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Sustained Effort:
The Life of Sir Leonard Isitt

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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.

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Devon Sutcliffe
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Sir Leonard Isitt (RNZAF Museum)

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Introduction

On 29 August 1945, an Allied fleet of more than 150 vessels gathered in Tokyo Bay. This fleet was one of the most powerful that had ever been assembled at one anchorage as a demonstration of Allied might, and had a primary role, in addition to landing occupying troops, of conveying and supporting Allied representatives of various nations who were to sign a Surrender Document signifying the end of the Second World War .¹

After a number of delays, caused by details in the surrender plan which had to be worked through, the actual Surrender Ceremony took place on 2 September 1945, on the quarterdeck of the battleship USS Missouri. By 8.15 a.m. United States Naval and Army personnel, together with Allied representatives had assembled, and half an hour later the Supreme Commander of Allied Powers (General Douglas MacArthur) came on board. Immediately after this, the four Japanese envoys arrived and were brought on deck. General MacArthur commenced proceedings with a speech, and then he called upon the Japanese representatives to sign the Instrument of Surrender. After their signing, MacArthur signed the document himself, and then he invited the various Allied Service Chiefs to sign on behalf of their respective countries. First to sign was Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, on behalf of the United States of America. He was followed by Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser on behalf of Great Britain, and General Thomas Blamey (Australia), then representatives of France, Canada, the Netherlands, the Soviet Union and China. Last to sign was Air Vice Marshal L.M. Isitt, who represented New

¹ John Costello, *The Pacific War 1941-1945*, New York: Quill, 1982, pp. 598-601.

Zealand. The whole ceremony was short, concluding by 9.30 a.m., but it was most impressive to the participants, as well as being of the utmost significance, as it signalled the official termination of the Second World War.²

Air Vice Marshal Leonard Isitt, Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) and Chief of the Air Staff (CAS), had been chosen by the New Zealand War Cabinet to represent New Zealand at the surrender Ceremony. There were two key reasons for this choice. First, the RNZAF made a major New Zealand contribution to the Pacific War against Japan. At its peak 20 active squadrons were in operation, manned overseas by some 7000 service personnel. The RNZAF also operated continuously overseas from December 1942 until the end of the war. By comparison, the 3rd Division of the New Zealand Army had a more limited role, being deployed actively in the Pacific only from November 1943 until September 1944. The Navy had played an active role from September 1939, first as the New Zealand Division of the Royal Navy until September 1941, and then as the Royal New Zealand Navy, but had a lesser presence than the RNZAF. Second, Isitt had been CAS since June 1943, and had overseen the development of the RNZAF into a smoothly operating organisation capable of making a positive contribution to the Allied cause. Isitt also had the confidence of the New Zealand Government, and his choice as Surrender Document signatory was a reflection of the status of the RNZAF and Isitt himself at that time. It was

² Isitt, *Visit to Japan*, Thodey Papers.

also a highpoint in Isitt's service career which had spanned some forty years since his enlistment in the Army in 1915.

In the history of New Zealand aviation there have been many individuals who have made their mark, and will be remembered for their achievements. Very often these achievements were transitory or isolated, but in the years from 1920-1963 there was one man who contributed in greater depth and with more impact than any other person to the development of New Zealand aviation. This man was Leonard Monk Isitt. During the period 1920-1946, his involvement was predominantly with service aviation, culminating with his rising to be Chief of the Air Staff in the RNZAF from mid-1943, but a significant proportion of his inter-war duties were devoted to civil aviation, encompassing matters as diverse as the establishment of aerodromes and overseeing the expanding aero club movement. In the period 1946-1963, following his retirement from the RNZAF, Isitt's interests turned to commercial aviation, with his serving on the boards of the major airlines operating in and from New Zealand; the New Zealand National Airways Corporation (NAC), Tasman Empire Airways Ltd (TEAL), and British Commonwealth Pacific Airlines (BCPA).

This thesis is an examination of Isitt's life and his contribution to New Zealand aviation. It endeavours to answer four key questions. These are: Why was Isitt chosen as the first New Zealand CAS?; How well did he perform in this role?; Why was Isitt chosen to represent the New Zealand

Government's interests in NAC, TEAL and BCPA?; How effectively did he carry out this task?

The role of the biographer is a difficult one, particularly when the subject of the biography has been dead for over forty years, and most of his contemporaries have also died. Even when the biographer knows his subject personally, there can be major problems in attempting to complete an objective study. A recent biographer of the writer Roald Dahl highlighted these difficulties in his effort to offer a 'warts and all' analysis.³ He felt that 'somebody who had not met him would find it almost impossible to put together all the disparate pieces of the jigsaw which made up his complex and extravagant personality'.⁴ The biographer was highlighting the difficulty of creating an encompassing study from written documentation alone, as most biographical subjects have complicated personalities. He was attempting a balanced and accurate study without getting bogged down in unnecessary detail,⁵ and his personal knowledge of his subject was of significant assistance. A pithy summary of the difficulties faced by a biographer is expressed in the quotation by C.D. Broad, 'A biography, at best, is a series of photographs, taken from a limited number of positions, on a selectively sensitive plate, by a photographer whose presence affects the experience of the sitter in a characteristic way.'⁶

³ Donald Sturrock, *Storyteller: The Life of Roald Dahl*, Harper Press:London,2010; *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Oliver Cromwell, 'Mr Lely, I desire you would use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me, and not flatter me at all; but remark all those roughnesses, pimples, warts and everything as you see me, otherwise I will never pay a farthing for it.', p.167; *New Zealand Defence Quarterly*: Summer 1997, p.29; Denis McLean, *Howard Kippenberger: Dauntless Spirit*, Random House: Auckland, 2008, p.13.

⁴ Donald Sturrock, p.10.

⁵ *ibid*, p.12.

⁶ Quoted in Glyn Harper, *Kippenberger: An Inspired New Zealand Commander*, HarperCollins:Auckland,1997, p.10.

Offsetting this approach is the danger of being captivated by the subject matter. Denis McLean encountered this problem in his study of the New Zealand military commander Howard Kippenberger, who was editor of the Official Histories on the Second World War.⁷ McLean had the opportunity to interview many of Kippenberger's contemporaries, and none would venture any criticism of him. In fact they were shocked at the idea, and this created another problem for the biographer - 'it has been difficult to find fault, all who knew Kip speak well of him.'⁸ However, Harper was able to cite some rare criticism in his earlier study of Kippenberger, much of it relating to comments made by Kippenberger when he was President of the New Zealand Returned Services Association.⁹ An isolated adverse comment of Kippenberger as a commander came from a disgruntled former signals officer, Peter R. Dasler. 'Kippenberger's *Infantry Brigadier* is (such) a host of misstatements and inaccuracies that I'm utterly disgusted with him and it. I put it down to greediness on his part, and also an effort ... to justify any errors of judgment he may have made.'¹⁰

Positive remarks apply with equal regard to Isitt, who was Kippenberger's contemporary, with both growing up in Christchurch in the years before the First World War. Every effort was made to locate any examples of negative criticism relating to Isitt, but specific instances have been difficult to locate. While there are isolated examples of his temper manifesting itself, these examples are rare, and arose from extenuating circumstances.

⁷ Denis McLean, p.13.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Harper, pp.274-6.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, Rear Cover.

Without being critical, F.E. Jones, the Minister of Defence in the War Cabinet, was always reticent in his comments of Isitt. In turn, Isitt did not hold Jones in high regard, and this may have been reflected in Jones' attitude. Isitt on occasion also had to make decisions regarding individuals which were not welcomed by the individuals concerned. However, Isitt always gave reasons for his decisions, and while disappointed, the individuals could not fault his logic. In time the differences were forgiven.

