Did the RNZAF Pacific Deployment during World War Two Constitute a Credible Force?

Defence and Strategic Studies

Research Essay

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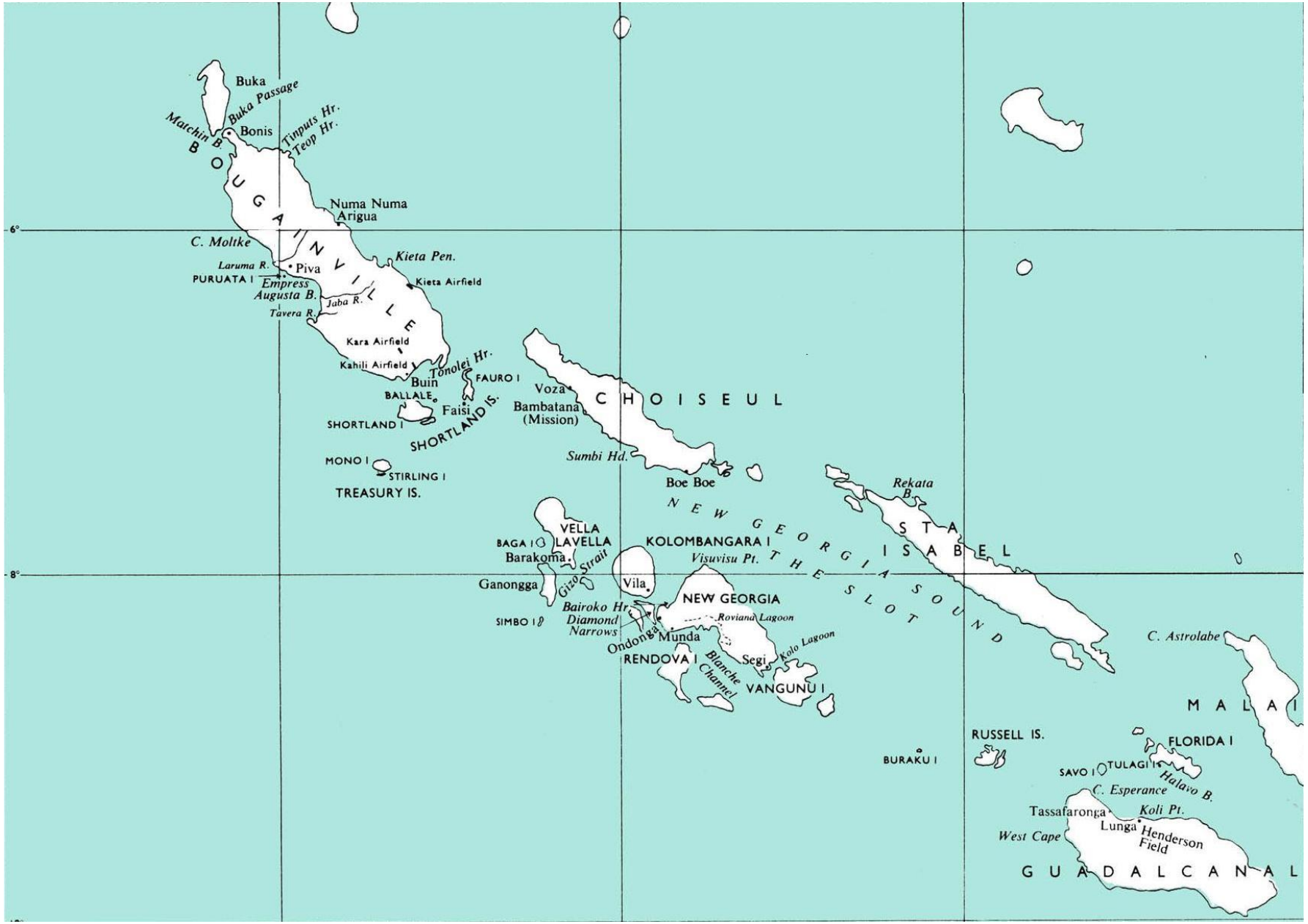
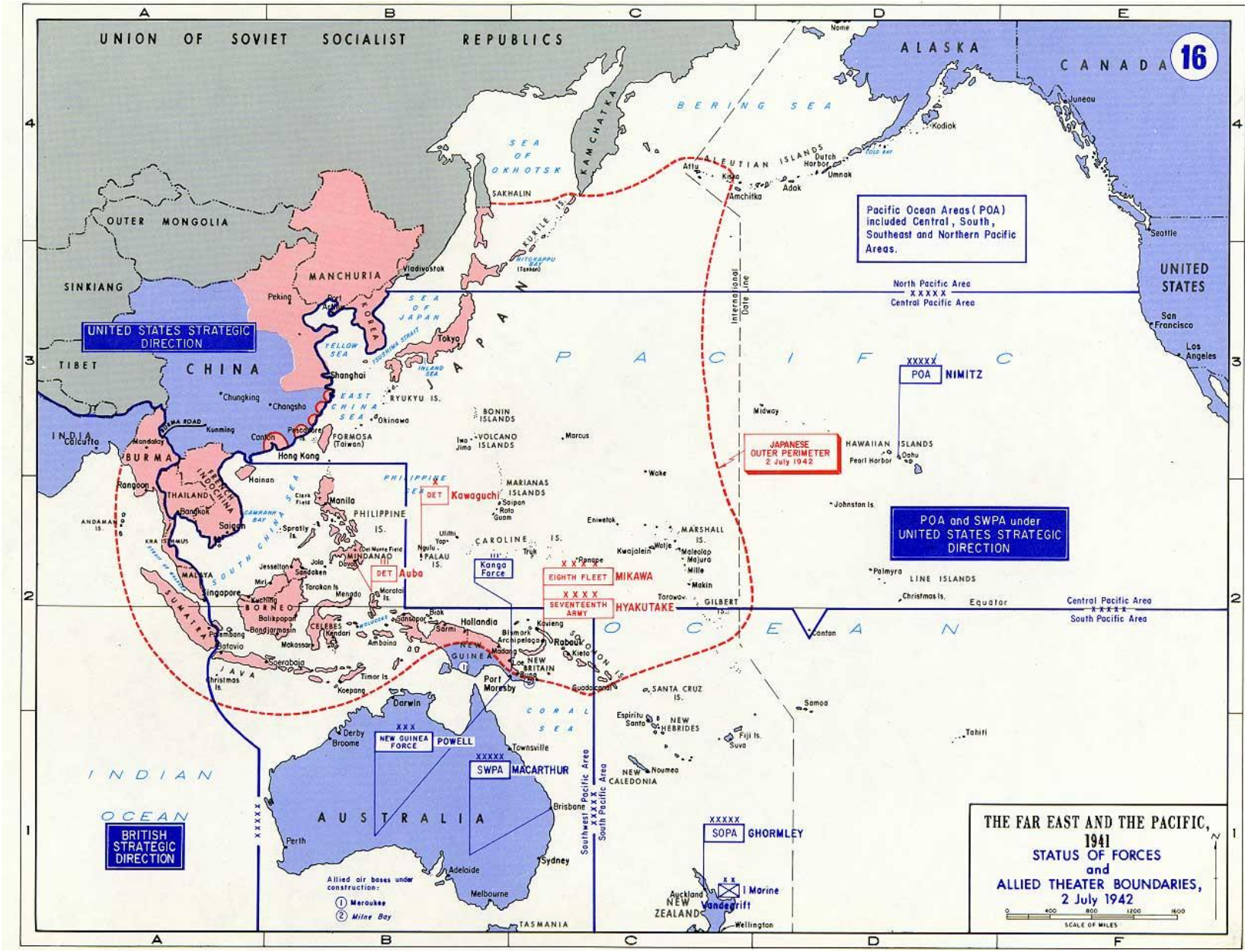
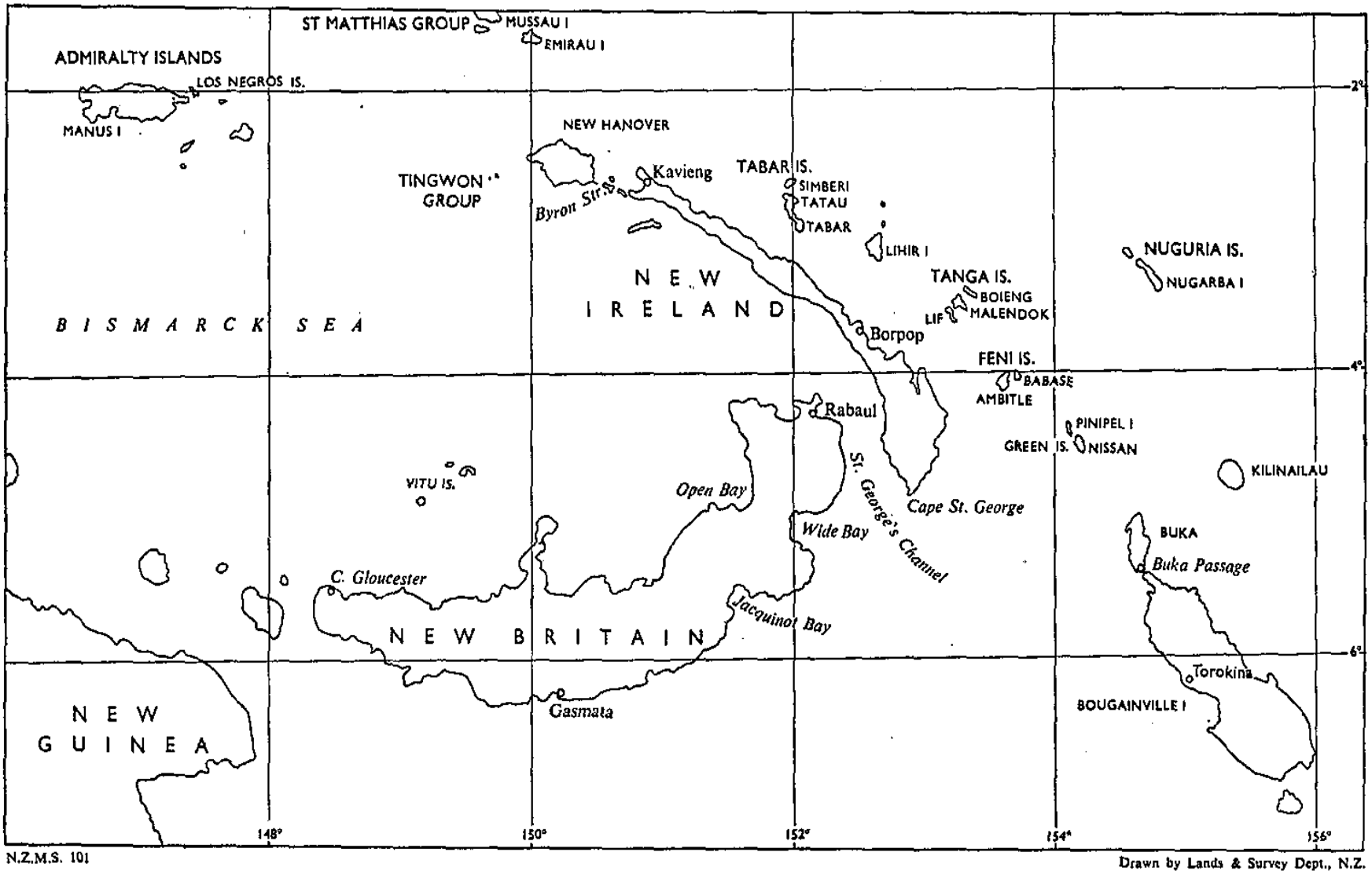
Contents



Map I – The Solomon Islands



Map II – Pacific Theatre-Areas of Operations



BISMARCK ARCHIPELAGO AND NORTHERN SOLOMONS

Map III – The Bismarck Archipelago

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The entry of Japan into the Second World War caught everyone, if not by surprise, then certainly unprepared to meet them. However, America, in concert with her new allies, soon set in motion steps to face the Japanese. The question for New Zealand was: what could be done by such a small nation, to make sufficient impression on America to enable post-war political aspirations in the Pacific region, which New Zealand considered its own 'backyard'? New Zealand was already supporting a division in the Middle East and a modest operational division of the Royal Navy (RN), so the decision was made that the government would turn to the Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) to support American operations in the Pacific – and it was clear that to have credibility, any deployment would have to include combat operations. This essay will consider the credibility of the RNZAF deployment, as being fit to provide a significant contribution to the American campaign in the South Pacific.

