

CHAPTER 3

DEMAND VERSUS CAPACITY

TO meet the immediate demands of war the Permanent Air Force possessed 310 officers, 3,179 airmen, and 246 aircraft (only 164 of them operational machines); there were 36 general duties officers in the Citizen Air Force and 158, many of them former regulars, in the Reserve. The current program, which was to have been completed by June 1941, was for 19 squadrons with a strength of 212 first-line aircraft and a reserve of 50 per cent. Of these squadrons 12 had been formed but two existed in nucleus only. Part of No. 10 Squadron had been sent to England to take delivery of Sunderland flying-boats with which the squadron was to be equipped.

In Parliament on 6th September, Mr Curtin, as Leader of the Opposition, assured the House that the Labour party's platform insisted that "nothing should be left undone to ensure the greatest effectiveness among our people to hold this country for the citizens of the Commonwealth". There ought not to be, but there might be, he added, two major points of difference between the Government and the Opposition—conscription (to which Labour was most strongly opposed) and the dispatch overseas of expeditionary forces.

Despite Curtin's pointers to possible political differences, the Government, on 15th September—the day on which the formation of the War Cabinet was announced—decided to enlist a volunteer army force of 20,000 men for service at home or overseas. Five days later the Prime Minister, Mr Menzies, announced the Government's further decision to offer the British Government a force of six squadrons—four of bombers and two of fighters, with ancillary units.¹ The Prime Minister's announcement, which was received in Parliament with a burst of cheering,² was followed by an explanatory speech in which Mr Menzies said that the offer conformed completely with the Government's policy: first, to provide for adequate defence of the Commonwealth and, second, to give to Britain whatever help was possible without detracting from Australia's capacity to discharge the first responsibility. The Government had learned, he said, that, particularly in the first years of war when the production of military aircraft in Great Britain and France would be expanding rapidly and when it might be anticipated that air warfare would be of predominating importance, the greatest possible assistance that could be given to Britain would be in providing trained aircrews. A careful survey of Australia's capacity to train such crews had shown it to be far greater

¹ HQ Field Force—1 Fighter Wing HQ with Nos. 7 and 15 Sqns; 2 Bomber Wing HQ with Nos. 1 and 8 Sqns; 3 Bomber Wing HQ with Nos. 16 and 17 Sqns (nominal strength 550 officers and airmen); 1 Air Stores Park, 1 Medical Receiving Station, HQ Base Area, Base Depot. Strength, with ground staff (if provided) 2,975; reinforcement pool 225—total 3,200 officers and airmen.

² *Argus* (Melbourne), 21 Sep 1939.

than was required to man all the military aircraft that, in the most favourable circumstances and within measurable time, would become available in Australia through local manufacture and purchase overseas. After providing fully for present and contingent needs it would be possible to train enough men for the air expeditionary force it was proposed to offer Britain. The dispatch of such a force, he said, while it would be a relatively small subtraction from total manpower, would give a very real measure of help to Britain in an arm in which her needs were greatest; the dispatch of the force would not reduce Australia's defence by a single aircraft. Under the terms of the offer the six squadrons would operate as an Australian force. The question of sending ground maintenance staff had been deferred until the effect such action might have on Australia's reserves of skilled mechanics could be measured. Unless it would prejudice Australia's production capacity such staff would be sent. The whole proposal would, of course, be subject to any unexpected difficulties or change in Australia's strategic position. As Australia's capacity to do so increased, the Government would give consideration to the possibility of still further reinforcing the great air effort in which the British and French peoples would undoubtedly have to engage before long.³

On 14th September the Minister for Defence, Mr Street, disclosed a plan for training a "large number" of civil pilots as flying instructors. Applications, he said, would be invited from pilots aged between 32 and 45 years who held private or commercial licences and had at least 300 flying hours recorded in their log-books.

But keen interest in the prospect of service in the air force was not confined to those who wanted to fly. This was illustrated on the day on which Mr Menzies made his speech in Parliament by a scene at the Melbourne recruiting depot, which was crowded by about 2,000 men anxious to enlist as fitters, cooks, mess stewards and labourers. According to a newspaper report⁴ 1,000 applications were dealt with and the remainder of the men were sent away after being told to apply in writing. The report added that, at the time, the air force was calling for between only 157 and 170 men.

On 30th September Mr Fairbairn broadcast an earnest appeal for flying instructors; the large numbers hoped for by Mr Street were not coming forward. He declared that "victory in this war will depend upon mastery in the air", and that "the training of an overwhelming strength in pilots and aircrews is one of the most essential tasks to be undertaken by the democracies". He announced the widening of the age-range for flying instructors to from 25 to 45 years and a reduction of the flying hours required to 200. Successful applicants would be enlisted, he said, as pilot officers and, after a training course of from six to eight weeks, would begin duties as flying instructors with the rank of flying officer. Mr Fairbairn examined the reasons for the disinclination of civil airmen

³ *Commonwealth Debates*, Vol 161, pp. 840-1.

⁴ *Argus* (Melbourne), 21 Sep 1939.

to become instructors. An eager preference for combat service and an over-modest assessment of their qualifications were predominant. He appealed to trained airmen to regard the work of the service flying instructor as even more valuable than combat duties, particularly at that stage of the war.⁵

Earlier, in a national broadcast, the Prime Minister had again emphasised his conviction that priority must be given to air force planning. He declared that the British Government was not asking Australia to send a large military force abroad. "I believe," he said, "and my belief is pretty well founded, that the cooperation of the Dominions with Great Britain in the provision of trained airmen, and in the case of some Dominions, in the provision of aircraft, will be of growing and vital importance. It may be that in our hours of greatest difficulty—and we are going to have some—the Mother Country will be asking more insistently for help in the air than for help on the land or the sea."⁶

In the meantime on 22nd September the Defence Committee had endorsed the recommendation of the Air Board that the R.A.A.F. should be increased by 13 squadrons to fulfil the 32-squadron plan first mooted in June. But on the grounds that there seemed little likelihood of an attack on Australia and that Australia's cooperation with Britain in providing trained airmen was of vital importance, the Government again deferred a decision thus to build up the strength of the R.A.A.F. at home.

On 4th October the War Cabinet considered a cablegram sent on 26th September from the United Kingdom Government proposing that Australia should share in a vast cooperative air effort to provide 50,000 aircrew a year from all Empire sources—20,000 pilots and 30,000 other aircrew members—and should send a mission to Canada to confer on the proposal. Mr Menzies told the Cabinet that Australia's quota would probably be 3,000 pilots and 4,500 other aircrew. Goble, who was present at this Cabinet meeting, said that the 70 training aircraft then held by the R.A.A.F., plus 130 that could be provided from civil aviation, could train 1,000 pilots a year and that an additional 500 aircraft could train 2,500 a year; 700 aircraft would be needed to produce 3,500 pilots a year.