Some of the best examples of the biographical approach to the study of aviation history have been written by Vincent Orange, formerly Reader at Canterbury University. These include biographies of Keith Park,¹¹ Arthur Coningham,¹² Arthur Tedder¹³ and John Slessor.¹⁴ Park, Coningham and Tedder had parallels with Isitt in that their initial military service was in the Army, before they transferred to the Royal Flying Corps. Orange is not specific as to the reasons for these transfers. Park merely transferred to the Royal Flying Corps,¹⁵ and then Coningham sailed for England after being medically discharged from the New Zealand Army to join the Royal Flying Corps¹⁶, while Tedder just transferred to the Royal Flying Corps without indicating any previous interest in aviation, after injuring his knee and being ruled unfit for active service in the Army.¹⁷ Another parallel which Coningham shared with Isitt was that he did not attend either the Staff College or the Imperial Defence College, but this deficiency did not hamper

¹¹ Vincent Orange, *Sir Keith Park*, Methuen: London, 1984.

¹² Vincent Orange, *Coningham*, Methuen: London, 1990.

¹³ Vincent Orange, *Tedder, Quietly in Command*, Frank Cass: London, 2004.

¹⁴ Vincent Orange, *Slessor, Bomber Champion*, Grub Street: London, 2006.

¹⁵ *Sir Keith Park*, p.15

¹⁶ *Coningham*, p.14.

¹⁷ *Tedder*, p.26.

him in his steady advancement.¹⁸ Of these studies, *Sir Keith Park*, is the story of a man who never quite made it to the top, although he did not fail in any task he was given in his service career.¹⁹ *Tedder* and *Slessor* are both studies in High Command, as in each case their active flying career was relatively short. The *Coningham* title was the most useful as a model for this study of Isitt. Parallels have already been cited, to which must be added Coningham's dislike of administrative matters,²⁰ which was echoed by Isitt. It is interesting that there is no record of Isitt having met Coningham, although he did meet Park and Tedder post-war in a civilian capacity, and was most impressed by Slessor whom he met in Washington in 1942.

Reviews of Orange's various titles have been consistent in their praise. David Dickens wrote of *Park*, 'This is a fine and consistently interesting book about an innovative, important and at times difficult airman.'²¹ Christopher Pugsley describes *Coningham* as a 'brilliant biography.'²² Sebastian Ritchie reviewing *Tedder: Quietly in Command*, described it as a 'very important and highly readable biography portrays Tedder the *man*... as well as Tedder the *commander*,' with the result being 'an immensely balanced narrative which succeeds in its principal objective.'²³ Christina Goulter describes *Dowding of Fighter Command: Victor of the Battle of Britain* as 'another magnificent biography' from Vincent Orange, in which the 'biographer

¹⁸ Vincent Orange, *Coningham*, p.50.

¹⁹ *Sir Keith Park*, p.261

²⁰ *Coningham*, p.58.

²¹ Dickens, David, *New Zealand International Review*, Mar/Apr 2003, v.28 n.2, pp.28-9.

²² Pugsley, Christopher, *Evening Post*, 11 August 1990, p.31.

²³ Ritchie, Sebastian, *Air and Space Power Journal*, Winter 2004, p.112.

treats his remarkable subject with great sensitivity and objectivity throughout.²⁴

This study is important because no previous attempt has been made to assess Isitt's impact on New Zealand aviation. For the period 1920-1963 no other person had a greater impact on aviation matters, first from a service viewpoint and then from a commercial perspective. Under Isitt's command as CAS, the RNZAF in 1944 grew to a manning level of nearly 45,000, with an aircraft complement in excess of 1200. No other New Zealander has ever commanded an Air Force of such size controlled from New Zealand, which operated effectively and efficiently in the South and South-West Pacific Areas to make a worthwhile contribution to the Allied cause. With the end of the war, it was necessary to re-configure the RNZAF on a peacetime basis, and through Isitt's efforts a balanced force emerged with dramatically reduced manning levels.

Following his retirement from the RNZAF, Isitt commenced a new career in commercial aviation. He was the effective founder of NAC, the first nationwide airline to operate within New Zealand; while with TEAL he oversaw its development from a purely trans-Tasman route structure, to the point where it was poised to enter the jet age and expand its routes further afield. Both airlines were financially successful, operating modern fleets,

²⁴ Goulter, Christina, *The Journal of Military History*, October 2009, p.1371.

and their framework is reflected in the later merged Air New Zealand operation nearly fifty years after Isitt's final retirement.

The literature on Isitt reflects his self-effacing attitude to life. On the one hand there are no in-depth studies which refer to him and his role in New Zealand aviation, while in contrast there are numerous short references to him, quoting a fact or opinion, or referring to his attending an event or function.²⁵ He was the public voice of both NAC and TEAL, and most press releases from these companies were in his name.

Isitt left no autobiography, but he did have a substantial input to the Official War History, *Royal New Zealand Air Force*, written by J.M.S. Ross.²⁶ He read the whole text and Ross, in separate correspondence, acknowledged that Isitt contributed many useful comments to the draft, although no record exists of his specific amendments.²⁷ While there are a number of references to Isitt in the Official History relating to the period prior to World War II, there are only two during his period as CAS. The first covers his visit to Washington in mid-1944 to negotiate the retention of an active role for the RNZAF.²⁸ The second refers to his attendance at the Japanese Surrender Ceremony.²⁹

²⁵ Typical examples of such references include *Auckland Star*, 27 February 1928, p.4; *New Zealand Herald*, 26 October 1927, p.6; *Aeroplane Monthly*, 33:11, November 2005, p.81; *Wings*, 5 June 1937, p.4; *Whites Aviation*, November 1949, p.21; *Dominion*, 15 December 1942, p.7; *Evening Post*, 25 February 1943, p.7; *Southland Daily News*, 9 March 1943, p.9.

²⁶ J.M.S. Ross, *Royal New Zealand Air Force*, Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1955.

²⁷ ANZ Air 1 12/15/1 Official War History Vol. 2, Ross/Isitt, 18 January 1951; Isitt/Ross, 21 February 1951.

²⁸ Ross, p.261.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p.311.

Brief biographies of Isitt are supplied in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, written by David M. Crooks;³⁰ with an unattributed entry in *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*³¹ concentrating on his military career; as does the Air Force Museum publication, *Swift to the Sky*.³² In other publications, the two longest references are in *Airline* by I.H. Driscoll,³³ and *A Noble Chance* by M. McGreal.³⁴ Driscoll had the interesting experience of being interviewed by Isitt for a position with NAC, and subsequently worked with him. McGreal has a short description of a flight which involved a flying boat caught in a thunderstorm, on which Isitt was a passenger. Whites Aviation supplies the most consistent references in the period 1946-1963. This was a monthly magazine edited by a journalist who had known Isitt since early Hobsonville days, and was a person who appreciated how the aviation industry in New Zealand operated.

Aimer, in *Wings of the Nation*,³⁵ offers a good description of Isitt's involvement in the early days of NAC, while Campbell in his unpublished *History of NAC*,³⁶ supplies shrewd insights into Isitt's method of operation. Campbell was a journalist with a political background who knew Isitt well.

³⁰ C. Orange, (Gen. Ed.), *The Dictionary of National Biography, Volume Five 1941-1960*, Auckland: AUP, 2000, pp.252-3.

³¹ I. McGibbon, (Ed), *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*, Auckland: Oxford UP, 2000, pp.247-8.

³² E.W. Martyn, *Swift to the Sky*, Rosdale: Penguin, 2010, p.170-1.

³³ I.H. Driscoll, *Airline: The Making of a National Flag Carrier*, Auckland: Shortland, 1979, p.164.

³⁴ Maurice McGreal, *A Noble Chance*, Wellington: M. McGreal, 1994, pp.113-5.

³⁵ Peter Aimer, *Wings of the Nation*, Auckland: Bush Press, 2000.

³⁶ Duncan Campbell, *History of NAC*, Clarke Papers.

Nearly all the newspaper interviews reflect Isitt's ability to respond in a bland manner, so as to avoid controversy wherever possible.

