

# A Research Challenge

**Lt William Cargill Colvin  
No.6 (Training) Squadron, AFC**

**By John Baker**



## Introduction

*A few years ago the Society launched an initiative whereby people with relatives involved in World War One aviation, could send us details of their service. With a great deal of input from our Journal Editor, this information was used to create articles, which were published in the Journal.*

*Earlier this year I was contacted by Mr. Jim Colvin, whose father had served in both the army and the Australian Flying Corps, with a query as to whether this could be done in his case. At first sight I had to tell Jim that the detail he had was not sufficient for such an article. On later consideration, it seemed to me that the snippets I had gleaned in pursuing further facts to flesh out the picture were intrinsically very interesting, and thought there could well be in our ranks members who might be enthused to look further; members who had the knowledge and the expertise I lack. Consequently not only do I welcome input to this article but I am hopeful that some fresh light will be cast on the specific questions raised.*

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William Cargill Colvin No. 3026 was born in Sydney on 18 September 1898, and enlisted on 24 August 1915, giving his age as exactly 18. Like so many of his compatriots he was of course inflating his age (by a year and a month) in his keenness to join up. Given that he was only five feet eight and a half inches (1,74 metres) tall and weighed in at 146 pounds (66 Kilograms) with a chest measurement of 32 to 35 inches (81 to 89 centimetres) perhaps the Medical Officer turned a blind eye, or more likely this was a fairly standard set of measurements for the times. He gave his calling as Apprentice Engineer.

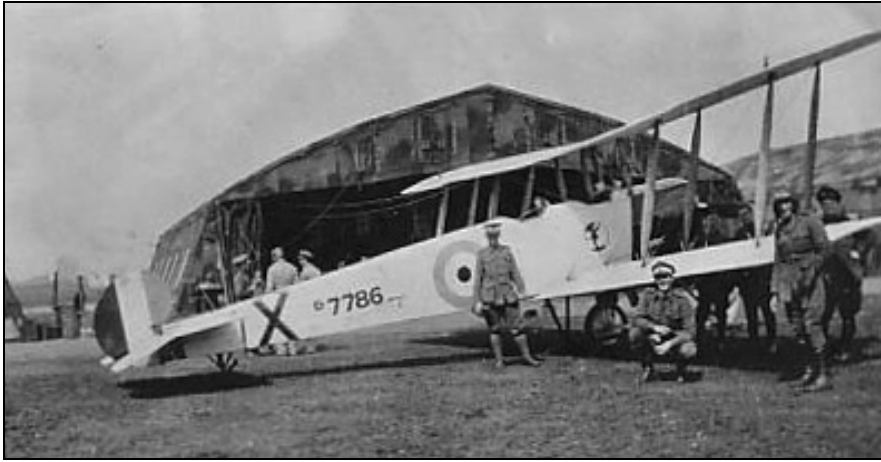
William left Australia on the *Warilda*, on 8 October 1915, as part of the 10<sup>th</sup> Reinforcements, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. After completion of training in Egypt, his unit went on to England and on 13 February 1916 he was taken on the strength of the 55<sup>th</sup> Battalion. A challenge would be to investigate the activities of this battalion in 1916, as William's Statement of Service makes no comment on events for the whole of 1916, until Christmas Eve, when he was hospitalized until early February of 1917, in King George Hospital, whilst on leave in the United Kingdom.

Just two months later, on 8 April, whilst in billets at Le Bargue in France, some type of detonator or similar which was embedded in the wood of the fire he was tending, exploded in his face, injuring his left eye in particular. He was transferred through two hospitals to receive specialised treatment, which included surgery to remove splinters and fragments as they worked their way to the surface of his eyes. It was some three months before he was able to see much at all.

Given this accident, it is some surprise to find Private Colvin's next service entry is a notation of his transfer to the Australian Flying Corps Headquarters on 5 October 1917, and then on to Wendover, Reading and Oxford as a Cadet pilot. Perhaps he was able to do a Manno<sup>1</sup> but what must have helped greatly was a burning desire to succeed, as he spent more time in and out of hospital over his training period. It must have been difficult to persuade the Powers of the value of continuing on with his training.

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<sup>1</sup> Major Edward Manno VC, DSO and Bar, MC and Bar, one of the top Allied fighter pilots, who is sometimes credited with cheating his way through his eye test due to poor sight in one eye.



*Left: 'X', the Wing Examiner's bus, at Minchinhampton.*

*Right: William Colvin ready for a flight in Avro 504K serial 3107. Note the Kangaroo emblem painted on the fuselage.*



*Left: Lt William Cargill Colvin, AFC.*

All Photographs provided by Bill Colvin.

*Below: A Sopwith Camel gunnery fuselage at Minchinhampton.*



At Oxford University he completed a six week course on Military Aeronautics. Next the records show that William was sent to the No.6 (Training) Squadron, Australian Flying Corps on 20 April 1918. There is some family lore that says he was well above average in both the theory and practice of flying and there is also some suggestion he was employed in instructing other students, with his service record hard to decipher on either hypothesis. A.H. Cobby, in his autobiography **High Adventure**, says on this score: "*Almost any pilot who had returned from overseas,----- was put on to instructing----- and a large number of the more advanced pupils themselves were given similar duties.*"

There are a small number of photographs still in the family's possession, showing William in front of both crashed and intact aircraft. Of particular interest are two Avro 504s. One bears the number 7786 and a large 'X' and is noted as "*Wing examiner bus*". It stands before a camouflaged canvas hanger. The other features a kangaroo and the number 3107. A third shows ground gunnery practice in a cut down aircraft consisting of cockpit, top wing struts and a portion of wing.

On 19 July he graduated and was appointed "*Flying Officer [Pilot] to be 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in AFC.*" Then three months later, on 19 October, "*to be Lieutenant*".

The next entry in his service record is dated 11 February 1919, and states that he was "*to be Lieutenant*" in the No.6 (Training) Squadron. This discrepancy is not explained in the records, but could be brought about by the cessation in hostilities which can bring with it a general cutting back or just plain sloppy record keeping.

From available records, it is clear that William almost certainly did not fly operationally in France, and one can only speculate why. Perhaps his eyesight was considered a problem in that context, but this was balanced by his expertise in a training role.

Leave with pay was granted him from 20 March to 20 of May 1919 for the purpose of "*attending Fairfield Ship Building Coy Limited, Glasgow*" to study marine engineering, specifically steam turbines. This must have been part of a training scheme to better fit William for a return to civilian life. It is surprising to me that such consideration was given to military personnel and I would ask for comment from anyone with knowledge of the policies on post war training. Finally on 28 June 1919 he is noted as having "*completed duty to instruct. To rejoin No. 2 Group*".

He returned to Australia on the "*Canberra*". On the voyage he was appointed Education Officer, perhaps a testament to his training skills. Once home in Australia William resumed his apprenticeship and remained in that area during the inter-war years, becoming the Assistant Commissioner for Apprentices for New South Wales. He was exempted military service in World War Two, given his position in Government service.

Like so many of his compatriots William rarely talked about his experiences as an infantryman on the Somme, but was a little less reticent on the subject of flying. He died in 1970.

I hope this article has provided food for thought and raised some stimulating questions. At the very least it has provided an opportunity for one man amongst many to be remembered and that is, after all, the service historians should provide.

