AUSTRALIAN FLYING CORPS IN NEW GUINEA

In January 1911 defence Minister Pearce announced his intention to form an air service, and later that year the government advertised for ‘Two Competent Mechanists and Aviators’ to establish an Australian Flying Corps.


The formation of the Australian Flying Corps and Central Flying School was considered by the Military Board on 11 September 1912, and approved on 20 September. Army Order 132/1912, issued on 26 September, officially brought both the school and corps into being. The existence of the new military flying school at the outbreak of World War I made it possible for the Australian Government to contemplate the conduct of actual air operations within Australia’s area of responsibility.

And so it was that not long after the outbreak of war that Australia’s first aviation unit was being readied for active service and deployment overseas. A month before the first course at Central Flying School had completed training, the government decided to raise a 3rd Battalion of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF) to relieve the contingent that had seized Germany’s colonial territory in New Guinea, shortly after the war started. This battalion became known as the ‘Tropical Force’.

In late November 1914, in the week before Tropical Force was due to depart, information was received about a large German garrison and two armed vessels that were 60 kilometres inland on the Sepik River. In view of this development, Tropical Force’s objective was changed and it was ordered to capture the German outpost. A hastily assembled aviation unit was attached to the Tropical Force to assist with reconnaissance upriver.

On 27 November Lieutenant Eric Harrison, one of Central Flying School’s instructors, was appointed to lead the small aviation unit, which included newly graduated pilot Lieutenant George Merz and four mechanics, including Sergeant Shorland and Private McIntosh. All six personnel were attested full members of the AN&MEF. The following morning the flying school’s staff sent two reconnaissance and training biplane aircraft—a government owned BE2 and a Maurice Farman Hydroplane donated to the war effort by the entrepreneur Lebbeus Hordern—along with a full complement of spare parts, fuel and all other necessary gear, to Sydney via rail to board HMAS Una, the first RAN warship to carry aircraft. HMAS Una was the captured German naval yacht Komet.

With army authorities anticipating a ‘decent scrap’, the air party readied themselves in preparation for possible action during the voyage north. The primary role of the air element was to observe and gather intelligence. As prepared landing fields were unlikely to be available, and with the surrounding terrain being unsuitable for aircraft operations, the aircraft were expected to operate as floatplanes. However, only the Maurice Farman was a seaplane. Therefore, plans were drawn up on board the ship to convert the BE2 to a seaplane en route, although they were not implemented.

Tropical Force had been given the initial task of ousting a reported German wireless station remaining on the Sepik River. In anticipation of more robust action, Harrison and two of the mechanics fitted fixed propellers to the back of a number of 16-kg lyddite artillery shells to convert them into bombs. These propellers ensured that the shell would follow a straight trajectory to the target.
with the propeller serving the same purpose as the bore of a rifle. However, upon arrival at Madang on 7 December, Tropical Force’s Commanding Officer, Colonel Samuel Pethebridge, learned from a pair of German missionaries that there was no such enemy garrison on the Sepik River. The alleged enemy base was found to be based on fraudulent information by a paid informer that was passed on to intelligence authorities in Sydney. Disheartened by the deception, the force was then sent on to Petershafen, on Witu Island north of New Britain, and then on to Rabaul. All through this voyage, the aircraft remained in their crates.

The General Staff subsequently prepared to scale down operations in the Pacific and reduce the AN&MEF to a garrison force. On 20 December Colonel Pethebridge cabled the Defence Department explaining that he no longer needed the aircraft. By the end of 1914, all German posts in New Guinea had been occupied, and German New Guinea was placed under Australian military administration. Although this was a subject for much congratulations among the officers commanding the naval and military operations, the fact that the aircraft were never needed caused great disappointment to the aviation staff.

The two aircraft remained in their crates at the Customs House in Rabaul, and were returned to Australia unused, along with their crews, in mid-January 1915. On its return to Australia, the Maurice Farman was allocated to the Central Flying School at Point Cook. At the time the Central Flying School syllabus did not include the training of seaplane pilots, and therefore further use of the aircraft in the maritime role remained very limited. The aircraft’s floats were later removed and ultimately the aircraft was converted to a land trainer.

The aviation deployment was kept secret until the personnel returned to Australia, and Harrison’s absence was explained by a cover story that he was on his honeymoon after his recent marriage. The team’s health had also suffered during the deployment. Although all personnel had been inoculated against typhoid, the small aviation team all returned suffering from the effects of malaria.

Although this initial opportunity to lay the foundation of a tradition for Australia’s fledgling air corps proved abortive, a second chance immediately arose. In February a request was received from the Government of India for aerial assistance during a planned campaign in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq). The Australian government agreed to help, despatching what became known as the Half-Flight, AFC, from Melbourne on 20 April 1915.

**Key Points**

- **Formation of the AFC and CFS made it possible to consider air operations in Australia’s area of responsibility.**
- **Although the aircraft were not employed in this case, the deployment to New Guinea demonstrated the AFC’s ability to carry out expeditionary operations and paved the way for future operational deployments of AFC units.**
- **The ability to deploy was an early demonstration of the flexibility of air power in providing the Government with different options in the pursuit of national security.**