Credibility might be assessed in a number of ways, with quantity merely being a starting point, and arguably not a particularly useful one. It is the quality of deployed forces that counts, and this might be gauged through: training, organisation, equipment, and history. Unfortunately, history and equipment were something the RNZAF lacked, having only become an independent service in 1937, and subsequently being principally organised around basic aircrew training as part of the Commonwealth Air Training Plan (CATP). So the RNZAF was literally starting from scratch in seeking credibility as a combat force. In the power-politics context of the times, credibility with an ally was based upon building trust through action, not words. If the government wished to have influence on the international stage, i.e. obtain bargaining leverage, or deny gains to others on the international stage, it was insufficient to express political support without backing up with the physical, i.e. military force. As Frederick the Great

put it, 'diplomacy without armaments is like music without instruments'.[1] To have credibility in a military coalition with a much more powerful ally with whom you seek influence, you must demonstrate three things: commitment, reliability, and competence, all of which build up trust and respect.

Commitment in this context means commitment of resources, i.e., hardware and people, and being prepared to put those resources at risk. So the first measure is; were appropriate resources made available as the foundation of a credible force, and with no limits placed on their employment? Secondly, having made a commitment of resources, they must deploy when required; in place, on time, and ready to fight, i.e. be reliable. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the government's and the RNZAF's response to American requests for deployments. Thirdly we have competence; having demonstrated a degree of credibility just by deploying, the RNZAF then had to meet its tasking in order to establish credibility. Competence is the most important consideration and cuts across all aspects, but most importantly it is demonstrated by effective and efficient fulfilment of operational tasking; which in turn enables sustainability.

In any military operation there are always pressures to succeed, both internally, from commanders, and externally, from politicians and allies. In their eagerness to impress, there was always the danger that the RNZAF might be inclined to take risks. A balance had to be struck, as credibility would have been lost, if after a week, all the aircraft had either been shot down, lost in flying accidents, or couldn't be repaired. Conversely, there would be no credit gained by ending a deployment with no losses, if you failed to meet your task. Either way, you are a liability, and would not be valued. And while competence on operations was paramount in seeking credibility, the RNZAF first had to find the resources to commit, and then convince the Americans they could be relied upon to fulfil a role. Deficiencies in any area could ruin overall credibility.

[1] Cited in Jensen & Miller, *Global Challenge: Change and Continuity in World Politics*, Harcourt Brace & Co.: Orlando, 1997, p.108.

CHAPTER 2

THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW ZEALAND AIR POWER 1919-1939

During the First World War the New Zealand flying schools at Kohimarama and Sockburn trained 290 pilots, of whom 224 received commissions in the RFC, RNAS, or RAF.[2] By the end of the war the government was aware of the potential value of the aeroplane, and with the return to New Zealand of experienced aviators, an opportunity presented itself to develop an Air Force. The government requested Britain send an officer who could advise on air policy, and early in 1919, Colonel Bettington RAF, duly arrived complete with four aeroplanes and two mechanics. The report Bettington presented called for a minimum of seven squadrons of various aircraft types, and that plans and materials should be in place for rapid expansion. A detailed plan was supplied with costings of around £2.5m over eight years. He also provided a summary of the strategic situation, which predicted the emergence of Japan as the major power in the Pacific region, and that other nations should review their defence policies in light of this.[3] Bettington also warned that due to New Zealand's isolation, a considerable time would elapse before any assistance could be rendered, and that it should not rely on Australia. The government rejected this plan and requested something on a reduced scale, which was duly produced reducing the cost to £1m, but again rejected. It was then requested to submit a plan based on what was already in place. Eventually, £25,000 was allocated to aviation for the 1919/20 financial year, which was to subsidise the existing flying schools – thus New Zealand passed up its first opportunity to form an air force.

The potential of aviation though had been recognised, and in 1920 an Air Board was set up. This led to the government authorising an Air Policy in September of that year that mainly focused on the development of civil aviation; which could however be put to military use if required. Subsequently in 1923, the

[2] J.M.S. Ross, *Royal New Zealand Air Force: The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War*, War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs: Wellington, 1955, pp.5-6.
[3] A.V. Bettington, The Bettington Report and Related Papers, RNZAF, June 1919.

New Zealand Permanent Air Force (NZPAF) was formed as part of the regular forces, and the New Zealand Air Force (NZAF) was formed as part of the territorial forces; both under the command of the army. Development was slow and in 1928, Air Marshall Sir John Salmond RAF, was invited to visit New Zealand to advise on air defence needs. At the time of his visit the NZPAF consisted of five officers, seventeen other ranks, and 18 aircraft, of which 15 were obsolete.[4] Again, seven flying units were recommended with supporting infrastructure. In support Salmond strongly recommended that the Air Force should be the primary defence against attack from the sea, warning that New Zealand was particularly vulnerable to raids by armed cruisers.[5] This was probably not what the government wanted to hear, Prime Minister Coates having committed £1m to the construction of the Singapore Naval Base in 1927.[6] Once again, an unfavourable financial climate prevented implementing the proposals.

The deteriorating international situation coincided with a new Labour Government in 1935 that could hardly have less credibility to lead the nation in any coming war. The cabinet contained an ex-pacifist and four men who had been jailed for sedition, but not one ex-serviceman.[7] They placed faith in the League of Nations, and while they were accused of being naïve, they retorted that it was equally naïve to place faith in the RN.[8] However, the government soon approved significant increases in defence spending and commissioned yet another report on air defence. The 1936 report[9] recommended the establishment of the RNZAF as an independent service, and the creation of two squadrons of modern medium bombers to counter maritime raiders, which the author, Wing Commander Cochrane RAF, saw as the major threat. The government was suitably impressed and requested that Cochrane stay in New

[4] John M. Salmond, Report: *The Organisation, Administration, Training and General Policy of Development of the New Zealand Air Force*, Government Print: Wellington, 1928.
[5] John M. Salmond.
[6] Matthew Wright, *Pacific War: New Zealand and Japan 1941-45*, Reed Books: Auckland, 2003, p.12.
[7] Keith Sinclair, *Walter Nash*, UP: Auckland, 1976, p.190.
[8] Ibid, p.200.
[9] R.A. Cochrane, *Report on the Air Aspect of the Defence Problems of New Zealand: Including the suggested duties, strength, and Organisation of the NZAF*, Government Print: Wellington, 1936.

Zealand to implement his recommendations, and in April 1937 he became the now independent RNZAF's first Chief of Air Staff (CAS) - 30 Vickers Wellington bombers were also ordered from the UK.

The Finance Minister, Walter Nash, had strongly supported the report, urging that the defence of New Zealand was paramount rather than the defence of the Commonwealth.[10] The Imperial Defence Committee argued this would weaken Commonwealth defence, and that the existing two cruisers could counter any raids until the RN arrived anyway. They also presented a grossly overoptimistic strategic picture designed to encourage defence planning with Britain.[11] In 1938 the New Zealand government proposed that should war break out it could train up to 1000 pilots a year for RAF service.[12] This was accepted and plans were put in place to implement it. Under the shadow of increasing Japanese aggression, the Pacific Defence Conference was held in Wellington in April 1939, and attended by Australia and Great Britain. The participants endorsed Cochrane's report, acknowledged the threat from Japan, and recommended the development of airfield facilities in Fiji and Tonga. Fiji in particular was noted as being crucial to New Zealand's defence; a point previously raised by Bettington in 1919. New Zealand also agreed to increase its training commitment to 1300 aircrew for the RAF, which would be in addition to any potential requirements for its own operational needs.[13] Following the outbreak of war this was again increased to a commitment to provide 2879 trained or partly trained aircrew per annum as part of the CATP, 1400 of who would be pilots.[14] To place this in perspective, the present-day air force produces around 20 pilots a year. This was a massive undertaking for an organisation that at the time consisted of 91officers and 665 airmen in the regular force.

[10] Keith Sinclair, p.200.
[11] Ibid, p.201.
[12] J.M.S. Ross, p.31.
[13] Ibid p.53.
[14] Ibid p.51.

CHAPTER 3

WAR WITH JAPAN – THE STRUGGLE TO BE READY

Prior to the war, New Zealand was in a deep financial crisis and had requested a £5m loan from Britain to improve defences[15], which was declined. New Zealand had also felt largely let down by the British government's appeasement of both Japan and Germany. Despite this, New Zealand had largely co-operated with Britain on defence matters and was keen to assist in any impending war. A few days before the outbreak of the war New Zealand had offered its new Wellington bombers and crews to the RAF, which were just about to leave the UK for New Zealand. Naturally, given the circumstances, they were eagerly accepted. In the light of previous warnings of the threat from commerce raiders, this was an ill-advised gesture, with four ships being sunk by German raiders in and around New Zealand waters in the second half of 1940.[16]

The impunity with which the raiders operated, highlighted the dire state of New Zealand's home defences, and particularly the lack of aircraft capable of long-range patrol. The decision to gift the RNZAF's 30 Wellington bombers being seen for the naïve and short-sighted gesture it was, having brought New Zealand not the slightest advantage with the British government. On 28 November 1940, the day after the sinking of the *Rangitane* 300 miles off East Cape, a request was made to the British government for Hudson coastal patrol aircraft. Given the genuinely dire circumstances of Britain at the time, quite understandably the reply was negative. Prime Minister Fraser then reminded Churchill of the donation of the Wellingtons, and further informed him, 'at present the New Zealand Air Force possesses not one single aircraft suitable either for reconnaissance or for attack against a raider'.[17] Fraser literally pleaded with Churchill for even 'half a dozen', and the reply, ten days later, promised Hudsons without actually saying when.

[15] Keith Sinclair, p.175.
[16] Te Ara Encyclopaedia of New Zealand, online.
[17] *Documents, Vol.III,* p.15.

This was to set the scene for the next three to four years with constant requests for equipment, and promises never quite fulfilled.