Next day the War Cabinet gave its approval in principle to the British Government's plan and agreed that an Australian mission, headed by Mr Fairbairn, should go to Canada as proposed by the United Kingdom. The Air Board was asked for a report on the plan and it was also decided that a leading business man, Mr F. B. Clapp,⁷ should leave for the United States to investigate the purchase of training aircraft (if and when the United States *Neutrality Act* was amended) and to report on the delivery of Lockheed Hudson aircraft already ordered.

⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 Oct 1939.

⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 Sep 1939.

⁷ F. B. Clapp, General Manager, Aust Gen Electric Pty Ltd. 1932-46; Director of Purchases for C'wealth Govt in New York, 1939-42. Of Sydney; b. Melbourne, 28 Nov 1881.

By this time expenditure on the fighting Services was mounting so rapidly that the War Cabinet asserted that transition from peace to war did not imply that unlimited financial resources were available, and instructed all the Service boards to review their programs and report on what reductions and savings were possible.

A decision to provide the ground maintenance staff for the proposed expeditionary force was announced on 9th October. This was still only a force "on paper". Indeed the War Cabinet's approval, in principle, of Australian cooperation in an Empire air force was a very strong hint that planning on a vastly wider scope was going on behind the scenes, and this became much more than a hint when, on 10th October, the British Secretary of State for Air (Sir Kingsley Wood⁸) announced in the House of Commons the decision of the British Government to inaugurate an Empire air training plan.

A picture of the British Government's conception of how Australia might contribute to Empire defence had been given in a detailed appreciation sent by the Dominions Office to the Australian Government on 8th September. One hypothesis in this appreciation was that Japan was not only neutral, but friendly, and a second that she was neutral and "reserving her attitude" to democratic countries. Under the first hypothesis it was hoped that Australian military forces would be prepared for dispatch overseas—though the best destination and composition of any expeditionary force could not at that stage be suggested. The Commonwealth Government might wish to consider such forces relieving British forces in "say, Singapore, Burma and India" as they became available, or might prefer to delay dispatch of such forces until complete divisions could be available for a main war theatre. Under the second hypothesis the Government might think it unwise to send an expeditionary force, but the Commonwealth could assist by holding ready formations which could reinforce, at short notice, Singapore, New Zealand or the British and French islands in the Pacific. The reaction of the Chief of the General Staff to this was the realistic one that there was a third hypothesis—a hostile Japan. This, he said, could not be disregarded entirely and it was not safe to assume a more favourable situation than that Japan was delaying a decision. If Japan proved hostile Australian forces could be sent overseas only as a direct measure of Australian defence.

But the Dominions Office appreciation emphasised that the main weakness of the Allies was, as Menzies had pointed out, in their air strength against Germany, and that Britain looked to the Dominions, whose resources lay outside the range of German bombers, to ensure that this discrepancy was reduced as early as possible. Ways in which Australia could contribute to this were by the direct dispatch of complete units of the R.A.A.F. to Britain; by providing R.A.A.F. squadrons to release R.A.A.F. squadrons from overseas service so that they could be used for

⁸ Rt Hon Sir Kingsley Wood, Secretary of State for Air 1938-40; Chancellor of Exchequer 1941-43. B. 1881. Died 21 Sep 1943.

home service; and by the supply of aircraft, material and trained men. Neither the direct dispatch of complete units to Britain, nor the provision of squadrons to relieve R.A.F. squadrons away from home were recommended as an immediate step because Australia's own home defence requirements and the fact that R.A.A.F. squadrons had obsolescent aircraft (due to delays in the British aircraft production program) made such a course impracticable. As soon as appropriate Australian squadrons had been re-equipped the substitution of R.A.A.F. squadrons for R.A.F. squadrons at stations overseas from Britain would be welcomed. It was also suggested that the Australian crews then in England awaiting delivery of Sunderland flying-boats should remain with their aircraft in England at the disposal of the R.A.F. This would give most valuable aid because of Britain's immediate need for squadrons for trade protection.

It added that what Britain needed most was a steady increase in the supply of all aircrew and she would be most grateful if the Commonwealth Government could consider to what extent its existing program could be modified to satisfy these needs, making, it was suggested, the maximum possible use of civil aviation resources for initial training. A flying training school, based on the R.A.F. establishment, should produce about 500 pilots a year and an air observers' school about 260 observers and 390 air gunners. It was appreciated by the United Kingdom that ultimately the Commonwealth would wish that complete Australian units should be formed and that these, in turn, should be amalgamated into an Australian contingent. The suggestions offered did not appear to be in conflict with this aim which could be achieved as and when there were adequate reserves of Australians in Britain to maintain the contingent.

Goble commented on this appreciation that it had always been the view of the Air Staff that the ultimate aim of the Commonwealth in giving air assistance to Britain should be to provide complete Australian units grouped into an Australian contingent for operations in the main theatre or a theatre of importance. The British Government's recognition of this was noted with pleasure. The first two of the methods for providing air aid suggested by the Dominions Office were the same, except that the destinations differed. Both envisaged dispatch of units complete with aircraft. In immediate terms this was impossible and, unless the American *Neutrality Act* was revoked, it would remain impossible for some time. Relief by the R.A.A.F. of R.A.F. squadrons serving away from Britain could be carried out as soon as the local situation and the supply of aircraft permitted. Dispatch of complete R.A.A.F. units to Britain would be very largely dependent on aircraft supply, and there was the added point that by the time this could be done the aircraft of the R.A.A.F. squadrons might not be equal to "Western Front" performances though suitable for action envisaged in the plan to relieve R.A.F. overseas squadrons. Australia could, however, in the very near future, supply squadrons without aircraft, which would be a compromise between sending squadrons to Britain and the supply of trained men as suggested in the third proposal.

Trained R.A.A.F. men could take over complete R.A.F. squadrons, allowing the R.A.F. crews and other staff to be withdrawn. The initial Australian force might take over squadrons in the Middle East, thus giving R.A.A.F. crews an opportunity for further training before going to an active theatre. The net gain to the R.A.F. would be the same in either instance and Australia could make a beginning with her own contingent. Men trained later should be organised into service units and sent overseas, complete with ground maintenance staff and ancillary services, as a complete contingent. Any excess of pilots and other aircrew members could go to the R.A.F. on loan until required for the expansion or reinforcement of Australian squadrons. There appeared little prospect of Australia supplying aircraft and material for a long time.

Goble noted that the Dominions Office assumed that the immediate aim of Australia was to dispatch trained men to Britain, but he assumed that this course, which was a matter for Government policy, was not correct, the immediate Australian objective being home defence. Even so he considered that by the extensive use of reservists and civil aircraft, the Australian training organisation could be expanded to meet local needs and at the same time initiate an overseas contingent if, in the first instance, R.A.F. aircraft and technical equipment could be taken over as R.A.A.F. squadrons relieved R.A.F. squadrons.

