APPENDIX 1

MILITARY AVIATION 1909-14

THE comprehensive story of the war operations of the Australian Flying Corps is told in Volume VIII of the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18*.[1] Two earlier events—the founding of the Central Flying School and the formation of the Aviation Instructional Staff—have their place in the opening chapter of the present volume, but behind them was a series of decisions and incidents without record of which the picture of the growth of military aviation in Australia is incomplete.[2]

The first of these was an announcement by the Commonwealth Government on 8th September 1909 that a prize of £5,000 would be awarded to the inventor or designer of the flying machine adjudged by the Minister for Defence to be the best and most suitable for military purposes. This award was subject to conditions, the principal one being that the aeroplane should remain over a marked area of not more than half a square mile and should "be navigated at such a speed as will permit of a comprehensive description of the land in the area being made by an observer in the aeroplane". Though there were more than forty entries, including several from Britain, no prize was awarded.

The next infusion of official activity followed correspondence in the *Brisbane Courier* in September and October 1910, in which Charles Lindsay Campbell, secretary of the Queensland Aero Club and honorary secretary of the Aero League of Australia, advocated that Australian aviation engineers and mechanics should be sent to Britain and the Continent for training and then brought back to form the nucleus of a Commonwealth school of aviation and an Australian aviation corps. Campbell was particularly clamant after the *Courier* had published some rather negative opinions on military aviation expressed by Admiral Sir Reginald Henderson,[3] then engaged at the invitation of the Government, in preparing a report on the Commonwealth's naval defences. These opinions, Campbell claimed, tended "to lull the average public into a false sense of security by dismissing the practicability of aviation in warfare, except for scouting purposes". Campbell stoutly challenged Henderson's opinion on the effectiveness of a projectile dropped from an aeroplane. Damage, Henderson considered, would be "only local". Campbell's picture was that of an aeroplane which "at a height of a few hundred feet could, with certainty, drop the most dangerous explosive down the 30-foot diameter smoke stack of one of the modern 'Dreadnoughts'." In January 1911

---

[1] F. M. Cutlack, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18*, Vol VIII, *The Australian Flying Corps* (1923).

[2] An account of the early days of flying in Australia has been provided by Stanley Brogden in *The History of Australian Aviation* (1960).

[3] Admiral Sir Reginald Henderson, GCB; RN. B. Worth, Kent, Eng, 20 Nov 1846. Died 12 Jul 1932.

he gained an interview with the Minister for Defence (Senator Pearce) in Melbourne and later submitted a plan in writing. In this he undertook to organise and direct a school of aviation and an aviation corps in conjunction with Gaston Cugnet, member of the Aero Club of France, and a pupil of the renowned Blériot, who had made a contract with him to cooperate in the advancement of aeronautics in Queensland. Campbell set out his own credentials which included experiments dating back to box-kite work from 1893 to 1903; experiments with gliders and later with aeroplanes (one an amphibian which he had entered for the Commonwealth prize of £5,000).

Pearce sent the plan to the Military Board which, on 17th January 1911, replied cautiously that there had been considerable agitation outside the forces for the formation of an aviation corps and pointed to the research by British Army experts who, so far, had not adopted any definite type of aeroplane. Since the Minister would soon be visiting England, the Board recommended that action should be deferred until he had been able to consult experts at the War Office. Also at the Board's suggestion, interim advice was sought from the War Office by cable message, the reply to which, sent from London on 31st January, informed Cabinet that Mr E. T. Willows, constructor and navigator of the dirigible airship *City of Cardiff,* which had recently flown from London to Paris, was willing to come to Australia to demonstrate this airship for defence purposes. The War Office commended this proposal. Pearce answered by asking that a decision be deferred until he reached England in May.

Meanwhile the British and Colonial Aeroplane Company, later the Bristol Aeroplane Company Ltd, had sent one of its aircraft, a biplane powered by a 50 horse-power Gnome engine, to Melbourne, and in February, Major C. H. Foott, of the Royal Australian Engineers, on instructions from the Chief of the General Staff (Brigadier-General J. M. Gordon) witnessed trials with this aeroplane, which was piloted by Mr J. J. Hammond. He reported favourably on its performance. A final entry in the diary Foott kept during the trials is a graphic little reminder that aviation was then very much in its infancy. "24th February 1911—" the entry ran, "Was to have gone for flight as passenger; 5 a.m.—Wind gusty, 3 to 6 m.p.h.; 7 a.m.—Fair breeze, 5 m.p.h.; 8 a.m.—Abandoned attempt." "The competition for the £5,000 prize has, so far as I know, produced no tangible results," Foott wrote in his report. "I think it extremely unlikely that any real effect will be produced by individual research with limited means. . . . It is, I think, obvious that instruction by an experienced aviator on a known pattern of machine is far less dangerous than wild attempts by untrained persons on machines of unknown qualities. For this reason I strongly recommend consideration of the B. and C.A. Company's terms if . . . it is intended to establish a fleet here." As a nucleus for a fleet, Foott suggested four flying machines with eight trained aviators and ten mechanics. His recommendation went

to the Military Board which decided to take no action pending further information from the War Office.