Primary source material includes files, private collections and papers, supplemented by interviews. The majority of the primary sources come from Archives New Zealand in Wellington. This includes the Air Force (AIR), Army Department (AD), External Affairs (EA), Civil Aviation (CA), Public Works (PWD), and the Prime Minister's Department (PM) files. Particularly useful were Isitt's Monthly Liaison Letters and Correspondence files during the period when he was CAS. The Monthly Liaison Letters are a de facto history of the RNZAF during this time, and extensive reliance has been placed on these Letters. First, they provide the only comprehensive, contemporary summary of RNZAF activities during Isitt's period as CAS, and were eventually circulated to the War Cabinet as the best means of providing this information. Secondly, they were written by Isitt, and supply his personal viewpoint of the various activities. Because of their subjective nature, the Letters do not present a balanced viewpoint, and Isitt generally withheld or diminished any critical or contentious information. This means that other sources have been consulted in an effort to obtain an overall picture of Isitt's tenure as CAS. However, the RNZAF Annual Reports for 1944 and 1945 corroborate the general thrust of the Liaison Letters and reinforce the degree of confidence with which the Letters may be approached. As the author of the Letters, Isitt was not in a position to offer a critical assessment of his own performance. He wanted to inform and raise morale among his readers, and to this end avoided using any negatives wherever

possible. While he did not avoid mentioning problems, very often a solution had been obtained before Isitt mentioned the matter.

Fortunately, the Prime Minister's Department files reflect Cabinet Secretary Shanahan's interest in international aviation, and cover the post-war period very well in relation to TEAL and BCPA.

The Air Force Museum at Wigram holds a sundry collection of papers relating to Isitt's early years with the RFC and RAF, as well as his Flying Log Books.³⁷

Isitt's grandson, Peter Thodey, still retains some of his grandfather's papers, while Maurice Clarke, son of F. Maurice Clarke, first General Manager of NAC, holds the Clarke Papers. Much of the information held in these papers is not available elsewhere, as most of the early NAC records were destroyed in a 1952 Head Office fire, and it appears that subsequent records have suffered a like fate. A similar situation exists with early TEAL records, with significant destruction having been carried out.

The Alexander Turnbull Library contains some useful information, while the Oral History Archive supplied useful ancillary detail on the experiences of early NAC employees with Isitt, as well as aspects of his Christchurch life prior to World War I. Other archives, the Film Archive and the Radio New Zealand Archives, contain only fragments.

Because of lack of personal papers, the majority of the information in Chapter One had had to be inferred from unit and official records, as no

³⁷ Isitt, *Pilot's Flying Log Book*.

specific records of Isitt's direct involvement remain. Similarly, in Chapters Two and Three, heavy reliance has been placed on Isitt's Logbooks to supply an overview of his flying career on active service. He was not a good record keeper, and wherever possible recourse has been made to independent sources to verify logbook entries. For the above reasons, the first three Chapters have been constructed from limited resource material with meagre archival records and no personal papers. This lack of detailed information has determined the structure of these three Chapters.

This thesis is divided into eleven chapters, each of which covers a distinct period of Isitt's life. Chapter One deals with the early years, leading to his enlistment in the Rifle Brigade and service in Egypt and on the Somme, followed by his wounding and subsequent repatriation to the UK. In Chapter Two his transfer to the RFC, training as a pilot and his active service career are examined. A span of twenty years is covered in Chapter Three and Four, embracing the inter-war period. After the declaration of war in September 1939, Isitt was chosen to represent New Zealand's aviation interests in Canada, and his early wartime involvement is covered in Chapter Five. Chapters Six to Ten outline Isitt's period as CAS, and give an overall picture of the many problems facing him during his tenure, through until his retirement from the RNZAF in 1946. A concluding chapter covers his post-war career as a civilian, when as Chairman of NAC and TEAL he balanced political demands against commercial realities, and acted as an unaccredited diplomat for New Zealand on many occasions overseas.

The significance of Isitt's role in New Zealand aviation has never previously been documented in a coherent study. He was important because of this role and for the positions which he occupied with distinction; as well as for the foresight which he displayed consistently throughout his career. This thesis attempts to analyse the extent of his achievements, and the critical influence he played over four decades. He commanded a greatly expanded New Zealand air force operating within an allied context in wartime; and he was instrumental in the creation of successful national and international airlines. Even today, the basic structures which he helped create in the RNZAF and Air New Zealand are still apparent, evidence of the splendid vision he had for New Zealand.

The importance of Isitt's role in New Zealand aviation is difficult to overstate. Without his contribution, New Zealand aviation would have developed in a less structured manner than it did. The growth of NAC was a singular achievement, which required foresight, dedication and determination to achieve economic success, as well as becoming a pivotal organisation in the New Zealand economy. When Isitt retired, TEAL was poised to become an international operator, with a secure financial base, and providing a service which attracted experienced travellers to a wholly New Zealand owned operation.

This thesis is an examination of Isitt's life and his many accomplishments. He played a pivotal role in the development of an air force in New Zealand,

seeing it grow from miniscule beginnings as a section of the Army, to a separate force comprising nearly 45,000 personnel in the Second World War. After the war, he oversaw the creation of a single national airline out of fragmented local operators, as well as the development of TEAL to where it was poised to operate globally. With Isitt's vision and focus, New Zealand aviation developed in a coherent and balanced manner, consistent with a nation anxious to be heard on the world stage.

Chapter 1: Early Years 1891-1917

Leonard Monk Isitt was born in Christchurch, New Zealand on 27 July 1891. He was the younger son of Hon. Leonard Monk Isitt, who had been born in Bedford, England and who had emigrated to New Zealand in his late teens. After working initially as a warehouseman in Dunedin, Isitt senior followed the example of his father and brother, and became a Methodist minister in 1876, being ordained in 1881, by which time he had become involved with the temperance movement. He married Agnes Martha Caverhill in Christchurch the same year, and after serving in a number of successful pastorates throughout New Zealand, settled with his family in Sydenham in 1889, where he joined with T.E. Taylor, a prominent Christchurch politician, in a fight for legislative prohibition. They started a paper, the *Vanguard*, and also embarked on a nationwide speaking campaign.¹

Isitt senior had a natural eloquence, and when combined with enthusiasm for his topic, made him an orator probably unequalled in New Zealand at the time. With the consent of the Methodist Conference, he resigned from the ministry to devote all his time to the advocacy of temperance reform. The work earned him a reputation abroad, and he was invited by the United Kingdom Alliance, an association formed for the abolition of liquor traffic,

¹ Methodist Church of New Zealand Connexional Archives, Christchurch, New Zealand.

to visit England Britain and lecture there.² By this time he and Agnes had three children; Frances Caverhill, born in 1889; Leonard Monk junior; and Willard Whitmore, born in 1894.³

Leonard Isitt senior made four trips to the United Kingdom (UK) lecturing, staying five years on the final assignment in 1900. He took his family with him for this posting, and Leonard junior attended school at Mostyn House, Parkgate in Cheshire. After this assignment, the family returned to Christchurch in 1905, where Isitt senior built a home on the Cashmere Hills. His neighbour was T.E. Taylor, and the two families were the centre of an active social life, becoming prominent members of the Christchurch social scene. Musical evenings were a feature of these activities, with Isitt senior invariably contributing with his fine singing voice. When T.E. Taylor died in 1911, he was Mayor of Christchurch, and Isitt senior succeeded him as the Member of Parliament for Sydenham, holding the seat until 1925, when he was appointed to the Legislative Council⁴ which entitled him to the use of the honorific 'Honourable'.