The Sunderland flying-boats being taken over by No. 10 Squadron, Goble agreed, should, with the crews then in England, be placed at the disposal of the British Government. He suggested that No. 10 Squadron should operate as an Australian unit in England and that the remainder of its officers and men, then at Point Cook, should be sent to Britain. As the local defence situation allowed, appropriate Australian squadrons should be sent to R.A.F. overseas commands, such as Singapore or the Middle East, to replace R.A.F. units.

On 20th October, the War Cabinet, having received reports from the Australian High Commissioner in London (Mr Bruce) on the views of the British Government, decided "for the present" not to proceed with its expeditionary air force plan. Then, on 31st October, came the Government's announcement of the cancellation of this plan, and next day the Air Board was instructed to plan Australia's contribution to an Empire air scheme. At the same time approval was given for the dispatch of crews to England to complete No. 10 Squadron.

The Government's decision to cancel the expeditionary force plan appears to have been based on two contentions: that Australia's resources of trained men would be fully employed in carrying out the Empire training scheme, and that Australia could not equip the six squadrons with modern aircraft. On the other hand Australia did not disband any of her existing squadrons in order to staff the training schools; on the contrary additional squadrons were soon formed. It is difficult to see why Britain should not have accepted the services of six squadrons manned by well-trained crews and equipped them overseas from her own

factories, as was happening with No. 10 Squadron and would soon happen with another. The net result was that, on advice from London, squadrons that might promptly have gone overseas remained in Australia and—an important consideration for the R.A.A.F.—a Force headquarters and three wing headquarters commanded by senior officers of the R.A.A.F. were not established in the theatre of war.

By this time, indeed, despite all the optimistic Ministerial predictions and estimates, the incapacity of the air force to absorb more than a mere fraction of the men applying for enlistment had become the subject of keen and at times hostile criticism—criticism that had been heightened by the rapid succession of changes in policy and planning. The Government did not lack an answer to the charges, but that answer was never adequately presented—a fact which, perhaps, was sound ground in itself for criticism. An after-the-event examination discloses such difficulties as the habitual dependence on Britain for a lead in air force policy and planning. As an example, the six-squadron expeditionary force offer was a big Australian gesture made within three weeks of the outbreak of war, but the British Air Ministry considered that the Empire Air Training Scheme was already superseding all other kinds of air aid from the Dominions; expeditionary forces were not wanted. And the Empire scheme itself, even under the high pressure of the urgency of Britain's need, took much time to initiate and organise, making decisions on major air force policy difficult, to say the least. Another serious disability was the lack of aircraft, both for operations and for training. Aircraft, more than any other weapon of war, were being subjected to the most radical changes under the influence of the changing conception of their tactical and strategical uses and the development of aeronautical science generally. Further, Australia's industrial development had not attained anything like the momentum needed to achieve an adequate output of modern service aircraft.

Criticism was being heightened by the dramatic content of the speeches by Mr Menzies and his Ministers. Thousands of enthusiastic volunteers, experiencing acute frustration because their services were not being accepted by the air force, could not be blamed for noting with some bitterness that, while Menzies was declaring that provision of trained airmen was of growing and vital importance, Australia's air force contribution to Britain's urgent needs was still almost entirely a matter of words, spoken or on paper. This was true except for No. 10 Squadron, some hundreds of Australian officers and trainees sent to England in the last few years and now serving with short-service commissions in the R.A.F., some R.A.A.F. officers on exchange, and a few others.

Early in November Menzies showed how conscious of this criticism he had become by referring to it in a national broadcast. He mentioned the ordering of Lockheed Hudson bombers from the United States and then spoke of the planning for the production in Australia, of Bristol Beaufort bombers, of "hundreds of training aircraft and engines", and of

large aircraft engines which would be used, not only to equip the Beauforts, but to make Australia more self-reliant in high-powered aircraft.⁹ What he did not emphasise was the disturbing time-lag both in the delivery of aircraft from overseas and in the production of aircraft in Australia.

The Air Board had submitted to the War Cabinet an estimate of £800,000 for the construction of 350 Tiger Moth training aircraft and 500 aeroplane engines. On 10th October the Government approved an order for the building of these training aircraft at the De Havilland Aircraft Company's works at Mascot, and by the first week in November work had begun. It was then predicted that when the factory was in full operation production would be at the rate of one aeroplane a day.

Efforts were being made to complete the current R.A.A.F. program by June 1940, instead of June 1941 as originally planned. The order for Lockheed Hudson bombers from the United States had been increased from 50 to 100, and the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation was accelerating its rate of production of Wirraway aircraft with six aircraft a week as its immediate production goal.

A decision of the full Cabinet on 28th October that the 6th Division of the "Second A.I.F." should be sent overseas when it had reached a suitable stage in its training was accompanied by a decision not to send a R.A.A.F. army-cooperation squadron with that force. This last decision was made for the same reason that caused the cancellation of the plan to send an air expeditionary force to Britain—a desire to concentrate on the Empire Air Training Scheme.¹

It was now obvious that air force organisation had to be widened to span the dual purpose of home defence expansion, including the rearming of R.A.A.F. squadrons with modern aircraft, and an aircrew training program of hitherto unimagined dimensions to meet the needs of Australia's share in the Empire air plan. In deciding on its new pattern of organisation the Board had a choice between the geographical system—simply a matter of division into commands by specific boundaries—and the functional system in which formations would be established to carry out specific tasks (operations, training, maintenance, etc.) and which would command units concerned with those functions irrespective of their geographical location. But the Air Board held its hand on this issue. It became known to the Air Board that, on a Cabinet level, the question of importing a senior R.A.F. officer to fill the appointment of Chief of the Air Staff was once more being considered and, since the composition, and perhaps the constitution, of the Air Board was likely to change, no immediate revision of the basic organisation of the force was undertaken. Already the Government's rejection, on United Kingdom advice, of the air expeditionary force planned by its own advisers was an indication of lack of confidence in those advisers.

⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 Nov 1939.

¹ When it recommended the 6-squadron expeditionary force plan, the Air Board was unaware that the formation of the EATS was being considered by the British Air Ministry—*War Report of the Chief of the Air Staff, 3 Sep 1939 to 31 Dec 1945*, p. 10.

The twelve squadrons which, with ancillary units, formed the combat strength of the air force at the outbreak of war, were controlled by R.A.A.F. Headquarters through four station headquarters,² and there were, in addition, No. 1 Flying Training School at Point Cook, No. 1 Armament Training Station at Cressy, Victoria, and a liaison office in London. Adequate for a peacetime force of the size of the R.A.A.F. at that stage, this organisation was quite inadequate for a force that was to be expanded to operate over not only the entire Commonwealth but its external territories as well, quite apart from its overseas commitments, which, bound to be extensive, were as yet undefined.

Australia's first step towards the air defence of her external territories had been taken on 25th September, when the first R.A.A.F. unit to serve in New Guinea was established at Port Moresby. This was No. 11 Squadron³ commanded by Flight Lieutenant Alexander,⁴ which was equipped at the outset with only two Short "C" type flying-boats (originally Qantas Empire Airways' *Centaurus* and *Calypso*) requisitioned and converted for general reconnaissance.

