



# Aviation Medicine at Point Cook

For some time now I have wanted to look at the important area of aviation medicine and when Museum Curator Allison Bartlett sent me a text about Arthur Poole Lawrence, this seemed like the perfect way to start. In this two-part article by WGCDR John Williamson, Lawrence's life and activities as a pioneer in aviation medicine are described.

## Group Captain Arthur Poole Lawrence MC A Life of Service to Australia – AIF World War 1 and Medical RAAF

By WGCDR John Williamson AM OStJ RAAF Res (Ret.)



### The Beginnings

Arthur Poole Lawrence was born in Newmarket, Melbourne, on 12 March 1893, the son of Alfred and Edith (née Slade) Lawrence. Arthur, the second-born, had two brothers and a sister. Their father, founder of the Sydney-based Australian firm Lawrence & Hanson

Electrical Company, subsequently returned to England and the children were brought up by their mother.

A serious and conscientious student, Arthur was educated at Ascot Vale State Primary School, University High School and then at Scotch College, Melbourne. He enrolled into the Faculty of Medicine at Melbourne University and with academic success gaining him scholarships, graduated in medicine close to the top of his year in early November 1916. He was enrolled into the Medical Practitioners' Board of Victoria, Register No. 3181, in the same year.

With the beginning of World War 1 in 1914 many young Australians of Lawrence's vintage at that time were itching to volunteer for overseas service. So it is no surprise that Arthur Lawrence, temporarily pinned down by his undergraduate medical studies, made preparation for such service abroad by joining the AIF. On 25 August 1916, at the age of 23 years and 5 months, he applied for an AIF commission with the Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC). He was appointed captain on 16 November 1916 which immediately following his medical graduation. The appointment was published in the Commonwealth Gazette on 28 December 1916.

Dr Lawrence was appointed as a first year medical intern to the Royal Melbourne Hospital. However, he declined that appointment because of its 12 month requirement and instead took a three month appointment at the Geelong Hospital. These arrangements enabled him to embark for "Service Abroad"<sup>1</sup> with the "AAMC AIF Reinforcements" on 18 February 1917, at the age of 23 years and 11 months.

Just prior to all these events, on 31 January 1917, Dr Lawrence married Amy Moxon Beck, the daughter of a pharmacist, in Moonee Ponds, Melbourne.



Lawrence embarked for England on board His Majesty's Australian Transport (HMAT) *Ballarat* on 19 February 1917

### Overseas and World War 1

The young captain's embarkation for "Service Abroad" as a "medical practitioner" was obviously processed as soon as he completed his three months at Geelong Hospital. He embarked for England on board His Majesty's Australian Transport (HMAT) *Ballarat* on 19 February 1917. His war began unexpectedly quickly. En route, HMAT *Ballarat*, 11,120 tons, a P&O vessel, was torpedoed in the English Channel by a German submarine on 25 April 1917 and sank the next day.<sup>2</sup> To his family's knowledge Captain Lawrence was the last off the ship and there was fortunately no loss of life.

## England

Captain Lawrence disembarked safely in Devonport, England on Anzac Day 1917. His service record thereafter records him as:

“Capt M/1 (*marched in*)<sup>3</sup> from Aust; (sic) Parkhouse,<sup>4</sup> 27/4/17”.

There followed various United Kingdom medical training postings in Perham Downs and Durrington and finally to an Overseas Training Depot in England on 25 June 1917. Much later, on 2 December 1918, his wife Amy received a “form of Commission” from the AIF Base Records Office in Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, which was issued by the British War Office, advising her of the appointment of her husband to the “temporary” rank of Captain in the “Regular Forces of the British Army, for retention against the time of his return from active service.”

## France and Belgium

Captain Lawrence was shipped to France on 19 September 1917, where he was “Taken on strength” (TOS) “1st Australian General Hospital”. From there he was permanently detached to the 2nd Australian Division on 13 October 1917 and TOS in the 6th Field Ambulance, which was to be his home unit. From here until 20 January 1918, there followed a series of temporary detachments from the 6th Field Ambulance as a Regimental Medical Officer (RMO), first to the 23rd Battalion (Bn) (Victorian, 6th Brigade), then to the 2nd Division Engineers, and then to 24th Bn. (Victorian, 6th Brigade). He rejoined the 6th Field Ambulance between each of these detachments. On 30 January 1918, he was detached into the Australian Corps School for Medical Officers.

Lawrence went on leave between the 13 February and 2 March 1918, then returned to active duty in the 6th Field Ambulance. Due to illness he was admitted to hospital in a forward medical unit on 18 May and then to a small local hospital on 21 May. On 1 June, he was admitted to 20 General Hospital, Dannes-Camiers, France with ‘Trench Fever and a Pyrexia of Unknown Origin (PUO)’.<sup>5</sup> He was transferred to 73 General Hospital, Trouville, France on 4 June, by now classed as “seriously ill”. He was removed from the seriously ill list on about 1 July and was “discharged to duty” on 12 July.