On leaving school Isitt became a sheep farm cadet in North Canterbury, and he worked on a number of different farms for a period of some four years, but details from this period are non-existent.⁵ He then joined his father's

² C. Orange, (Ed.), *L.M. Isitt (Allan K. Davidson), Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, Volume Three 1900-1920*, Auckland: AUP, 1996, pp.244-5.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Isitt, Personal File 1002, NZDF Personal Files: Trentham.

bookselling business in Christchurch as a clerk, and it was from this position that he enlisted for service in the War.⁶

Early in his life, Isitt junior became involved in military matters, as he served in the Christchurch Boys' High School Cadets for two years, 1906-7, followed by a further year in the Christ College Rifles. Although his *Personal File* contains conflicting details about his pre-war activities, as far as can be ascertained on 1 March 1911 he joined the Territorial Army, enlisting in the 1st Canterbury Regiment. He served with them until his transfer to the 7th Wellington and the Wellington West Coast Regiment in July 1912. Initially he served with C Company, and then transferred to what he described as the 'Battalion Signallers' until the completion of his service in December 1913. He returned to Christchurch, and rejoined the 1st Canterbury Regiment in January 1914. Initially he was with E Battery Signallers, but he later transferred to become a specialist in the 1st Battalion, first as a signaller and then as a scout.⁷

The war in Europe had commenced in August 1914, and in New Zealand preparations were immediately made to set the country on a war footing. Calls were made for volunteers, and the first soldiers sailed from New Zealand for Egypt in October 1914. The majority of these soldiers formed part of the Anzac Contingent which landed at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915.⁸ Four bodies of reinforcements were subsequently sent from New Zealand at

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ NZDF Personnel Archives, Trentham, *Isitt Personal File 23/793*.

⁸ H. Stewart, *The New Zealand Division 1914-1919*, Wellington: Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd, 1921, p.1.

approximately monthly intervals, when it was decided that the next contribution to the Imperial cause would be an entirely new brigade of infantry, which formed the Fifth Reinforcements and became known as the New Zealand Rifle Brigade, officially coming into existence on 1 May 1915.⁹



Isitt (left) as a member of the winning Relay Team, 'B' Company, 7th Regiment, Takapau Camp 1914. (Thodey Collection)

⁹ W.S. Austin, *The Official History of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade*, Wellington: L.T. Watkins Ltd, 1924, p.1.



A c-1914 shot of Isitt (second left, rear row) as a corporal in Territorial Service. (RNZAF Museum)

Isitt had enlisted on 29 April 1915, and was attested by Lieutenant J. Pow, who had known him in territorial days, and may have influenced his being promoted Sergeant immediately. He was one of the 2,207 men who reported for duty at Trentham Camp, Wellington, on 29 and 30 May 1915. Of these 534 came from Canterbury, and they comprised the nucleus of C Company, part of the 1st Battalion, to which Isitt was assigned. He also received the regimental number 23/793, with the prefix 23/ signifying the 1st Battalion.¹⁰

Initially, because of the rudimentary state of Trentham Camp, then in the course of construction, the entire force was devoted to improving the

¹⁰ *ibid*, pp. 2-3.

physical conditions of the camp, and in creating paths and drains. However, general training commenced in earnest on 4 June, followed by the issue of khaki uniforms and forage caps on 19 June. Although training continued, the poor conditions created such health problems that the grandstand at the neighbouring Trentham Racecourse had to be utilised as a temporary hospital.¹¹ As a result the decision was made to evacuate the camp, and on 10 July the regiment was entrained for Palmerston North, pending the establishment of a suitable camp at Rangiotu, a farming settlement on the Foxton road, some nine miles from Palmerston North.

At Palmerston North, the 1st Battalion was temporarily located in the Show Grounds, until a move into another temporary camp at Rangiotu on 15 July. A move into the permanent camp took place on 14 August, by which time considerable progress in training had been achieved. In fact the 2nd Battalion went on seven days' final leave on 20 August, and were followed on their return by the 1st Battalion. Field exercises then took place in the sandhills near Bainesse some five miles to the west, before a return to Rangiotu, and a final honing with an emphasis on trench warfare.¹²

On the morning of 8 October 1915, the two battalions travelled by train to Wellington, arriving at noon. All troops marched to their troopships to locate their quarters and to stow their kit, before going on leave until 10.30 p.m. The following morning, the official embarkation took place with all rolls being checked, after which a farewell march through the city took

¹¹ *ibid*, p.8.

¹² *ibid*, p.8.

place at 2.30 p.m. All then re-embarked, and the troopships moved into the stream and anchored at 5.00 p.m. The convoy, which consisted of five vessels, sailed the next day, 10 October 1915, at 6.00 a.m. without the benefit of any escorting warships.¹³ Isitt, together with other members of the 1st Battalion, sailed in the *Maunganui* (Transport No. 30),¹⁴ and settled into an uneventful voyage. The food and quarters were recorded as being good, while time was employed with drill and lectures. In the evenings, concerts and boxing tournaments were frequent. The *Maunganui* also had a printing press, and this was utilised to produce a magazine '*The Periscope*', with decrepit type, faded ink and absorbent paper.¹⁵

Albany, Western Australia, was reached at 5.00 p.m. on 19 October, and here the convoy divided, three vessels proceeding directly to Egypt, while the *Maunganui*, in company with another troopship, called at Fremantle. These two transports sailed from Fremantle at 8.00 p.m. on 23 October, crossing the Equator on 4 November, and reaching Suez at 7.15 a.m. on 14 November. Notwithstanding this early arrival, disembarkation did not take place until the following day, when the 1st Battalion entrained for Aerodrome Camp near Cairo. This involved a seven hour journey, and an arrival at Helmieh Siding at 11.30 p.m., followed by a two mile route march to camp. Aerodrome Camp was part of a large base camp adjacent to the town of Heliopolis, and was some six miles from the centre of Cairo.

¹³ *ibid*, p.16.

¹⁴ *Index to N.Z. Section of the Register of all British Ships 1840-1950 Vol. 2*, The New Zealand Ship and Marine Society: Wellington, 1962, p.425. The *Maunganui* had been built at Govan in 1911. It was 430 feet in length, with a gross displacement of 7527 tons, and its engines developed 7,000 h.p.

¹⁵ ATL, *The Periscope*, H.M.N.Z.T. No. 30 (*Maunganui*), On board ship: 1915.

Isitt left no diaries or letters regarding his experience as a soldier, and his involvement in Egypt and the Western Front can only be inferred from secondary sources.

Since May 1915, the Senussi sect, a loose association of radical Islamic tribes based in northern Africa, with considerable mercantile and political power, had been under significant Turkish - German influence. In November 1915 Western Egypt was invaded by a force of some 20,000 men, consisting of a main force of Senussi regulars enhanced by Arabs, Turks and Berbers, and assisted by Turkish, German and Arab officers. This force was well supplied with rifles and ammunition, had ample access to camels for transport, and in the event of a successful invasion into Egypt, would potentially have the ability to increase its strength. To oppose the Senussi a Western Frontier Force was created, comprising a mounted and an infantry brigade.¹⁶

The initial intention had been for the 1st Battalion to leave almost immediately for active service with the Western Frontier Force at Dabaa. However, the 1st Battalion had not been vaccinated for active service, and the 2nd Battalion, which had been vaccinated on the voyage, was substituted, leaving for Alexandria on 22 November. Meanwhile the 1st Battalion was vaccinated, and settled down for five weeks' training involving trench digging, night advances and attacks, and route marches of

¹⁶ Austin, pp.17-23.

increasing length.¹⁷ The 1st Battalion on 16 December received instructions to be ready to depart at short notice for service with the Western Frontier Force at Mersa Matruh. Final orders for the move were at noon on 18 December, and by 6.00 p.m. the complete Battalion had left for Alexandria. At Alexandria, A Company embarked on the *Missir*, sailing at 5.00 p.m. on 20 December, and travelling by night to reach Mersa Matruh at dawn the following morning. Submarines were an ever-present danger, hence the dusk sailing. Mersa Matruh was about 200 miles west of Alexandria, and at that time had a permanent population of about 200. It was selected as the British advance base for operations against the Senussi, but it had no secure land lines of communication, and the main support was by sea.¹⁸ In the Second World War, Mersa Matruh again played a significant role in the North African conflict, and became well known to New Zealand soldiers.¹⁹

The Senussi began to concentrate near Jebel Medwa, a hill approximately eight miles to the south-west of Matruh, and the British planned a significant attack on Christmas Day. The 1st Battalion formed part of the main column which advanced directly on Jebel Medwa, and initially C Company was in reserve under cover, but by noon was brought into the attack and employed in clearing branching nullahs leading into the main wadi. The advance continued slowly and by 4.00 p.m. the final position was taken. Total casualties for the Battalion were 6 killed and 14 wounded, and

¹⁷ *ibid*, pp. 17-23.

