

## FROM THE SAME ROOT

My starting point is the question of why aviation developed in Australia the way that it did. There are two parts to this question; why did civil aviation here become so closely linked with defense and why did it take Australia longer than other similar countries to implement an aviation policy.

The Australian government's active participation in civil and military aviation began in March 1921 when the Civil Aviation Branch of the Department of Defence was established and the Australian Air Force was brought into operation, both under the direction of the Minister for Defence and, under him, the Air Council. It could have happened earlier and in other ways. The New Zealand government enacted its Aviation Act on 10 December 1918, in the United Kingdom civil aviation was brought under the control of the Air Ministry in 1919 and the Canadian Air Board Act was enacted on 6 June 1919.

I reckon that the answer to my questions can be found in the discussions of the Council of Defence in 1918 and 1919 and in policy development initiated in and flowing from the Council. The main source of historical evidence for this argument is the minutes of the Council's six meetings between 8 August 1918 and 15 April 1919, a Cabinet meeting on 14 May 1920 and the government's defence policy set out in Prime Minister Hughes defence speech of 10 September 1920.

By 1918 there were hundreds of Australians involved in the air war overseas but interest in an air defence of Australia began in April 1918 when the Germans launched a major offensive in Europe and General Legge, Chief of the General Staff, feared this could end with the allies having to reach an unfavourable peace settlement which would leave Australia exposed to Japanese ambitions in the Pacific. This would necessitate strengthening home defence including aerial defence, so the army drew up plans for a home

defense air force. Not to be outflanked, the navy bought an aviation expert, Wing Commander Maguire (who had flown with the Royal Naval Air Service), from Britain who drew up plans for a local naval air force. As a result, in June 1918 the government had plans for two air forces before it, a most difficult, perplexing and potentially costly problem. Not wanting to deal with this problem, the government passed it off to the Council of Defence.

The Council of Defence I'm talking about is what the National Australia Archives calls the Council of Defence II which held eleven meetings between 23 April 1918 and 12 April 1920, before falling into abeyance for a few years. The minutes of all eleven meetings have been scanned and you can read them on-line at CRS A9787. The first version of the Council had been established in 1905 to foster liaison between the army, navy and government but it was reconstituted in 1918 because it was not very effective and because, as the second paragraph of the memorandum under which it was reconstituted said:

This War has shown that war is not now a matter for navies and armies only, but calls for the utilization of the whole resources of the Nation.

The Council comprised senior officers of the army and navy and senior politicians including the Prime Minister and Ministers for Defence and the Navy. So at the third meeting on 26 June 1918 there was the Minister for Defence (Pearce), the Minister for the Navy (Poynton), the 1<sup>st</sup> Naval Member (Admiral Creswell), the Chief of the General staff (General Legge) and George Swinburne, Chairman of the Business Board of the Department of Defence (after whom Swinburne University is named). The Prime Minister (Hughes) would have presided but he was overseas and the Acting Prime Minister (Watt) should have presided but he was a crook, so Pearce ran the meeting.

Because the two air force proposals were on the agenda also attending were Wing Commander Maguire and Captain Cochrane of the Navy and Major

Harrison, OC of the Flying School. It was the only item the meeting discussed and after two hours all it could resolve was to set up an expert committee comprising naval and military officers and Swinburne.

Unsurprisingly, given inter-service rivalries, the expert committee could not reach a decision either. Its report to the next Council meeting on 8 August resulted only in the resolution to ask government how much it was prepared to spend on an air force. The answer came back, £3 million (the equivalent of \$270 million in 2018 values), but over three years to the middle of 1921. Along with this decision came the instruction that the Council was to finalize the matter so, at its fifth meeting on 28 August Council appointed a sub-committee with representatives from the army and navy, chaired by Swinburne.

By the next Council meeting on 4 November the navy had given in to the probability that there might be one unified air force but the army was still strongly against it. It was not a novel idea, the Royal Air Force had been created in Britain the previous year to amalgamate the army's Royal Flying Corps and Royal Naval Air Service.

