

# The Red Devil: Captain Harry Butler, AFC, Pioneer Aviator

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Although hailing from a tiny farming community, in his time Captain Henry John “Harry” Butler (1889-1924) was a household name and known throughout the commonwealth as ‘Butler of South Australia’. Upon Butler’s death, SA’s *Register* wrote:

*No name was better known, no individual more esteemed and beloved than Harry Butler....Harry Butler as an airman was unrivalled, incomparable, and alone; and although he made many lives happier because he lived, we sincerely regret his early and greater flight aloft.*

Butler, also known as ‘The Red Devil’ in contemporary newspapers, after his red Bristol monoplane, belonged to a small group of Australian aviation pioneers who lived in exciting and dangerous times. Many served in the Royal Flying Corps or the Australian Flying Corps during the first World War, where the average life expectancy for a pilot was only 2-6 weeks, or 17 flying hours. Even when they survived the war, they often made the ‘ultimate sacrifice’ in pursuing their passion for flying, dying in their 20s and 30s.

To truly appreciate the exploits of these pioneer aviators calls upon us to imagine the time when over 100 years ago, aviation was in its infancy and thoughts of regular flying were little more than a dream. In 1902 the *Register* newspaper asked ‘*Will airships ever be practicable?*’

In the early days, aircraft were little developed beyond (Australian) Hargrave’s box kites, made of wood and fabric using small engines, and often made in backyards. Pilots in these aircraft were at the mercy of the unsophisticated machinery as well as unfavourable weather. A great deal of courage was required to intentionally place oneself in such craft and attempt to fly. This is especially true of the WW1 pilots, especially where parachutes were rarely given to pilots as they were in short supply and reserved for ‘observers’ in air balloons. Even the most skilful of aviators had to rely upon not only their ability but also their luck, as was reflected in Butler’s life motto. Despite his undoubted skill as a pilot (often referred to in contemporary reports) and his commitment to safety (he never drunk spirits for this reason), Butler’s motto was ‘*Luck, Pluck and Ability*’.

From his early days on the farm outside Minlaton, Yorke Peninsula, SA, Harry had a love of all things related to aviation. His obsession with flying was established from a childhood spent experimenting with the wingspans and aeronautics of his mother’s chickens and making model planes with his friends. As a young man, he joined another early SA aviation pioneer in Carl W. Wittber on the plains north of Adelaide, developing home made aircraft and learning all he could about flying. It took him 9 hours motorcycling from Minlaton to Dry Creek to join these efforts. Although these experiments often only resulted in hopping across rough fields, it was enough to peak his interest and firm up his dream of flying. The government later ordered that all

backyard aircraft operations were to be ceased due to WW1: in anger, Wittber burnt his planes.

The first World War was partly seen as an opportunity to realise Harry's dream of flying. After travelling to Melbourne with his sights set on joining the Australian Flying Corps, he showed his natural aptitude by becoming the only applicant to be accepted (as an aeromechanic) from his group into the recently formed Central Flying School at Point Cook. *The Bulletin* observed that this farm boy (who had only attended primary school) had won a place over other university and college educated applicants (he was later to attend Christchurch College, now part of Cambridge in the UK).

A hiccup occurred when Butler's chronic asthma and lack of formal education caused problems for his flying career with the AFC. There were also limited opportunities for flying due to the small number of aircraft available at the time in Australia. But the strength of Butler's desire to fly and do his bit for the allied war effort led him to beg his father to pay his passage to the UK so he could enter the Royal Flying Corps. He vowed that he would go to the UK 'by hook or by crook'. Once there, he joined the RFC as an engineer and quickly became a pilot and rose up through the ranks, becoming a Flight Instructor in Turnberry and Chief Flight Instructor in Yorkshire.

As a pilot over the Western Front in France and then as an instructor training 2,700 pilots in the UK, Harry Butler's contribution to the allied war effort was enormous. He was also involved in protecting the UK, chasing German planes which were dropping bombs on Ramsgate. He was subsequently mentioned in despatches for his part in the capturing of two German submarines and later decorated with the Air Force Cross. He was also the first 'airman' to land in Turnberry, Scotland, and the first to fly airmail in such parts.

A small number of pioneer aviators who made it through the war, like Butler, used the skills that they had honed in combat in the skies over Europe to bring aviation to the Australian people. Harry's fame and contribution to aviation did not thus end with the armistice in 1918, as he purchased two planes from the RFC, one of which was the Bristol M1c monoplane, 'The Red Devil', the fastest of its kind at the time, reaching a speed of 132 miles per hour, little more than the modern family car. Butler was determined to fulfil his passion for flying and plans for civil aviation, although this would also be financially costly, leading him to sell to his brother his share in farming land, and borrowing money from the family.

