



Te Matataua

The Scouting Party of Air Power

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New Zealand Air Power in Western Samoa, 1930

The first joint operation by New Zealand Air and Maritime forces

On 6th January 1930, the New Zealand Government decided to deploy a detachment from the New Zealand Permanent Air Force (NZPAF), including a Gypsy Moth seaplane, with the cruiser HMS Dunedin to assist naval forces in the maintenance of law and order in Western Samoa. This deployment marked the first joint operation by the NZPAF and the New Zealand Navy, including the cruiser's complement of Royal Marines¹. It was also the first time our fledgling air force conducted warlike operations.



Flight Lieutenant Wallingford and his Moth seaplane

Western Samoa had been a German colony until World War One when New Zealand sent a force to occupy the territory. After WWI the League of Nations distributed German colonies to Allied nations, and New Zealand was allocated Western Samoa to administer as a Mandated Territory.

New Zealand had no foreign affairs office at that time, and had not yet developed the skills to successfully administer another country. Early

administrators were unsympathetic to local customs and traditions, which created friction with the locals. In 1918/19, Western Samoa suffered the tragic loss of 24% of the population to Spanish Influenza through a lack of resistance to the disease, poor quarantine practices and lack of suitable regulations. The mortality rate, which was the highest in the world and significantly more than other Pacific Island nations, increased ill sentiment against the New Zealand Administration.

The Mau movement was created to oppose New Zealand Government control of Western

Samoa with the slogan "Samoa for the Samoans". Several clashes between the Mau and Police occurred in 1928 as the administration clamped down on the Mau movement. On Saturday 28 December 1929, Mau supporters marched into Apia to welcome two Mau members who were returning from exile in New Zealand. Mau leaders were advised that any wanted men would be arrested if seen. Police noted the Mau Secretary marching and went to arrest him. A struggle developed and the Police retreated while firing shots into the crowd, killing nine Samoans and injuring many others.

The enraged crowd chased the Police, caught a constable and beat him to death. A machine gun was fired over the heads of the crowd to disperse them. The subsequent coroner's report justified the

¹ At this time, the New Zealand Navy was a Division of the Royal Navy, and ships companies were crewed with British and New Zealand personnel. All cruisers carried Royal Marines as part of the ship's company who manned one of the guns and provided shore parties.

use of firearms by the Police but Samoans viewed the use of guns as excessive since the crowd only had sticks and stones with them. Samoans felt a deep sense of injustice against the administration in the weeks following 'Black Saturday'.

The administration clamped down further on the Mau, and the New Zealand Government decided on January 6, 1930, to send HMS Dunedin and a Moth seaplane to support law and order.

On January 8th, the Moth was flown from Hobsonville Base to Devonport to be stowed with wings folded on the 'X' gun deck of HMS Dunedin. Flight Lieutenant Sidney Wallingford and Corporals Smith and Sorrell of the NZPAF deployed on the cruise, where they made the Moth ready for operations prior to arrival on January 12. As the Mau had taken to the bush, the order was given for the force to land.

The Moth was hoisted off the gun deck with the wings folded, which were then spread whilst suspended, before dropping the seaplane on the crest of a wave. The seaplane was then towed to shore, but the original Apia Harbour location at Mata'utu proved to be too exposed for taxiing, and Mulinu'u on the more sheltered western side of the bay was used instead.

The primary tasks of the seaplane was to carry out general reconnaissance, cooperate and communicate with ground forces, distribute messages and propaganda to villages, and undertake offensive action if required. A secondary task was to improve the maps of Upolu Island to assist ground planning.

Wallingford, the pilot of the seaplane, found observing over cultivated land to be easy, whereas it was more difficult to spot men in copra plantations, which required very low flying over the treetops. It was near impossible to identify men in dense bush, but signs were evident in dead leaves and tracks around clearings. Mau men usually wore a dark blue lavalava and a green shirt, but they tended to turn the lavalava inside out when the seaplane approached, making them difficult to identify.

A morse radio was fitted to the Moth, but it was too fiddly to operate while flying, and the aircraft lacked the power to take a passenger in conjunction with the radio. Therefore, message bags and a signal pistol were used as the primary means of in-flight communication with ground forces.

The Moth allowed rapid delivery of pamphlets to districts, which would normally take up to a week to

deliver from the ground. This allowed the administration to communicate with villagers within two hours, and well before the Mau could distribute their own leaflets.

Even though armed with an unwieldy Lewis gun, offensive action was mostly limited to using the signal pistol which proved effective in turning back boats and getting men to retreat. Wallingford notes an encounter when flying at 50 feet, when a Samoan nearly hit his aircraft with a rock. As he circled around, another rock was thrown and he fired a signal pistol in return. The thrower fled into the bush, but the flare had set his house alight. No more stones were thrown from the village. It was later found that stone throwing was a favourite pastime of Samoans, hence the accuracy of throwing.

The torpedo officer of HMS Dunedin fabricated a hand-release bomb comprising a cylinder filled with 3lbs (1.4kg) of guncotton, a striker, and a safety pin. Wallingford used the bomb to coerce a boat to return to the mainland, by dropping it to impact off the bow. Fortunately it did not explode, as the boat was occupied by an Australian missionary! An improved bomb was fabricated and held in reserve for use as a demoralising weapon based on the noise of the explosion.

The psychological effect of the aircraft was great as it forced the Mau to maintain cover and hampered their movements. It also forced the Mau to cook at night, adding to their discomfort while living in the bush.

A truce was arranged on March 1, 1930, which resulted in 'wanted' Mau giving themselves up and villagers to return to their homes. From January 16 until the operation concluded on 11 March the Moth seaplane undertook 90 hours of flying.

Key Points

- In modern air power terms, the main roles of the seaplane were ISR and strike.
- It was the first joint deployment of an Air and Naval arm from New Zealand.
- It was the first offensive use of a New Zealand military aircraft.

References

1. This bulletin is derived from information sourced from the RNZN historian, Mr Michael Wynd, and FLTLT Wallingford's report.
2. Photo: Samoa. Flight Lieutenant Wallingford and his moth seaplane. Ref PA1-o-795-17-3. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/23230648.