

LIEUTENANT WALTER HENRY SHIERS

May 17th, 1889 - June 2nd, 1968



2021 Premier's Anzac Spirit
School Prize
Golden Grove High School
Jessica Grasser

No doubt you have heard of Ross and Keith Smith's amazing achievements. But have you ever considered the mechanics who were also on their plane?

May 17th, 1889 in Norwood South Australia, Anne Nee Haire and Liam Shiers brought Walter Henry Shiers into the world. Raised in the suburb of Hilton, Adelaide, Walter was among a large family of 11 siblings. This family dynamic instilled Walter's sense of mateship as he learnt from a young age the importance of teamwork and reliability as one of the older siblings. (Figure 1)

Walter was enrolled at Richmond Public School until aged 13 when he began work at a market garden, acquiring basic knowledge of pump and motor mechanical maintenance. In 1907 Walter's mother Annie died of unknown causes. This tragedy prompted Walter to reside



Figure 2: Shiers, Walter Henry. Australian Light Horse soldiers Tom [?] and Wal Shiers (right) on horseback, Middle East

with one of his brothers in Broken Hill, where he commenced his work at the North Mine. He then moved to New South Wales in 1913, where Walter worked as an electrical contractor in rural Leeton. All this experience proved useful in his military career.

On the 9th of April 1915 Wally made a day trip to Liverpool where he was approached by a recruitment officer. Whether it was for himself, his country or his loved ones is unknown, but Walter chose not to return home and was sent down to the Paddington barracks. After the necessary tests were completed, he was assigned to the 4th Light Horse Regiment.

On June 22nd, 1915, Walter left Australia on the *HMAT Vestalia* for Cairo, Egypt. The 4th Light Horse Regiment continued training eight hours a day for six days a week for two months until units were deployed. Some went to Gallipoli to fight the Ottoman Empire, but Walter's unit remained and fought the Sinai and the Battles of Gaza including the charge of Beersheba. Walter was brought to camp in the Palestine Campaign in 1916 (figure 2). The 1st Double Squadron of the Light Horse Brigade were considered 'surplus to requirements' and it was their job to guard the Suez Canal while most of the Anzac Mounted Division pushed east to drive the Turks out of Palestine. It must have been frustrating to play a relatively minor role but Walter preserved.



Figure 1: Wally Shiers, aged about 11, rides atop a hay cart in Torrensville, with one of his 5 brothers (left) and father (right)

On the 9th of April 1915 Wally made a day trip to Liverpool where he was approached by a recruitment officer. Whether it was for himself, his country or his loved ones is unknown, but Walter chose not to return home and was sent down to the Paddington barracks. After the necessary tests were completed, he was assigned to the 4th Light Horse Regiment.

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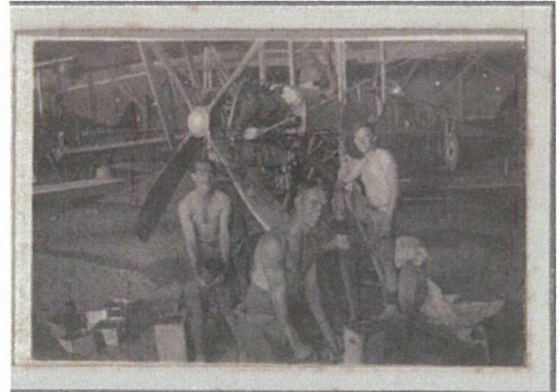


Figure 3: Walter Henry Shiers (left) repairing one of the aircrafts standing in front of a partially dismantled Royal Aircraft Factory B.E.2 biplane in a hangar, Middle East,



Figure 4: Royal Aircraft Factory B.E.2c biplane flown and serviced by Walter's

At this point in the war, airships and early aircrafts were used primarily for tactical reconnaissance until the Australia Flying Corps (AFC) was formed. March 1917 the AFC called for men from the Light Horse to join and Walter, with his knowledge of mechanics and electrics, returned to Cairo to train for the following three months. He was placed AFC Squadron 1. Walter served in C Flight (figure 4), based in Kantara, with Captain Ross Smith and fellow mechanic Jim Bennett, who he ultimately made history alongside. Within his unit Walter found a familiar sense of brotherhood (figure 3) he recognised from growing up.