The main concern of the New Zealand government at the beginning of 1941 was defence of the homeland. The core of the Navy at home consisted of the light cruiser *Achilles* and the armed merchant cruiser *Monowai*. The country's best soldiers were in Egypt and England, soon to embark to Greece, and the Air Force had no modern combat aircraft. New Zealand did what it could though. The RNZAF set up regular coastal patrols with obsolescent Vickers Vildebeest and Vincent biplanes, and the Navy converted a number of trawlers and merchantmen to military use.[18] Some relief was on the way though, and in May 1941 a supply mission was established in Washington. This was part of the British Supply Mission set up under the Lend-Lease Act, which handled all New Zealand's procurements. Unfortunately, the US War Department stipulated that all New Zealand's requests be approved by the British Mission, before they would even be considered.[19] This might help to explain why the procurement of aircraft was so tortuous, given that Britain would obviously see to her own needs first. This was reflected when in July 1941 Britain authorised the release of 64 Hudsons from allocations in America; 30 to be provided in the remainder of 1941 and the rest in 1942, at the rate of six a month.[20] Regardless, the conversion of the RNZAF from what was essentially a feeder organisation of the RAF, into a combat force in its own right, had begun.

When Japan entered the war in December 1941, the operational strength of the RNZAF comprised: 36 Hudsons, 35 Vincents, 2 Singapore flying boats, around 500 mostly training types, and 11,000 personnel.[21] Japan had approximately 3,000 first-line aircraft equally divided between the army and navy, and around 6000 pilots, all with more than 500 flying hours and many with

[18] Te Ara Encyclopaedia of New Zealand, online.
[19] M.P. Lissington, *New Zealand and the United States 1840-1944*, Department of Internal Affairs: Wellington, 1972, p.30.
[20] Ibid, p.77.
[21] J.M.S. Ross, p.108.

combat experience.[22] The US, Commonwealth, and Netherlands forces had around 1200 aircraft of all types in the Pacific theatre. Japanese forces quickly advanced south into the East Indies, and a defensive perimeter was established through the Solomons, with Rabaul on New Britain as the nerve centre. The occupation of Rabaul was of great concern to New Zealand, and raised the spectre of possible invasion. It was not so much New Zealand's shortage of materials and manpower that put the country in an apparently vulnerable situation, but the use the leaders had made of them. Had an effective policy been put in place between 1919 and 1939, New Zealand would have been in a much stronger position to face any threat, as well as being able to deal with her allies from a stronger position.[23]

The possibility of invasion was remote at best, though to the public it was real.[24] The official view, in the United States at least, was that New Zealand's isolation would probably be sufficient for Japanese purposes.[25] However, Fraser appears to have perceived the threat as a possible point of leverage, which elicited another request for equipment.[26] This at least resulted in Roosevelt informing Churchill that the US would undertake to furnish Australia and New Zealand with all practical assistance in ships, planes, munitions, etc.[27] On 30 January 1942 Fraser even requested four squadrons of fighters complete with crews; this being in addition to 36 fighters requested the previous month.[28] The fall of Singapore generated another pleading telegram for the reinforcement of New Zealand, and further supplies of equipment. It was not until the end of March that confirmation was received that a further 36 Hudsons were to be

[22] Trevor Nevitt Dupuy, *The Military History of World War II Volume XIII: The Air War in the Pacific: Air Power Leads the Way*, Franklin Watts Inc.: NY, 1964, p.14.
[23] John Robertson, *Australia at War 1939-1945*, William Heinemann: Melbourne, 1981, p.210.
[24] Pierard and Rabone, personal interview.
[25] Matthew Wright, p.36.
[26] *Documents, Vol.III,* p.122.
[27] Ibid, p.130.
[28] Ibid, p.218.

allotted to New Zealand in the coming months; though still no additional fighters due to a greater need in the Middle East.[29]

There appears to be no concrete evidence that the New Zealand government realistically thought invasion likely.[30] However, it was undoubtedly in its interest not to discourage the notion, as it channelled public opinion and effort into supporting the government's war measures. By March 1942 there were around 80,000 US troops spread between Australia, Fiji, New Caledonia and Tonga, with a further 24,500 en route to Australia; a large number of aircraft had also been despatched.[31] It appears though, that New Zealanders were not aware of most of this. Initially, the creation of SOPAC, of which New Zealand was a part separate from Australia in SWPAC, was fiercely opposed by New Zealand.[32] However, it was soon realised that with Auckland becoming the administrative centre for SOPAC this would attract large US forces readying for a counter-offensive through the Solomons. This was a great relief for New Zealand and it was then able to think about how it might contribute.[33]

This was merely happy coincidence and not related to any US concerns over New Zealand's defence, the major powers having previously adopted a 'Germany first' policy at the ARCADIA[34] conference. When New Zealand became part of SOPAC the US accepted responsibility for its defence, though mainly in the interest of maintaining bases for future military action.[35] Wright contends the US considered New Zealand a light-weight; there was no serious risk of invasion, and it was of little consequence;[36] probably seeing its main value as being a supplier of produce. This is certainly supported by Roosevelt writing to Morgenthau, the Secretary of the Treasury, telling him, 'nothing would be worse

[29] *Documents, Vol.III,* p.257.
[30] The fact they did not immediately recall the NZ Division seems to support this.
[31] M.P.Lissington, p.42.
[32] *Documents, Vol.III,* p.204.
[33] Matthew Wright, p.51.
[34] The first summit meeting of Churchill and Roosevelt, held in Washington, Dec1941-Jan1942.
[35] Matthew Wright, p.48.
[36] Ibid, p.164.

than to have Russia collapse…I would rather lose New Zealand, Australia or anything else…'.[37]

By the middle of June 1942, Fraser was much more optimistic, having seen the arrival of US troops in New Zealand, the delivery of the first Kittyhawks, and the reverses inflicted on the Japanese at the Battles of Coral Sea and Midway. On June 19th he cabled Nash, now the Minister in Washington, instructing him to pass on to Admiral King (US Chief of Navy) the potential of the RNZAF to be considered as part of his planning.[38] Eight days later he forwarded an ambitious plan for 20 RNZAF squadrons to be operational by 1943 in an offensive role.[39] Considering the active role Fraser wished for the RNZAF, there is no evidence to suggest that the Air Force itself was making any plans to fulfil it. When Rear Admiral McCain (COMAIRSOPAC) requested six Vincents to carry out ASW patrols around New Caledonia, it seems to have caught the RNZAF by surprise. Nevertheless, on July 1st 1942 an advance party was on its way by boat, and the decision was also made to send Hudsons instead, the CAS remarking, 'In the first place, the Vincents would have to be taken to pieces and shipped, as they cannot make the distance from New Zealand…The Hudson proposition is a much simpler one'.[40] The decision to send the more modern and capable Hudsons was undoubtedly the correct one from a credibility perspective, and the RNZAF was finally off to war.

[37] Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945*, Oxford UP: NY, 1979, p.338.
[38] *Documents, Vol.III,* p.262.
[39] Ibid, p.266.
[40] ANZ, 22 section 1: Guadalcanal Campaign July 1942-February 1943.

CHAPTER 4

DEPLOYMENT – THE FIRST HALF: JULY 1942-FEBRUARY 1944

The first deployment, to Plaine de Gaicas 180 miles north of Noumea, was a somewhat improvised affair due to a lack of equipment. And while the local US quarter-master unit was happy to make up most of the deficiencies[41], it was not a good start. However, by November 1942 it had a full complement of aircraft, subsequently being renamed 9 Squadron, and only requiring fuel and rations from the Americans.[42] The squadron relieved American B-26 medium bombers and stayed there until March 1943, being employed patrolling the seas out to 400 miles around the coast of New Caledonia. While the tour was generally uneventful with only one submarine spotted, no shipping was lost in the area during 9 Squadron's tenure, which was not the case before they arrived.[43] From a reliability and competence perspective, the squadron fulfilled the RNZAF's first operational tasking to the satisfaction of all concerned, during a period of intense shipping activity throughout the Guadalcanal campaign.

By August 1942 the Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS) had agreed to a ten squadron RNZAF based on Kittyhawk and Hudson aircraft. And while events were already straining manpower, New Zealand was committed to supporting the Pacific Campaign in every way it could. Group Captain Neville wrote to COMSOPAC with a proposal that the RNZAF could man US aircraft, suggesting that within 12 weeks of arrival they could become operational on four medium bomber squadrons and two fighter squadrons.[44] One option for filling manpower shortages was to return surplus aircrew from the UK. However, Air HQ were not keen to tap into 'stagnation pools in the UK' as the men previously returned were 'disgruntled and dilapidated'.[45] The offer to man American aircraft never amounted to anything, though 15 Squadron did take over the aircraft of an

[41] Alex Horn, *Wings Over the Pacific*. Random Century Group: Auckland, 1992, p.36.
[42] J.M.S.Ross, p.132.
[43] Ibid.
[44] ANZ, 130/10/3 Plans: RNZAF Expansion Programme 1942/43.
[45] Ibid.

American pursuit squadron on Tonga in October 1942, gaining valuable experience operating under GCI radar coverage provided by attached RNZAF personnel. The main positive of this event was that the Americans had made an offer and New Zealand had responded quickly and successfully – building confidence and credibility in the RNZAF.

As the tempo of operations in the Pacific increased with US landings on Guadalcanal on 7th August 1942, air assets were stretched. Allocations for Army Air Forces had been kept to the minimum and would always be governed by the demands of the European Theatre, while the Navy more or less had equal balance between the Atlantic and the Pacific. Local commanders though, always claimed they never had enough aircraft,[46] and this is probably why the New Zealand government's wish for an active role in the Pacific was granted, i.e., out of necessity. Shortly after the landings, a request was made by COMGENSOPAC for another squadron of patrol aircraft, which saw 3 Squadron deploy to Espiritu Santo during mid-October. Within three months the RNZAF had gone from no participation, to three squadrons deployed in the forward area. This activity was also marked by the whole country transitioning to a war footing, with New Zealand becoming a signatory of the Lend-Lease Agreement in September 1942. The US officially becoming New Zealand's principal supplier of military hardware, in return for employing its full resources in pursuit of the signatories' war aims.[47]

After March 1942 the American effort in the Pacific had been divided between the two services, as the Navy refused to put the Pacific Fleet under the command of a general, and MacArthur in particular, and MacArthur bitterly opposed Navy pre-eminence in the Pacific theatre. Thus were created Nimitz's Pacific Ocean

[46] J.L. Cate and W.F. Craven (Eds.), *The Army Air Forces in World War II: Volume XIV The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan August 1942-July 1944*, UP: Chicago, 1950, p.x (Reprinted by the Office of Air Force History, 1977).
[47] Geoffrey Bentley, *RNZAF: A Short History*, A.H. and A.W. Reed: Wellington, 1969, p.44.

area and MacArthur's South West Pacific area.[48] MacArthur wanted to attack Rabaul, but the JCS believed it would be too costly. Instead, the planners in Washington decreed that the Navy and Marines would attack Guadalcanal in August, while MacArthur's forces moved on the south east New Guinea coast.[49] It was the former element of this two pronged drive, codenamed CARTWHEEL, which New Zealand would soon be supporting. To prevent the Japanese establishing a strong defensive outpost on Guadalcanal,[50] while also providing further bases for offensive action, the US undertook to occupy Tulagi, Guadalcanal, and Florida Islands; the landings on 7th August 1942 being to this end. Japan up until that time had a doctrine of fighting one decisive battle that substituted for a campaign, and this in turn fulfilled strategy.[51] But Japan felt it needed to retain Guadalcanal as, 'it was the step…to Rabaul then the Home Islands themselves – it was to be held at all costs'.[52] Thus Japan embarked on a war of attrition with the only country that could defeat her.[53]