On 13th November Mr Fairbairn, then in Canada, became the Commonwealth's first Minister for Air. The appointment was explained by the Prime Minister when he told Parliament that the machinery appropriate to peace was, in war, not only inappropriate but inefficient, and that no one Minister for Defence could possibly cope with administrative responsibility for the three Services. Therefore, "for the duration of the war", there would be a Minister for each of the armed Services and a Minister for Supply and Development. The activities of the departments of these Ministers would be coordinated by a Minister for Defence Coordination, who would be the Prime Minister himself.

As Mr Fairbairn was absent Mr Holt⁵ was appointed to act as Air Minister until his return. Each Service Minister was also a member of the War Cabinet. Parallel with the decision to appoint a Minister for Air was the important consequential decision, on the same date, inaugurating the Department of Air as an independent Service department with Mr Coleman as its permanent head. Coleman's place as Secretary to the Air Board was filled by Mr Mulrooney.⁶

One of Holt's first tasks as acting Minister was to approve a recommendation by the Chief of the Air Staff that 38 advanced operational bases on the coast should be established to give extended range to aircraft engaged in seaward reconnaissance;⁷ the bases to have refuelling,

² At Laverton (Vic), Richmond and Rathmines (NSW) and Pearce (WA).

³ Formed at Richmond, NSW, on 21 Sep 1939, with 4 regular air force officers, 4 ex-Qantas Empire Airways officers, 12 regular airmen and 11 ex-Qantas airmen.

⁴ Air Cmdre J. Alexander, OBE. Comd 11 Sqn 1939-41, 9 Sqn 1941, 10 Sqn 1942-43, RAF Stn Mount Batten 1943-45. Regular air force offr; of Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 3 Apr 1907.

⁵ Rt Hon H. E. Holt. MHR since 1935. Acting Min for Air 1939-40; Min for Labour and National Service 1940-41 and 1949; Min for Immigration 1949-58; Treasurer since 1958. Of Melbourne; b. Sydney, 5 Aug 1908.

⁶ F. J. Mulrooney, MBE. Secretary to Air Board 1939-52; Asst Secretary Dept of Air since 1952. Public servant; of Sandringham, Vic; b. St Kilda, Vic, 27 Dec 1900.

⁷ Qld, 8; NSW, 6; Vic, 4; SA, 5; WA, 10; NT, 3; Tas, 2.

rearming and wireless telegraphy facilities. Of these bases, 10 were listed as urgent and expenditure for their development was provided.⁸

As a first step towards meeting the need to decentralise the R.A.A.F. organisation, two groups—No. 1 Group, with headquarters at Melbourne and No. 2 Group with headquarters at Sydney⁹—were formed on 20th November. This left R.A.A.F. Headquarters free to concentrate on major policy. The new groups controlled all flying operations within their area, except naval and army-cooperation training, and operations for the defence of trade, for which R.A.A.F. Headquarters retained full responsibility.

At this stage it became imperative for the Government to take action to formalise the constitution of the air force. Ever since the very brief *Air Defence Act* became law in 1923, after a fierce battle of words on the issue of the attempted incorporation of the Imperial *Air Force Act*, the R.A.A.F., for all practical purposes, had been administered by regulations. The intention to introduce fresh legislation to obviate this form of control had been left shelved through the years, but now, with the country at war and the various air forces of the Empire being drawn into close cooperation, perhaps even coordination, the R.A.A.F. was in need of a code of law. On 7th December the Government brought down a brief measure based on the code which had been adopted for the navy and the army and which was similar in most respects to that of the R.A.F. and the other Dominion air forces.

Mr Holt, who introduced the measure, explained that it would apply the Australian *Defence Act* to the R.A.A.F. One important issue—that of the position of compulsory trainees—was raised on the Opposition side of the House by Mr Blackburn,¹ whereupon Mr Holt obtained the Government's approval for an amendment which ensured that, unless they voluntarily agreed to do so, no "universal trainees" would be required to serve in the air force. With this and some other minor amendments, the Bill was passed through both Houses promptly.²

At the end of 1939 the composition of the Air Board was much as it had been at the outbreak of war, with Air Vice-Marshal Goble as Chief of the Air Staff, Air Commodore Russell (on exchange from the R.A.F.) as Air Member for Personnel, Air Commodore Anderson as Air Member for Supply, and Mr Langslow³ (who, on 30th November, became Secretary of the Department of Air) as Finance Member. Each of the members was head of a branch and between them, the branches controlled twelve directorates.⁴

⁸ Cooktown, Rockhampton (Qld); Moruya, Evans Head (NSW); Mallacoota, Bairnsdale (Vic); Mount Gambier (SA); Albany, Busselton (WA); and Flinders I (Tas).

⁹ No. 1 Group commanded by Gp Capt H. N. Wrigley, No. 2 by Gp Capt A. T. Cole.

¹ M. McC. Blackburn. MLA Vic 1914-17, 1925-34; MHR 1934-44. Of Essendon, Vic; b. Inglewood, Vic, 19 Nov 1880. Died 31 Mar 1944.

² Assent was reported in April 1940.

³ M. C. Langslow, MBE. (1st AIF: Major Army Pay Corps 1915-22.) Finance Member Air Board 1937-40; Secretary Dept of Air 1939-51. Public servant; of Brighton, Vic; b. Maldon, Vic, 20 Jun 1889.

⁴ CAS Branch: Operations and Intelligence, Organisation and Staff Duties, Works and Buildings, Signals; AMP Branch: Personal Services, Manning, Training, Medical Services; AMS Branch: Equipment, Technical Services, Aeronautical Inspection; Finance Branch: Stores Accounts.

Since no amount of organising, planning, equipment and training could achieve an effective war program without efficient recruiting machinery, it is appropriate here to examine first, the Directorate of Recruiting, or Manning as it was now known. Before the war it was customary for a board of seven officers to interview applicants for cadetships, a method that became obsolete immediately war was declared. In November 1939, the then Director of Manning, Wing Commander Cobby,⁵ made a survey on the recruiting position and recommended the establishment of a recruiting depot in each capital city and 12 provincial recruiting centres. Thereupon centres were established in all capital cities and provision was made for provincial recruiting.⁶

It was from the recruiting field, as we have seen, that the chief grounds for public criticism arose. Even after three months of war had passed, comparatively few applicants had achieved any greater satisfaction than the knowledge that their names were included in a huge waiting list. By December the mass output of trained aircrews was still, as one newspaper aviation correspondent put it, "in the realm of planning". This correspondent wrote of the quenching of the enthusiasm of young men who were eager to become war pilots and deplored the "disappointment, confusion and even bitterness" which they experienced.⁷ And the Service had to face this serious situation with the certain knowledge that the thousands of men offering would be needed urgently when the capacity of the force to absorb them had been developed.