In an oral history interview Walter describes fighting on the Western Front where he finally had a chance to engage with German enemies. "We'd go out at 4pm and come back at 12am bombing, scowering, dropping flares and finding out communications of the Turks. Eventually the big night came where we came with 32 machines and bombed the Turks off the earth, which was the start of the armistice."

Walter came out of the war alive and could have returned home. Instead, his aviation adventures were far from over. Wally and Jim Bennett were chosen as the mechanics for a long-range survey mission in a Handley Page plane from Cairo to Calcutta. After this mission Ross and Keith Smith accompanied by Jim Bennett and Walter competed in the Great Air Race from England to Australia, a flight never achieved before.



Figure 5: Route flown by Ross, Keith, Jim and Walter. From England to Australia

On the 12th of November 1919 the men set off (figure 5) determined to succeed. With their fair share of difficulties they finally returned to Australian soil on the 10th of December 1919 after 27 days and 20 hours. The Smith Brothers became national celebrities with their journey compared to the first moon landing by NASA astronaut Andy Thomas. Walter was promoted to sergeant in 1919, and in 1920 he was granted the honorary rank of lieutenant. Walter was awarded the Air Force Medal and a Bar (figure 6) for his wartime service and roles immediately after.



Figure 6: Lieutenant Walter Henry Shiers medals from left-right: Air force medal and bar, 1914–1915-star, British war medal 1914–1920, Victory medal, Indian General Service medal, George VI coronation medal 1937

On the 22nd of February 1920 Walter married Helena Alford in Sydney (figure 7). For the next 5 years he worked alongside other pilots and on the 20th of November 1929 he obtained his own pilot licence. He continued to work both flying and as a mechanic for another 15 years, including chief engineer for New England Airways during World War II until 1939



Figure 7: Wally and Helena's Garden wedding photographed for Sydney's The Sunday Times. Source:

when he managed the textiles branch of the Light Aircraft Co until his retirement in 1945. Walter then lived quietly in Adelaide with wife Helena and no children, until his passing from heart disease on 2 June 1968. (Figure 8) Walter's

friends and family remembered him as a *'short nuggetty man of great character who had a strong will and abrupt manner. He was generous to a fault, had a disregard of material gain and placed a high value on comradeship.'*

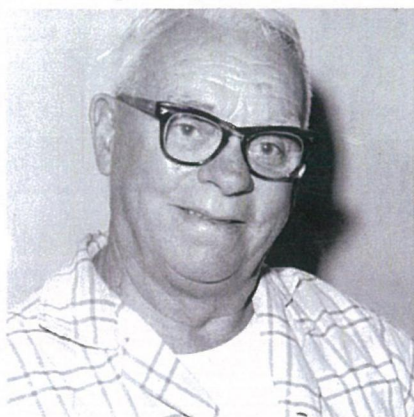


Figure 8: Image of Walter aged 76 published courtesy of News Corp Australia and was taken by an unidentified staff reporter in 1965.

When analysing Walter's perseverance and mateship his entire life comes to mind, rather than just his service in World War I. After losing his beloved mother and main care giver, Walter spent his life surviving and working in various manual jobs. Despite everything he worked for in Australia as a young man, Walter left, leaving everything behind to defend his country. Even after the war was completed Walter continued his perseverance for the development of his country's aviation accomplishments. Walter's brothers and sisters taught him the responsibilities of independence and dependence, trust, reliability and support at a young age. All qualities pertaining to his prominent sense of mateship. Within his record-breaking flight, Light Horse and AFC unit Walter found a familiar bond ship with his fellow service men sacrificing their lives for each other. The extent of this brotherhood was documented through his personal photography (figure, 9,10,11) where the chemistry, bond and connection of the lads is undeniable. Walter's perseverance and mateship allowed him to not only connect and love the people around him and the friends he made in his service, but they also enabled him to push himself harder and fight for the Australian values he loved.