The Guadalcanal campaign was no more than a battle for possession of the airfield that was later known as Henderson Field. Tactics that evolved in the Pacific more or less followed a pattern of first gaining air superiority, then isolating the battlefield, and finally assisting surface forces to move forward. Within two weeks of the landings, fighters were operating from the airstrip which was literally only hundreds of metres from the front-line. The Americans were extremely hard pressed during this period and the RNZAF could have been employed much earlier than they were. The Japanese were constantly running re-supply convoys down 'The Slot',[54] and many American aircraft were employed on patrols searching for these convoys. An ongoing issue over who actually controlled the RNZAF at home, contributed to delays in the issuing of a directive

[48] H.P.Willmott, p.125 (see map II).
[49] Michael Schaller, *Douglas MacArthur: The Far Eastern General*, Oxford UP: NY, 1989, p.70.
[50] Naval Analysis Division, p.105.
[51] Ibid, p.84.
[52] Paul S. Dull, *A Battle History of the Imperial Japanese Navy (1941-1945)*, Patrick Stephens Ltd.: Cambridge, 1978, p.182.
[53] H.P.Willmott, p.29.
[54] The area of sea including New Georgia Sound that divides the Solomon Islands (see Map I).

from COMSOPAC to the RNZAF CAS. By October it drew a sharp response from Nimitz who wrote to Goddard, 'Following on our frequent discussions on the subject, I feel that a concrete directive should be prepared at the earliest date to cover the prospective employment of the RNZAF…'.[55] Admiral Halsey (COMSOPAC) wrote again in December and it was not finally sorted out until July 1943. Despite these constitutional details, 3 Squadron deployed six Hudsons to Guadalcanal on 23rd November 1942, thus becoming the first RNZAF unit deployed on combat operations.

On 22nd October 1942, a report to Halsey stated that only 22% of B-17 flying time was on offensive operations; the rest being on reconnaissance or patrol. It recommended that Hudsons be brought in as soon as possible to assume most of this role, despite these flights being regularly intercepted, and only the B-17's heavy defensive armament saving them.[56] A number of aircraft had still been lost though, and local commanders believed the slow and lightly armed Hudsons would be unsuitable.[57] However, within days of commencing operations, Flying Officer Gudsell became the first member of the RNZAF to win a combat decoration in the Pacific War, being awarded the US Air Medal, showing that, 'when attacked in the open without cloud cover, was not necessarily a sitter for enemy fighters'.[58] This gave a great confidence boost to the squadron,[59] bringing immediate recognition by the American commanders of the ability of the RNZAF crews, with a clear demonstration of their competence. Only two RNZAF Hudsons were ever lost to enemy air action[60] despite numerous encounters. The squadron flew in direct support of American shipping strikes, as well as bombing enemy occupied villages.[61] The Hudsons also acted as navigation leaders for air

[55] ANZ, 130/4/7 Plans: Directives to AOC RNZAF September 1942-July1943.
[56] J.L. Cate and W.F. Craven, pp63, 68.
[57] Geoffrey Bentley, p.97.
[58] ANZ, 22 section 1.
[59] J.M.S. Ross, p.149.
[60] Chris Rudge, *Air-To-Air: The story behind the air-to-air combat claims of the RNZAF*, Adventure Air: Lyttleton NZ, 2003, p.122.
[61] ANZ, 22 section 1.

strikes, which resulted in fewer losses.[62] Generally though, the Hudsons were used for ocean reconnaissance in search of enemy shipping. Throughout their employment the RNZAF Hudsons performed sterling work under difficult conditions, being the eyes and ears that enabled the more 'glamorous' role of the strike squadrons, and initiating action on a number of occasions that resulted in the sinking of enemy ships. The AOC, Air Commodore Isitt, warmly remarked of, 'the steady and efficient plodding of the B.R. crews, who have really made the reputation here for the RNZAF'.[63]

Meanwhile, the machinations of aircraft allocation continued. The day after Guadalcanal was secured Halsey wrote to the New Zealand CoS, advising that sufficient aircraft would be delivered by April 1943 for 10 combat squadrons, and it seemed practicable to increase that to 15 Squadrons by April 1944.[64] He further requested that manpower be made available to this end; his intention being to utilise those squadrons over and above the number required for home defence, and what that number might be. The reply was two fighter (F) and two bomber reconnaissance (BR) squadrons as well as OTUs, which may seem high considering the Japanese had just suffered a major setback – these numbers would become an issue later in the year. Due to the expected increase in the number of RNZAF units operating in the Pacific, it was decided to establish No.1 Islands GHQ at Espiritu Santo during March 1943, being subordinate to COMAIRSOPAC[65] – Group Captain Wallingford was appointed AOC in April.

The first half of 1943 was a testing time for the RNZAF as they strove to meet growing demands. The radar unit from Tonga was sent up to Guadalcanal in February, and the need for a repair depot at Santo was also identified and plans put into action. The first of the Catalinas had arrived and No. 6 (FB) Squadron

[62] Alex Horn, *Wings Over the Pacific*. Random Century Group: Auckland, 1992, p.49.
[63] ANZ, 4: Officers Commanding RNZAF Groups.
[64] ANZ, 87/4/5 part 1: Deployment and Disposition of New Zealand Air Force.
[65] See appendix B for Command Structure of Pacific Forces, p.48.

had formed in Fiji in May,[66] prior to moving forward. Halsey had requested additional radar units, and plans were also put into action to meet this request.[67] The first of six Dakotas and nine Lodestars arrived in New Zealand and No. 40 Transport Squadron was formed at Whenuapai in June 1943 and immediately began work. The first RNZAF fighter aircraft in the combat area came with the arrival of 15 Squadron complete with new Kittyhawks on 26th April. The transit into theatre was a shambles with most of the equipment and ground-crew not arriving until the tour was almost over. Despite these problems, and with help from 3 Squadron and an American pursuit squadron, they started operations three days later with a routine patrol over Guadalcanal, Russell Islands and local shipping.[68] 14 Squadron were at Espiritu Santo working up prior to their moving into the combat area in June, and having learned from 15 Squadron they were better organised, starting operations the day after they arrived. This increased activity was supported by various servicing units and detachments of works personnel, who were toiling away in the background in extremely difficult conditions, keeping the aircraft flying and also providing facilities for the men to live and work in.

The campaign to take Guadalcanal lasted till February 1943, the Japanese losing around 30,000 men, 24 warships, and almost 700 aircraft and crews. The Americans lost 7000 men, over 600 aircraft, and 23 warships plus one Australian cruiser.[69] Following a short period to regroup, from mid-1943 the Allies conducted a series of operations aimed at consolidating control in the Central Solomons, prior to beginning a campaign aimed at bypassing and neutralising Rabaul.[70] Landings were made on New Georgia, Segi, Munda, Rendova Island, Vella Lavella, and at Mono and Stirling Islands; all supported by the RNZAF and some involving 3 NZ Division. By 9th October 1943 the last Japanese evacuated Kolombangara Island to the north of New Georgia, and the Central Solomons

[66] ANZ, 130/10/3 Plans: RNZAF Expansion Programme 1942/43.
[67] *NZAP 212: A Short History of the RNZAF*, RNZAF: Wellington, 2002, pp.7-12.
[68] Ross, p.181.
[69] Donald A. Yerxa, *Guadalcanal*, online.
[70] H.P. Willmott, p.123.

were clear of Japanese. In mid-1943 it was still MacArthur's intention to attack Rabaul by land. However, in July the JCS proposed that Rabaul merely be neutralised.[71] At the QUADRANT Conference held in Quebec during August it was confirmed that this would be the case. This decision marked the first official pronouncement of a policy bypassing strong centres of resistance, otherwise known as 'island-hopping', which would replace the hitherto conservative step-by-step method of operations.[72]

While the (BR) squadrons had exceeded all expectations, the first fighter deployment had not made the impact Isitt hoped for. Writing on 4th June 1943 Isitt remarked of 15 Squadron that, 'while their work has been good they have not done anything particularly outstanding'.[73] Isitt got his wish three days later when the squadron shot down four enemy aircraft for no loss,[74] which prompted him to write, 'I was glad that 15 Squadron did really get "blooded" before they left, and it gave them a good finish. They were unfortunate in a way in having been the pioneers'.[75] Isitt was probably referring to the close scrutiny they came under, as well as the lack of facilities and resources they had to contend with. On their second tour they were suitably battle-hardened to the point where the CO recommended shooting Japanese pilots who bailed out over their own territory, 'otherwise they will live to fight again and might shoot you down next time'.[76] On 11th June 1943 14 Squadron arrived to relieve 15 Squadron and on their first operation the next day shot down six aircraft; within a few more days they had shot down 15 enemy aircraft[77] for one loss. At the end of their tour on 25th July 1943 they had destroyed 22 Japanese aircraft, probably destroyed four more,

[71] Maurice Matloff, *United States Army in World War II: The War Department: Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare 1943-1944*, Office of the Chief of Military History-Department of the Army: Washington, 1959, p.206.
[72] Matloff, p.235.
[73] ANZ, 4: Officers Commanding RNZAF Groups.
[74] Chris Rudge, p.87.
[75] ANZ, 4: Officers Commanding RNZAF Groups.
[76] Wigram Museum Archives, 27/23/3 "Suggestions for Fighter Squadron Formations in the Solomons Area", 22 September 1943.
[77] Alex Horn, p.60.

and lost four aircraft and three pilots.[78] COMAIRSOPAC sent a message to the RNZAF CAS commending their performance, expressing admiration, and pride, in having them as comrades in arms.[79] Political nicety or not, this was an impressive display of competence for a first tour.

The Japanese pilots were initially well trained and experienced with around 500 flying hours, and while many had combat experience in China, the tactics they used there, did not sit well against organised and determined opposition in the Pacific, and this proved to be a major difference.[80] Responding to high Japanese losses during the Guadalcanal campaign, Admiral Yamamoto injected the elite aircrews of Carrier Divisions 1 and 2 into the fray during April 1943, bringing aircraft strength around Rabaul to nearly 700, just as RNZAF fighters were arriving. The demise of the Japanese aerial effort began in July when they fiercely opposed Allied landings on New Georgia, which unfortunately for them coincided with the introduction of the very capable Corsair and P-38 fighters by American squadrons.[81] And while the Japanese no-rotation policy for aircrew eventually took its toll on aircrew standards, it appears that for the first few months at least, the RNZAF faced the best the Japanese had. The Allies had a rotation policy for aircrew in place that saw them change every 6-12 weeks, depending on the types of operation and the situation at the time[82]. All sources seem to agree that this kept aircrew reasonably fresh, and also made combat experienced pilots available for a tour as an instructor if required.

The outstanding performance of 14 Squadron in particular was enabled in great part by the CO and one of his flight commanders being Battle of Britain veterans[83], having previously destroyed 20.5 enemy aircraft between them. There were dozens of pilots available who had flown in the Battle of Britain or the

[78] J.M.S.Ross, p.193.
[79] Alex Horn, p.164.
[80] Bergerud, p.327.
[81] Ibid, p.329.
[82] This period was extended by the RNZAF as 1944 progressed, due to there being no air opposition. Ground crew typically did at least a 12-month tour and this remained relatively constant.
[83] Pierard, personal interview.

