

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR & AVIATION EVENTS PROFILES

Reginald Sidney Ellis



Figure 1 - Reg Ellis at 7 SFTS Deniliquin in 1942.

21 May 2022 is the 75th anniversary of Reg Ellis' hiring as flight instructor by the Royal Aero Club of South Australia.

Reg Ellis' predecessor, Cuthbert Lum, was briefly assistant flying instructor at the Club before the war, and returned as CFI immediately afterwards. He had had a good war, advancing to Wing Commander as chief flight instructor at the Central Flying School with an AFC. He was therefore a considerable asset to the Club but seriously overqualified, and he flagged an intention to resign at the end of March 1947.

This was not good timing because flying training at the Club, which resumed after the war in October 1946, had been kick-started with *The Advertiser's* offer of a £100 scholarship for which applicants had to be tested, plus an agreement had been proposed with the Spencer's Gulf Aero Club to provide training in Whyalla and Port Pirie. In any event, Lum resigned on 23 April having been appointed to a position with the DCA in Melbourne with a commencement date as soon as possible. Advertisements for a new instructor had been placed in the press already and Reg Ellis, a recently demobbed Lancaster pilot with

a RAF A Instructor rating, was one of four candidates interviewed on 22 April. Ellis was appointed to the job on 6 May at £11 a week, subject to him getting a civilian commercial licence and instructor's rating. A couple of the other candidates were offered 'honorary instructor' roles.

The DCA had agreed to defer Lum's commencement until the Club was able to appoint his replacement, and his last duty was to test Ellis for his commercial licence on 8 May. On 19 May the DCA telegraphed that the commercial licence and B1 flight instructor rating had duly been issued to Ellis, and he started work as instructor on 21 May 1947. He was a worthy successor to Lum, having joined the RAAF in 1940 as a twenty-two-year-old and going on to war service that included the achievement of the A instructor rating plus eleven missions over Europe. He went on to serve the club faithfully for eleven years.

Ellis was born in Angaston on 26 November 1917 and brought up with his younger brother on a winery in the McLaren Vale. He left school aged fourteen, so when he joined the RAAF he had to study for his secondary school intermediate certificate before being accepted at No. 4 Initial Training School Victor Harbor on 20 June 1941. From there he did his initial training at No. 1 EFTS Parafield, then his service flying training on Wirraways at No. 7 SFTS Deniliquin where he was made sergeant pilot.

He embarked in Sydney for Canada on 24 August 1942 for his next stage of training, but the ship was diverted to England while enroute. After a shore stop in Durban, his troopship was torpedoed during the leg to Lagos but, fortunately for Reg, not until after the submarine commander had given the crew and passengers time to evacuate the ship into its lifeboats. They were picked up by a Norwegian ship and

taken to Cape Town where they were given shore leave before embarking again for Lagos. They were not allowed ashore there and waited in offshore anchorage until a convoy of seventy-five ships was assembled. They finally made it through to England after a harrowing two-week trip with the loss of about fifty ships of the convoy. Reg was one of 1,500 fully trained airmen on his troopship, who were apparently considered valuable enough to justify placing in the most protected place in the middle of the convoy.



Figure 2 - Reg Ellis (centre) and crew at Waddington in 1945.

In England he trained initially as an instructor in Shropshire, then was posted to No. 16 EFTS Burnaston near Derby where he was commissioned as pilot officer after about fifteen months, having achieved his A instructor rating. He bounced around England, qualifying then training on Oxfords, Wellingtons, Stirlings and finally Lancasters before being posted to 463 Squadron Waddington on 28 February 1945 for operational flying on Lancasters. He flew his first mission on 6 March to Sassnitz on the German Baltic coast, then ten more throughout March and

April over Germany and Czechoslovakia.

His fifth mission, on 16–17 March 1945 was to Wurzburg, about which Reg's postwar notes say prior to reaching the target he was wounded in a fighter attack. Both port engines were disabled, which required a two-engine landing at the US base at Rennes where the Americans stitched him up, and then he flew back to Waddington the next day. He also wrote after the war that on a Komotau mission on 18–19 April, which was to bomb the Skoda factory, enemy fighters took out their hydraulics so that they couldn't open the bomb bay doors or lower the landing gear. They returned with the bombs already fused and were diverted to a "special aerodrome" to make a wheels-up landing with the entire crew aboard after they refused Reg's offer for them to bail out. (These stories are not totally supported by the operational records. They are derived from my interview with Reg not long before he died, his biographical notes



Figure 3 - Target photo from Reg's mission over Bremen in Lancaster JO-O on 23 Mar 1945.

held by his daughter Wendy Ottway and two press interviews he had given late in life. It's possible that Reg was a bit of a story-teller in his old age, but there is no doubt about the veracity of his mission record.)



Figure 4 - The RAAF team in Bombay. Reg 3rd from left, Lindsay Hassett 6th from right.

The RAAF team, captained by Lindsay Hassett, played five tests against England before taking a long route home when the war ended to play another series of five tests in India. Calcutta was the only test Reg missed when his rickshaw was attacked by an anti-British mob on the way to the ground. Reg reportedly escaped by crawling through the legs of his attackers when the rickshaw was overturned. They flew home to Perth via Christmas Island and were forced – very tired and homesick by then – to play a series of games against all six of the state teams before being demobbed and allowed to go home. Reg was demobbed on 4 February 1946 as a Flight Lieutenant.



Figure 5 - Going out to field on day 1 of the Lahore test. Reg 2nd from left and Lindsay Hassett leading.

