

SIR ROSS SMITH COMMEMORATION SERVICE

ST PETERS CATHEDRAL

15 JUN 2019

Main Address – Air Commodore Phil Gordon

Senior Air Force Representative South Australia

Your Excellency and Mrs Le,

The Honourable Steven Marshall, Premier of South Australia,

The Most Reverend Geoffrey Smith, Archbishop of Adelaide,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for coming here today to commemorate the passing of one of this nation's most distinguished military airmen and renowned aviators. In the last two years, RAAF Edinburgh and the RAAF Association have combined to hold this service at North Road Cemetery but this year, the centenary of the epic flight, I can think of no better place than to commemorate the passing of Sir Ross Smith in the very cathedral where he lay at rest here in 1922. Thus, I would like to pay a special thank you to The Very Reverend Frank Nelson, Dean of this fine Cathedral, for allowing us to be here today.

The biography in the Commemoration Service handout contains a summary of Sir Ross Smith's short but quite incredible life. I therefore do not intend to provide you with a repeat synopsis of his life. Instead, I would like to give you an indication of the character of this man by highlighting some examples that illustrate the daring, initiative and airmanship of this quite remarkable South Australian who has perhaps been somewhat forgotten in recent decades.

I therefore take you to the Middle East in September 1917. No 1 Squadron has been operating in the Middle East since mid 1916 largely performing reconnaissance and interdiction roles with inferior machines learning aerial warfare in a hostile and barren environment.

Ross Smith, a 24 year old South Australian born in Semaphore and educated at Queens College, North Adelaide, is in a Bristol Fighter patrolling the air over Beersheba. Having joined the Australian Light Horse in August 1914 at the start of the war, Ross Smith is already a veteran like many Australian Flying Corps aviators. Having sailed with the first convoy to leave South Australia, he landed in Gallipoli in May 1915. He rose through the ranks in the Dardanelles Campaign to Regimental Sergeant Major and was then commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant before being invalided to England after

which he rejoined the Australian Light Horse in the Middle East to fight in the Battle of Romani in 1916.

Having transferred to the Australian Flying Corps in early 1917, he quickly established himself as a highly successful aviator as an observer. He was awarded a Military Cross in March 1917 as an observer when he and his pilot landed their BE2C in the face of the enemy in the desert to rescue a downed Royal Flying Corps pilot. While his pilot rescued the downed pilot, Smith kept the approaching enemy at bay with his revolver.

Now, on 1 September 1917, he is the pilot of another inferior BE2 aircraft. He spots a German Albatross escorting a Rumpler Reconnaissance aircraft. He carefully manoeuvres into the sun and dives onto the Albatross's tail, opening fire at only 40 metres. The surprised German throws his machine into an about turn for his lines. Smith, awake to the pilot's intentions, expertly manoeuvres to re-engage by climbing up over the aircraft and then turning head on to re-engage. The two aircraft hurtle toward each other, the pilots clearly seeing each other's faces and then pressing their triggers. Smith sees his bullets hit the Albatross but suddenly is dazed by a bullets smashing into the cockpit with one going through his cheek and another grazing his

forehead and shattering his goggles. Smith is hospitalised but later hears that the Albatross had gone down. It is the first of Smith's many aerial victories and one of the first for No 1 Squadron.

He was awarded a second Military Cross in 1918 for conspicuous action and gallantry in conducting photo reconnaissance and bombing. Many of these tasks involved flying at distance across unsurveyed enemy territory such as when he was the first allied airmen to fly over Jerusalem and Jericho. He opened the Battle of Armageddon with a bombing raid which destroyed the critical telephone exchange at El Afule and severely damaged the railway junction. These actions directly resulted in the subsequent allied ground offensive being conducted with surprise.

Smith also conducted vital resupply missions and provided air defence for Lawrence of Arabia's Arab camp at Um Es Surab. In his book *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, the renowned Lawrence of Arabia recalls Smith's daring and prowess. He notes one morning when he was sharing sausages for breakfast with the aviator. Smith suddenly heard incoming German aircraft and quickly dashed away to his aircraft and took to the air. After defeating the enemy he landed and returned to his still warm sausage. A short while later as

he was about to eat some toast, three other German aircraft appear and Smith again dashes off to defend the camp driving away the German raiders.