Then, on 30th December 1911, the Commonwealth Government[4] called for applications for "Two competent mechanists and aviators". In July 1912 H. R. Busteed, an Australian then in England as chief test pilot of the Bristol Aeroplane Company, and H. A. Petre, were appointed, and orders were placed for two B.E. biplanes (70 h.p. engines) and two Deperdussin monoplanes (35 h.p. engines).

In September, on the advice of General Gordon, the Government rejected an offer by the French organisation, *Societe Anonyme des Ateliers D'Aviation,* to train pilots and to provide training equipment and eight aircraft for a military squadron.

An Army Order issued on 25th September 1912 proposed the organisation of one flight of an aeroplane squadron with four aeroplanes and an establishment of four officers, seven warrant officers and sergeants and 32 air mechanics. Two of the officers, one sergeant and six mechanics were to be permanent and the remainder militia. The permanent men were to form a flying school in Federal Territory. Then on the advice of the War Office an order was placed for a slow-type Bristol biplane for training. In October Busteed withdrew his application and a fellow Australian, E. Harrison, a Bristol pilot who had served as a mechanic with Harry Hawker, a noted Australian airman, was appointed in his place.

While all this planning had been going on, Lieut-Colonel J. G. Legge, who, in his subsequent role as Chief of the General Staff, was to exert so great an influence on the initial planning for an Australian air force, was serving as a liaison officer at the War Office. On 1st November 1912, having learned of the Military Board's plans, Legge wrote a critical report in the course of which he noted that the only persons with expert knowledge of aviation were two pilots neither of whom had any knowledge of military discipline or organisation and whose pay was to be only £400 a year. "The best class of aviators can command much larger remuneration," he wrote. "In civil establishments the pilots are the star artists; their work consists of flying pure and simple. . . . In a military organisation the work in peace is necessarily on almost the same lines as in war. . . . In a dangerous occupation of this character there must be that very high degree of mutual confidence obtained from strict discipline. . . . A mere flying certificate is of no more value for war than is a riding certificate . . . for the creation of an efficient cavalry soldier." Legge strongly urged the appointment of a thoroughly competent officer of some length of service to command the flying school in Australia and the training of mechanics in England or the selection in England of trained mechanics as instructors. Gordon's reply was that the aviators selected should be able to teach flying, that the necessary military instruction must come later and that Australian mechanics would first be tested before adopting English training or importing instructors.

[4] *Commonwealth Gazette,* No. 97.

Petre, therefore, after watching the construction of the Deperdussins, came to Australia in January 1913. On his recommendation the flying school site was changed from Federal Territory to Point Cook, where 734 acres were bought. This site had the advantage that it offered facilities for both land and sea plane operations. In the same year the Aviation Instructional Staff was formed at Point Cook with Petre and Harrison as its first officers—the rest of the staff comprised four mechanics[5] selected in England, one quartermaster-sergeant, one clerk and one caretaker. By the end of January 1914 Petre and Harrison were on the job with the five aeroplanes that had been ordered from Britain. On 17th August the first of a series of eight flying courses began and Australia was on the way to producing her own airmen. Conditions were primitive—the school was under canvas except for an office and a workshop—but its officers wrought well. Of the two Petre, quiet and academic by nature, was the more deeply knowledgeable in aviation. For his part he concentrated on the immediate task, leaving the not unimportant task of publicising the school to his more assertive colleague, Harrison. Partly because of this and partly because of his own subsequent long term of service with the force which grew out of these beginnings, it was Harrison who gained the title "Father of the R.A.A.F.". In fact, this was an appellation to which Petre was, at least, equally entitled.

The A.I.S. continued its service until September 1918. It was then disbanded in favour of No. 1 Home Training Squadron which, in turn, was disbanded in December 1919.

[5] H. J. Chester, A. E. Shorland, G. A. Fonteneau and C. V. Heath, DCM.