



PITHER, ALFRED GEORGE (1908-1971), air force officer, was born on 16 October 1908 at Shepparton, Victoria, eldest of six children of James Luke Pither, farmer, and his wife Rosanna Amelia, née Fletcher, both Victorian born. Educated at the local agricultural high school, George served in the Militia before entering (1927) the Royal Military College, Duntroon, Federal Capital Territory, as one of the first cadets nominated by the Royal Australian Air Force. On graduating in 1930, he was commissioned in the R.A.A.F. as a pilot officer.

After completing flying training at Point Cook, Victoria, in December 1931, Pither spent the next five years engaged in flying and staff duties in various units. He had been a radio enthusiast since his schooldays and began to specialize in signals. Early in 1936 he was promoted flight lieutenant and sent to England to attend the Royal Air Force signals

school. Returning to Victoria in September 1937, he was appointed to command the Signal Training School, Laverton. He found the S.T.S. in a 'parlous condition', and set about reorganizing and improving it before finally designing a school to be built at Point Cook. The move took place on 1 September 1939; Pither received the temporary rank of squadron leader that day.

In October 1939 Pither was posted to Air Force Headquarters, Melbourne, as a staff officer in the Directorate of Training, where he planned and administered the signals programme. In September 1940 he travelled to England to learn about the new and secret technology of radar; he also studied developments in this field in Canada and the United States of America. At Christ Church Cathedral, Vancouver, Canada, on 13 April 1941 he married Sydney-born Lillian Ruth Ball (d.1964) with Anglican rites. Back home in May, with the rank of wing commander, he resumed work in the Directorate of Signals. He established a chain of long-range radar stations throughout Australia and the Pacific. In March 1942 his section was expanded and he was made head of what became, in September 1943, the Directorate of Radar.

In October 1943 Pither was sent to England on exchange duty. He was posted to headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Air Force, and helped to plan the Normandy invasion. From July 1944 he served with No.80 Wing, R.A.F., in command of a radio-jamming unit set up on the south-east coast of England to counter German V-1 rockets. Crossing to France, his unit followed the allied forces into Belgium on a campaign to jam V-2 rockets.

Pither returned to Australia in December 1944 and resumed his post as director of radar.

A lecture on German V rockets, given by the RAAF's Director of Radar to the Institution of Engineers in Melbourne on this day, caused fears in the US that a major security leak had occurred. Having become an authority on these weapons while on exchange with the RAF in Europe during 1944, Wing Commander George Pither said in his talk that the invasion of Europe had saved England from possible annihilation. Had war been prolonged, he claimed, Germany might have armed its rockets with uranium disintegration bombs as warheads. Unfortunately, Pither's lecture coincided with the first explosion of an atomic device under America's Top Secret 'Manhattan Project', and his remarks caused alarm when carried in media reports overseas. Later investigation showed that Pither knew nothing about the existence of atomic weapons, but had based his comments entirely on speculation in popular science about German experimentation in this direction.

Following the Japanese surrender, he was appointed (October 1945) to a three-man Australian mission charged with examining the state of Japanese scientific development and investigating Australia's claims for reparations. He left Japan in February 1946 and in May became an R.A.A.F. member of the Australian delegation to the Commonwealth Defence Science Conference, held in England.

Reaching Australia in July 1946, Pither was appointed to R.A.A.F. headquarters and given responsibility for guided missiles. In April 1947, as a temporary group captain, he helped in planning an Australian rocket-range. When it was decided to proceed with the project, he was appointed R.A.A.F. liaison officer. It was he who suggested naming the new establishment 'Woomera'. In May 1951 he was seconded to the Department of Supply and made range-superintendent. The next three years marked an important phase of atomic and guided-missile testing.

On reverting to duty with the R.A.A.F. in July 1954, Pither was posted to R.A.A.F. headquarters as director of telecommunications and radar. In 1956 he was appointed C.B.E. Placed in command of No.1 Aircraft Depot at Laverton in June 1959, he was officer commanding Laverton base headquarters in 1961-62. From January 1963 he was staff officer for telecommunication engineering at headquarters, Support Command, Melbourne, until he retired from the air force in February 1966 with the honorary rank of air commodore. At the Methodist Church, Camberwell, on 18 December 1964 he had married Ethel Constance Jones, née Wilton.

In his retirement Pither served as treasurer and councillor of the State branch of the Royal Flying Doctor Service of Australia. He kept fit, swam, skied and played golf, and dabbled in watercolours. Survived by his wife, and by the twin son and daughter of his first marriage, he died suddenly of coronary infarction on 2 July 1971 at Hawthorn and was cremated.