His last aerial victory was particularly notable. On 19 October 1918, on patrol in a two-seat Bristol F2B fighter across enemy lines, he identified an enemy two-seater DFW aircraft. He dived on the aircraft firing bullets into its wings. The aircraft pitched into a spinning dive apparently out of control. As he continued to watch the aircraft, he suddenly saw it level off close to the ground touching down to a smooth landing. Smith proceeded to fly over the aircraft raking it with machine gun fire, forcing the pilot and observer to abandon the aircraft. He then proceeded to land beside it and while his own observer covered the enemy with the aircraft's rear guns, set fire to the enemy aircraft, destroying it and then taking off to return home. This action led to his third Distinguished Flying Cross – the Citation reading “To have affected a landing in an unknown country, many miles in rear of the enemy's advanced troops, demonstrated courage and skill of a very high order.”

Earning the nickname “Hadji”, Smith would go onto record a total of eleven kills in the Middle Eastern campaign – a remarkable record given the paucity of aircraft involved compared with the Western Front where the great

majority of aces emerged. He would finish the war as one of the most highly decorated allied airmen of World War 1.

Less than three weeks after the Armistice, Ross Smith was selected to be the co-pilot for the pioneering survey flight from Cairo to Calcutta in a Handley Page 0/400 bomber aircraft; the same aircraft type he had flown with the Australian Flying Corp in the Middle East. Comprising a crew of three pilots and two ground maintenance staff, Smith and his team arrive in Calcutta 11 days after leaving Cairo. Arriving in mid December, the team stayed over the Christmas period entertained by the British Officers in India, dining with the Viceroy, tiger shooting and generally living the high life of the British Raj.

Of course, Smith was later knighted for conducting the first flight from England to Australia in 1919. Only two and half years after learning to fly, two years after his ventures in the Middle East and less than a year after his Cairo to Calcutta flight, Smith responded to the Australian wartime Prime Minister Billy Hughes offer of 10,000 pounds to be the first person to fly from England to Australia in less than 30 days. While today we can complete such a journey in less than 18 hours, Ross Smith and his team completed the

incredible journey only 16 years after Wright Brothers first took to an aircraft into the air.

In the most daring and difficult test of endurance, Smith, his brother and two support crew flew over 18,500km for 28 days and about 135 hours in the air.

Registered as G-EAOU, the Vickers Vimy they flew came to be nick-named “God ‘Elp All of Us” given the myriad of foul weather, mechanical problems and other issues the crew encountered over the epic journey. Indeed, faced with almost daily extreme challenges that would test the resolve of today’s aircraft and aircrew, Ross Smith and his fearless crew demonstrated the utmost fortitude, ingenuity and human endeavour that is shown by only a few in history.

Taking off in dense fog on 12 November 1919 from Hounslow, they flew through blizzard-like conditions where snow and ice-cold wind lashed them in their open cockpits over the English Channel. Their aircraft instrumentation froze; their goggles were rendered useless by ice. Even their sandwiches froze! They suffered intense pain from the exposure causing Ross to record in his diary “The cold is hell and I am a silly ass for having ever embarked on the flight.” It was only the first day.

In a subsequent leg, their aircraft was bogged at Pisa, Italy, after heavy overnight rain formed a lake at the landing field. After being bogged for a day and unable to move the aircraft, Smith realised they must get airborne on the second day as they were losing time. He directed one of the aircrew to run beside the fuselage, dropping his dead weight on the tail area so the Vimy wouldn't tip on its nose when Smith throttled the engines. As the plane became airborne, the crewman had to clamour aboard, with instructions to get himself to Rome by train if he fell off, and they'd meet him there.

Bad weather continued for most of their flight across Italy and Greece. At one stage they were flying so low along the Greek coastline to avoid heavy cloud that they almost ran into a rocky outcrop that suddenly appeared out of the mist. At Ramadi the aircraft was almost destroyed on the ground when a sudden wind change threatened to blow the aircraft over only, to be saved by 50 Indian cavalrymen suddenly jumping on the aircraft to hold it down while the crew turned it around into the wind.

On takeoff at Calcutta, their aircraft engine shuddered when two Hawks struck the port engine and wing. Even today, a bird strike in engines can spell calamity for an aircraft at that fragile moment when an aircraft first lifts off, but for a basic biplane, it was danger that as Smith proclaimed himself, was a terrifying moment.

