



THE SECOND OLDEST AIR FORCE

The claim has been made for many years that when the RAAF was formed, exactly three years after Britain's Royal Air Force, it became the second independent air force in the world. Similar claims have been made by other countries which were active in military aviation in the same period, most notably Canada and South Africa—both former British Dominions like Australia. So what is the basis for the RAAF claim, and what is its validity in comparison to other contenders for the title of the second oldest air force?

An "air force" is defined, arguably, by something more than the operation of a single aircraft—which is the basis on which Finland celebrates the start of the 'Finnish Aviation Force' as predating the RAF by 25 days! (The Finnish Air Force itself only came into formal existence on 4 May 1928.) It also requires that an air service has its own administrative structure and independent identity, rather than function simply as an adjunct of a standing army or navy. It was the autonomy of the RAF following its formation on 1 April 1918 that made it the world's first air force.

The event which prompted the rash of "air forces" immediately after World War I was the offer by Britain in June 1919 to give 100 war surplus aircraft free to any of its Dominions that wished to set up their own air force. The offer of this 'Imperial Gift' was accepted by all five dominion governments, but in two cases the result fell short of emulating the RAF example. India, for example, used its aircraft for mainly civil purposes and relied solely on RAF squadrons until April 1933. New Zealand accepted only a third of its quota, and initially released most of these to civilian operators. The air service that began in New Zealand in 1923 remained under Army control, with separation finally achieved only in April 1937.

Australia's claim to be the first dominion with a true air force rests on the fact that the body it brought into being

on 31 March 1921 was conspicuously separate from either the Army or Navy, even though it initially lacked separate legislative provisions. An Air Defence Bill to give formal recognition to the new 'Australian Air Force' (the Royal prefix did not follow until 13 August 1921) was introduced into Parliament on 8 April, but in the event there was no *Air Force Act* until September 1923.

The RAAF's actual status was demonstrated by the administrative arrangements which accompanied its

establishment. Control was exercised by an Air Board of Administration that had direct parallels with the Naval and Military Boards controlling Australia's Navy and Army. From October 1922 Wing Commander Richard Williams headed the Air Board as 'Chief of the Air Staff', the equivalent in title to the uniformed heads of the Navy and Army. The Air Board had, in fact, been formed in November 1920, in clear anticipation that the new service would shortly supersede the Army's interim 'Australian Air Corps' which was maintaining Point Cook airbase and taking receipt of consignments of the Imperial Gift as these arrived in Melbourne from March 1920.



Australia's Air Board, 1928.

The same three uniformed members formed the Board in November 1920.

That the new Air Force was different to the Australian Air Corps (AAC) was obvious because separate recruiting for the RAAF had been conducted across Australia during March 1921, and many of the 149 personnel on strength on Day 1 had no previous connection with the AAC. Further, immediately on the RAAF's formation the new service adopted the rank titles of the RAF in place of the AAC's Army ones. In virtually every respect, the RAAF emerged on its formation as a new and entirely separate organisation from what had existed before.

The South African Air Force (SAAF) dates its beginning from 1 February 1920, when Lieutenant Colonel H.A.

(“Pierre”) van Ryneveld was given temporary rank of Colonel and appointed Director of Air Services while tasked with setting up an air force from the Imperial Gift aircraft. In fact, Ryneveld’s appointment occurred in June 1920 and was backdated to February, and the simple act of appointment did not instantly put him at the head of a viable flying service. The organisation Ryneveld was appointed to lead did not boast even a Flight until 26 April 1921. The title ‘South African Air Force’ was not used officially until 1 February 1923 when the SAAF was listed under the Union’s reconstituted Defence Act as one of the corps of the Permanent Force. Even then Ryneveld did not stand outside the Army organisation, as demonstrated by his later appointments as commander of Army troops near Pretoria and commandant of the Military College, and even Chief of the General Staff—all while still running the Air Force!



Governor-General Lord Forster inspection of RAAF, Point Cook, 1921

In Canada’s case the story is more problematic. A Canadian Air Force had been set up between February and April 1920 to supersede Army and Navy air services formed in the last months of World War I, but the new service was only a non-permanent body (that is, along militia lines) that existed mainly as a training facility for civil aviation operations. Although regarded by some as a ‘travesty of a force’, it nonetheless had a small staff of instructors and mechanics at Camp Borden and a sketchy headquarters in Ottawa. It also boasted an Air Vice-Marshal as Inspector-General (actually a retired British major-general) and an Air Commodore as first AOC (serving under the Army’s Chief of the General Staff).

A new government elected in December 1921 jettisoned this organisation and Canada’s air militia ceased to exist. The Air Board which had functioned since late 1919 disappeared into a Department of National Defence, and although the permanent cadre achieved recognition as the ‘Royal’ Canadian Air Force on 15 February 1923, it took another year before Canada’s real air force took shape. On 31 March 1924 the RCAF’s 263 airmen were automatically discharged and required to join a new permanent Air Force; those who declined were replaced next day by new enlistments. On 1 April, the revamped RCAF also took the step of adopting the RAF Ensign, motto, uniforms and rank structure of the British service as its own. Even then, administrative control of the RCAF remained with Canadian Army officials until November 1938.

On the available evidence, it seems clear that the RAAF was formed in the strongest shape as a separate, autonomous air force organisation. What is equally interesting is that it broadly retained the administrative form with which it began for the next 55 years.

- *After the RAF formed on 1 April 1918, the RAAF became the next truly separate and autonomous air force when it was established on 31 March 1921.*
- *Among Britain’s other Dominions, South Africa reached a comparable point on 1 February 1923 and Canada on 1 April 1924 —and even then both remained strongly subordinate to the Army for some time.*
- *The basis on which the RAAF was originally constituted survived virtually unaltered for more than half a century.*

‘The country will some day pay for the stupidities of those who were in the majority on this commission. They know as much about the future of aviation as they do about the sign writing of the Aztecs.’

James H. Doolittle,
later a US Air Force general,
commenting on the 1934 presidential committee
of inquiry which did not support establishing an air
force separate from the army.



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