Rejoining the 6th Field Ambulance his service record indicates without further comment that he remained there for the next four months. This period of AIF battles, destined to echo in Australian military fame, was also significant in Lawrence’s military life as outlined below.

Following these momentous four months, he was detached temporarily to 24th Bn again as RMO on 10 November 1918 for 5 days.

## After the Armistice of 11/11/1918

On 25 January 1919, Captain Lawrence was again temporarily detached from the 6th Field Ambulance, this time to 2nd Division Artillery Column (DAC), as RMO. He was moved from the 2nd DAC to the 2nd Pioneers on 16 February 1919. He then was required to report “on duty” to Headquarters London so he left France and disembarked at Folkestone, England on 28 February 1919.

## Recognition of distinction in the field

It is here, through these bland and unfeeling words of the service record that we get the first real indication of the gallant role that Captain Lawrence played as a medical officer under fire. The dates of his detachments to battalions of the 6th Brigade between October and November 1917, could place him in the Ypres area (where his family have believed he was) during the so-called ‘Third Battle’ of that salient, namely the infamous ‘Passchendaele’.<sup>6</sup> However there is no specific reference in his service record to his involvement there.

Firm records of subsequent events reveal that Captain Lawrence’s conduct under heavy shell fire in the skilful evacuation of Australian wounded in the final Australian campaigns of 1918. These famous Australian series of battles, involving all five Australian divisions under Lieutenant General Monash, took place between 8 August and 5 October 1918.<sup>7</sup> The role of the 2nd Division AIF in the triumph of Mont St Quentin-Peronne is commemorated by the splendid monument to that Division, situated appropriately beside the *Rue de Australien*, in Mont St Quentin. The village Mont St Quentin was captured by the AIF in a great feat of arms in September 1918. The particular battle in which Captain Lawrence was involved with such distinction was in the Hindenburg Line itself.<sup>8</sup>



Lawrence's actions occurred leading up to and during the famous attack and capture of the dominant and tactically critical French ridge village of Montbrehain, east of Peronne, by the 21st and 24th Battalions and the 2nd Pioneers. This engagement was the final battle of the Australian Corps on the Western Front on 5 October 1918. The diggers not only achieved this goal, but also captured 400 prisoners and then held the position against desperate German counter attacks. However the action cost in casualties 30 Australian officers and 400 other ranks.

Lawrence escaped death or wounding. What he achieved during these actions, his service record now at last speaks for itself. For the next entry is: "Awarded Military Cross, London Gaz: 31219". The gazette was dated 8 March 1919. The citation for Lawrence's Military Cross was published in the second supplement to the *London Gazette*, No. 31583, dated 4 October 1919:

#### **Military Cross**

With reference to the award conferred as announced in the London Gazette, dated 8th March, 1919, the following is the statement of service for which the decoration was conferred: Captain Arthur Poole Lawrence, MC

He displayed great gallantry and able leadership on 3rd, 4th, and 5th October, 1918, during the fighting in the Hindenburg Line, north of St. Quentin, particularly during the assault on Montbrehain, as bearer captain (sic). He maintained touch with the R.A.P's in spite of heavy shell fire, and his genius for selecting routes and loading posts resulted in very rapid evacuation of wounded.

The recommendation for the Military Cross which was raised by the Assistant Director Medical Service, 2nd Australian Division and supported by Major General Charles Rosenthal Commanding 2nd Australian Division included the following paragraph which was not included in the citation published in the *London Gazette*:<sup>9</sup>

His work throughout the period was quite outstanding time after time he went to heavily shelled locations to extricate the wounded – he was always where the danger was greatest, where the casualties were occurring, and by his coolness and courage and example, rendered the most gallant service in a very difficult situation.

Many weeks later, on 28 July 1919, his family received the following communication from the AIF Base Records Office, Victoria Barracks, Melbourne:

Dear Madam,

I have much pleasure in forwarding hereunder copy of extract from Second Supplement, No. 31219, to the "London Gazette", dated 8th March 1919, relating to the conspicuous services rendered by the undermentioned member of the Australian Imperial Force.

Awarded the Military Cross

HIS MAJESTY THE KING has been graciously pleased to approve the above award to the undermentioned in recognition of gallantry and devotion to duty in the field. The acts of gallantry for which the decoration has been awarded will be announced in the "London Gazette" as early as practicable:

Captain ARTHUR POOLE LAWRENCE

The above has been promulgated in *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette*, No. 75, dated 17 June 1919.

#### **Singled out**

In 1918, the French Government, as a mark of respect to the World War 1 allied forces that had fought on French soil, commissioned a French artist, Yvonne Rosetti, to portray one allied soldier from each country for display in



**The French artist, Yvonne Rosetti, portrayed one allied soldier from each country for display in the Louvre. The Australian selected was Captain A P Lawrence, MC AIF. Ms Rosetti presented a crayon drawing to her sitter**

the Louvre. The Australian selected was the undeniably handsome Captain A P Lawrence, MC AIF. Ms Rosetti presented a crayon drawing to her sitter.<sup>10</sup>

#### **France again**

Following the announcement of the award of the Military Cross, he returned to France on 6 March 1919 and rejoined the 5th Field Ambulance until 23 March. His subsequent attachments between these dates, as listed above from his Service Record, would have involved the on-going medical work that falls to the lot of all medical officers in war, long after the last shots are fired. He was then directed to report to the Director Medical Services (DMS) back in England.

