



Te Matataua

The Scouting Party of Air Power

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NEW ZEALANDER'S AND THE DEFINING ERA OF AIR POWER

At 11 am on the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918 armed conflict between Germany and the allied powers ceased under the terms of an armistice. Seven months later, the first truly global war formally came to an end with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. The Great War is mostly remembered for the millions of lives lost and futile campaigns such as at Gallipoli and on the Somme. It is less remembered for being the era when air power came of age, and even less for New Zealand's involvement in this new form of warfare.

Air power arguably evolved the most during the period of the First World War. Initially utilised by all sides as observation platforms, aeroplanes, balloons and airships were limited in number and subject to the needs of either the army or navy. Considered useful in this role, it was when the ability of aircraft to act as the 'eyes'

of the guns had been fully realised that air power became invaluable. No offensive on the Western Front could succeed without the destructive power of artillery, as it was the only means at that time which was truly capable of preparing the battlefield, supporting the offensive and preventing counter-attack. Air power assured precision through the ability to identify targets, spot the fall of shot and provide direction for adjustment.

Once the value of air power to the conduct of ground operations was realised the need to control the air and prevent the enemy from

performing their own aerial tasks became just as vital. Aircraft were first modified, and then specifically designed to shoot down enemy observation machines and protect those of their own side. Air-to-air combat became commonplace and technological advancement in order to remain ahead of the opposition was rapid. In concert with fighter development came advances in strike capability. Bombs began to be ever-increasingly dropped by aircraft, initially for interdiction of supplies and personnel and then for close air support to troops in the field.



Canterbury Aviation Company Caudron G-III, Sockburn 1917

Reconnaissance of enemy shipping was conducted in support of maritime forces, as was direct action against submarines. The concept of strategic bombing was implemented by the Germans with Zeppelin raids against London, and then by both sides as aeroplane technology advanced. By the end of the war air

power had evolved to become an accepted component of modern warfare. While it could not win wars alone, it was now apparent it would be hard to win wars without it.

In New Zealand the outbreak of war led to a recommendation for the sole aircraft owned by the government (a Bleriot XI named 'Britannia') to be used in support of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force. Instead, the aircraft was sent to Britain for use by the British Royal Flying Corps (RFC). Any prospect for military aviation in New Zealand during World War One was dashed after the Imperial Government strongly advised against

the formation of a Flying Corps in late 1914. The New Zealand Government took that advice and decided to drop all pursuit of military aviation in this country until after the war, instead devoting all resources to the land forces.

While not possessing air power of its own, New Zealand did contribute personnel to the air forces of Britain during World War One, albeit through civilian and not military organisations. The first of these, the New Zealand Flying School at Kohimarama, was established in 1915 by Vivian Walshe and his brother Leo. Their request for financial support was turned down by the New Zealand Government so they entered into an agreement with the Imperial Government whereby the flying school would train pilots at the students own expense in return for the pilots receiving refund of expenses on graduation, passage to England and commission into either the RFC or Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS).

In 1916, Sir Henry Wigram, a vocal advocate of air power joined with a group of Christchurch businessmen and formed The Canterbury Aviation Company which trained pilots under a similar agreement with the Imperial Government to that of the Walshe brothers'. All Canterbury Aviation Company flying was conducted out of Sockburn Aerodrome in Christchurch which was later bought by the New Zealand Government in 1923 following a gift of money from Wigram to enable the purchase. Sockburn Aerodrome was renamed Wigram Aerodrome in his honour.

The exact number is unknown but it is thought that about 850 New Zealand air and ground crew served in either the RFC, the Royal Naval Air Service (both of which merged to become the Royal Air Force on 1st April 1918) or the Australian Flying Corps during the First World War. This number includes a handful of New Zealand women who joined the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF). 200 pilots came from the two flying schools in New Zealand while the others were trained overseas. Even though they were not serving within New Zealand units, New Zealand airmen were nevertheless fighting for the New Zealand cause and can be considered the first practitioners of air power for this country. 79 were to die during the course of the war.

In 1917 the activities of a German armed merchant raider within the waters of New Zealand caused the Government to briefly reconsider the use of air in the defence of this country. Operating with impunity, the German raider not only used a seaplane to force the surrender of two ships but also laid mines off Three Kings Islands and Cape

Farewell, mines that were to later claim ships. The first armed military aircraft to operate over New Zealand territory was German and constituted a threat for which New Zealand had no answer. Urged to do so by both navy and army advisors, the New Zealand Government sent a request to Britain for three 'high powered seaplanes capable of offensive tactics'. This was not able to be met due to ongoing needs in Europe and no further requests for aircraft were made.

Many New Zealand air and ground crew members were decorated for their achievements during World War One. Two individuals with New Zealand connections were to receive the premier awards for bravery.

Victoria Cross: 2nd Lt William Rhodes-Moorhouse

The highest British award for gallantry in the face of the enemy, the Victoria Cross was bestowed upon 19 airmen during World War One. The first of these, and the first ever for an airman, was awarded to Second Lieutenant Williams Rhodes-Moorhouse, an English pilot with both Pakeha and Māori lineage. Following a German breakthrough at Ypres, Belgium Rhodes-Moorhouse was tasked on 26 April 1915 to bomb a rail junction in Courtrai, in order to help slow the flow of German reinforcements. Flying low to ensure accuracy he was repeatedly hit by rifle and machine gun fire. Despite his injuries he continued and released his bomb right on target. Further hit by fragments from his own bomb as well as ground fire he managed to nurse his aircraft back to Base whereupon he refused medical attention until he had made his report. He died in hospital the following day.

Albert Medal: Flight Sergeant Thomas Nicoll

Eventually replaced by the George Cross, the Albert Medal during World War One was the highest British award for gallantry in saving life. Eighteen members of the British air services were recipients, including Flight Sergeant Thomas Nicoll. A Scottish-born Southlander, in 1918 Nicoll was serving as groundcrew with 100 Squadron RFC, a night-bomber squadron based at Ochey, France. On the night of 26 February two bombs exploded during a re-arming operation, completely destroying the aircraft they were being loaded on to and killing five personnel. Red-hot flying fragments set fire to an incendiary bomb mounted underneath a neighbouring aircraft, which could then have exploded at any moment. Seeing the potential for further destruction and loss of life, Nicholl removed the bomb from its rack and took it to a place of safety, severely burning his hands in the process. He survived the war, later settling in the United States of America.

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