Figure 9: Walter (left) and Jim Bennett (right) working on the Vickers Vimy

Walter didn't just present or display these values they very core of himself. He did so with no boast, brag or brawl, he simply did. Sharing Walter's lesser-known story is a celebration of the 100-year anniversary of the RAAF and the values at its core.



Figure 10: Shiers, Walter Henry. 1916, Australian Light Horse Brigade soldiers Wal Shiers, on left, and Tom[?] standing next to a stone pillar, Palestine,



Figure 11: Walter Henry Shiers (centre) and two other mechanics standing in front of a partially dismantled Royal Aircraft Factory B.E.2 biplane in a hangar, Middle East,

Part B:

In the attempt to document Walter's life, I kept a research journal to log my process. In this journal I described the ever-growing connection I formed to Walter's service and life, and my dedication to sharing his life through writing my piece.

The process started with choosing the subject of my entry. In Year 9 History we learned about World War I and the influence it had on the globe, including the creation of the Royal Australian Air Force. This class introduced me to the notable story of the Smith brothers and their lesser-known mechanics Jim Bennett and Walter Shiers. After deciding on Walter as my subject I went to the Epic Flight Centenary website and started reading about his coming-of-age story and his service. After learning the basics about Walter, I visited the Ross Smith memorial at Adelaide Oval. While I was there, I had the opportunity to lay a poppy and pay my respects (figure 1). I then visited the original *G-EAOU Vickers Vimy* at Adelaide Airport (figure 2). In an attempt to fully pay my respects, I was also able to visit Walter's grave at the Centennial Park Cemetery. These visits enabled me to write from a more personal perspective about Walter. I was able to connect with him as a real person motivating me to share his story.

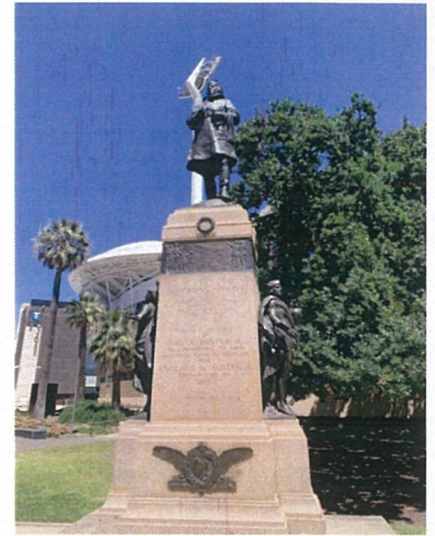


Figure 1: Ross Smith Memorial, Adelaide Oval 17/11/2020 photographed by me

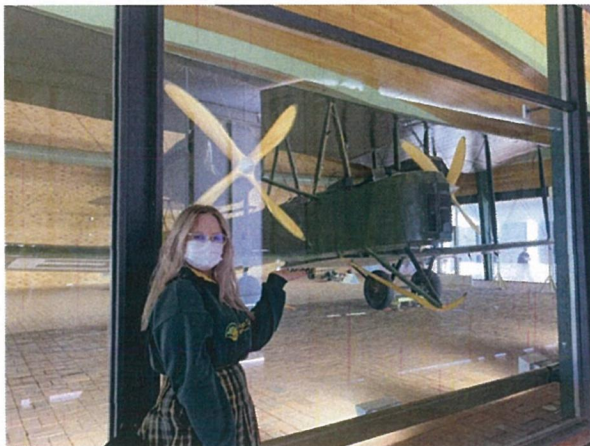


Figure 2: Me Infront of the original *G-EAOU Vickers Vimy* at Adelaide Airport 17/11/2020

After consulting the online records for a typical Anzac, I made appointments at the State Library to look at physical records like photographs taken of and by him, newspaper clippings of his wedding as well as his Australian Dictionary of Biography entry. I also went to the State Records of South Australia and was able to read Walter's personal file to locate accurately where he was serving throughout World War 1. I became aware of a series of interviews, by Hazel De Burg before Walter passed away. To gain access to these recordings I contacted the National Library of Australia. I also contacted a local historian and author Lainie Anderson who wrote *Long Flight Home*, a fiction book based on the Great Air Race. Ms Anderson's correspondence gave me an insight into Walter's personality as well as his morals and values. She also guided me to resources she utilised in her writing, enabling me with a wide variety of primary and secondary sources as well as guidance throughout my endeavours of writing this entry.