One great difficulty was to obtain enough recruits for *all* musterings to ensure balanced development. In December 1939 there were 62 separate musterings for airmen, divided into five groups according to rates of pay. Three months later the number had increased to 67. The problem of maintaining proportionate strength was intensified by the difficulty in obtaining men for the technical ground staff musterings. And as this need increased, the Service found resistance in the industrial sphere, where there was anxiety about the training of mechanics to lower standards than the accepted ones. A pointer to this was a protest by the New South Wales Minister for Education (Mr D. H. Drummond) that the States were gravely concerned by the effect on industry of the Commonwealth's plan for the training of "many thousands of air force mechanics".⁸

Australia's manpower of service age was not inexhaustible and the difficulties inherent in that fact were increased by unavoidable inter-Service competition. There could be no question that the development of the R.A.A.F. had introduced a problem new to wartime recruiting. The air force required a high proportion of technically and professionally

⁵ Air Cmdre A. H. Cobby, CBE, DSO, DFC, GM. (1st AIF: 4 Sqn AFC.) Director of Manning 1940; AOC HQ North-Eastern Area 1942; Cmdt RAAF Staff School 1943-44; AOC 10 Gp 1944, 1st TAF 1944-45. Regular air force officer; b. Prahran, Vic, 26 Aug 1894. Died 11 Nov 1955.

⁶ Centres were established at Newcastle and in the Northern Rivers District, NSW, with two mobile units to each State of Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, and one each to the States of South Australia and Western Australia. A centre in Hobart was also to be equipped for use as a mobile unit when required.

⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 Dec 1939.

⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 Dec 1939.

trained men. These were categories from which the other Services drew many of their potential commissioned and non-commissioned officers, and they were understandably reluctant to see the source of supply diminishing. To meet competition the air force had to engage, not only in direct publicity, but to use all the indirect appeal at its command; appeal such as was expressed by emphasis on the uniform of conspicuous blue (which included a collar and tie for all ranks) and a wide variety of musterings which might be expected to have an attraction for the young men whom all the Services urgently needed.

A situation had now been reached in which the air force, though unable to absorb anything like the number of men offering, was yet obliged to engage in a full-scale recruiting campaign. As this paradox became more sharply emphasised, a very practical, if incomplete, answer came from the Air Member for Personnel, Air Commodore Russell, on whose recommendation, in February 1940, men enlisted were placed on a call-up waiting list, given a special badge to wear, and provided with pre-entry instruction. In this way the air force endeavoured, and with appreciable success, to maintain the interest of those enlisted but not called up, and at the same time to attract new recruits.

But this represented only partial success. After six months of war the recruiting statistics revealed not only the extreme importance of this pre-entry plan but that the difference between the number of men offering and the number actually entering the Service showed little, if any, improvement. By 30th March 1940, 11,550 men had applied for enlistment as aircrew. Of these 4,617 had been interviewed and 1,973 selected, but only 184 had begun training, leaving 1,789 on the waiting list. For the same period, the figures for ground staff recruitment were: applications 56,777, selected 7,894, enlisted 5,346, on waiting list 2,548. Final responsibility for these problems rested, of course, with the Air Board, but the various directorates came in for their share of the difficult task of developing the Service machinery to the stage at which it could achieve an adequate intake of recruits.

By the constitution of the Air Board, Goble was the senior member and was responsible for coordinating policy and for the disposition of the force, command, employment, fighting efficiency, collective training, organisation, communications and works services. Under Goble at the head of the Air Staff was Group Captain Bostock,⁹ who, on 1st September 1939, had been appointed Deputy Chief of the Air Staff, a post first superimposed on, and subsequently substituted for that of Assistant Chief of the Air Staff held by Wing Commander Jones.¹ The real importance of this change was in the authority given to the Deputy Chief to act for the

⁹ AVM W. D. Bostock, CB, DSO, OBE. (1st AIF: 2 Sigs Tp and A and NZ Mtd Div Sigs 1914-17; 48 Sqn RFC 1917-18.) Director of Operations and Intelligence RAAF HQ 1938-39; Deputy Chief of the Air Staff 1939-41; Chief of Staff AAF SWPA 1942; AOC RAAF Cd 1942-46. MHR 1949-58. Regular air force offr; of Melbourne; b. Sydney, 5 Feb 1892.

¹ Air Marshal Sir George Jones, KBE, CB, DFC. (1st AIF: 9 LH Regt 1915; 4 Sqn AFC 1916-19.) Asst Chief of the Air Staff 1939-40; Director of Training RAAF 1940-42; Chief of the Air Staff 1942-52. Regular air force offr; of Melbourne; b. Rushworth, Vic, 11 Nov 1896.

Chief of the Air Staff, an authority not carried by the appointment of Assistant Chief. In keeping with this increased authority the Deputy Chief was made a member of a Joint Planning Committee. Bostock's main Air Staff role was that of Director of Operations and Intelligence, but, at the outbreak of war, his directorate had no specific organisation on which a comprehensive Intelligence service might be built. At this stage combat operations were far removed from Australia and the need for the development of Intelligence, though keenly appreciated by all concerned, was not immediately pressed.

In the branch of the Air Member for Supply, the Directorate of Technical Services, with Wing Commander E. C. Wackett as director, accepted a very heavy burden of responsibility from the first day of war. Items of equipment essential to the efficient operation of aircraft were often lacking and ways had to be found to offset deficiencies.

For its supply in aircraft and appropriate stores, the air force was then almost dependent on Britain, but Britain's preoccupation with the onslaught of the German forces, and the tenuous and vulnerable sea routes which lay between Britain and Australia, made it all too obvious that this dependence must cease, at least for an appreciable time. The true position, as the Prime Minister had indicated, was one in which the Dominions might well be expected to develop their aircraft industries so that they might supplement instead of drawing on British production. The immediate alternatives for Australia were thus her own production, still of infant proportions, and her best endeavours in the American market. But only moderate success was possible there in the face of the American arms embargo, still unrepealed, the, as yet, extremely limited capacity of the American aircraft industry itself, and the pressing demands for aircraft from both Britain and France who were both placing orders in the United States considerably above their theoretically permitted limit of expenditure.²

At the same time the Air Board was under pressure from the War Cabinet to control expenditure, and late in December it reviewed the aircraft on order from Britain in the light of short-range needs. No savings could be made, the board considered, in current allotments to the air force, but, as the planning of the E.A.T.S. indicated, the British Government was willing to make available without cost to Australia large numbers of Anson and Fairey Battle aircraft for its share in that vast plan. These were aircraft which, it was claimed, could be diverted from training to service use if circumstances demanded it. The board therefore decided that a substantial cut in the number of Beaufort aircraft on order from Britain would be justified. Delivery of 30 of these aircraft was outstanding in the current program and it was proposed that this number should be reduced to 14, it being felt that the British Air Ministry would be glad to take over the 16 other aircraft. In addition an order had been placed

² W. K. Hancock and M. M. Gowing, *British War Economy* (1949), p. 191, a volume in the civil series of the British official history of the war of 1939-45.

for a further 50 Beauforts from Britain. The Air Board considered that this order could also be cancelled with safety. The deficiency of 16 twin-engined aircraft in the current program could be made up eventually from locally built Beauforts.