¹⁸ *ibid*, pp.30-1.

¹⁹ J.L. Scoullar, *Battle for Egypt*, Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1955, pp. 22-3.

the effect was for the Senussi to withdraw to Unjeila and Halazin, some 25 miles to the west, after what was the turning battle in the campaign.²⁰

Meanwhile the Battalion returned to Matruh, emerging for an abortive foray to Bin Jerawala on 28 December, which, although resulting in the acquisition of considerable booty, failed to see any action. From 2 until 21 January, the Battalion was employed in outpost duty, until a further attack was planned on Halazin. An enemy force of 5,000 was identified by air reconnaissance from Matruh.²¹

On 22 January an attacking force, consisting of a number of components including the 1st Battalion, moved out of Matruh, bivouacking at Bin Shola. Next morning the march was resumed, and early reports were received of enemy sightings. By mid-day heavy fighting was taking place, and at 1.00 p.m. C Company was sent left in support of the 15th Sikhs and brought into the firing line there. Meanwhile, the main attack continued, and by 4.00 p.m. had developed into a complete rout, with the enemy fleeing the field. Enemy casualties were estimated at 200 killed and 500 wounded, against which the Battalion suffered 1 killed and 32 wounded. With this significant victory, the Battalion commenced a return march, eventually reaching Matruh late in the afternoon of 25 January.²² The power of the Senussi had been broken by the two engagements, and the decision was made to clear the coast to the west of Matruh, with the 1st Battalion departing on 13

²⁰ Austin, p.34.

²¹ *ibid*, p.45.

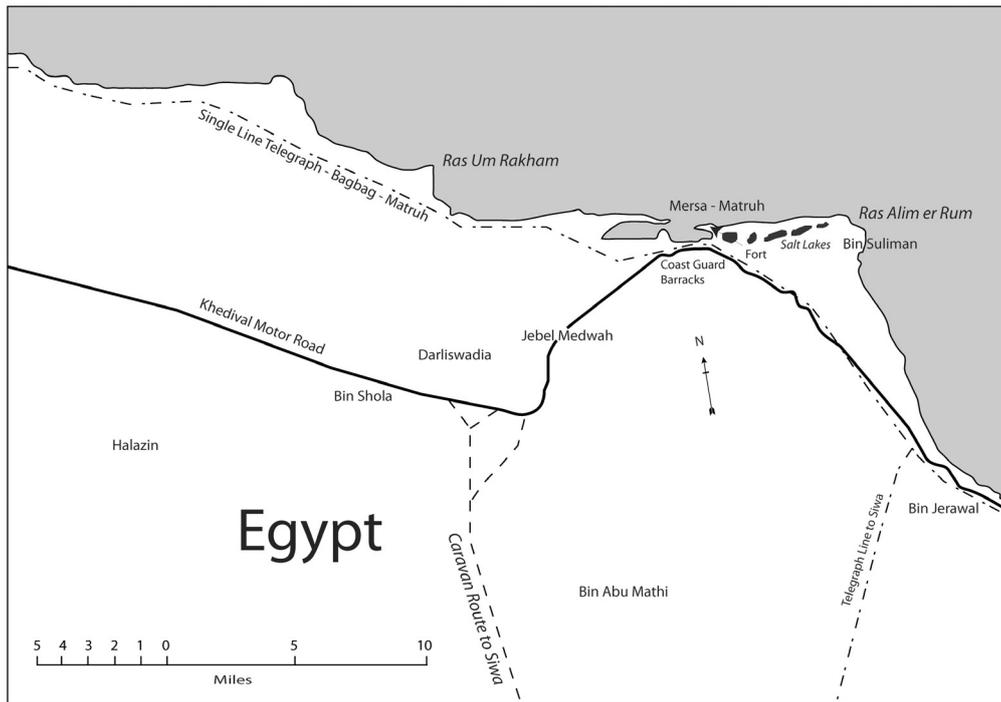
²² *ibid*, p.49.

February.²³ However, after two days' march, the battalion was recalled, and provisions were made for a phased return to Alexandria, with C Company sailing on 17 February. The Battalion stayed for ten days at the Matras Rest Camp, resting and refitting, before rejoining the Brigade at Moascar on 29 February. Again, the stay was short, as the Battalion formed part of the New Zealand Division which took over a defensive sector in the Suez Canal Zone from the 2nd Australian Division, occupying a camp at Ferry Post, about half a mile east of the Suez Canal, on 6 March. The 1st Battalion was charged with the responsibility of defending the sector from Bastion A to the Beacon Light on the Suez Canal from the 11 to 15 March.²⁴

On 20 March, the Brigade moved from Ferry Post to Moascar Camp, where it remained until it left for France early in the following month. The Rifle Brigade formed the nucleus of a New Zealand Division (1NZEF) which was formed in early 1916, with a decision being made to transfer 1NZEF to the Western Front in April 1916. Training continued, and as departure approached, further inoculations were carried out and unnecessary private belongings were sent home. On 5 April the 1st Battalion left Moascar for Alexandria, and embarked on the *Arcadian*, departing on 7 April for Marseilles. The vessel was crowded, and after enjoying generally fine weather on a circuitous voyage to elude submarines, eventually arrived safely on 12 April.

²³ *ibid*, pp. 51-3.

²⁴ *ibid*, p.59.



Mersa Matruh 1915 - 16

From Marseilles each battalion moved independently in a separate train, taking the greater part of three days for the journey to Steenbecque and the Western Front.²⁵ Here the 1st Battalion was billeted initially in farmhouses adjacent to the village, but after a few days moved to the nearby village of Boeseghem. Accommodation was generally in houses, lofts and sheds, made more comfortable by meagre issues of straw. Training resumed at once, comprising general procedures, specialist work and route marching combined with instruction in how to cope with gas attacks. The first move towards the battle-zone took place on 1 May when the Brigade marched to Estaires, but marched back to Morbecque on 9 May for further training involving musketry and machine guns.

²⁵ *ibid*, pp.69-70.

The New Zealand Division commenced to take over a quiet section of the Front in the Armentieres salient. On 13 May the 1st Battalion marched to Doulieu and then on 15 May moved into Armentieres. The New Zealand Division would hold the Armentieres salient until mid-August, and while there were quartered mainly in abandoned factories. They commenced their first tour of duty in the trenches in France on the night of 22/23 May, taking over a sector due east of Armentieres.²⁶ The 1st Battalion was responsible for the Epinette sub-sector, occupying a front line trench from Auckland Avenue to Hepburn Avenue some 1300 yards in length. Rations and general supplies came from Houplines, utilising a tramway constructed along a road marked 'Australia Avenue'. Relief took place on the night of 1/2 June, with the Battalion returning to Armentieres, where it acted as garrison of the Armentieres lines of defence, and made preparations to occupy the inner defences of the town in the event of an emergency.²⁷

The first major offensive for 1916, by the Allies on the Western Front commenced on 1 July 1916, and became known as the Battle of the Somme. By this stage of the War, sufficient munitions were available, and massive artillery barrages, became a feature of this and subsequent battles. The Rifle Brigade moved back into the lines of the Armentieres salient two days later, with the 1st Battalion taking the subsidiary line at Bois Grenier. The Battalion moved to Rue Marle on the night of 11/12 July, and three nights later took over a stretch of line vacated by an Australian Battalion which

²⁶ Stewart, p.25.