I utilised as many primary sources as I could find but I also used online secondary sources to my advantage because information about Walter was more accessible due to the fame of the Smith Brothers. One example of how I used both to my advantage was Walter's medals. Walter's medals are in the custody of the Adelaide Art Gallery and only limited pictures were available online. By using the secondary sources, I was able to find the names and origin of this unique set of medals. In total I spent four months researching before I started writing and I believe it influenced the quality of my essay significantly. I hope to meet his family members one day regardless of how I go in the competition.

Word count (1902)

Reference List

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Images/figures:

Figure 1: Wally Shiers, aged about 11, rides atop a hay cart in Torrensville. Photo courtesy of the West Torrens Historical Society, viewed 4 December 2020 <https://epicflightcentenary.com.au/wally-shiers/>

Figure 2: (Australian Light Horse soldiers Tom [?] and Wal Shiers on horseback, Middle East, ca. 1917 [picture] 2021, Trove, Trove <<https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-140817606/view>>. (Walter Shiers album of photographs from Egypt and the Middle East during World War I)

Figure 3 & 11: Three mechanics standing in front of a partially dismantled Royal Aircraft Factory B.E.2 biplane in a hangar, Middle East, ca. 1917 [picture] 2021, Trove, Trove, viewed 18 May 2021, <<https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-140814700/view>>. (Walter Shiers album of photographs from Egypt and the Middle East during World War I)

Figure 4: Royal Aircraft Factory B.E.2c biplane. RAF B.E.8 2021, Flyingmachines.ru, viewed January 2021, <<http://flyingmachines.ru/Site2/Crafts/Craft25647.htm>>.

Figure 5: Map showing the route followed in the first flight from England to Australia, marking places where the aeroplane landed. Map originally published in Sir Ross Smith's '14,000 Miles Through the Air', Macmillan Company, New York, 1922. State Library of South Australia <<https://digital.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/nodes/view/6511>>.

Figure 6: Wally Shiers' medals, gifted to the Art Gallery of South Australia by Mrs Arthur Shiers in 1968. L-R: Air Force Medal and bar; Victory Medal; British War Medal; Victory Medal; India General Service Medal with Afghanistan NWF 1919 bar; George VI Coronation medal; Royal Aero Club Bronze Medal. AGSA nos NM00021 (1-6) and NM00148. Photo provided privately through correspondence with Art Gallery of South Australia.

Figure 7: Sergeant Shiers Married. - The Scone Advocate (NSW : 1887 - 1954) - 20 Feb 1920 2014, Trove, Trove<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/156901132?searchTerm=Walter%20Shiers%20helena%20alford>>.

Figure 8: Image of Walter aged 76 published courtesy of News Corp Australia and was taken by an unidentified staff reporter in 1965. Death of Walter 'Wally' Shiers | Epic Flight Centenary 2019, Epic Flight Centenary - History Trust of South Australia <<https://epicflightcentenary.com.au/timeline/death-of-walter-wally-shiers/>>.

Figure 9: Wally Shiers and Jim during the epic flight. SLSA [PRG-18-9-1-5C-e] viewed 4 December 2020 <https://epicflightcentenary.com.au/wally-shiers/>

Figure 10: Australian Light Horse Brigade soldiers Wal Shiers, on left, and Tom[?] standing next to a stone pillar, Palestine, 1916 [picture] 2021, Trove, Trove <<https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-140820903/view>>.

Interviews:

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PDF:

<https://www.saam.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/SAAM-Profiles-WALTER-SHIERS.pdf>