European Theatre; Mike Herrick, Johnny Gibson and Roy Bush to name a few, and the Americans did not hesitate to use them to advantage. It was not unusual for such New Zealanders, regardless of rank, to act as strike leaders during joint air operations.[84] And while the Kittyhawks were at a disadvantage in a number of respects compared to the Japanese fighters, US intelligence reports acknowledged that the work they carried out was at least the equal of more modern American types.[85] The Americans flew mostly P-38 and F4U fighters whose performance was superior to the Kittyhawk's in every respect. This was compensated for, to a significant degree, by good tactics tailored to the aircraft, and robust flying discipline. Initially, the Americans refused to allow the Kittyhawks to fly over Rabaul, but having proved themselves time and time again elsewhere, they were reluctantly allowed to join the Americans on fighter sweeps. The RNZAF fighters quickly proved their worth and subsequently took part in all major operations against Rabaul and the surrounding airfields.

By the end of June 1943 Isitt was buoyed, and in light of the success of the Hudson operations, and at the request of his crews, he sought a more aggressive role, which he believed, 'would greatly boost the morale of our B.R. squadrons'. He saw the introduction of the more capable Ventura as supporting this desire. Isitt also remarked that the success of the fighter squadrons had initiated, 'a tremendous change of attitude…in the home-based squadrons, which, furthermore, changed their outlook on the P.40 completely'.[86] In July, 14 Squadron started bomber escort missions and because of the degraded performance of the Kittyhawk's Allison engine above 15,000 feet,[87] the New Zealanders were given the role of close escort. The bombers felt very comfortable being led by the New Zealanders[88] due to their superior flying discipline. One American SBD pilot remarked, 'They were fabulous people and top pilots…We had a lot of American pilots there too, but they'd be off chasing

[84] Pierard, personal interview.
[85] J.M.S.Ross, p.185.
[86] ANZ, 4: Officers Commanding RNZAF Groups.
[87] The engine only had a single-stage supercharger - New Zealand Fighter Pilots Museum, online.
[88] Pierard, personal interview.

Zeros in their Corsairs and P-38s. But the New Zealand pilots would stay right with us'.[89] This was amply demonstrated when two 16 Squadron pilots were awarded immediate American DFCs for driving off 10 Zeros attacking a damaged and straggling B-24 returning from a raid on Kahili on southern Bougainville.[90]

The American respect and trust in the RNZAF was demonstrated by requests for an increase to the deployment. In August 1943 COMSOPAC requested an additional fighter squadron, stating that, 'the retention of 3 VF squadrons in New Zealand was not justified'.[91] Despite one of the squadrons being little more than a 'paper' squadron between deployments, the War Cabinet, ever eager to please and demonstrate their commitment, approved the move of a second fighter squadron to the combat area. This led to the creation of the NZ Fighter Wing at Ondonga, RNZAF Station New Georgia, on 24th October 1943. In the following month the RNZAF station commander took over command of all fighter operations at Ondonga, which included US Army and Marine fighter units. This represents a strong statement of the confidence the US theatre commanders had in the ability of the RNZAF operational commanders. In a similar vein, COMAIRSOPAC, 'submitted…a strongly worded request for the temporary retention in the forward area of No. 3 Squadron', and also expressed a desire to employ 2 Squadron on offensive operations from Guadalcanal.[92] These requests were driven by the pressure being placed on air assets with the landings on Bougainville on 1st November 1943. Shortly after, those RNZAF (BR) squadrons equipped with the more capable Ventura were given an offensive role ranging as far as New Britain and New Ireland. In December, 6 (FB) Squadron had also deployed to Halavo Bay on Florida Island, engaged on long-range patrols and 'Dumbo'[93] missions recovering downed airmen. There were also various radar units operating from Norfolk Island in the south, to right in the centre of the

[89] Eric M. Bergerud, *Fire in the Sky: The Air War in the South Pacific*, Westview Press: Oxford, 2000, p.535.
[90] J.M.S.Ross, p.194.
[91] ANZ, 87/4/5 part 1: Deployment and Disposition of New Zealand Air Force.
[92] ANZ, 87/4/5 part 1.
[93] The PBY Catalina aircraft being affectionately likened to the flying elephant of Walt Disney fame.

combat area at Bougainville; No. 59 RU being the first RNZAF unit active on the island from 6th December. In January 1944 alone, the unit made 103 contacts resulting in 24 intercepts by American fighters.[94]

With the opening of airstrips on Bougainville, New Britain was now in reach of Allied fighters and the assault on Rabaul began in earnest on 17th December 1943; the RNZAF Fighter Wing taking part in every major attack on Rabaul through to the end of February 1944.[95] No Japanese aircraft reinforcements were made after December 1943, and following US carrier attacks on Truk during 17-18 February 1944, the remaining 120 aircraft on Rabaul were ordered to Truk. By the 20th February only around ten aircraft remained on Rabaul.[96] According to the Strategic Bombing Survey the Solomons Campaign had cost the Japanese 2935 aircraft and a similar number of crews.[97] The high attrition of aircrew was due to no organised rescue facilities being in place, unlike the Allies who would literally go to any lengths to rescue downed airmen. The losses suffered by the Japanese weakened all subsequent defensive efforts,[98] and the RNZAF had played a full and active part alongside its American counterparts.

Winnefeld and Johnson remark that everything in the theatre was used and useful, from long-range army bombers to navy dive-bombers to New Zealand fighters,[99] and that the campaign was the high-water mark of jointness and unity of effort in air operations until the Gulf War in 1991.[100] One might suggest that the Solomons Campaign was a more impressive achievement, given the opposing force was more or less equal in quality and quantity in the beginning, and that the outcome was never certain. Admiral McCain (COMAIRSOPAC) remarked to Isitt that, in his opinion, the most efficient and reliable squadrons in

[94] J.M.S.Ross, p.234.
[95] ANZ, 48: Assault on Rabaul 17 December 1943-29 February 1944.
[96] Naval Analysis Division, p.183.
[97] Ibid, p.160.
[98] Ibid.
[99] James A. Winnefeld and Dana J. Johnson, *Joint Air Operations: Pursuit of Unity in Command and Control, 1942-1991,* Arlife Publishing Ltd.: Shrewsbury, 1993, p.34.
[100] Ibid, p.33.

the Pacific were the New Zealand squadrons;[101] which Isitt attributed to superior selection and training. General Mitchell (COMAIRNORSOLS) wrote to Isitt of, 'quite a list of recommendations for DFCs and Air Medals', for New Zealand aircrew. He remarked, 'Never have I served with better. They have established an unbeatable reputation for daring and loyalty and have gone on with this business in a most inspiring, uncomplaining and determined manner. It is a source of deepest satisfaction for me to have had your squadrons attached to my command.'[102] This statement, and numerous others like it, are a matter of record, and open testament to the credibility of the RNZAF in the eyes of the American military commanders.

[101] ANZ, 87/4/5 part 1.
[102] ANZ, 9: United States Army and Air Force Officers.

CHAPTER 5
POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS – THE CANBERRA AGREEMENT AND MANPOWER

H.P. Willmott declares that War is a political phenomenon, and thus it follows that the determinants of war are political rather than physical[103]; this platitude is nevertheless appropriate in the case of the RNZAF during World War 2. Having 'fought' the great powers for equipment and the right to fight alongside the US, the RNZAF now faced further hurdles following the end of the Solomons Campaign. New Zealand's small population of only around 1.6m created two major problems. Firstly, New Zealand was a very small player who had previously looked to Great Britain for foreign policy guidance; but the war had changed things, and New Zealand was now determined to have a voice, particularly in the Pacific region. Secondly, with a policy of supporting a two-front war, while providing thousands of aircrew for the RAF and also striving for maximum produce output, manpower was always going to be an issue. As manpower was ultimately the limiting factor of any contribution – and New Zealand's 'voice' would ultimately be governed by its contribution, the two issues were inextricably linked.

Towards the end of 1942, the three New Zealand services had 153,600 men and 3,400 women in uniform;[104] the men representing nearly a third of the male labour force. During 1943 there were plans in place for expansion of the Air Force to 20 squadrons, and with 3 Division moving into the Pacific, a compromise would be necessary. Despite Fraser's increasing tendency to favour the Pacific theatre, Churchill was adamant that 2 Division should stay in North Africa. Consequently, between April and September 1943, 5331 men were recruited from the Army for Air Force service.[105] On 21 May the government had made

[103] H.P. Willmott, p.186.
[104] Keith Sinclair, p.235.
[105] J.M.S. Ross,p.288.

the decision to retain 2 Division in the Mediterranean theatre,[106] and a reduced 3 Division was retained in the interim. While this decision pleased the Americans and British, it did not please the Australians,[107] who had already withdrawn its three divisions from Europe and North Africa, and expected New Zealand to do the same. Despite reassurances to the Americans that manpower for the RNZAF in particular was not an issue,[108] by the end of the year the general situation was critical; possibly triggered by shortages for the lamb killing season. In January 1944, Nash wrote to Roosevelt spelling out New Zealand's problem and seeking guidance on where best to employ its manpower.[109] Churchill unsurprisingly favoured disbanding the Pacific Division,[110] and while Roosevelt suggested that New Zealand had a greater interest in the Pacific,[111] he was prepared to leave the matter to Churchill. By August 1944, 3 Division was withdrawn, and its men either directed into industry or reserved for reinforcement of the European Division.[112]

This was undoubtedly a difficult decision, and while it was the right one strategically, it was probably the wrong one politically. The Pacific Division was sacrificed in favour of the Air Force despite two good reasons not to. Firstly, the Solomons Campaign effectively ended in February 1944 and despite various efforts, no concrete plans for the RNZAF's continued use in an offensive role ever got close to materialising. Secondly, while the Americans had no need of additional air forces, they desperately needed amphibious forces, and 3 Division had become very efficient at amphibious operations having carried out landings and subsequently cleared Japanese forces from Vella Lavella, Treasury Islands and Green Islands. The Division had exceeded all expectations and had been

[106] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War 1939-1945, Volume II: Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945*, War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs: Wellington, 1949-1951, 1963, p.211.
[107] Brian Hewson, *Goliath's Apprentice: The Royal New Zealand Air Force and the United States in the Pacific War 1941-1945*, Canterbury University, 2000, p.96.
[108] ANZ, 130/10/3 Plans.
[109] *Documents, Volume II*, p.360, app.XI.
[110] M.P.Lissinton, p.65.
[111] *Documents, Volume II*, p.336.
[112] M.P.Lissinton, p.65.

selected by the Commanding General 1st Marine Amphibious Corps, ahead of available American and Australian divisions, for incorporation in his Corps for impending operations.[113] It is likely that 3 Division would have made a useful contribution in the Central Pacific had they been utilised. A possible explanation for this strategy lies in the overarching context of minimising cost. By maintaining the Air Force in the Pacific, the actual physical 'commitment' remained significant at around 20,000 personnel and around 400 aircraft. However, the nature of the conflict after February 1944 was relatively low-risk in terms of casualties, compared to the high risk of casualties if 3 Division had followed the Americans into the Central Pacific. Thus credibility was to be sustained through numbers rather than actions. In a war that still had months of bitter fighting ahead, the real risk was that the RNZAF's contribution would soon be forgotten.