²⁷ Austin, p.87.

was moving to the Somme.²⁸ During the remainder of July, the 1st Battalion engaged in frequent raiding parties, which achieved considerable success. Early in August the Brigade was relieved and moved back to Armentieres, with the 1st Battalion again providing the garrison for the defence of the town.²⁹

Intensive training now began in preparation for actual involvement in the Battle of the Somme.³⁰ The Brigade initially entrained at Steenwerck on 14 August, after an exhausting march from Armentieres, for the Second Army Training Area, where the 1st Battalion was quartered at Wallon Cappel. On 20 August, the Brigade marched to St Omer, and then entrained for Abbeville, where the 1st Battalion billeted at Doudelaineville . The journey was uncomfortable, with the troops travelling in boxcars. Training continued at high pressure for the remainder of the month, until the move to the Somme battlefield on 2 September, with units marching by road and reaching Dernancourt, two miles south of Albert on 8 September. The 1st Battalion had moved by stages through Le Quesnoy-sur-Airaines, St. Saveur and Alonville marching with full packs up. A final march was made on 9 September, when Fricourt Camp, east of Albert was reached. The whole march was a long, hard and exhausting effort. Fricourt had been captured in the early stages of the Somme offensive, and the landscape showed the effects of battle. On the following day, the 1st Battalion relieved an English battalion in the front line, taking over from the junction of Peach and Tea

²⁸ Stewart, p.35.

²⁹ Austin, p.110.

³⁰ Andrew Macdonald, *On My Way to the Somme*, Auckland:HarperCollins, 2005, p.54.

Trenches to Sap A, which ran from the northern apex of Delville Wood to the eastern corner of High Wood, but stayed there only two days before returning to rest at Mametz Wood. ³¹

The rest period was short, as on 14 September orders were received for a major attack on Flers the following day. This attack became known as the Battle of Flers-Courcelette, and saw the first ever use of tanks in battle.³² The attack was preceded by an intense artillery bombardment commencing on 12 September, and which continued unabated until zero hour at 6.20 a.m. on 15 September, a day which became fine after the abatement of a morning mist. Various objectives, specified as colour-coded lines, were allotted to the Rifle Brigade, taking in four German trench networks, a low-lying ridge and the north-west corner of Flers.³³ The 1st Battalion was detailed for the final objective, or Red Line, the Grove Valley communication trench. This final objective meant that the 1st Battalion had to proceed behind the 2nd and 3rd Battalions' advance, and it was not until nearly 11.00 a.m. that it was able to attack.³⁴ The leading companies came under severe machine-gun fire, and while advances were made, the 1st Battalion found itself out on a limb, and exposed to fire from the west, north and east with heavy casualties were suffered.³⁵

³¹ Austin, p.112.

³² Macdonald, p.75.

³³ *ibid*, pp. 73-6.

³⁴ *ibid*, p.75.

³⁵ *ibid*, pp.101-2.

Isitt was wounded on 15 September, and while no time is entered in his *Personal File*, most of the Company's casualties occurred in the morning. However, he was not admitted to XV Corps MD Station until the following day, reflecting the heavy casualties suffered, and the inevitable delays in collecting and treating the wounded.³⁶ He spent only a short period at the XV Corps MD Station, being transferred later that day to No. 38 Casualty Clearing Station. Here he spent two further days, before he was transferred to No.10 General Hospital on 18 September.³⁷ The repatriation system was working smoothly, and after only two days Isitt was evacuated on Hospital Ship *Laufrenc* on 20 September, arriving in England the following day and being admitted to 2nd London General Hospital at Chelsea the same day. Here he stayed for a month, making sufficient progress to be transferred to the New Zealand Convalescent Hospital at Hornchurch on 24 October.³⁸ Here he stayed until he was transferred to the New Zealand Command Depot at Codford on 10 November.

Isitt received a wound in the scalp, which initially rendered him unconscious through concussion.³⁹ Existing records indicate that the wound was caused by a bullet.⁴⁰ Because of the large number of wounded, the New Zealand Medical Corps was nearly overwhelmed, and for many soldiers it took about 48 hours, and for some cases as long as 72 hours to remove them from the battlefield.⁴¹ Initial casualty stations were established in Flers and at

³⁶ Isitt, *Personal File* 23/793.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, Telegram J. Allen/L.M. Isitt, 16 October 1916.

⁴¹ Austin, pp.54-58.

Bogle's Post, and casualties were passed to two advanced dressing stations at Flatiron Copse and Quarry, situated about two miles behind the assembly trenches. From here they were taken by ambulance or lorry to Becordel near Fricourt, the Medical Corps' main dressing station. After treatment, wounded soldiers would then be fitted into the hospital network in France and England.⁴²

This was the end of Isitt's active service career as a soldier. Interestingly, his involvement on the Somme has never been acknowledged, particularly as one of those soldiers who would go on to high rank in the Second World War. Macdonald, in the most recent account of New Zealanders on the Somme, records that Kippenberger,⁴³ Barrowclough⁴⁴ and Park⁴⁵ were knighted, but omits Isitt from this list.⁴⁶ Both Kippenberger and Park were wounded on the Somme as well, with Kippenberger returning to New Zealand in order to convalesce from his injuries. Isitt's injuries nagged him for the remainder of his life, and from time to time he required medical treatment to alleviate the discomfort he experienced.

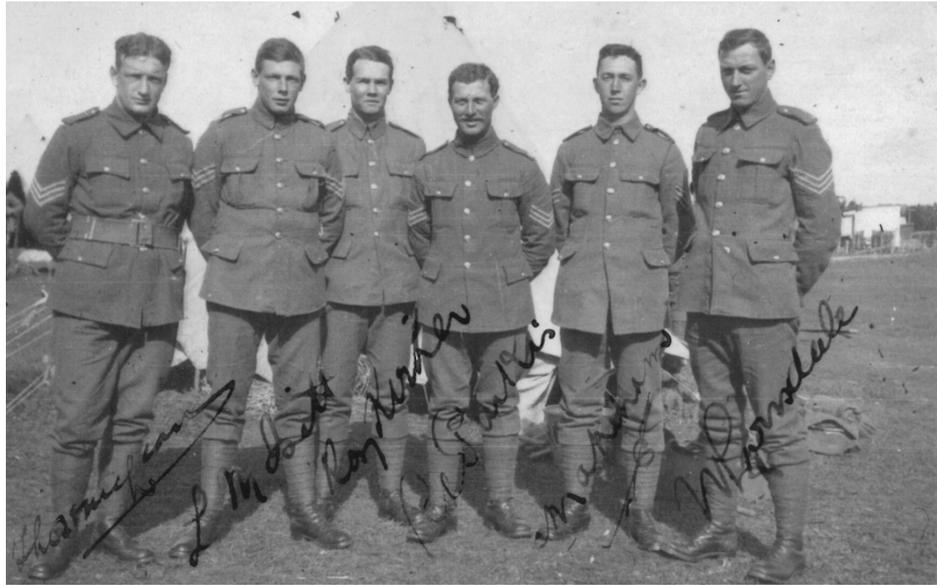
⁴² Macdonald, p.84.

⁴³ Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger, 1897-1947. Commander 2nd New Zealand Division 1944.

⁴⁴ Major-General Sir Harold Barrowclough, 1894-1972. Commander 3rd Division in Pacific, 1942-44.

⁴⁵ Air Chief Marshal Sir Keith Park, 1892-1975. RAF Deputy Commander Fighter Command 1938-40, Commander Allied Air Force, South East Asia Command 1945.

⁴⁶ *ibid*, p.231.



*Isitt (second left) with a group of fellow Rifle Brigade Sergeants (c.1915)
(Thodey Collection)*



*Isitt
20-8-17.*

*Studio Portrait of Isitt, immediately prior to proceeding to France on first
tour of operations 20/8/17. (Thodey Collection)*



Battle of Flers-Courcelette 15 September 1916

While Isitt was recuperating, his brother Willard had been serving with 1NZE in Flanders. Willard was killed in action on 31 October 1916. While the family in New Zealand was affected profoundly by Willard's death, there are no surviving records as to how Isitt received the news or its effect upon him.

