

## Magnificent Men in Flying Machines

Centenary commemorations of World War 1 focus, understandably, on the contribution of the Diggers. But there are some interesting stories related to the infant Air Force too.

Herbert Henry (Herbie) Freeman was the only son of Henry Freeman, a highly successful Carlton businessman of many parts and founder in the 1890s of the very well known Freeman's Livery Stables, which operated from the Drummond Street building later known as the Pram Factory, the location today of Lygon Court.

Fascinated by motor cars (he owned one before the World War 1) Herbie as a young man of 20 infuriated his father by leaving the family business to become a mechanic. In 1910 Henry famously told him, "Son, you're making a mistake. The motor car will never replace the horse."

During the war Herbie served as the Chief Mechanic of the Royal Australian Flying Corps stationed at Shawbury, England. It was a training base and the planes were not fighters but used for observation. They could carry a pilot and an observer but the weight of a machine gun was too much. If a German plane fired at them the pilot used a rifle to defend himself. Herbie improved the motor to the point where he believed a machine gun could be carried but his theory had to be proved. Eventually, after some vigorous betting in the officer's mess, he and a companion sat on the lower wing of the plane and held on to the struts while a successful test flight took place. At first threatened with disciplinary action, they were in the end congratulated and a certificate presented.

Many years later Herbie gave his granddaughter Bronwyn Street a photograph of himself posing in the plane and also the letter (which he regarded as a certificate) with his own account of the incident on the back of it, describing it as his most precious possession. Herbie's laconic explanation of the fact that his signature appears twice reminds us that for all the happy go lucky tone of his account, the war was no joke.

Herbie's account (including some idiosyncratic spelling and punctuation) is reproduced here exactly as he wrote it. The incident is also described in Norman Ellison's *Flying Matilda : early days in Australian aviation*.

"The Machine which is a 'Morris Farman' Short Horn Biplane had a 250 H.P. Renault Engine with a lifting capacity of two men and a rifle. (A machine gun or parachutes would overload it). So after making a modification to the Carburetter a bench test 10 H.P. more was recorded. Lieut Guillon was attached to our Squadron from the Royal Flying Corps, and was very proud of the work of what he called his Aussies so at lunchtime in the Officers Mess he stated he had a "Morris Farman" which could lift FOUR PASSENGERS, so one of the R.F.C. Pilots bet him the £5-0-0 the machine would not lift off the ground, two other Pilots bet 50/- he could not get any one silly enough to go up with him. I knew nothing of these bets until later, and after lunchtime Lieut Guillon came to my office and made the proposal to try out the test (Our OIC Major Petrie was away in Edgbaston) at the time, so I agreed that with our safety margin and 10 H.P. we could lift. We made arrangements with two of my A.M.'s to try. The Nacelle was

dual control so there was no room for the two extras, and we had to find somewhere to ride so after some consideration we decided two would have to ride on the bottom Plane then these two had to balance the craft, so after weighing I put 6, ½ inch bolts in Bill Barber's pocket to make him the same weight as myself. We had a successful flight to Three Thousand Feet and were very pleased when we were to share in the Prize.

Our Major on returning had us on the mat, and we were charged with endangering property and lives of Airmen, We were asked if we would take his finding or have a Cort-Marshall, we decided to have a Court-Marshall and our papers were sent to HorsferryRd and instead of a Court-Marshall we were presented with this letter.

The signatures of four you will notice two are in the same handwriting. (Bill Barber was killed the following day) therefore I signed for him and initialed the signature."

Signed Ex Chief Mechanic Aust Flying Corps  
29th Squadron Shawbury 1917



Image: Courtesy Bronwyn Street

***CCHG thanks the Freeman Family for sharing the story of Herbie Freeman***

More information on the Freeman Family:

Herbert Henry Freeman in the Great War  
[www.cchg.asn.au/greatwar.html#herbie](http://www.cchg.asn.au/greatwar.html#herbie)

Freeman's Livery Stables  
[www.cchg.asn.au/livery.pdf](http://www.cchg.asn.au/livery.pdf)