The War Cabinet, on 22nd December 1939, approved these cancellations and also decided that the 14 Beauforts remaining on order from Britain should be delivered without engines, these aircraft to be fitted in Australia with Pratt and Whitney twin-row "Wasp" engines, 60 of which were to be bought in America.

On the engineering and maintenance side the difficulties were great. An example was the problem presented by the need for extended range for aircraft engaged in long and vital seaward reconnaissance. The Anson bomber, the only suitable aircraft available for these operations with the exception of a limited number of flying-boats, had to be fitted with additional fuel and oil tanks to give added range within safe technical limits. Douglas DC-3 airliners and the Short "Empire" flying-boats impressed from civil aviation had to be converted for service purposes and armed. These tasks had to be accomplished under pressure of time and with very limited numbers of trained technicians.

The two distinct and, in a measure, competitive phases of expansion set big problems for the Training Directorate. The first wartime Director of Training was Wing Commander Scherger,³ who had held the post since February 1938. Scherger found an urgent task in providing sufficient flying instructors. It is understandable that at this time the whole of the training organisation was in a very fluid state.

Aircrew training for musterings other than pilots, demanded special consideration. In September 1939 there had been approximately 40 trained air observers in the whole of the force. These had been selected for air-observer training from certain basic musterings which included wireless telegraph operator, photographer, fitters, and armourers. There were also approximately 20 officer pilots who were classed as "navigation specialists".⁴

The peacetime decision to develop the Air Force Reserve to include commercial airline pilots and aero-club instructors was an aspect of the wartime link between civil and service aviation. An example of the capacity of the commercial airline operators to respond to the needs of the air force, was the signing up early in September 1939 of the first two crews from Qantas Empire Airways for active duty with the R.A.A.F. These crews⁵ came into the fighting Service to operate flying-boats which

³ Air Marshal Sir Frederick Scherger, KBE, CB, DSO, AFC. Director of Training RAAF 1938-40, 1942-43; comd RAAF Stn, Darwin 1942-43; AOC 10 Group 1943-44, 1st TAF 1945; Air Member for Personnel 1945, 1955-56; Deputy Chief of the Air Staff 1947-51; AOC RAF Malaya 1953-55; Chief of the Air Staff 1957-61. Regular air force offr; b. Ararat, Vic, 18 May 1904.

⁴ With the introduction of the EATS the air observers' course was established. The first was completed at No. 1 ANS, Parkes, NSW, on 19 Dec 1940 with 38 successful trainees from the first intake.

⁵ Cpts C. R. Gurney and E. C. Sims; First Officers W. B. Purton and G. E. Hemsworth; Radio Officers J. R. Moyle and J. H. Willmott. First Officers later transferred from Qantas to RAAF were K. G. Caldwell, M. V. Mather, J. L. Grey, R. M. Hirst and L. J. Sloan.

were under charter from Qantas Empire Airways and to join, as we have noted, with regular air force men to form No. 11 Squadron.

The relationship between civil and R.A.A.F. flying training was, in fact, fully reviewed at a conference convened at R.A.A.F. Headquarters two days before war was declared. Originally it had been intended that civil air reserve training by various private and commercial flying organisations should be under the sole control of the Department of Civil Aviation. As the tension in Europe had increased the Cabinet had approved a plan which, it was hoped, would make a large proportion of aero club and commercial airline pilots available for the R.A.A.F. training program so that the current air force expansion plan could be quickened. The Air Board's contention was that training should be controlled by the air force while still conforming to the Government's policy that any efficient training facilities available in civil aviation schools should be used in preference to setting up permanent air force establishments. Such civil aerodromes and buildings as were needed to provide the additional accommodation required would be taken over by the Service and expanded. The Air Board also considered that there were sufficient preliminary training aircraft available to meet the needs of the then current R.A.A.F. training program.

The conference agreed that the four main aero club centres—Essendon (Victoria), Mascot and Newcastle (New South Wales), and Archerfield (Queensland)—should be used as training centres. On 22nd November 1939, Ministerial approval was given for the training of aircrew at 11 aero clubs and commercial aviation schools.⁶ When R.A.A.F. staff was already based at an aerodrome it would supervise the civil schools established there, otherwise a staff of Service supervisors was to be appointed.

Early in the new year a form of contract was drawn up providing that the schools should train to the elementary stage of flying instruction under the direction of the R.A.A.F., each school accepting responsibility for the provision of suitable aircraft and equipment and their maintenance and repair, and the provision of qualified technical staff and flying instructors. Pupils were to be allotted on the basis of three for each initial equipment aircraft and not more than four to each approved instructor. The course was to be of eight weeks with an intake every four weeks. The R.A.A.F. was to be responsible for ground instruction and discipline.

As already noted the first flying training school had long been in operation at Point Cook. The first of the new schools were at Parafield (South Australia) and Archerfield (Queensland), where Nos. 2 and 3 Flying Training Schools were officially established. Soon these were renamed Elementary Flying Training Schools, Parafield becoming No. 1 and Archerfield No. 2. In January 1940 No. 3 was formed at Essendon and No. 4 at Mascot. It was estimated that of 92 pupils entering the schools with each four-weekly intake 80 would pass on for more advanced instruction. Thus

⁶ Queensland Aero Club, Airwork Ltd (Qld); Newcastle Aero Club, NSW Aero Club, Airfite Ltd, Kingsford Smith Air Service Ltd (NSW); ANA Flying School, Victoria & Interstate Airways Ltd, Victorian Aero Club (Vic); South Australian Aero Club; West Australian Aero Club.

pending the initiation of the Empire scheme the training of aircrew continued at high pressure. Before the first Empire scheme trainees graduated, more than 400 new pilots, for example, had been commissioned. It was the training of these and other aircrew in this period that made possible the fairly rapid expansion of the home air force in 1940 and the steady reinforcement of the squadrons overseas.

Meanwhile the ever-increasing administrative duties of the Service demanded men with executive and professional ability. The development of the "Administrative and Special Duties" branch, as distinct from the "General Duties" branch (all officers qualified for flying duties) presented special problems. Civilians were being brought into the air force in increasingly large numbers. They had to be trained as speedily as possible in both routine and specialised duties covering the whole field of Service activity on the ground, and given as wide an appreciation of air force history, tradition and general practice as was possible.⁸ Neither of the other fighting Services provided such contrast in outlook as that between the General Duties and the A. and S.D. officer in the air force. It is important to note the great responsibility this influx of civilians, a large proportion of them with no previous Service training, placed on the regular force from the day war began. The main weight of this responsibility rested with the Directorate of Personal Services.

