

# PATHFINDER



AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN

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## THE RAAF IN ANTARCTICA

The Royal Australian Air Force has operated in a wide range of geographical areas and climatic conditions in both peace and war. Given the current international situation, operations in and over desert terrain are prominent and readily identifiable. However, it is a little known fact that the Air Force has been involved in operations in the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic area for over 50 years.

The Air Force has had an important role in assisting with defining Australia's territorial and scientific aspirations in the Antarctic. On 13 January 1930, Sir Douglas Mawson claimed the area of land between 73 degrees east longitude and 47 degrees east longitude in the name of King George V. Two RAAF pilots, Flying Officer S.A.C. Campbell and Sergeant G.E. Douglas, were present at this historic event. They had been seconded from the RAAF as pilots of the Moth floatplane that Mawson had insisted on being part of the expedition equipment. The little aircraft was used for ice reconnaissance, photographic and geographical survey flights.

The same two RAAF fliers (Douglas now a pilot officer) joined Mawson's next expedition in November 1930, undertaking a large program of exploration and coastal survey during January–February 1931 despite constant bad sailing and flying weather. On 27 January Douglas and Mawson suffered a mishap while preparing the Moth for lifting back on board the expedition's ship. An unexpected roll of *Discovery* in the swell left the Moth bumping into the ship's side at the end of the lifting cradle, with both occupants dangling from it. Fortunately no one was hurt and the aircraft was repairable.

Late in 1935 Douglas was selected to lead a six man RAAF party to accompany an expedition sent south to assist in the rescue of American explorer Lincoln Ellsworth and his English pilot, after they were presumed to have gone missing while attempting to fly across Antarctica. Douglas' second in command was Flying Officer Alistair Murdoch, later to become Chief of the Air Staff in 1965–70. Accompanying the airmen in *Discovery II* were two machines this time: a Wapiti and a DH60X Gipsy Moth floatplane. On 15 January 1936 the mission succeeded in locating Ellsworth, who—despite insisting he was neither lost nor in need of rescuing—returned in *Discovery II* as a guest of the Australian government.

After World War II, Campbell was appointed director of the Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition (ANARE) and influenced the decision to involve the RAAF in the Australian return to Antarctica. In 1947 a Vought Kingfisher was embarked in HMAS *Wyatt Earp* (Ellsworth's former support ship), and a Walrus aircraft aboard HMAS *Labuan*, to assist with survey, photographic and reconnaissance tasks. The Walrus was destroyed in a gale at Heard Island on 5 January 1948. Incidentally, after being recovered and rebuilt, the aircraft is now on display at the RAAF Museum, Point Cook.



*Wrecked Walrus after Heard Island gale, January 1948.*

The value of aircraft in such an environment was well recognised. In 1955 the Antarctic Flight was formed with two Auster Mk 6 aircraft. This flight deployed with the annual ANARE expedition (with the exception of 1961) until 1963. During this period the flight supported scientific parties and flew survey missions that added to the geographical knowledge of the continent. Until 1959–60 the flight remained on the continent with the ANARE members, but that season a Dakota was lost during cyclonic winds and that practice ceased. During 1962 and 1963 two DHC Beaver floatplanes were embarked on the annual ANARE resupply vessels to fly communications, photographic and survey tasks.

The RAAF commitment to the ANARE was significant. (In 1959 consideration was even given to the development of an airfield, capable of handling heavy four-engine transport aircraft, adjacent to the station at Davis.) Logistic support was supplied through RAAF sources so that a total of one Kingfisher, one Walrus, two Auster Mk 6, four Beavers and a Dakota were operated by RAAF airmen in the Antarctic. The savage natural

conditions in which they operated are exemplified by the material losses: the Walrus, one Auster, three Beavers and the Dakota all fell victim to the harsh conditions. This was a significant impact on the RAAF, but there was another factor that affected the military role on the continent.



***Dakota A65-81, later wrecked in blizzard at Mawson Sound early in 1961.***

The Antarctic Treaty was signed by representatives of Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Chile, France, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, United Kingdom, the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1959. The Treaty came into effect in 1961, with Poland and West Germany becoming additional signatories during 1977 and 1981 respectively. Parties to the Treaty agreed to drop all territorial claims to Antarctic territories for a 30-year period and to ban the use of the continent for the testing of nuclear weapons or the storage of radioactive waste. Additional environmental safeguards were implemented that protected a wide variety of species and feeding grounds.

The Antarctic Treaty attempted to depoliticise the continent and adjacent waters. Seven nations, including Australia, have made territorial claims to areas of the Antarctic continent. National pride, scientific study, and the potential benefits of exploiting Antarctica's natural resources combined to fuel claims and raise issues that may result in contention and political tension between nations. By defining the area below 60 degrees south latitude a demilitarised zone, the Antarctic Treaty limits the impact of military aviators.

It must be noted that the Antarctic Flight was a formal RAAF unit, and that the aircraft that it operated were obviously military aircraft. They were all painted with the

RAAF roundel (except the Beavers, which were painted with the 'Boxing Kangaroo', not the official 'Kangaroo in Motion' image) and had military serial numbers. This may also explain why the deployments of 1962 and 1963 were not long-term, nor were visits made by Hercules aircraft at McMurdo Sound in 1978 or the annual resupply missions to Macquarie Island by Hercules until the mid-1980s. Anecdotal evidence that these flights were curtailed due to environmentalist pressure, based on the path of the aircraft overflying a penguin colony on Macquarie Island, also suggest an Australian commitment to environmental protection in the area.

Australia has declared a 200-mile economic resource zone about the Australian continent and the sub-Antarctic islands, Heard and Macquarie. In addition, Heard, Macquarie and the McDonald islands, and 1362 hectares of the Australian Antarctic Territories, have been declared as protected areas due to their unique geography, flora and fauna. These declarations have placed a legal responsibility on Australia to monitor and protect them against any environmental deprecations or illegal economic exploitation. The dramatic interception of the Uruguayan fishing boat *Viarsa 1*, which was illegally harvesting Patagonian Toothfish adjacent to Heard Island during October 2003, is an example of the importance Australia places on its obligations in this field.

RAAF Orion aircraft, with long range, endurance and sensor fit, could be deployed to monitor, report and coordinate action against any similar incursions. In the future, long range UAVs could be economically deployed in this role. However, the international legalities of military action in such areas are moot. The geographic location of the sub-Antarctic islands could result in a merging of the demilitarised zone and economic resource zone that may further complicate national economic aims and the spirit of the international agreement.

***For good or ill, air mastery is today the supreme expression of military power. And fleets and armies, however necessary and important, must accept subordinate rank. This is a memorable milestone in the march of man.***

- Winston Churchill, 1949



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