Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.
Sustained Effort:

The Life of Sir Leonard Isitt

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
In Defence Studies
at Massey University, Palmerston North New Zealand.

Devon Sutcliffe
2011
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the life of Sir Leonard Isitt, and his contribution to New Zealand aviation, first from a service perspective, and then considers his involvement with commercial aviation. Isitt commenced his military career as a foot soldier, serving first in Egypt during 1915, and then on the Somme, where he was seriously wounded in September 1916. While convalescing he arranged a transfer to the Royal Flying Corps, where he trained as a pilot, before undertaking two tours of duty on the Western Front. After the War Isitt remained in the United Kingdom undertaking various courses, before returning in late 1919 to join the embryo New Zealand Air Force. He became the first Commanding Officer at Wigram, and then took command of the operational station at Hobsonville. When the Royal New Zealand Air Force was created in 1937, he became the first Air Member for Personnel on the Air Board, and oversaw the build-up of personnel in anticipation of the Second World War. With the declaration of war, Isitt was posted to Canada to monitor New Zealand’s contribution to the Empire Air Training Scheme, and was subsequently posted to Washington and London before returning to New Zealand as Deputy Chief of the Air Staff in early 1943. In mid-1943 he was appointed Chief of the Air Staff, the first New Zealander to hold this position, and saw the RNZAF build its strength to 20 active squadrons, equipped with over 1300 aircraft and supported by 45,000 staff. At the end of the War, Isitt was chosen to sign the Japanese Surrender Document on behalf of New Zealand at a ceremony on USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay. Isitt was knighted in 1946 and retired from the RNZAF to become Chairman of Directors of the nationalised airline New Zealand National Airways Corporation. He also became Chairman of Tasman Empire Airways Ltd and served as New Zealand nominee on the Board of British Commonwealth Airways Ltd.

Isitt finally retired in 1963, after spending over forty years in the forefront of New Zealand aviation, and during this period arguably had a greater influence in this sector than any other person.
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Professor Glyn Harper and Dr John Tonkin-Covell, my doctoral supervisors for their encouragement and advice; the staff at Archives New Zealand; the staff at the Defence Library; the staff at Alexander Turnbull Library; the staff at the RNZAF Museum; John Crawford of the NZ Defence Force; Peter Thodey; Errol Martyn; Peter Aimer; Maurice Clarke; Paul Lumsden; above all to my wife Eleanor.

Devon Sutcliffe
Wellington
31 March 2011
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 1: Early Years 1891-1917 ........................................................................... 16

Chapter 2: War in the Air 1917-1919 ................................................................. 39

Chapter 3: New Zealand and Abroad 1919-1929 .............................................. 60

Chapter 4: A New Service and the Coming of War - 1930’s .......................... 86

Chapter 5: Service Abroad 1939-1943 ............................................................... 107

Chapter 6: Chief of the Air Staff 1943-1944 ...................................................... 155

Chapter 7: Difficulties Arise 1944 ....................................................................... 206

Chapter 8: Under Attack 1944 .............................................................................. 237

Chapter 9: War’s End 1945 .................................................................................. 295

Chapter 10: Aftermath of War 1945-1946 ......................................................... 331

Chapter 11: Post-War 1946-1976 ......................................................................... 387

Conclusion ................................................................................................................... 443

Appendix A: Glossary. ...................................................................................... 459

Appendix B: Isitt’s 1926-27 United Kingdom Itinerary ........................................ 464

Appendix C: Isitt’s Award Citations. ................................................................. 466

Appendix D: RNZAF Aircraft on Charge 1943-46............................................. 468

Appendix E: Japanese Surrender Document ..................................................... 469

Appendix F: Isitt’s Victory Claim ......................................................................... 471

Bibliography ............................................................................................................. 472
List of Maps and Illustrations

MAPS

Mersa Matruh 1915 ................................................................. 27
The Somme - Battle of Flers-Courcelette September 1916 ............... 34
RFC/RAF Airfields - France and Belgium 1917-18 .......................... 59
Principal RNZAF Locations 1939-45 ...................................... 153
Solomons Campaign ............................................................. 154

Photographs

Frontispiece ........................................................................ IV
Isitt in Relay Team; Territorial Service ................................. 19-20
Rifle Brigade Sergeants; Studio Portrait .............................. 33
Studio Portrait; Family Album ............................................. 37-38
RE8 Group; DH9 Group ...................................................... 58
Refresher Courses ................................................................ 63
Venice Flight to view Schneider Trophy Contest ..................... 80-81
Isitt at Hobsonville; Cutty Sark ........................................... 91-92
Isitt with Prime Minister; Wings Parade .............................. 119-120
Flag Day ............................................................................. 139
Isitt in Islands with Wilkes; and dugout canoe .................... 158-159
Isitt with Elsie and Annette; with Nina ................................. 162-163
Isitt with Halsey and Buckley ............................................. 170
Isitt with Haldane; Isitt at Desk .......................................... 176
Isitt at Desk ....................................................................... 182
Flying to Surrender Ceremony ........................................... 333
Surrender Ceremony ........................................................... 363
Isitt signing Surrender Document ......................................... 364
Junior Commander Dorothy Cranstone .................................. 366
Isitt with Mountbattens and Duke of Edinburgh .................. 392-393
Isitt with fish trophies; and Surrender Document .................. 438-439
Isitt at last public engagement; funeral Gun Carriage ............. 441-442