Over Thailand they encountered what Smith would later refer to as the worst weather for the entire trip. Storms forced them up to 11,000 ft, the upper extremity of their aircraft's operating ceiling, to fly over mountain ranges that had summits up to 7,000 feet. Not knowing if they had actually crossed the mountains, the storms forced them to descend through rain and heavy cloud, risking running into the mountains. At Singapore the only landing ground was a racecourse that was actually too short for the Vimy's landing distance. On landing, Smith had one of the mechanics slide down the fuselage to the tailplane causing the tail to drop quickly and thus the aircraft to pull up after only a hundred yards. Lastly at Surabaya, in modern day Indonesia, they were again confronted with a bogged aircraft stalling their travels. Local villagers came out to build an adhoc runway out of bamboo matting sourced from their houses, allowing the aircraft to successfully take off.

Finally, after almost 28 long days they landed at Darwin to a hero's welcome. Of the six aircraft to depart England only the Vickers Vimy and one other actually made it to Australia; the other, piloted by Lt Parer took 206 days to accomplish what Smith and his crew accomplished in 28 days. Of the others, the crews of two aircraft lost their lives in crashes. The Smith brothers became national heroes. The feat has been likened to man landing on the

moon or Christopher Columbus sailing to the Americas. It was at the time, and would be for some years, an incredible feat unsurpassed.

Ironically, Ross Smith would tragically die in front of his brother in an aircraft accident in England in 1922, less than two years after the epic flight.

The perils of pioneer aviation had caught up with Ross Smith, just as they

later would for Bert Hinkler, Harry Butler, Charles Ulm and Charles

Kingsford Smith. Ross was buried at North Road Cemetery after lying in state

here in St Peters Cathedral. His body was brought by horse and carriage from

Port Adelaide to the Cathedral where it lay in rest. On 15 June 1922 his

funeral was held in this cathedral and his coffin was taken by horse and

carriage to North Road Cemetery through streets lined by 100,000 South

Australians, a ¼ of Adelaide's population - saying farewell and acknowledging

a remarkable South Australian. It was reported by the local newspaper in his

obituary, that a eagle was soaring above the Cathedral on the day of the

funeral – the only day an eagle has been seen flying over Adelaide.

Today, a fine monument to Smith stands on War Memorial Drive in front of

the Adelaide Oval looking across to the Adelaide Hills. Meanwhile, the

Vickers Vimy G-EAOU is on display at Adelaide airport; both in recognition

of an incredible and ground breaking aviation feat and display of courage, airmanship and tenacity. And hasn't it been so incredible to hear in this special centenary year, of the commitment from Federal and State governments and the Adelaide Airport to fund and move the aircraft to a better and more appropriate place at the airport for future generations of South Australian's and visitors to enjoy. In this respect, I must congratulate those, in particular, the Epic Flight Centenary, who have championed its move; a fantastic outcome of the Epic Flight Centenary and for the State of South Australia.

Les Sutherland, a fellow 1SQN colleague of Smith's and author of Aces and Kings, an account of 1 Squadron in World War 1, perhaps best summed up Ross Smith in suggesting he was "one of the great leaders and larrikins of 1 Squadron and the Australian Flying Corps; post-war he was also one of the great aviation adventurers whose life was sadly cut short after several record breaking flights ... A leader born, he was absolutely fearless.' Today, in an era where modern jet aircraft transit our great oceans with the greatest of ease in hours rather than days, the feats, courage and determination of Sir Ross Smith have become somewhat forgotten. The Centenary of the Smiths' Epic Flight this year has provided South Australia the opportunity to address that deficiency. The Royal Australian Air Force is proud to have teamed up

with various other passionate stakeholders under the auspice of the History Trust of South Australia to implement what has already been a most successful Centennial celebration to inspire the next generation of South Australians - and we are only half way through 2019. I'd like to commend the great work of the Epic Flight Centenary team and in particular, its Chair, Greg Mackie, Chief Executive History Trust of South Australia, Group Captain Greg Weller, Deputy Chair, and Lainie Anderson, the Epic Flight Centenary Ambassador.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I commend to you the story of Sir Ross Smith. Embrace his courage, airmanship, ingenuity and determination as fine examples to embrace. And as we go away, let us not allow his story to fall away from our collective memories again. At a time, when we are seeking to grow and develop as individuals, as a population and as a nation, the story of Sir Ross Smith can serve to inspire our endeavour, initiative and achievement. Thank you.