Isitt formed part of the repatriation system and is next recorded as a patient in the 2nd London General, Chelsea St. Marks Hospital, being admitted on 21 September 1916.⁴⁷ Here he was visited on 16 October 1916 by a Mrs Elsworth, a volunteer hospital visitor, who recorded Isitt as being a 'cot case, very cheerful, wound on head'.⁴⁸ Mrs Elsworth visited again, and in her report of 30 October 1916 found Isitt 'up and out most of the time, but going on well'.⁴⁹ By the time of Mrs Elsworth's next visit, Isitt had been discharged from Chelsea.⁵⁰ In the process of his convalescence, Isitt had been transferred from Chelsea to the Hornchurch Convalescent Hospital on 24 October 1916, with a further move to the Command Depot at Codford on 10 November 1916.⁵¹

Meanwhile Isitt was continuing to make a steady recovery, and on 26 February 1917 was named as part of the February Nominees Reinforcement Commissions. The GOC New Zealand Expeditionary Force nominated six

⁴⁷ *Isitt Personal File 23/793*.

⁴⁸ Clutha MacKenzie (Ed), *Chronicles of the N.Z.E.F., vol 1, no.1*, London: NewZealand Contingent Association, 1916, p.95.

⁴⁹ *ibid*, p.112.

⁵⁰ *Isitt Personal File 23/793*.

⁵¹ *ibid*.

NCO's for Commission in Reinforcements, with Isitt being the sole nominee from the Rifle Brigade. He was to be sent on a course in Trentham Camp for service in the Infantry. While no information was available as to the probable date of the nominees' arrival in New Zealand, on their arrival they were to be given three weeks ordinary leave, after which they were to report to their respective camps.⁵²

Isitt's time as a soldier was nearing its end. He had experienced two years of hard physical effort, first in training and then in Egypt and on the Western Front. No doubt the opportunity to return to New Zealand and take up a commission in the army would have been tempting, but the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) offered a more enticing opportunity. He always set the highest standards for himself, and his leadership qualities had been recognised by his selection for officer training. The numbers chosen were small, and only the best were identified in this manner. Isitt had an active disposition, and while his scalp wound was serious, he made an excellent recovery. No records exist as to why he chose to transfer to the RFC, but it was consistent with his character. He saw it as an opportunity to be taken. From comments he made in later life, it would appear that overall Isitt enjoyed his experience as a soldier.⁵³ However, the openings for advancement in the Army were limited by comparison with the alternative of an aviation career. Army life, particularly in the trenches, was hard, and

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ ANZ Air 100/7, *Miscellaneous Correspondence*, Isitt/White, April 1943.

Isitt was fortunate that his injuries were not more serious.⁵⁴ It gave him his first experience of command, and the fact that he was chosen for a commission indicates that his leadership qualities were apparent. While convalescing he had time to contemplate the future, and saw an opportunity in military aviation which created a pathway.⁵⁵ He had a different vision for the future from that offered by the Army, and that is why he chose to be an aviator.



Studio Portrait 16/11/17 (Thodey Collection)

⁵⁴ Interview by author: Mrs. Nina Wood interviewed 31 August 2006.

⁵⁵ Isitt Personal File 23/793.



Isitt in England on leave c.1918

Chapter 2: War in the Air 1917-1919

For some time Isitt had been planning a different career path. As he used to joke to his daughter, he preferred sleeping in a bed to the incredible discomfort of a trench on the Western Front,¹ and on 9 March 1917 he was discharged from the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF) to take up a commission in the Royal Flying Corps (RFC).² The bare details of this transfer were reported in the New Zealand press, with the *Southland Times* of 20 April 1917 representing a typical example.³ On 8 March 1917 he had entered Officer Cadet Wing at Denham for initial officer training, before being posted to No. 2 School of Aeronautics at Oxford University on 4 April 1917 for ground training. This was followed by a posting to No. 7 Reserve Squadron at Netheravon on 11 May 1917, with the rank of 2nd Lieutenant on probation.

No. 7 Reserve Squadron was a training squadron, and Isitt had his first flight on 13 May 1917 for 20 minutes. The flight took place between 10.40 a.m. and 11.00 a.m., was recorded as reaching a height of 1500 feet, and

¹ *Interview by author: Mrs N. Wood, interviewed 31 August 2006.*

² *Isitt, Personal File 23/793.*

³ *Southland Times, 30 April 1917, p.8.*

consisted of one take-off and landing with Lieutenant Turner as instructor. The Maurice Farman S.11 Shorthorn, was equipped with an 80 h.p. Renault engine.⁴ It was a bi-plane, and powered with a pusher propeller. This ensured an excellent view from the cockpit, which was equipped with only three instruments, of which the most important was a revolution counter. The speed range was narrow, with pilots taking off at about 40 m.p.h. and cruising at about 55 m.p.h.⁵ Early in the war it had been used as a bomber, but advances in aircraft performance during the ensuing three years had relegated the type to training duties only.

By the end of his first week of training, Isitt had accumulated 1 hour 40 minutes in the air, and the following week he had a further six flights. On 19 May Lieutenant Scott replaced Lieutenant Turner as his instructor, and after two flights with his new instructor Isitt was sent off solo on 22 May 1917. He had received 3 hours 15 minutes dual instruction, had made eight flights, and completed 28 landings. By today's standards this seems a very low number of hours flying experience, when 7-10 hours is considered the minimum for solo standard, but by the standards of the First World War it was not exceptional, and many pilots were sent solo with less than two hours instruction.⁶

The next week was a busy one, with Isitt managing twelve flights in a spell of good weather. Solo flying predominated, with 2 hours 20 minutes being

⁴ B. Robertson, *British Military Aircraft Serials 1912-1969*, Shepperton: Ian Allan, 1969, p.41.

⁵ Cecil Lewis, *Farewell to Wings*, London: Temple Press, 1964, p.3.

⁶ Cecil Lewis, *Sagittarius Rising*, London: Peter Davis, 1936, p.16.

recorded, combined with 1 hour 20 minutes dual, so that by the end of the week Isitt's total hours had risen to 7 hours 40 minutes.⁷ During the week Lieutenant Scott took Isitt for a 20 minute flight in a Sopwith One and a Half Strutter, which was a two-seat tractor reconnaissance biplane. Historically it was important as being the first British aircraft to go into service with an interruptor gear permitting a fixed machine-gun to fire through the propeller arc. By the time Isitt flew in it, the aircraft had been outclassed as a fighter on the Western Front, but it still had a useful role to play as a bomber.⁸

In his final week at Netheravon, Isitt had only one flight, his last in the Maurice Farman Shorthorn, and his longest to date, taking 1 hour 6 minutes. By the end of his course, Isitt had totalled 9 hours 5 minutes flying, of which 4 hours 5 minutes were solo.⁹

Isitt's Record of Service indicates that his next posting in June 1917 was to No. 55 Training Squadron, but within three days this was amended to No. 66 Training Squadron, based at Yatesbury,¹⁰ which is in Wiltshire, and lies to the south-west of Swindon. With his army experience, combined with his specialty knowledge of signalling, it was natural for Isitt to be posted for training in two-seat aircraft, with an ultimate objective of becoming an army co-operation pilot. Isitt re-commenced flying on 8 June, with two passenger flights in a Royal Aircraft Factory RE 8 and a Royal Aircraft

⁷ Isitt, *Pilot's Flying Log Book*.

⁸ J.M. Bruce, *British Aeroplanes 1914-1918*, London: Putnam, 1969, pp.541-51.

⁹ Isitt, *Pilot's Flying Log Book*.

¹⁰ Isitt, *Record of Service*, Royal Flying Corps.

Factory BE 2b. This was his introduction to these types of aircraft, and he was later to fly the RE 8 operationally. The BE 2b was part of the BE series of aircraft produced by the Royal Aircraft Factory. The name had its origin in the title 'Bleriot Experimental' or 'Biplane Experimental', and set a fashion in the use of initial letters that has never faded entirely. The bulk of all artillery observation work carried out by the RFC in the First World War was performed by the three aircraft types BE 2c, BE 2e and the RE 8, so it was useful for Isitt to train on types which were either in current use or had only recently been phased from front-line service.