#### **The young surgeon**

Captain Lawrence had by this time resolved to obtain a post-graduate surgical qualification. This is not surprising mindful of the extensive battlefield, casualty, and allied hospital surgical experience he would have gained in the preceding 18 months. His service record indicates he was granted Non-Military Employment (NME) leave from late March until 7 October 1919 for the stated medical purpose of attending the Royal Infirmary in Glasgow.

It was about this time that Arthur cabled his young bride in Melbourne and asked her to join him in England. They had not seen each other for two long years since he embarked from Melbourne. She arrived in England a little later in 1919, to the great delight of them both, following a voyage from Sydney, via New Zealand and then across Canada.<sup>11</sup>

They had their delayed honeymoon there in England and Arthur began what was to be a six months Glasgow course preparation for his examinations for a Fellowship in the Royal College of Surgeons Edinburgh (FRCS [Edin.]), with his wife by his side. But fate took a hand with those plans!

### His strength of character in Scotland

In the words of Arthur's younger son (Dr Stephen Lawrence) the following events took place in Edinburgh:

He was above all a man of honour. When about to sit for his FRCS in Edinburgh, the Warden of the College asked him for afternoon tea the day before the exam. On some pretext the Warden left him alone and to my father's dismay, he saw that the exam paper for me next day was in front of him. On the Warden's return, my father told him that he had done my father a great disservice, for he could not sit the exam after this experience and he would have to stay in Glasgow for a further six months until the next sitting. This he did.

So of necessity, when Arthur's previous NME leave period had expired he immediately obtained an extension until 21 January 1920. That extra time allowed him to gain his FRCS (Edin.), a considerable achievement on the heels of all that he had been through during those previous two and a half years.

### Homeward bound

Lawrence reported as Medical Officer to the Deputy Assistant Adjutant General (DAAG) in England on 22 January 1920 "for disposal", and he and the now-pregnant Amy embarked on 22 January 1920 for Australia on board the former German vessel, the *Fredericksberg*.<sup>12</sup> They arrived in Melbourne on 9 March 1920, undoubtedly to a joyful reception.

Captain Arthur Lawrence's AIF appointment was terminated in Melbourne on 21 April 1920. Arthur and Amy's first child, a daughter, Patricia, was born on 22 June 1920.

### Not a Civilian for long

In 1920 only a few short months after the four operational and the four training squadrons of the Australian Flying Corps (AFC) of WW1 had been disbanded, following their return to Australia, the decision was taken to establish an Australian Air Force.<sup>13</sup> The AFC had been part of the Army. The establishment of this new Australian Air Force occurred on 31 March 1921 with approval to use the 'Royal' prefix approval by His Majesty King George V on 13 August 1921. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) was based at Point Cook, Victoria.

In 1920 Dr Lawrence had been appointed as the Medical Officer to the Point Cook Flying School. He was appointed to a commission in the Medical Branch of the Permanent Air Force with rank of flight lieutenant on 31 March 1921, the day the RAAF was established.<sup>14</sup>

On 28 May 1921, Arthur and Amy welcomed the arrival of their second daughter, Suzette.

Soon afterwards, the medical services of the RAAF were born modestly at Point Cook on 1 July 1921 with its inaugural sole (Senior) Medical Officer the freshly promoted Squadron Leader A P Lawrence MC FRCS (Edin.).

Royal Assent to the Air Force Act 1923 was received on 1 September 1923, which gave the RAAF equal status to the Royal Australian Navy and the Australian Military Forces (at least theoretically!).

### A possible first military aviation medicine flying experiment in Australia?

Squadron Leader Lawrence was in charge of the Point Cook "sick quarters" – which was simply a small hut. However, with his enquiring mind he quickly became interested in aspects of aviation medicine, in particular in the selection of recruits for flying training and in the little understood problems that then beset high altitude flying.

One day his attention was caught by two flight lieutenants in a DH9 aircraft<sup>15</sup> after they had landed from a flight to a claimed altitude of 28,000 feet without oxygen supplement.<sup>16</sup> One airman was visibly centrally cyanosed<sup>17</sup> and both showed other clinical signs of hypoxia (lack of oxygen). They remained rather unwell for the next few days. Typically, Lawrence then persuaded a squadron leader to take him up to allow him to study the effects of high altitude without supplementary oxygen on himself. At a confirmed altitude of 22,000 feet Lawrence identified the clinical signs, symptoms and effects of hypoxia in himself, finding that he was quite unable to think or observe accurately.<sup>18</sup> This may have been the first aviation medical experiment conducted while flying, in Australian military history.



Lawrence was appointed to a commission in the Medical Branch of the Permanent Air Force with rank of Flight Lieutenant on 31 March 1921, the same day the RAAF was established

Footnotes for this article will be included in the concluding second part next issue. Ed.