Apart from inter-service rivalry the Council faced three problems in finding a solution.

The first was the cost because the money the government was prepared to spend on military aviation was a lot less than would be needed to create even a viable unified air force. So some way had to be found to bolster Australia's air defence with the resources the government was prepared to provide.

The second was what to do about all the men who had gained aviation experience during the war when they returned to Australia. The Minister for Repatriation suggested that pearl button making was a technical and honourable trade that some might take up but a leader in the Sydney Morning

Herald said that would be a great waste when aviation would play a significant role in Australia's future. A new air force would not absorb all the men returning to Australia and something else had to be done to make use of their new skills.

The third problem was related but much more far reaching and longer term; what was to be done about Australia's vast and largely unknown interior. Australia, like the British Empire on which it relied, depended on the sea and was a maritime nation in a maritime empire. Britain might rule the seas but it had a great deal more difficulty in ruling its vast inland expanses. Australia suffered from the same problem with settlements mainly around the coast with a few railways reaching into the inland, so large areas remained relatively unexplored, underdeveloped and a liability. The government believed it was a fundamental principle of international relations that if white Australia did not occupy and defend these largely underdeveloped areas they would lose them to Asians. This fear lay in the background of a great deal more Australian policy making than aviation, but it was in the minds of the Council of Defence as it pondered the problem of air defence.

When the Council of Defense met for its seventh meeting on 20 January 1919 the war was over and some of the pressure confronting the government and the Council about national defense had been lifted. Swinburne's committee recommended, with Legge's strong dissent, that a single air service should be formed and the Council established an Air Services Committee as one of its Standing Committees with representatives of the Army and the Navy, chaired by Swinburne. Legge soon gave into the inevitable and the Air Services Committee met for the first time on 31 January 1919.

At that Council meeting on 20 January the idea of civil aviation entered the picture. It had been floating around for some time but this appears to be its first official airing. Pearce was worried about the cost of an air force and said that if 'encouragement were given to civil aviation there would be no

difficulty in building up a militia force which would be efficient in time of national emergency'. Others had been thinking along the same lines and, later in that meeting, Council considered a memorandum submitted by General Legge on 23 December 1918 which led to creation of another standing committee, the Air Traffic Committee to consider the matter of civil aviation. It was to have representatives from the Army and Navy, the Attorney General's Department, the Departments of Trade and Commerce and Home and Territories, the Australian Aero Club and the Post Master General's Department, if that seemed advisable.

The creation of these two standing committees of the Council of Defense, the Air Service Committee and the Air Traffic Committee, marks the division between military and civil flying in the official mind, but it also linked them in that mind as two arms of national defence.

On 14 January 1919 Pearce told the press that the government wanted to encourage civil aviation in Australia, but very little happened for the rest of that year. Cabinet approved proposals regarding an air scheme but then decided to hold over the whole issue and reconsider it the following year due to the state of the economy. It is likely that happened because the two major supporters of aviation in Australia, Hughes and Pearce, were overseas for most of 1919 and there was little enthusiasm for aviation without them present.

With Hughes and Pearce back in Australia things began to move again in 1920. A conference of senior politicians and navy and army officers on 14 January 1920 resolved to set up an Air Board and estimated that an air force would cost about £1.5 million to establish with recurring costs of about £1 million. At a Cabinet meeting on 14 May 1920 the government made decisions relating to the creation of both military and civil aviation in Australia. An air force would be created under the control of an Air Council under the Minister for Defense and civil aviation would be controlled and encouraged for national development and defense. A Controller of Civil Aviation would be

appointed, to be separate from the air force but a member of the Air Council to secure co-operation between civil and defense aviation. To encourage civil flying the government would set up a lot of the ground organization, enact legislation to regulate flying, define air routes and provide at least £100,000 to meet expenses necessary for the development of civil aviation during the year 1920-21.