Another air force directorate faced with special difficulties at the outset was that of Medical Services. A 12-year-old Ministerial order vested certain responsibilities for the Air Force Medical Services with the Director-General of Medical Services (Army), who despite R.A.A.F. objection was given general control over air force and civil aviation medical organisations. When war came this overriding authority, exercised by an officer of another Service, was considered illogical by the air force which had developed medical problems that were distinct from those of the other fighting Services. The remedy came later, but for a time the Director of Medical Services (Air), Wing Commander Daley,⁹ who, in his own specialised field, was the proper person to advise the Air Board, had to defer and refer—always in principle if not always in practice—to the Army's Director-General.

Having surveyed the principal directorates as they were in the war's earliest stage, it is necessary to reconsider the command situation. We have already noted that the question of the appointment of a senior R.A.F. officer to the position of Chief of the Australian Air Staff was being considered at Cabinet level. When Goble had been appointed to this post in February 1939, he was, in the words of Mr Lyons (then Prime Minister), to "become Acting Chief of the Air Staff with the temporary rank of Air Vice-Marshal". Moreover, there were always those in high

⁸ In August 1940 the School of Administration was opened at Laverton. As the demand for more "A and SD" officers increased other schools were opened.

⁹ AVM E. A. Daley, CBE, DMS RAAF 1938-40; 1 Air Ambulance Unit ME 1941; DGMS Representative RAAF OHQ 1944; Deputy DGMS 1942-43, DGMS since 1945. Regular air force medical off; of Melbourne; b. Bendigo, Vic, 23 Jan 1901.

political places who considered that the post he held should go to a British officer. Mr Fairbairn, an airman of some distinction who, as mentioned, had been made Minister for Civil Aviation and Minister assisting the Minister for Defence in April, and who was now the Minister for Air, was not one of these.

Fairbairn, on the day he was appointed Minister for Air, cabled Mr Menzies that he expected to fly to Australia via New York and Marseilles and would like Air Vice-Marshal Williams to travel with him from Marseilles to absorb the general principles of the Empire air scheme. It seems that at this stage Fairbairn was, very naturally, assuming that Williams would leave his appointment with Coastal Command, R.A.F., to resume the appointment of Chief of the Air Staff in Australia. However, at that time the Minister for Supply and Development, Mr Casey, very much senior to Fairbairn, was in London, and on 17th November Menzies informed Fairbairn that Casey was negotiating for the loan of an officer of the R.A.F. as Chief of the Air Staff; Menzies would like Fairbairn to go to London to form his own opinions about the officers available.

Already in October the Cabinet had replaced the Chief of the General Staff, Lieut-General Lavarack,¹ by a British officer, Lieut-General Squires,² who had been in Australia since 1938 as Inspector General. The First Naval Member, Admiral Colvin,³ was an officer of the Royal Navy. The Government was now seeking a British officer to lead the air force also.

Fairbairn replied to Menzies on 20th November that, unless the Air Ministry would make available an officer of the "capacity" and "tact" of Air Marshals Mitchell⁴ or Longmore,⁵ he was "concerned at" the proposal to appoint a R.A.F. officer and would prefer to recall Williams. Mitchell and Longmore were both Australian-born; Mitchell then commanded in the Middle East where, in 1940, Longmore would succeed him. Next day Casey cabled to Fairbairn that he was advised that Air Chief Marshal Sir John Steel⁶ was the best man available. (Steel was aged 62 and had been on the retired list for two years.)

¹ Lt-Gen Sir John Lavarack, KCMG, KCVO, KBE, CB, DSO. (1st AIF: GSO1 4 Div 1917-19.) Chief of the General Staff Aust 1935-39: GOC Southern Comd 1939-40, 7 Div 1940-41, I Corps 1941-42, First Army 1942-44. Governor of Queensland 1946-57. Regular soldier; of Melbourne; b. Brisbane, 19 Dec 1885. Died 4 Dec 1957.

² Lt-Gen E. K. Squires, CB, DSO, MC. (1914-18: Maj Indian Army.) Director of Staff Duties War Office 1936-38; Inspector General AMF 1938-40; CGS 1939-40. B. Poona, India, 18 Dec 1882. Died 3 Mar 1940.

³ Admiral Sir Ragnar Colvin, KBE, CB. Entered RN 1896. (With Grand Fleet 1914-18, in *Revenge* at Jutland.) Naval Attaché China and Japan 1922-24; President RN College, Greenwich 1934-37; First Naval Member Aust Naval Board 1937-41; Naval Adviser to High Commissioner for Aust in London 1942-44. B. 7 May 1882. Died 22 Feb 1954.

⁴ Air Chief Marshal Sir William Mitchell, KCB, CBE, DSO, MC, AFC. Air Member for Personnel on Air Council 1937-39; AOC-in-C RAF in ME 1939-40; Inspector General of RAF 1940-41. Regular air force off; of London; b. Sydney, 8 Mar 1888. Died 16 Aug 1944.

⁵ Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, GCB, DSO, AOC-in-C RAF in ME 1940-41. Inspector General of RAF 1941. Regular air force off; of Wentworth, Surrey, Eng; b. St. Leonard's, NSW, 8 Oct 1885.

⁶ Air Chief Marshal Sir John Steel, GCB, KBE, CMG. (Served South African War; 1914-18 War with Grand Fleet and RN Air Service.) Transferred to RAF 1919. AOC RAF in India 1931-35. AOC in Chief Air Defence of Gt Britain 1935-36; Bomber Command 1936-37. Controller-General of Economy Air Ministry 1941-45. B. 1877.

When Fairbairn arrived in London he learnt that the choice was between Steel and Air Marshal Sir Charles Burnett,⁷ 57, an Inspector General of the R.A.F., who had previously been in command of Training Command. It is evident that Fairbairn was annoyed at the way in which the choice of a new head of his Service had been largely taken out of his hands, and that he would have preferred Williams but now accepted the fact that the Cabinet had decided to appoint an Englishman. On 12th December he asked the Secretary of State for Air whether Burnett could be made available "at any rate for one year" and whether Williams could be released to assist him and be ready to take over later. The Secretary of State promptly agreed to both these requests, whereupon Fairbairn informed Menzies that he had arranged for Burnett to be Chief of the Air Staff for one year with Williams as Second Member of the Air Board. Fairbairn had informed Burnett that he would be promoted to the rank of air chief marshal and Williams that he would be promoted to the rank of air marshal.

At Marseilles on the way home Fairbairn learnt by cable on 21st December that Menzies wished that no commitment be entered into with Williams; Fairbairn replied that he considered the appointment of Burnett and the recall of Williams to be definite commitments.

Meanwhile, in Australia, Goble had been carrying on in frustrating circumstances. The difficulties that beset him and, indeed, the whole Air Board in this early war period are typified by the fact that the War Cabinet decided to support the British plan for an Empire air scheme without first consulting the board. Though this was only a decision "in principle" it was momentous to the Air Board. Again, we have noted that when the Air Board recommended the six-squadron expeditionary force it was unaware that the Empire plan was being considered in London, though this was known to the Cabinet. It is difficult to see how these officers could possibly have given their best service in such circumstances. On 21st December the War Cabinet recorded Goble's resignation. As mentioned, Fairbairn was then at Marseilles having entered into a firm agreement to appoint Burnett and Williams as Chief of the Air Staff and second member of the Air Board respectively.