Butler was on a path to fulfilling a promise he had made to his mother during the war, to one day return triumphantly to his home town in an aeroplane, the likes of which people had never seen before. True to his word, Harry flew from Adelaide to Minlaton over St Vincent's gulf in stormy weather, and witnessed a homecoming that drew crowds from all over the Yorke Peninsula as well as Adelaide. He put the small farming community on the map as he had conducted the first ever air crossing over a major body of water in the southern hemisphere and the first airmail over water. For the trip he wore a primitive life jacket in the form of plastic tubing under his clothing, and a steam launch was waiting in the gulf in case his mission failed. The 4000 postcards he carried held a message from Butler on one side

*“Dear Friend,  
If ever you feel a bit down the Aeroplane will carry you heavenward where the  
Sunshine of dear old Aussie shines eternally. So keep on Smiling. The Plane  
was great in War but it will be greater in Peace. This little souvenir from the  
Clouds is the beginning of a new era in mail and passenger transport. So keep  
your eye on the Aeroplane.  
Yours, Harry J Butler, Captain R.A.F.”*

Perhaps he also had posterity in mind when on the way back to Adelaide he dropped a leaflet over his old school at Koolywartie:

*To my old school and scholars, I sincerely hope that this little message from  
the air will bring you the very best of luck.*

When he returned to Adelaide, he was met by a large crowd headed by Chief Justice Sir George Murray and Governor Galway who patriotically declared ‘you have made South Australia proud’.

In the next few years, Harry Butler was a central figure in Australian aviation. Butler’s plan to bring aviation to the people involved purchasing an ‘airport’ at Northfield and starting the first commercial flying business with his engineering partner Kauper, so everyone could experience the joys they had discovered as aviators. This is where the South Australian Smith brothers landed after they completed their historic first UK-Australia flight in December 1919: a small memorial currently marks the spot.

Butler’s strong belief was that aeroplanes could be used for a number of civilian purposes, but he needed the support of the people to embrace this venture. Butler took the first aerial photographs of Adelaide and surrounds and also sold to the government what became Adelaide’s first government airport at Hendon.

Keen to show the great potential of aviation, Butler used every available opportunity to have the Red Devil in the air. As the nickname of his plane suggested, Butler was a daredevil with a love of aerobatics at a time when it was highly dangerous. The local newspapers could not get enough of the cheery, eccentric and debonair Captain Butler, and he became as regular a fixture in their pages as he was in the sky above Adelaide. As a contemporary report said of one demonstration

*“Opening the performance with a display of looping the loop, Captain Butler included in his remarkable exhibition the spinning nose dive, rolling, half-rolling, the side slip, Immelman turns, spiral descents, and flying upside down. One of his most sensational feats was a spinning nose dive from a very high altitude.”*

Crowds emerged wherever his little plane went, performing spins, rolls and death defying dives leaving crowds hungry for more. Large crowds flocked to such aerial displays to see the ‘flying man’ and his aeroplane, for many the first ever sight of an aircraft. As the *Register* reported

*“People were ranged at every coign of vantage – on housetops, on motor cars, on fences and anywhere and everywhere. And when it was over, everyone had been thrilled by the inspiring demonstration given by this fearless flying man. The admiration of the people knew no bounds.”*

Butler was also community minded, strongly supporting patriotic and repatriation causes. He used his newfound fame by volunteering his time and aeroplane to promote the first Australian Peace Loan, which raised funds for his fellow Returned soldiers. In Premier Peake’s words at the Peace Loan Launch, *‘the money was required for repatriation purposes to provide for the future lives of the men who had fought so gloriously to save this country’*. The crowd attending was more than 40,000. Butler also dropped his ‘Bombs of Good Luck’ pamphlets over the city to promote the Peace Loan. Subsequently, an oil portrait was given to Butler by the Central Traders Association for his contribution to the Peace Loan Day and to honor his ‘skill and intrepidity’ as ‘the pioneer aviator of the state’. Along with other famous returned airmen, Captain Frank McNamara VC and Lt F S Briggs, Harry Butler also engaged in Australia’s first aerial race over Adelaide to promote the Peace Loan.

