

REPORT BY THE CHIEF OF THE AIR STAFF FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31st MARCH, 1938.

The Hon. the MINISTER OF DEFENCE,

I have the honour to submit the following report on the Royal New Zealand Air Force for the period 1st April, 1937, to 31st March, 1938.

The year under review saw a notable advance in the administration of aviation in the Dominion by the passing of the Air Department Act and the Air Force Act. The former established a Department to administer service and civil aviation, and charged it with the duty of advising the Government on all matters affecting aviation that might from time to time be referred to it. The Air Department was organized during the year and has successfully linked up the activities of the two branches of aviation, thus ensuring that there shall be no overlapping in the many spheres of common interest.

The Air Force Act gave power to raise and maintain an Air Force for the defence of New Zealand, and organized it into three sections—the Regular Air Force, the Air Force Reserve, and the Territorial Air Force. In the following paragraphs I have indicated briefly the purpose for which each section is required, the strength which has been approved, and the progress which has been made during the twelve months under review in building up the Force towards its final strength.

THE REGULAR AIR FORCE.

The strength of the Regular Air Force under the approved programme will be in the region of 100 officers and 900 airmen who are required to man two regular squadrons: a Flying Training School; a depot for the storage and repair of equipment; and also to act as instructors for the Territorial Air Force and the Reserve.

The two Regular Squadrons will be located respectively at Ohakea (near Bulls) and in the Auckland district. The site for the aerodrome at Ohakea has been acquired and construction commenced, whilst work on the Auckland site will commence shortly.

The Flying Training School has been established at Wigram Aerodrome, Christchurch, and is training pilots both for the Royal New Zealand Air Force and for the Royal Air Force. Its capacity is forty-eight pilots a year in two courses of five and a half months each. The school made good progress throughout the year and achieved satisfactory results, in spite of handicaps due to shortage of experienced instructors and lack of certain specialized equipment. These deficiencies were inevitable in the circumstances, but they are now being remedied.

The Stores and Repair Depot is being established at Hobsonville by the enlargement of the existing station. The repair of air equipment calls for a very high standard of engineering skill and experience, and modern workshop facilities. Suitable workshops will be erected and also buildings for the storage of the necessary reserves of equipment. In the meantime the existing facilities of the station are being used to the fullest extent in training the personnel who will be required for the maintenance of aircraft. Although the request for recruits has met with a very satisfactory response both as regards quality and numbers, much further training is necessary, even for those who have already had experience as mechanics, before they are fit to undertake the responsibilities of aircraft maintenance.

THE AIR FORCE RESERVE.

Trained reserves are an essential element in a fighting force, for without them the effort in war will dwindle owing to the inability to replace casualties, and it will also be impossible to bring about that greater effort which will inevitably be called for. Reserves are normally built up over a number of years from the personnel who serve a limited time in the force and on leaving undertake reserve service. In a newly raised force, however, some special measures are necessary, and the form which these should take has been under constant review during the year. A start has been made with the organization of a Reserve of Pilots. By an agreement with the Royal New Zealand Aero Club and its constituent clubs 100 selected candidates who are medically fit and who undertake to serve in the Air Force in an emergency will be trained each year. These pilots, although only accustomed to light aeroplanes, would be ready to proceed to further training on service types of aircraft should the need arise. Their initial instruction in peace will therefore materially shorten the time required in war to turn out trained pilots. In addition to the scheme for a Civil Reserve of Pilots outlined above, a few vacancies are being kept in each course at Wigram for candidates who on completion of their training pass immediately to the reserve. This provides a favourable opportunity for those who wish to take up commercial flying as a career.

The manner in which a reserve of mechanics and other tradesmen required for the maintenance of Air Force equipment can best be obtained has been investigated, but owing to the more immediate problems associated with the Regular and Territorial Squadrons it was impossible to launch the scheme during the year.

THE TERRITORIAL AIR FORCE.

In October, 1937, authority was given to raise a Territorial Squadron at Wellington, and this authority was subsequently extended to include further squadrons at Auckland, Christchurch, and Dunedin.