So Reg Ellis was employed as flight instructor from 21 May 1947 at a salary of £11 a week – a princely sum relative to his service pay over the previous four and a half years. He was quickly thrust into the testing of scholarship applicants, and with nineteen applicants living in Naracoorte and another twenty-one in Mt Gambier, he set off into country SA to test them there between 7 and 12 July. He probably used one of the three ex-RAAF Tiger Moths the Club had then stored in Mt Gambier, because two club engineers were dispatched to Mt Gambier at the same time to inspect and overhaul the aircraft in preparation for them being flown to Parafield on 20–22 July.

The following month Reg was dispatched to Port Lincoln, Tumby Bay and Loxton to test applicants there, and the winners were finally decided in November after a total of over 450 applications had been received.



Figure 6 - Reg in front of DH-82A VH-BXF overturned in a training accident at Parafield 1949.

discussions about how they might increase flying. The solution was generally to heap more responsibilities onto Reg Ellis. He was told that he must regard himself as the *"manager of the club's operations at Parafield, and that it was the desire of the committee to centre the flying activities of the club around him"* This sounds far more onerous than merely being CFI.

By 1957 Reg hadn't been happy for some time, probably since the rejection of a request for a salary increase in April the previous year. He had asked for parity with his counterpart at the Royal Victorian Aero Club, only to be told in no uncertain terms that the Victorian club flew double the number of hours, which warranted a higher salary. The committee had nominated Nobby Buckley and Des Gillespie to deal with the request, with the admonition they take a firm line with Reg, so perhaps they had been less than diplomatic.



Figure 7 - Reg (right) in front of DHC-1 Chipmunk VH-BWB at Parafield in 1956. BWB was one of three initial Chippies acquired ex-RAF on 28 Sep 1956. The person at left is not identified.

Anyway, notwithstanding this slightly sour note, Reg Ellis's era at the Club had been significant. He was hired at a difficult time when the Club was wrangling with the RAAF for a return of its hangar and expanding rapidly with war-surplus DH-82A Tiger Moths. He was called on to do far more than normal CFI duties, and in fact acted as a defacto operations manager of the Club for the four tumultuous years until Bill Shinn was

eventually appointed as a manager. There was country training, participation in country air pageants, the Club's own pageants, a RAAF ATC contract and 24 Sqn training to service. He presided over an increase in annual flight hours from zero to over 6,000 per year and the commensurate increase in flight instructors and fleet through Tiger Moths, a Ryan, Austers and then the introduction of Chipmunks in late '56. There were the Club's frequent accidents to worry about too: mostly minor training bingles, but also a dreadful Auster crash at Ardrossan in 1953 when VH-BWK burnt after hitting powerlines on landing and killed the passenger.

So, by 1957 he had had enough. He resigned on 3 June, aged only 39 to run his own retail business, work as a security guard at the Pt Stanvac refinery and enjoy his fishing in Port Noarlunga, where he lived happily until he died aged 97 on 21 June 2015. His wife, Verna, whom he married in 1940 and he remained devoted to until she died, pre-deceased him by only a couple of years.

Mike Milln
History Group
May 2022

Over the Page is Reginald Ellis' Service History

APPENDIX – REGINAL SIDNEY ELLIS - SERVICE RECORD

Posting	Location	Date
RAAF Reserve	Adelaide SA	21.11.1940
5 RC	Adelaide SA	23.6.1941
4 ITS	Victor Harbor SA	23.6.1941
1 EFTS	Parafield SA	18.9.1941
10 EFTS	Temora NSW	22.2.1942
7 SFTS	Deniliquin NSW	8.3.1942
4 ED	Adelaide SA	20.7.1942
1 ED	Ascot Vale NSW	10.8.1942
Embarked	Sydney NSW	24.8.1942
Disembarked	Southampton Hampshire UK	18.11.1942
3 PRC	Bournemouth Dorset UK	18.11.1942
(50 Group)		27.1.1943
10 FTS (E)	Ternhill Shropshire UK	27.1.1943
(51 Group)		14.4.1943
16 EFTS	Burnaston Derbyshire UK	14.7.1943
9 EFTS	Ansty Warwickshire UK	8.11.1943
AOS Sidmouth	Sidmouth Devon UK	20.12.1943
7 EFTS	Cottesmore Rutland UK	27.3.1944
1545 BAT	Wheaton Aston Staffordshire UK	30.5.1944
29 OTU	North Luffenham Rutland UK	11.7.1944
75 Base	Goldington Bedford UK	25.10.1944
5 LFS	Syerston Nottinghamshire UK	21.1.1945
463 SQN	Waddington Lincolnshire UK	28.2.1945
11 PDRC	Brighton Sussex UK	12.6.1945
Embarked	Southampton Hampshire UK	22.6.1945
Disembarked	Adelaide SA	4.2.1946
4 PD	Adelaide SA	4.2.1946
Appointment terminated	Adelaide SA	4.4.1946
Enrolled - RAAF General Reserve	Adelaide SA	11.11.1953
Retired - RAAF General Reserve	Adelaide SA	28.11.1966

Promotions

AC2	23.6.1941
LAC	13.9.1941
SGT	26.6.1942
F/SGT	26.12.1942
PLT OFF	14.7.1943
FLG OFF	14.1.1944
FLT LT	14.7.1945

Honours and Awards

1939-45 Star
 France and Germany Star
 Defence Medal
 War Medal 1939-45
 Australia Service Medal 1939-1945
 Returned from Active Service Badge