Butler’s exploits brought him into contact with the prominent people of his day, including SA Governor Galway, who requested his presence at Government House just after he arrived in Adelaide from the war effort, and Lady Hackett, mining entrepreneur and philanthropist and wife of the City Mayor. He also met Prince Edward VII, the Prince of Wales on his visit to Australia, and in England the French General Foch, who delivered the terms of the armistice on behalf of the allies. Butler also welcomed Prime Minister Hughes into Adelaide after Hughes returned from England, following the train with his low flying aeroplane. He finally dropped Peace Loan literature and performed an aerial display over the Adelaide Railway Station.

Butler also dropped a tree from an aeroplane into Gallipoli Grove, South Parklands which Chief Justice Sir George Murray planted for ‘Wattle Day’ in memory of the war deed, which was then celebrated as Australia’s national day. The tree was

*“a memorial of the initiation of air navigation in South Australia, and a tribute from a gallant soldier to his comrades who have fallen in the field of battle.”*

At the time Justice Murray stated that in the future there may be bigger trees dropped from greater heights in the future, but that this tree had the honour of being the first!

Butler had become a figurehead for a community which was trying to get back on its feet after the terrible costs of the war, and where large sections of the community had lost loved ones. He also appeared to be aware of his role not only in aviation, but in terms of serving and building the spirit of the community. Butler would go out of his way to bring pleasure to people through his flying displays, flying over hospitals and children’s homes. He even got fan letters from prisoners who could glimpse his departures from Northfield and willed him into the air.

Butler’s marriage to a local teacher whom he met at Minlaton prior to the war, Elsa Birch Gibson of Bool Lagoon, was also a public event. The ceremony was held at St Pauls in Pulteney Street and attended by the people of Adelaide in their thousands,

with street traffic being suspended. As Elsa said *'My people had to come from [Bool Lagoon] and his people had to come from the Peninsula and the whole of Adelaide would have been disappointed if they hadn't seen him married'*. Some of the crowd sat on balconies and rooftops to get a glimpse of the couple, and one excited member of the public pulled off the bride's veil, whilst Butler was encouraged by Priest Bleby to escape through a side door of the church. Elsa had been 'a reluctant bride' of 22 years of age, who had wanted to see 'a bit of the world' before she was married and forced to give up her profession.

Ever aware of the precariousness of his profession, Butler regularly visited fortune tellers, but his luck ran out when tragically, in 1922, he had a serious crash in Minlaton. This led to multiple breakages in his face and a number of operations to have his face reconstructed. The doctors involved in these operations included the distinguished surgeon, Colonel Sir Henry Simpson Newland, and founding member of the Anesthetists Association, Dr Gilbert Brown.

A year and a half later, Captain Harry Butler suddenly died from an abscess of the brain, aged 34, bringing shock to the community. The outpouring of emotion and grief by the public and the many thousands that lined the streets for his military funeral procession (despite just a day's notice), were testament to his popularity and the regard with which the people of South Australia held him. His state funeral was accorded full military honors. Following this, the SA community raised funds for a memorial, through the *Register* newspaper. In the wake of the funeral, *The Pioneer* newspaper asked the local community to remember that

*Though short the span of his life, it was filled with honor and achievement –  
and to what greater ambition can man aspire for truly indeed*

*One crowded hour of glorious life  
Is worth an age without a name.*

After Harry's death, Elsa Butler gave up teaching and retrained as a nurse, following a career in the profession she had always desired, and which she was now well prepared for. She would 'see a bit of the world' as she had always wanted, nursing throughout the UK including during the bleak times of WW11 in London, before returning to Australia.

In the 1950s, a UK Doctor and postal historian, Dr Gordon Ward, started to write Butler's biography and collect information about Butler, including many letters from South Australians who had come across him (the collection was later donated to the Mortlock library, SA). In this collection is the letter of one woman who reported writing to Butler to tell him about her cockatoo that squawked *'Hurrah, here's Butler!'* the ever courteous Butler replied back that he'd heard of many cockatoos that emitted *'Here's Butler'*, but none that said *'Hurrah'* before it!

Butler's memory is kept alive in Minlaton, where his historic 1919 flight marking the first crossing of a major body of water in the southern hemisphere has been regularly celebrated. The 6<sup>th</sup> August 2009 marked the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this crossing, and the event was celebrated in the region, with guests including aviator Dick Smith, AO.

There is also a memorial in the town housing Butler's Bristol monoplane, 'the Red Devil'. This is said to be the only original of its kind in the world. Other reminders of Butler include the 150<sup>th</sup> SA jubilee commemoration plaque on North Terrace and the portrait in the Art Gallery of SA, the memorial funded by the SA community following Butler's death.