That Goble's position had been made untenable was clear from newspaper reports published before the War Cabinet recorded his resignation. One of these reported "on reliable authority" that Goble would ask the Government to relieve him of his duties. After stating that Goble had declined either to confirm or deny the report, the newspaper added: "It is understood that he hopes to leave shortly for Great Britain where he will offer his services, in any capacity, to the R.A.F. It has been known in Government circles that the Ministers have been considering a reorganisation of air force administration in anticipation of the inauguration of the

⁷ Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Burnett, KCB, CBE, DSO. (1914-18: RFC and RAF.) Inspector General of RAF 1939-40; Chief of Air Staff RAAF 1940-42. Regular air force offr; of Kemnay, Aberdeenshire, Scotland; b. Brown's Valley, Minnesota, USA, 3 Apr 1882. Died 9 Apr 1945.

Empire Air Training Scheme.”⁸ Next day the same newspaper stated: “Although Mr Menzies declined to comment on the matter, it is understood that Air Vice-Marshal Goble wishes to resign ‘on a matter of high principle’. It is known that he has been dissatisfied for some time with his relations with the Federal Government.” Goble’s resignation and Burnett’s appointment were announced on 5th January.

In a press statement next day Mr Menzies said that Goble had explained to him that his desire to resign was not due to any differences between himself and the Government on air force policy or his relations with Ministers but to “differences of a personal nature”.

Two days later *The Argus* (Melbourne) said: “Indicating the great importance attached by the Federal Government to the air force in the defence Services, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Burnett will be the senior of the officers at the heads of the fighting Services. It is generally admitted that the appointment of one of the two Inspectors General of the R.A.F. to the position is a great compliment, but many senior officers are nevertheless amazed that the appointment was made. They consider that the position could have been and should have been filled from the ‘ranks’ of the many highly efficient and experienced officers of the R.A.A.F.” The newspaper also quoted the Federal Opposition Leader, Mr Curtin, as saying that the appointment of Burnett confirmed the opinion that Australian airmen were, for the duration of the war at least, to be engaged in building up the R.A.F. and not the R.A.A.F. “I find it hard to believe,” Mr Curtin was quoted as saying, “that only personal reasons would account for Air Vice-Marshal Goble’s severance with the Australian Air Force.” This criticism was supported by a quotation from the leader of the Federal Country Party, Mr Cameron: “The present policy is tending to the belief that Australians are incapable of occupying some of the most important positions in the armed forces. This is in direct contradiction to the experience of 1914-18.”

To this criticism Mr Menzies replied next day, newspapers quoting him as saying that it was based on a failure to recognise that the Empire Air Training Scheme would involve Australia in the development of an air force that would be 20 times greater in manpower than the existing force and, in organisation, five times greater. Australia would have the benefit of Burnett’s experience and would not have to ask its limited number of relatively senior officers of the R.A.A.F. to undertake a task far beyond their experience.

Mr Fairbairn loyally tried to defend the Government’s action, saying that the appointment had been made because there was no officer in Australia with the necessary experience of the large-scale flying training that would be required under the Empire plan. He added that he did not anticipate that Burnett’s appointment would last more than the year for

⁸ *Argus* (Melbourne), 20 Dec 1939.

which he had been engaged; his work in Australia should then have been completed.⁹

On the recommendation of Fairbairn, Goble was appointed head of the Australian Air Liaison Office at Ottawa, Canada, where the Empire plan was gradually developing, and where Australia's interests were to be considerable. Anderson was appointed Acting Chief of the Air Staff. On 11th February 1940 Burnett took over, and Williams rejoined the Air Board—of which he had formerly been senior member for 17 years—as Air Member for Organisation and Equipment.

The Ministers' reasons for appointing an officer of the British Service are not convincing. The tasks that lay ahead were "far beyond the experience" of the senior officers of the R.A.A.F., but they were far beyond the experience of the senior officers of the R.A.F. also. And it was not likely that in 1939 the R.A.F. would be willing to lend one of its more valuable senior officers to Australia. The only two who seem to have been made available appear to have been Steel, who was on the retired list, and Burnett, who was clearly then in what was intended to be his last posting before retirement.

It so happened that in 1918 Burnett, then 36, and Williams, then 28, had each commanded one of the two wings in the Palestine Brigade of the R.A.F. Williams' No. 40 (Army) Wing was the larger and formed the air striking force in Allenby's great offensive that opened in September of that year. Burnett's No. 5 (Corps) Wing was a smaller army cooperation force. Between the wars Burnett had served in the Middle East and India until 1921, had commanded in Iraq in 1932-34, and had held various posts in the United Kingdom. Williams had the advantage of having graduated from the R.A.F. staff college, the army staff college at Camberley, and the Imperial Defence College. Burnett had not attended a staff college, probably having been considered too senior for such a course by the time the R.A.F. staff college was opened. Having regard also to the fact that Williams knew the R.A.A.F. and its problems intimately and had been its senior and respected leader for most of its life, it is difficult to see what contribution Burnett was likely to make that was beyond Williams' capacity.

However, in those days senior officers of the British Services evidently seemed to some Australian Ministers to possess a glamour that their own senior officers lacked, and had not been able to acquire in their periods of duty with the R.A.F. on exchange.¹ Thus, by February 1940, the Australian Air Force found itself under the leadership of an elderly officer

⁹ *Argus* (Melbourne), 9 Jan 1940.

¹ As mentioned both Williams and Goble had served in senior posts with the RAF between the wars, and so had a large number of their juniors. In 1938 for example the following RAAF officers were on exchange: Air Cmdre F. H. McNamara, VC (Liaison Duties); Gp Capt A. T. Cole (Imperial Defence College); W Cdrs W. D. Bostock (6 Auxiliary Gp, Bomber Cd); J. E. Hewitt (Comd 104 Sqn RAF); Sqn Ldrs C. S. Wiggins (attached Civil Aviation), R. H. Simms (GR School, 17 Training Gp), J. R. Fleming and W. G. Rae (RAF Staff College), C. M. Henry (RAF Long Engineering Course); F-Lts J. R. G. McDonald (RAF College), R. H. Moran (RAF Signals Course), I. H. Smith, A. R. Tindal and B. C. Waddy (RAF Specialist Armament Course); F-O D. J. Macpherson (RAF Signals Course).

of the British Service; Williams and Goble were assigned to administrative posts; and, in consequence of the decision not to send away an expeditionary air force, the likelihood that the Australian regular officers in the senior ranks would obtain active-service experience seemed bleak indeed. The Ministers' decisions seemed likely to debar the officers of the senior and middle ranks from the testing for which, in circumstances that would have discouraged less ardent spirits, they had so long been preparing themselves.