When Hughes announced the government's defense policy in a speech on 10 September 1920, £3.96 million was allocated for the Navy, £3.25 million for the Army, £500,000 for aviation, £400,000 for the Air Force and £100,000 for 'the encouragement of civil aviation'. After that things ground on in their usual bureaucratic way and the Civil Aviation Branch was established on 28<sup>th</sup> March 1921 and the Australian Air Force was brought into operation on the 31<sup>st</sup>, both under the direction of the Minister for Defence and, under him, the Air Council.

I want to conclude with a little coda about how these plans for the relationship between civil and military aviation in Australia worked out.

By mid 1939 Australia's civil aviation industry had grown to include 1,499 licensed pilots (376 of them commercial), 88 flying instructors, 565 ground engineers, 431 aerodromes and landing grounds and 344 aeroplanes. At around the same time the RAAF has a total personnel of 3,172 and 205 aeroplanes.

Few of the civil aviation pilots were trained front line combat pilots, but then again neither were most of the RAAF's personnel. Few of the civil aviation aeroplanes were fit for front line service but then again, only a few of the air force's aeroplanes were fit for combat. In addition to the reserve that civil aviation provided the air force, which was eventually almost entirely absorbed during the war, civil aviation also provided Australia with an aviation industry, a large body of men who had been trained in and understood

aviation, a network of aerodrome and air routes covering over 30,000 route miles across the continent and repair and maintenance facilities.

They were all turned to national defense when Pearce's predicted national emergency finally came.

## CHRONOLOGY OF GOVERNMENT POLICY RELATING TO AVIATION

April 1918	The Army prepares a proposal for an air force in Australia
May 1918	The Navy prepares a proposal for an air force in Australia
June 1918	Cabinet sends the army and navy proposals to the Council of Defence for consideration.
26 June 1918	Council of Defence sets up an expert committee to consider the proposals
8 August 1918	Following the expert committee report the Council decides to ask the government how much it is prepared to spend on aerial defence.
28 August 1918	Council of Defense appoints a sub-committee to prepare a report on aviation for its next meeting.
4 November 1918	At the Council of Defense meeting the sub-committee report proposal for a single unified air force gains support, with Army dissent.
14 January 1919	Minister for Defense Pearce says the government wants to encourage civil aviation.
20 January 1919	Council of Defence establishes the Air Services and Air Traffic Standing Committees.
14 January 1920	Meeting of high level politicians and officers held to move forward the matter of aviation.
14 May 1920	Cabinet decides on policies for military and civil aviation in Australia
10 September 1920	Hughes speech on defence, £400,000 allocated for Air defence and £100,000 for the encouragement of civil aviation.
2 December 1920	Air Navigation Act proclaimed and Controller of Civil Aviation appointed.
23 December 1920	First meeting of the Air Council.
28 March 1921	Civil Aviation Branch began official operations
31 March 1921	Australian Air Force brought into operation.



Memorandum upon the Establishment  
of a Council of Defence

March 1918

Appendix

APPENDIX I.

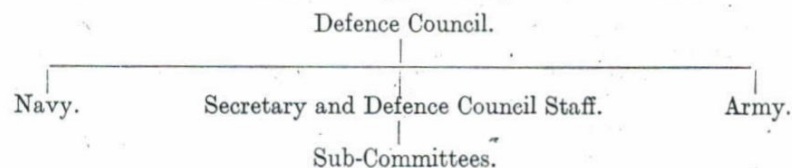
GENERAL ORGANIZATION.

The Defence Council to consist of—

- The Prime Minister, President.
- The Minister for Navy.
- The Minister for Defence.
- Two Members representing the Navy Department.
- Two Members representing the Defence Department.

In the absence of the Prime Minister, the senior Minister will preside if both are present.

The relation of the Council, the Navy, the Army, and the Council Staff would be—



In the constitution of the Council an attempt is made to bring together in the smallest possible number of persons the qualifications necessary for the solution of the problems which would conceivably have to be dealt with.

Briefly, the duties of the Council would be—

- (1) To connect Policy and the Forces.
- (2) To connect the Forces.
- (3) To direct and control these War factors of the nation which are not directly under the Navy or the Army.

G. F. PEARCE,  
Minister of State for Defence.

15th March, 1918.