

History



Military Aviation

Military aviation in New Zealand extends back to 1912 when two New Zealand Army Staff officers were sent to the UK to learn the science of flying. In 1913 the Imperial Air Fleet Committee in London presented a Bleriot monoplane named "Britannia" to New Zealand as the nucleus of a flying corps. It was flown briefly in New Zealand, and was returned to the United Kingdom (UK) in late 1914.

During World War I, two commercial New Zealand flying schools, part funded by the British Government, trained 250 pilots for service with the Royal Naval Air Service, Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Air Force. In July 1915 the first military trained New Zealand pilot, William Burns was killed on operations in Mesopotamia.

During this war, William Rhodes-Moorhouse, an Englishman with New Zealand parents, won the VC for action over France on 26 April 1915. Other New Zealand airmen received a range of decorations for gallantry in the air.

Following WWI the New Zealand Government sought advice from Britain on what would be required for an Air Force in New Zealand. In 1919 Colonel Bettington, an air adviser from Britain, recommended the establishment of a Permanent Air Force of 79 officers, 299 airmen, and a Territorial Force of 174 officers and 1060 airmen. Faced with the struggle to right the country's economy after four years of war, the New Zealand Government did not act on the report, but accepted several free ex-military aircraft from Britain, which were passed to commercial companies. An Air Board was established in 1920 to administer aviation in New Zealand.

The civilian flying schools in New Zealand succumbed to the economic downturn of the early 1920s, and conscious of a need to carry out refresher training for the small cadre of military pilots, the Government established on 14 June 1923 'The New Zealand Air Force' (a territorial force) with 102 officers and the 'New Zealand Permanent Air Force' (NZPAF) with a strength of four officers and two other ranks. Aeroplanes used by the two organisations were some of those gifted in 1919.

Throughout the late 1920s, refresher training was carried out at Wigram (Christchurch). A new maritime Air Station was formed at Hobsonville (Auckland) in 1928 and seaplanes were ordered. The first warlike operation by the New Zealand Permanent Air Force took place in 1930 when a Moth Seaplane (No.995), with pilot Flight Lieutenant Sidney Wallingford and two ground crew, was carried to Samoa on HMS Dunedin to help suppress a rebel uprising.

The Territorial Air Force (TAF) was formally raised in 1930 with four regionally based squadrons, at Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. However, the world depression of the early 1930s prevented the purchase of any equipment for the squadrons.

The depression years also severely curtailed Defence spending and little progress in expanding the NZPAF with personnel, bases or equipment occurred. In 1934 King George VI gave permission for the NZPAF to adopt the title Royal New Zealand Air Force. The deteriorating political situation in Europe in the mid 1930s saw an expansion of the RAF, and as New Zealand's Defence policies were aligned with those of Britain, the incoming New Zealand Labour Government of 1935 conducted a review of Defence Policy and approved increases in Defence spending. The Air Force share of this increase saw the expansion of Wigram, ordering of modern Vildebeeste torpedo bombers, and the increase in personnel by March 1936 to 20 officers and 107 airmen. The TAF strength was now 74 officers.

The Government commissioned a review of air defence requirements in 1936 and Englishman Wing Commander the Hon. Ralph A. Cochrane, AFC RAF, was seconded from Britain. Cochrane recommended an Air Force as a separate arm of the Defence Force comprising one Army co-operation and two medium bomber squadrons for local defence, the defence of shipping routes and the security of the United Kingdom.

Cochrane's report was agreed by Government and on passing of the Air Force Act on 1 April 1937, he was asked to remain in New Zealand as the first RNZAF Chief of Air Staff, in the rank of Group Captain. At the same time the Air Department Act came into force, establishing a body responsible for overseeing military and civil aviation interests in New Zealand.

During the period 1937 - 1939, the RNZAF underwent a rapid expansion, with new bases, aircraft and recruiting of personnel. The TAF squadrons were expanded and second-hand Baffin aircraft began delivery in March 1938. An order for 30 new Wellington bombers was placed in 1938, and land at Whenuapai and Ohakea purchased for establishment of new bases for them.

During the Pacific Defence Conference at Wellington, April 1939, the British and New Zealand Governments agreed, that in addition to providing personnel for local defence, the RNZAF's role in the event of a European war would be to provide trained aircrew to the RAF under the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP). New elementary flying schools and aeroplanes were to be established in NZ with a proposed annual output of 700 pilots and 730 observers and air gunners. The UK would provide training aircraft. This plan was formalised on 17 December 1939. Another flying school was established at Woodbourne in 1939, and an aircraft factory to assemble Tiger Moth trainers was completed in Wellington by early 1940.

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