New Zealand, along with Australia, had sought an increasing voice as the war had progressed, particularly in those decisions that directly affected them. Largely at their insistence, the Pacific War Council (PWC) had been established, holding its first Washington meeting in April 1942. The PWC though, was little more than a public relations exercise that never achieved the status hoped for; it never made decisions and had no influence on war strategy.[114] This was probably Roosevelt and Churchill's intention. Roosevelt wrote that the PWC gave him, 'a chance to keep everybody happy by telling stories and doing most of the talking'.[115] There had also been a series of summit meetings during 1943 from which Australia and New Zealand had been largely excluded from the decision making. Herbert Evatt, the ambitious Australian Minister for External Affairs, took exception to this, and in October 1943 invited New Zealand to discuss matters of mutual interest in any post-war Pacific settlement, which New Zealand accepted.[116] The meeting was given further impetus when at the December summit meeting in Cairo, the US, Great Britain, and China announced

[113] *Documents, Volume III,* p.412.
[114] Keith Sinclair, p.218.
[115] Robert Dallek, 1979, p.355.
[116] M.P.Lissington, pp.80-81.

their intentions for the Pacific; Australia and New Zealand knew nothing of this until it was released to the press. It wasn't so much the decisions made, more the process involved. This failure by America and Britain to consult fully on the future of the Pacific Islands with their allies, led to the signing of the Canberra Agreement in January 1944 that set out the objectives of the Dominions.

While the Agreement was well received in New Zealand, in Australia it was viewed as an affront to the US, being no more than a 'hands off' warning to the US in regard to the South West and South Pacific.[117] The reaction to the Canberra Agreement in the US varied from being viewed as realistic to outright hostile.[118] US Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, rejected the call for a conference on the Pacific's future as being a threat to the Allies' unity of effort. He also questioned the wisdom of a 'regional security' initiative before an international system was in place, i.e., the UN, as it might set a precedent and again cause discord. Clause 16 of the Agreement stipulated that the construction and use of bases in war time in no way formed a basis for territorial claims at the conclusion of hostilities – this appears to be clearly aimed at the US.[119] In April 1944, Fraser denounced a claim that the Canberra Agreement was directed against the US as 'stupid and untrue'.[120] Fraser was in a delicate position having already caused displeasure with Curtin, the Australian Prime Minister, for refusing to withdraw 2 Division when Australia withdrew its divisions. Signing the Canberra Agreement could have been Fraser's way of appeasing the Australians.

While Fraser reassured the US of its good intent, he reiterated that it was necessary to state clear declarations of policy at an early stage, while also making it clear that he saw no difficulty in negotiating American use of its bases on New Zealand controlled territory. Hull though, made it clear that he regarded the agreement as an affront and, '…now saw fit to disregard the contribution New

[117] M.P.Lissington, pp.88-89.
[118] Ibid, p.90.
[119] Ibid.
[120] James Thorn, *Peter Fraser: New Zealand's Wartime Prime Minister*, Odham's Press Ltd.: London, 1952, p.221.

Zealand and Australia were making in their attempt to gain a voice in the making of policies affecting their own future security…'.[121] Admiral King was equally dismayed and consequently refused the RNZAF a combat role in the Central Pacific Islands. Nash reported that King's views, '…are personal to him and are due to his strong resentment to the Article 26',[122] which declared an Australian and New Zealand interest in the Japanese mandates. However, at a later meeting between Nash and King, King agreed to put the question of employment of the RNZAF to the US CoS, and in July they agreed to an operational role in SWPAC, probably because they held Evatt responsible for the Agreement. But regardless of what the joint chiefs may have told New Zealand officials, in reality it is unlikely they would have risked upsetting King over a relatively minor matter at such a crucial time. Also, given MacArthur's indifference to Australian forces, it is likely he shared King's view; which may have manifested itself in the delayed hand over of NORSOLS to the RNZAF, which effectively kept them out of SWPAC and put them in limbo till the end of the war.

It is possible the Agreement provided a convenient 'excuse' to exclude both Australia and New Zealand from further offensive operations north of the equator. Bell[123] regards the American attitude as underlying a determination to monopolise the Pacific counter-offensive and post-war occupation and control of Japan. Curtin appears to have thought so too when he wrote to Churchill in August 1944 that, 'There is developing in America a hope that they will be able to say they won the Pacific War by themselves…, while the other allies…did very little towards recovering our lost property'.[124] Following the Canberra Agreement, American planners significantly reduced the role of ANZAC forces in the Pacific. For the RNZAF, this meant a secondary role engaged in garrison duties and suppression of isolated Japanese forces, which ultimately was of limited strategic importance.

[121] M.P.Lissington, p.95.
[122] *Vol.III*, pp.208-209.
[123] Roger J. Bell, *Unequal Allies: Australian-American Relations and the Pacific War*, UP: Melbourne, 1977, p.156.
[124] Christopher Thorne, p.479.

CHAPTER 6
DEPLOYMENT – THE SECOND HALF: MARCH 1944-AUGUST 1945 – LOOKING FOR A FIGHT

With the landings on Emirau and Manus Islands during February-March 1944, the isolation and neutralisation of Rabaul was complete. All that remained was to subdue the Japanese so as to render them incapable of mounting offensive action. At the end of February, No 1 Islands Group consisted of three (F) squadrons, three (BR) squadrons and one (FB) squadron. Towards the end of March this was further bolstered by the arrival at Bougainville of 25 Squadron flying Dauntless dive-bombers and 30 Squadron flying Avenger torpedo-bombers. The RNZAF were apparently reluctant to receive these aircraft as they considered additional types would further strain supply and training issues[125] – however, to have declined may have been perceived negatively by the Americans. Around this time the RNZAF was also introducing the Ventura patrol aircraft, and were preparing for the arrival of the Corsair to replace the war-weary Kittyhawks.

Meanwhile, the RNZAF fighters flew their last bomber escort mission on 6th March 1944, and three days later US bombers were attacking Rabaul unescorted.[126] Since there was no air opposition the Kittyhawks were fitted with bomb racks and assumed the fighter-bomber role. Rabaul was subjected to constant air attack and by May, 90% of the town had been destroyed.[127] Despite this onslaught the Japanese forces still possessed formidable AAA around Rabaul[128] and losses continued. On Bougainville, where the frontline only extended a few hundred yards around the airstrips, 25 and 30 Squadron were put to immediate action, having arrived during a heavy assault on the perimeter.

[125] Brian Hewson, pp.107-108.
[126] ANZ, 48: Assault on Rabaul 17 December 1943-29 February 1944.
[127] J.M.S. Ross, p.241.
[128] Flt Lts Pierard and Rabone, personal interview.

They attacked the Japanese the next day, the enemy being so close that their bombs were literally dropped in the circuit.[129] 30 Squadron attacked Kavieng airfield the following day, placing 22 bombs on the runway, effectively closing it down and attracting the personal congratulations of COMAIRSOLS.[130] This was an outstanding performance for only their second mission and reflected very favourably on the standard of their training. Subsequently both squadrons continued operations against Japanese positions around Rabaul and Bougainville, literally attacking anything that moved. They were withdrawn in May and 31 Squadron took their place carrying out similar missions, also taking on the novel role of 'crop-spraying' Japanese vegetable gardens with diesel. All three squadrons were disbanded on their return to New Zealand after only one tour each, supporting the view that the RNZAF was reluctant to operate additional types to little or no advantage over the capabilities of the Ventura and Corsair, which were appearing in increasing numbers.

Unfortunately, the increase in both capability and quantity coincided with an almost complete lack of hard military targets. During March 1944 the American heavy bombers had moved north because of this, and the JCS approved a paper formally liquidising most SOPAC forces. The entire 13th Air Force was handed over to MacArthur, and the RNZAF was mostly to be used on garrison duties.[131] Even the AOC Islands Group suggested there was no further need for additional fighters, but it was thought it would be bad for morale so the rotations continued.[132] Disbanding some of the squadrons would have relieved manpower issues, but it was considered that any reduction in combat forces would degrade New Zealand's position in post-war settlements. Apparently, at this stage, the fact of being there, was more important than what they did. There appeared to be three options for the future employment of the RNZAF. The favoured option was to follow Halsey into the Central Pacific, but this was a carrier war and there

[129] J.M.S. Ross, p.248.
[130] Ibid, p.250.
[131] J.L. Cate and W.F. Craven, p.574.
[132] J.M.S. Ross, p.259.

was no need for land-based aircraft. Secondly, they could transfer to SEAC with the British, but this would require lengthy re-equipping and training. The third, and most likely, was a transfer of those squadrons not on garrison duty to SWPAC, though even this posed difficulties as there were no logistics systems in place to support RNZAF aircraft types.[133]

Isitt, who was now CAS, wrote to Fraser on 5th April 1944, declaring that while it was logical that the RNZAF should join SWPAC, '…the experiences of the RAAF are not entirely happy and it is strongly felt that a still smaller RNZAF contingent would receive even less consideration…our policy should be directed towards remaining under American Naval Command in the Pacific'. He also reminded Fraser of the need to continue offensive operations, 'so that adequate representation is secured at the termination of hostilities.'[134] A few days later he wrote to Rear-Admiral Carney, Halsey's Chief of Staff, declaring, '…I have talked to the PM who agrees that an active role is essential for the…prestige of New Zealand'. There is perhaps a hint of desperation as he concludes, 'There are no strings on where they may be employed so long as there is something for them to fight'.[135] Isitt's pleadings were having no effect and he wrote, 'Our future employment in the Pacific has received a setback…it appears all they wish to offer us is garrison duty…I am protesting volubly'.[136] Despite growing uncertainty over the future employment of the RNZAF, Isitt's planning continued for expansion based around a '20 squadron plan'.[137] Isitt acknowledged that employment with Halsey was unlikely, and AVM Goddard, who was CAS prior to Isitt and who had now returned to the RAF with SEAC, had written to Isitt, 'that we will be much better to remain in the Pacific…(the RAF having a considerable backlog of pilots and aircrew)'.[138]

[133] ANZ, 81/4/2a part 3: New Zealand Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting Minutes.
[134] Ibid.
[135] ANZ, 9: United States Army and Air Force Officers.
[136] ANZ, 11: New Zealand Liaison Office, Melbourne.
[137] ANZ, 130/10/3 Plans.
[138] ANZ, 11: New Zealand Liaison Office, Melbourne.

By June 1944 SOPAC was considered non-operational, and the RNZAF lost a sympathetic ear when Admiral Halsey was reassigned to command the Third Fleet in the Central Pacific.[139] Soon after though, it was decided that seven squadrons not on garrison duty, were to be attached to SWPAC being spread amongst Bougainville, Emirau, Green Island, and Los Negros. By this time the RNZAF had 10 squadrons deployed and six in New Zealand. The intention was that when the Marines moved north, the RNZAF would take over responsibility for NORSOLS, and to this end the New Zealand Air Task Force (ZEAIRTAF) was formed on 1st September 1944. COMZEAIRTAF was supposed to assume command on 1st November, but due to continued delays, this did not happen until July 1945.

