircraft") for the years from 1921 and the Council's decisions are as follows;--

For the year 1921 the medal is to be presented to F. S. Briggs for a flight from Melbourne to Brisbane and Melbourne to Perth.

For the year 1922 the medal is to be presented to H. T. Shaw for flights from Melbourne to Sydney and Sydney to Melbourne in a light plane, viz., Maurice Farman Sport.

For the year 1923. – The Council regrets that during this year there were no performances brought under its notice of outstanding merit and the following motion was moved by Mr. Rigby and seconded by Mr. Perkins;

That the Council approach the Trustees of Col Watt's estate for permission to carry forward the 1923 medal and ask for further permission to award it at the discretion of the Council for any meritorious service rendered by an Australian pilot. It was also resolved that should a similar position arise in future years the Council obtain permission to allocate the medal at their discretion.

For the year 1924 the medal is to be presented to Flt. Lt. I. E. McIntyre for a seaplane flight round Australia.

For the year 1925 the medal is to be presented to E. J. Jones for a flight from Melbourne to Normanton and Normanton to Melbourne.

For the year 1926 the medal is to be presented to Flt. Lt. L. E. McIntyre for a flight to the Solomon Islands with Group Capt. Williams.

And so it dragged on – the awards were made, but there were no medals to present.

Thomas White, foundation president of the Victorian Section, made the following statement in regard to Federal Council matters in his retirement speech at the Annual General Meeting of the Victorian Section held on 8th December 1927.

“After overcoming many technicalities in the Oswald Watt Bequest, we have the money for the purchase of a plaque for the most outstanding annual feat in Australian aviation. Our negotiations for the design of this plaque with Sir Bertram Mackennal broke down, but at the moment negotiations with Mr. George Lambert are in train, and on finality being reached, the selected recipients will receive their trophies”.

Unfortunately there appears to be no record of when these recipients did receive their medals, but presumably they did.

On 29th July 1929 all State sections signed an agreement to “be associated in a properly constituted Association for the carrying out of the objects hereinafter mentioned.”

The name of the association was to be “Associated Australian Aero Clubs” and the objects as follows.

“The Association is formed to take over the Assets and Liabilities of the Australian Aero Club and for the co-operation of Clubs interested in the encouragement and development of aeronautics in Australia and for the purpose of promoting co-operation and mutual exchange of ideas between such Clubs and for the establishment of effective control of all competitions sporting events and trials in connection with aeronautics in Australia and generally for the advancement of aviation in Australia, and for the purpose of obtaining affiliation with the Federation Aeronautique Internationale either through the Royal Aero Club of the United Kingdom or direct.”

The signature Clubs were the Australian Aero Club (Victorian Section), the Aero Club of New South Wales, the Australian Aero Club (South Australian Section) Limited, the Australian Aero Club (Tasmanian Section), and the Australian Aero Club (Queensland Section). A copy of this document is held by the Royal Victorian Aero Club in its archives and it is fully reported in the *Aircraft* issue dated 31 August 1929.

The Associated Australian Aero Clubs changed its name to the Aero Club Federation of Australia in 1948 and to the Royal Federation of Aero Clubs of Australia in 1960. Since 1929 this organisation under its various names has controlled the approval of recipients of the Oswald Watt Gold Medal, the production of medals and the administration of the original fund bequest.

References and further reading.

Aircraft, various reports between 1918 and 1929
The Age and *The Argus* (Melbourne) April 1921.
Daily Telegraph (Sydney) 23 May 1921
Australians in the Air by Greg Copley, 1976
These are Facts, an autobiography by Air Marshall Sir Richard Williams.
Flying High, the story of Hudson Fysh and Qantas, by Timothy Hall.
Various original documents held by the Royal Victorian Aero Club.

Internet references providing detailed information and leading to other sources are:-

<http://www.diggerhistory3.info/daredevils/page/02-watt.htm>
http://www.australianflyingcorps.org/2002_1999/afc_feature_watt_bio.htm
<http://www.pittlink.net/Is/Bilgola.html>
<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A120458b.htm>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oswald_Watt#_note-ADB
<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A100295b.htm>