



Not Without Adversity

SIR LAWRENCE WACKETT, AIRCRAFT PIONEER

Wackett's aviators certificate reproduced from Lawrence Wackett's album Manuscripts Collection MS 4858

Christobel Mattingley considers the life of a great aviator and designer

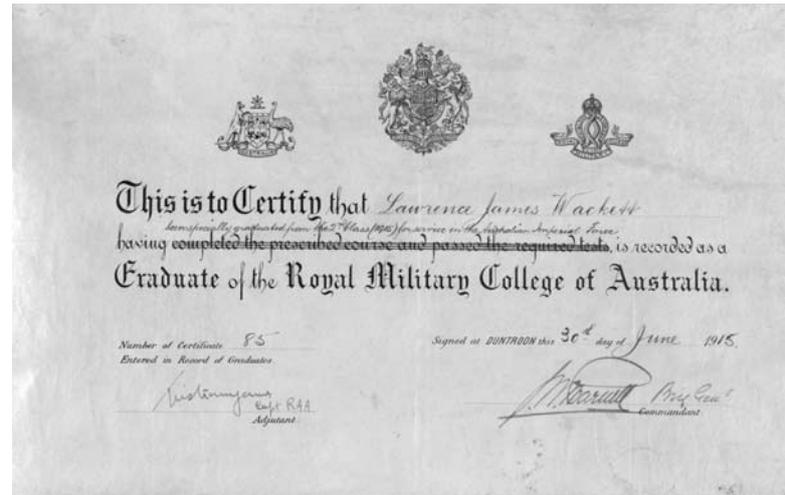
Adventure, achievement and adversity abounded throughout the life of Lawrence Wackett (1896–1982), pilot, aeronautical engineer, aircraft designer and manufacturer, whose vision and work made a brilliant contribution to Australian aviation. The importance of Wackett's achievements was recognised by Harold White, National Librarian, in 1961. White encouraged him to write his autobiography and was delighted when Wackett decided to leave his papers to the Library. Their correspondence and the neat handwritten draft of the autobiography are the first item in the Wackett papers (MS 4858) in the Manuscripts Collection.

Not Without Adversity, a phrase from his motto, was Wackett's choice of title, a fitting

one for his life. But the book appeared in 1972 as the more prosaic *Aircraft Pioneer*, perhaps because the publisher thought *Not Without Adversity* too cryptic.

The gem in the Wackett papers is a massive handmade album of 400 brown paper pages over 40 cm square, beautifully bound, in which Wackett pasted letters, certificates, photos, articles and press cuttings chronicling his long life dedicated to flying and the design and development of more than a dozen aircraft.

Lawrence James Wackett, later dubbed 'Wack', born in Townsville, Queensland, in 1896, attended Mundingburra State School and won a scholarship to Townsville Grammar. His interest in things technical was sparked at age six by a working model steamboat. It was given him by his father, who committed suicide soon afterwards. Lawrence and two younger siblings were raised by their mother.



In 1913 Wackett entered the newly established Royal Military College in its third intake. He impressed authorities by inventing a mechanical fuse setter, but it was not produced. In 1915 he became Duntroon's first graduate to join the Australian Flying Corps.

Sent to Egypt in No 1 Squadron, he assisted with reconnaissance and photography. Finding many aircraft out of action, he improvised a workshop and repaired them. Later, in No 2 Squadron in France, he devised a way, commended by General Sir John Monash, of distributing much-needed ammunition by plane and parachute to within 100 yards of machine-gun crews, and was Mentioned in Despatches in 1917. In 1918, flying at 500 feet (152 m), although under attack, he obtained valuable oblique photographs of areas 10 miles (16 km) behind the Hindenburg Line. His plane was a write-off. He received an immediate award of the Distinguished Flying Cross from General Birdwood, and the Air Force Cross in 1919.

After valuable experience at the Orfordness RAF Experimental Station, on return to Australia Wackett designed and built his first plane, the bird-like Warbler, described as a 'home-made freak' by one journalist, who reported that after excellent initial trials the engine began missing in one cylinder, 'and all the mechanics crowded round like a family round a baby with whooping cough'. It won second prize in the 1924 Low-Powered Aeroplane Competition.

In charge of the RAAF Point Cook workshops, Wackett graduated BSc

with Honours in one year at the University of Melbourne and began designing a flying boat, which he saw as a solution to Australia's isolation. Then, after appointment in charge of the RAAF Experimental Station (Randwick, NSW), he built it. Thirty feet (9 m) long, with a 40-foot (12 m) wingspan, Queensland maple hull and rolled brass wing ribs, the Widgeon, taking four people, and unique with lifeboat and paddles, was completed for £2000, £3000 cheaper than any imported machine of its class.

In July 1925, amid enthusiasm by supporters and derision from sceptics, the plane began its trials on historic Botany Bay. But it nosedived in an abnormal swell and journalists reported 'narrow shaves' and 'breathless escape' for Wackett and passengers as 'Widgeon comes to grief.' One newspaper denounced the waste of public money, calling for a royal commission into

above left:
Distinguished Flying Cross
certificate, 1918
reproduced from Lawrence
Wackett's album
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above right:
Lawrence Wackett's Royal Military
College graduation certificate, 1915
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below:
Unknown photographer
Widgeon I, before La Perouse
Monument, Botany Bay, 1925
Manuscripts Collection
MS 4858