In the second half of 1944 the issue of manpower came to the public eye through the newspapers. The Herald was particularly critical; of a top-heavy, empire building air force,[140] which was achieving nothing of consequence. While it appears that the RNZAF was bigger than its task, there are perhaps mitigating circumstances; one operational and one political. Firstly, there was the possibility that the RNZAF would be allocated a further offensive role sometime in the future; though nothing concrete ever emerged apart from a belated move to Los Negros in June 1945 where the squadrons were told they might be re-equipping with Mustangs and moving to Borneo.[141] Secondly, the RNZAF presence was a counter to growing Australian forces in the region, who as well as having a strong presence throughout SWPAC, had also taken over from US Army units on Bougainville during December 1944. Thus New Zealand felt compelled to continue operating in the Pacific in an attempt to prevent complete Australian domination of the region after the war.[142]

[139] J.M.S.Ross, p.259.
[140] Brian Hewson, p.153.
[141] Pierard and Rabone, personal interview.
[142] Brian Hewson, p.208.

Throughout the second half of 1944, operations continued around Bougainville and the Bismarck Archipelago. During this period, and for the remainder of the war, there were no hard military targets of significant value. However, the American chiefs decreed that the 100,000 or so Japanese troops in 'bypassed' areas must be eliminated, as they felt it unwise to allow undefeated Japanese units to return home;[143] also conveniently occupying the RNZAF. Operations consisted mainly of routine patrols and strikes against ill-defined targets; often only consisting of a smoke marker dropped in the jungle by one of the RAAF army co-op squadrons operating from Bougainville – pilots often not knowing or seeing what they were attacking.[144] Later in the war, pilots would go an entire tour carrying out routine patrols and never seeing any Japanese or their equipment.[145] By the end of 1944 even Isitt was beginning to wane and feared he would lose some of his men to food production back in New Zealand.[146]

Regardless, at no time did those men in the front areas doubt they were doing a worthwhile job, by keeping the remaining Japanese forces subdued, and the hope remained for a further offensive role.[147] It was not to be though, and for the remainder of the war ZEAIRTAF was limited to operating on the peripherals of SWPAC in support of US, and then Australian forces in the Northern Solomons. No 1 Islands Group on Guadalcanal was employed on garrison duties that involved little more than uneventful routine patrols. When the Japanese surrendered on 15th August 1945 there were around 7,000 men stationed in the Pacific. They supported nine fighter squadrons, two bomber-reconnaissance squadrons, and two flying boat squadrons[148]; there were six squadrons in New Zealand for rotation[149]. Thus as the war ended the RNZAF remained one short of the elusive 'twenty squadron plan'.

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[143] Brian Hewson, p.189.
[144] Rabone, personal interview.
[145] Pierard, personal interview.
[146] ANZ, 9: United States Army and Air Force Officers.
[147] Pierard and Rabone, personal interview.
[148] J.M.S. Ross, p.310.
[149] There were around double the number of personnel in New Zealand directly supporting the deployment as well as numbers 40 and 41 Transport Squadrons.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

At the time Japan entered the war the RNZAF was in reasonable shape to face any 'likely' threat, which realistically was only from isolated submarines and surface raiders. Consequently, the lack of fighters was never the major issue it was made out to be, and the 36 Hudsons in the country were a useful deterrent. However, what threat there was served as a useful lever for demanding more aircraft. When New Zealand became part of SOPAC it appears that America never really considered New Zealand as being anything more than a launch-pad for a future offensive, and held no expectations for a New Zealand combat role. But with the remote threat of invasion receding ever further, Fraser sought a combat role from the Americans so as to give voice to New Zealand in any post-war settlement. But with commitments elsewhere, New Zealand's one million or so labour force was always going to be hard-pressed. Nevertheless, Fraser decided on a combat role for the RNZAF, and vigorously sought and acquired a combat capability.

With the American build up to the offensive against Guadalcanal, New Zealand received a modest request for six patrol aircraft to be based in New Caledonia – the American's perhaps 'testing the water'. New Zealand responded immediately and despite this initial deployment being an improvised affair, the Hudsons performed their task well and set a solid foundation for the reputation of the RNZAF. The successful conclusion of this first deployment was vital to establishing credibility and building trust with the Americans. It required a clear demonstration of commitment, reliability and competence, and that this was the case, even at this early stage, was apparent. The Americans demonstrated trust by moving 3 Squadron up to Guadalcanal in November 1942, while the battle for the island was still in doubt. And while the Hudsons were primarily engaged with routine patrolling in search of Japanese shipping, the value of this tedious but often dangerous work should not be underestimated. Anti-shipping strikes against merchant vessels were vital to the war of attrition, the aim being strategic

in that losses should exceed ships being built thus preventing exploitation of the new empire.[150] With Europe remaining the focus of the Americans there were never enough aircraft, and with the first RNZAF deployments having established credibility, their involvement grew. The Kittyhawk squadrons began deploying to the combat area in April 1943, and soon established a reputation as tenacious and disciplined fighters. 1943 also saw more squadrons formed and requests for extensions to deployments, as well as a more aggressive role being assigned.

Every RNZAF deployment during 1943 was at the request of COMSOPAC, and every task was met and performed to the highest standard, attracting many favourable comments from the American commanders. From December 1943 to February 1944, the RNZAF fighters were involved in every major attack made on Rabaul. Faced with overwhelming air supremacy, virtually all Japanese aircraft were withdrawn from the Solomons/Bismarck region by the third week of February. Effectively, the Solomons Campaign was over, and all that remained was to keep the remaining Japanese ground forces subdued. Consequently, RNZAF fighters switched to the fighter-bomber role, but by mid-1944 hard targets were few and far between. Despite this the RNZAF continued to grow, though in the latter stages a pilot might go an entire tour without any contact with the enemy. Criticism at home was also mounting over the size of the deployment, in the belief that it was contributing little to the war. Credibility at home was eroded by this, and during the last 12 months of the war it appears the Americans had virtually lost interest in what the RNZAF was doing. One last hope was that the RNZAF fighter squadrons would re-equip and move up to Borneo, but the sudden end of the war finally ended speculation.

During 1943, New Zealand had become increasingly concerned over the lack of consultation by the major powers in decisions that affected New Zealand. And while New Zealand was content to accept almost unquestioning American military leadership in the Pacific, it was not prepared to accept American

[150] J.L. Cate and W.F. Craven, p.xv.

domination of the Pacific post-war.[151] This led to the Canberra Agreement being signed in concert with Australia in January 1944. This agreement, which sought to minimise the post-war American presence south of the Equator, while encouraging it to the north,[152] was not greeted kindly by the Americans. This led to Admiral King declaring there would be no further role for New Zealand in future offensive action against the Japanese, and this proved to be the case. The Agreement was ill-timed and gave the Americans an excuse to act unilaterally; which many authors believe was always their intention, and the author of this essay agrees. Manpower issues were also critical and this resulted in 3 Division being disbanded in favour of retaining, and even expanding the Air Force. This maintained a physically significant commitment, while also minimising risk. The belief being that it continued to contribute to New Zealand's desire for post-war influence. By this stage though, the Pacific War was rapidly leaving the RNZAF behind, despite Isitt's best efforts.

During the final phases of the Pacific War the US successfully monopolised military control of the counter-offensive, and unilaterally determined all major aspects of the surrender and post-war control and occupation policy in Japan.[153] Whether New Zealand might have been involved in the final offensive had they not signed the Canberra agreement would require more research beyond the scope of this essay. It is apparent though, that senior American officials did cite the Agreement as a reason for diminishing New Zealand's contribution to further offensive operations. Regardless, the evidence suggests that the RNZAF deployment provided a significant and valued contribution to the American campaign in the South Pacific, at the time of greatest need. The commitment of resources saw 26 operational squadrons deployed at various times, supported by around 20,000 personnel. This provided a solid foundation for credibility, especially taking into account New Zealand's relative size and manpower shortage. The RNZAF also established reliability, by meeting all requests for

[151] M.P.Lissington, p.98.
[152] John Robertson, p.163.
[153] Roger J. Bell, p.156.

deployments in a timely manner, some at very short notice. And while there were occasional problems, these were quickly overcome by a unity of effort and purpose by both fellow RNZAF units, and the Americans.

On operations, the RNZAF performed competently and professionally, probably being superior in some ways to their American counterparts, particularly in the areas of flying discipline, teamwork, and serviceability. That New Zealand sustained its commitment for over three years while actively pursuing an expanded offensive role throughout, demonstrated its willingness to pay the price of credibility on the international stage. And while many of the operations in the last year or so were 'merely' mopping up operations of limited strategic significance, the men carrying out these operations never doubted their worth, having long ago cast aside the notion of having to prove themselves. Ultimately, it was political events that determined the abbreviated nature of RNZAF offensive operations. It was also those same political events that prevented the government from being able to capitalise on the RNZAF's contribution, but that in no way reflects on the value of that contribution. The deployment to the Pacific established the RNZAF as a credible combat force in the eyes of the Americans. The RNZAF contribution nurtured the NZ-US relationship for 40 years, bringing prestige to New Zealand that still resides with the survivors of that era to the present day.

Glossary

AAA	Anti Aircraft Artillery
ANZAC	Australia and New Zealand (forces)
AOC	Air Officer Commanding
AVM	Air Vice Marshal
B-17	Boeing Flying Fortress (heavy bomber)
B-24	Consolidated Liberator (heavy bomber)
B-25	Mitchell (medium bomber)
B-26	Martin Marauder (medium bomber)
(BR)	Bomber Reconnaissance
C-47	Douglas Dakota (transport aircraft)
C-60	Lockheed Lodestar (transport aircraft)
CAS	Chief of Air Staff
CATP	Commonwealth Air Training Plan
CCS	Combined Chiefs of Staff (UK and US)
COMAIRNORSOLS	Commander Air Northern Solomons
COMAIRSOLS	Commander Air Solomons
COMAIRSOPAC	Commander Air SOPAC
COMGENSOPAC	Commanding General SOPAC
COMSOPAC	Commander SOPAC
COMZEAIRTAF	Commander ZEAIRTAF
CoS	Chiefs of Staff
DB	Dive Bomber
DFC	Distinguished Flying Cross
(F)	Fighter
(FB)	Flying Boat
F4U	Corsair (fighter aircraft)
GCI	Ground Controlled Interception (radar guidance)
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff (US)
NZAF	New Zealand Air Force (Territorial)
NZLO	New Zealand Liaison Officer
NZPAF	New Zealand Permanent Air Force
OTU	Operational Training Unit
P-38	Lockheed Lightning (fighter aircraft)

P-40	Curtiss Kittyhawk (fighter aircraft)
PBO	Lockheed Hudson (patrol aircraft)
PBY	Consolidated Catalina (flying boat)
PV-1 and -2	Lockheed Ventura (patrol aircraft)
PWC	Pacific War Council
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAF	Royal Air Force
RD	Repair Depot
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RN	Royal Navy
RNAS	Royal Naval Air Service
RNZAF	Royal New Zealand Air Force
RU	Radar Unit
SBD	Douglas Dauntless (dive bomber)
SEAC	South East Asia Command (theatre of operations)
SOPAC	South Pacific (theatre of operations)
SWPAC	South West Pacific (theatre of operations)
TBF	Grumman Avenger (torpedo bomber)
USAAC	United States Army Air Corps
USMC	United States Marine Corps
VF	Fighter Squadron (US Navy)
USN	United States Navy
ZEAIRTAF	New Zealand Air Task Force

Appendix A

RNZAF deployments to the Pacific Theatre July 1942 – August 1945[154]

No. 1 (BR) Squadron

Aircraft: Hudson, 1941–43; Ventura, 1943–45.

Guadalcanal	October–November 1943
	August–October 1944
	March–May 1945
New Georgia	November 1943–February 1944
Green Island	October 1944–January 1945
Emirau	May–June 1945

No. 2 (BR) Squadron

Aircraft: Hudson, 1941–43; Ventura, 1943–45.

Santo	November 1943–February 1944
Guadalcanal	February 1944 and November 1944–January 1945
New Georgia	February–April 1944
Bougainville	April–May 1944
Green Island	January–March 1945
Jacquinot Bay	June–September 1945

No. 3 (BR) Squadron

Aircraft: Hudson, 1942–44; Ventura, 1944–45.

Santo	October–November 1942
	October 1943–January 1944
	May–July 1944
Guadalcanal	November 1942–October 1943
	July–August 1944

[154] J. M. S. Ross, (NZETC, Victoria University, Wellington).

	February–March 1945
Bougainville	August–October 1944
Emirau	October–November 1944
Green Island	March–June 1945

No. 4 (BR) Squadron

Aircraft: Hudsons, 1941–43; Venturas, 1943–45.

Fiji	October 1940–November 1944
Emirau	November 1944–February 1945
Guadalcanal	May–June 1945
Emirau	June–July 1945
Los Negros	July–September 1945

No. 5 (FB) Squadron

Aircraft: Catalina.

Fiji	August–October 1944
Santo	October 1944–October 1945

No. 6 (FB) Squadron

Aircraft: Catalina.

Fiji	March–October 1943
Santo	October–December 1943
Halavo Bay	December 1943–September 1945

No. 8 (BR) Squadron

Aircraft: Ventura.

Fiji	November–December 1944
Guadalcanal	January–February 1945
Emirau	February–March 1945

No. 9 (BR) Squadron

Aircraft: Hudson, 1942–43; Ventura, 1943–45.

New Caledonia	July 1942–March 1943
Santo	March–October 1943 and February–May 1944
Bougainville	May–August 1944
Fiji	January–March 1945
Emirau	March–May 1945

No. 14 (F) Squadron

Aircraft: Kittyhawk, 1942–44; Corsair, 1944–45.

Santo	April–June 1943
	October–November 1943
	November–December 1944
	March 1945
Guadalcanal	June–July 1943
	February 1944
	June 1944
New Georgia	November–December 1943
Bougainville	February–March 1944
	June–August 1944
	April–May 1945
Green Island	December 1944–January 1945
Emirau	July–October 1945

No. 15 (F) Squadron

Aircraft: Kittyhawk, 1942–44; Corsair, 1944–45.

Tonga	October 1942–March 1943
Guadalcanal	April–June 1943
	September–October 1943
	May–June 1944
New Georgia	October–November 1943
	December 1943–January 1944
Santo	September–October 1944
	January–February 1945

Bougainville	June–July 1944
	November–December 1944
	June–September 1945
Green Island	February–April 1945

No. 16 (F) Squadron

Aircraft: Kittyhawk, 1942–44; Corsair, 1944–45.

Santo	June–July 1943
	November 1943–July 1944
	April 1945
Guadalcanal	July–September 1943
	March 1944
	July–August 1944
	November–December 1944
New Georgia	November 1943–January 1944
Bougainville	March–May 1944
	August–September 1944
	April–June 1945
Green Island	December 1944–February 1945
Jacquinot Bay	August–October 1945

No. 17 (F) Squadron

Aircraft: Kittyhawk, 1942–44; Corsair, 1944–45.

Santo	July–September 1943
	December 1943
	August 1944
	January 1945
Guadalcanal	September–October 1943
	April 1944
	August–September 1944
New Georgia	January 1943–January 1944
Bougainville	January 1944
	April–June 1944
	September–November 1944
Green Island	January–March 1945
Los Negros	May–September 1945

No. 18 (F) Squadron

Aircraft: Kittyhawk, 1943–44; Corsair, 1944–45.

Santo	September–October 1943
	January 1944
	August–September 1944
New Georgia	October–November 1943
Guadalcanal	May–June 1944
	September–November 1944
	January–February 1945
Bougainville	January–March 1944
	June–July 1944
	February–April 1945
	June–October 1945
Green Island	November–December 1944

No. 19 (F) Squadron

Aircraft: Kittyhawk, 1943–44; Corsair, 1944–45.

Guadalcanal	February–March 1944
	June–July 1944
	October–November 1944
Bougainville	March–April 1944
	July–August 1944
Emirau	November 1944–December 1945
Santo	February–March 1945
Los Negros	March–May 1945
Jacquinot Bay	June–October 1945

No. 20 (F) Squadron

Aircraft: Kittyhawk, 1944; Corsair, 1944–45.

Guadalcanal	April–May 1944
	September–October 1944
Bougainville	May–June 1944
	January–April 1945
Santo	August–September 1944

	January 1945
Green Island	October–November 1944
Jacquinot Bay	May–August 1945

No. 21 (F) Squadron

Aircraft: Corsair.

Guadalcanal	June–July 1944
	November–December 1944
Bougainville	July–September 1944
	December 1944–February 1945
Green Island	April–May 1945
Jacquinot Bay	May–July 1945

No. 22 (F) Squadron

Aircraft: Corsair.

Santo	August 1944
	December 1944–January 1945
Guadalcanal	August–September 1944
Bougainville	September–November 1944
	April–July 1945
Emirau	January–March 1945

No. 23 (F) Squadron

Aircraft: Corsair.

Santo	September–October 1944
Los Negros	November–December 1944
Guadalcanal	February–March 1945
Emirau	March–May 1945
Bougainville	June–October 1945

No. 24 (F) Squadron

Aircraft: Corsair.

Santo	October–December 1945
	March 1945
Bougainville	December 1944–January 1945
	July–October 1945
Green Island	March–May 1945

No. 25 Dive Bomber Squadron

Aircraft: Dauntless.

Santo	January–March 1944
Bougainville	March–May 1944

No. 25 (F) Squadron

Aircraft: Corsair.

Santo	December 1944
Guadalcanal	December 1944–January 1945
Los Negros	January–February 1945
Emirau	May–July 1945

No. 26 (F) Squadron

Aircraft: Corsair.

Guadalcanal	March–April 1945
Bougainville	April–June 1945

No. 30 Dive Bomber Squadron

Aircraft: Avenger.

Santo	February–March 1944
Bougainville	March–May 1944

No. 31 dive bomber Squadron

Aircraft: Avenger.

Bougainville May–July 1944

No. 40 Transport Squadron

Aircraft: Hudson, Lodestar, Dakota.

Based at Whenuapai throughout.

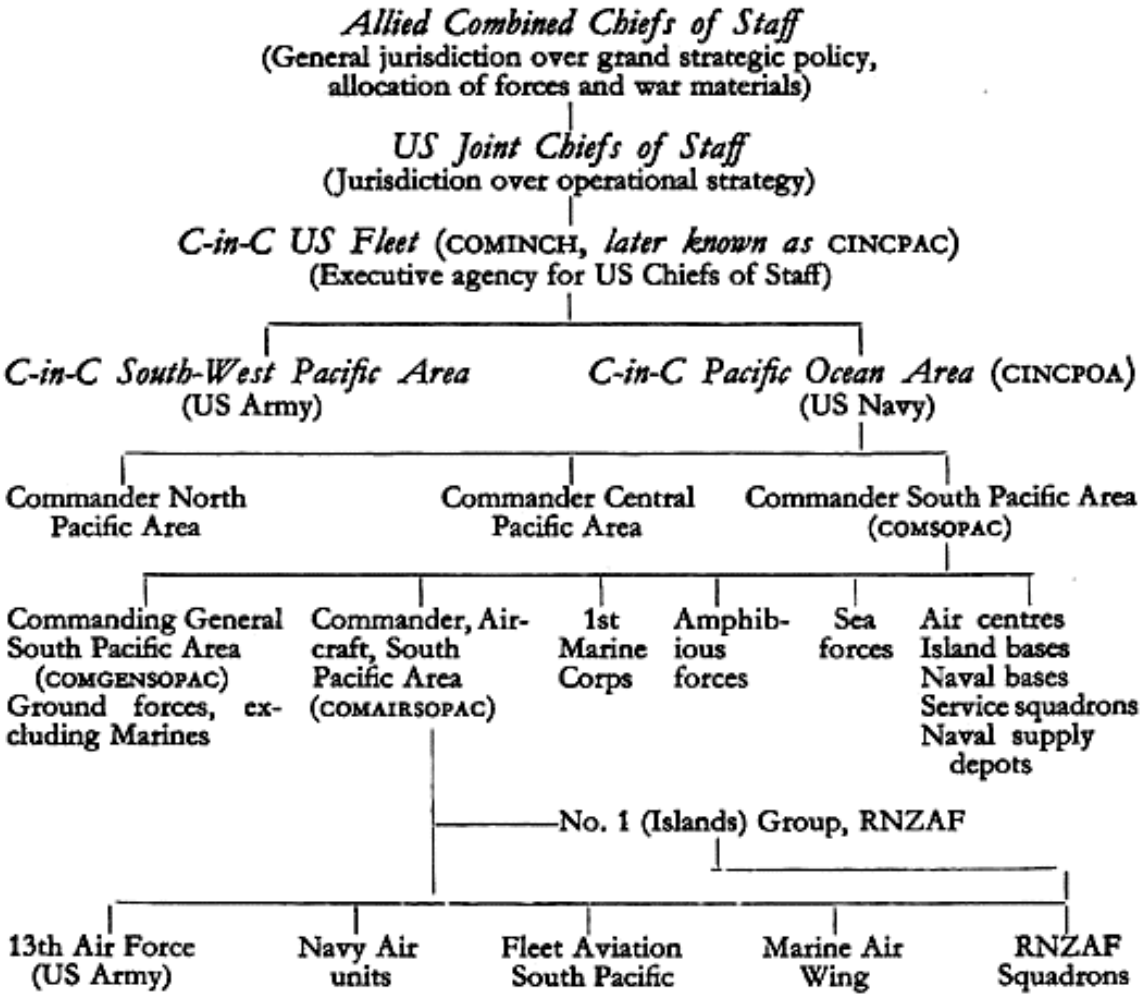
No. 41 Transport Squadron

Aircraft: Hudson, Lodestar, Dakota.

Based at Whenuapai throughout.

Appendix B

SOPAC Command Structure from March 1943



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Flt Lt Anthony 'Tony' Pierard, DFC, mid, interviewed 15Jun07, Palmerston North. Flew Kittyhawks and Corsairs during six operational tours with 15, 16, 17, and 20 squadrons at Guadalcanal, New Georgia, Bougainville, Green Island, and Los Negros.

Flt Lt Vincent Dudley Rabone, interviewed 30May07, Palmerston North. Flew Corsairs during three operational tours with 24 squadron at Bougainville and Green Island.

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