Isitt's initial instructor was Lieutenant Pettigrew, but he also flew with Lieutenant Vinson and Captain Dean. The intensity of training had escalated, and all flights ranged in height from 3,000-4,000 feet. During his first week he recorded 2 hours 45 minutes in the air, all dual, and was admonished for failure to record in his Log Book a flight on the first day of the course. This air of indifference to an accurate recording in his Log Book was a feature of Isitt, and leaves a constant suspicion that the details recorded are never entirely certain. In the second week on the course he went solo in both the BE 2d and the BE 2e. His Log Book was again noted 'Please include all flights when marking up Log Book.'¹¹

The next week consisted almost entirely of solo flights, with Isitt undertaking his first cross-country flight over two days. He left Yatesbury on 22 June in BE 2e departing at 10.50 a.m. and after cruising at 3000 feet, he

¹¹ Isitt, *Pilot's Flying Log Book*.

arrived at Oxford at 11.45 a.m. He spent only 30 minutes on the ground, taking off again at 12.15 p.m. for Upavon, and arriving there at 1.25 p.m. after a 1 hour 10 minute flight which reached 4,000 feet. Upavon is on Salisbury Plain, and at that time was a prominent Royal Flying Corps station. Isitt stayed the night, and flew back to Yatesbury the following day, leaving at 11.45 a.m. and arriving at noon after a 15 minute journey.¹²

On 25 June Isitt had a busy day, commencing with a 10 minute flight at 5.30 a.m. Then at 1.40 p.m. he took off for a 1 hour 45 minute flight. This was followed by a height test that commenced at 5.40 p.m., which attained a height of 8,000 feet, and lasted for 2 hours 35 minutes, followed by an eventual landing at 8.15 p.m. The next day he had a 10 minute check with Lieutenant Vinson in an RE 8, and marked his Log Book as having graduated.¹³ Graduation meant the awarding of his Pilot's Brevet or 'Wings', and confirmation of his rank Second Lieutenant in the Flying Branch, to which qualified flying personnel were transferred on graduation.¹⁴

Having graduated, Isitt now commenced to convert to the aircraft he was to fly in combat, the RE 8. He started with 15 minutes in Re 8 with Lieutenant Vinson on 10 July, followed by a 1 hour 15 minute flight, again with Vinson on 11 July. He went solo in an RE 8 on 11 July. The RE 8 was the eighth design in the Royal Aircraft Factory's Reconnaissance Experimental series, drawn up to provide a replacement for the various BE two-seaters. It was

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Isitt, *Record of Service*, Royal Flying Corps.

intended to meet a RFC specification for an aircraft capable of defending itself whilst performing corps - reconnaissance and artillery spotting duties. To meet this specification, the Royal Aircraft Factory designed a two-seat tractor biplane, powered by a 140 h.p. RAF 4a engine and accommodating the observer in the rear cockpit with a Lewis gun on a rotating mounting. The pilot sat almost under the centre section of the wing, and controlled a fixed Vickers gun mounted immediately in front of the cockpit on the starboard side of the fuselage, firing through the propeller arc. The service ceiling was 11,000 feet, and at 6,500 feet its maximum speed was 98 m.p.h. It took 21 minutes to reach 6,500 feet, and 40 minutes to achieve 10,000 feet.¹⁵ At this time it was about 20 m.p.h. slower than the current fighter aircraft then operating, such as the British Sopwith Camel or the German Albatros D.V.

Army co-operation work was one of the chief tasks of the RE 8, and the pilot and observer were seated very close together in order to achieve the highest possible degree of collaboration. In this machine the pilot normally undertook the major part of the spotting, while it was the observer's duty to scan the sky and watch for enemy aircraft. The RE 8 was the workhorse of the Royal Flying Corps, with over 20 squadrons being equipped with the type, and it was the machine in which the majority of artillery shoots were done.¹⁶ While it had many critics, it was generally reliable and flew an enormous number of hours in the course of its duties.¹⁷ For Isitt it was a

¹⁵ L. Bridgman, *The Clouds Remember*, London: Arms & Armour, 1972, p.28.

¹⁶ *Aeroplane Monthly*, December 2008, pp.26-7.

¹⁷ J.M. Bruce, *Windsock Datafile 24 RAF RE 8*, pp.2-5.

front-line combat machine which he had to master if he was to survive in combat.

After going solo in the RE 8, Isitt flew the type in a series of solo flights over the next five days. All the flights were longer than one hour, and two flights were of 2 hours 15 minutes duration.

The next week saw the end of his attachment to No. 66 Training Squadron, following which he shifted to Brooklands, another training aerodrome for an Artillery Reconnaissance Course. Isitt made three flights solo in a BE 2e, carrying out Artillery Reconnaissance on the first flight, and then concluded with training exercises at Woking on the last two flights.¹⁸ By the time he finished his training on 26 July 1917, he had recorded 51 hours 30 minutes in the air, of which 40 hours were solo.¹⁹ He was now considered fully trained, and at that stage of the War his total flying hours were about average for postings to the Western Front. His training compares with that of Cecil Lewis,²⁰ who had a total of thirteen hours when he flew to France in 1916.²¹ Similarly, Coningham²² had only fifteen hours solo when he was posted to France in 1916.²³ As the war progressed it was realised that better trained pilots had a greater chance of survival in combat, and required sixty hours before being posted to the Western Front.

¹⁸ Isitt, *Record of Service*, Royal Flying Corps.

¹⁹ Isitt, *Pilot's Flying Log Book*.

²⁰ *Cross and Cockade Journal*, Vol.28 No.3 1997, p.168. Lewis was an RFC pilot who subsequently became a well respected author, writing mainly of his wartime experiences.

²¹ Cecil Lewis, *Sagittarius Rising*, p.30.

²² Arthur Coningham was a New Zealander who flew DH 5's with the RFC in the First World War. After the War he was offered a permanent commission in the RAF, and rose to the rank of Air Marshal.

²³ Vincent Orange, *Coningham*, London: Macdonald, 1990, p.15.

Within two days Isitt was on his way to the Western Front and on 31 July 1917 joined No. 7 Squadron, Royal Flying Corps at Proven. Isitt's Flight Commander was Lieutenant H.D. Williams, a New Zealander who had joined the Army with the Auckland Mounted Rifles, but in 1916 transferred to the Royal Flying Corps.²⁴ The Squadron was equipped with RE 8 aircraft, and Isitt was initially allotted A3688 as his personal machine, which he flew solidly for nearly two months.²⁵ Isitt had one solo familiarisation flight on 5 August lasting 30 minutes. The following day he had his first operational flight, teamed with the man who was to be his regular observer over the next fortnight, 2nd Lieutenant W.E.V. Richards. This flight was the first time Isitt had carried a crew member other than his Instructor. It was terminated early as it was 'Dud for Observation', and the lead to the oil pump broke. A target area of Ypres and Lille had been scheduled.²⁶

The oil pump lead was repaired overnight, and necessitated an air test of 50 minutes the following day, in order to ensure that the machine was operational. From then on Isitt flew nearly every day for the remainder of the month. On many days he flew twice on operational missions, and it was not uncommon for him to record six hours flying per day. Unfortunately, he did not record in his Log Book the nature of the tasks he undertook, nor the location over which he was involved. One of the few flights recorded in any

²⁴ Williams, H.D., *Personal File No. 7 Squadron, R.F.C.*

²⁵ Isitt, *Pilot's Flying Log Book.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

detail took place on 16 August 1917; just over one week after Isitt had commenced operational flying.

In his Log Book, Isitt records 'Richards shot a Hun down out of control but did not see him crash on account of clouds. We were taking photos over Poelcapelle at 2000'.²⁷

The event was noted in the Official War History, *The War in the Air*,²⁸ as a positive example of the manner in which an RE8 could be handled, and in the *Royal Flying Corps Communiqués 1917-1918, Communiqué No 101 11-16 August 1917*:

'2nd Lts L.M. Isitt and W.E.V. Richards were attacked by two Albatros scouts while on patrol. They shot one down out of control, and on reconnoitring the ground at low altitude an EA was seen on the ground'.²⁹

This was Isitt's only confirmed combat success.

Isitt continued to fly daily, reaching 100 hours flying time on 25 August, which meant that he had flown 60 hours of combat missions in sixteen days, an average of nearly four hours per day. No details of any August flights are recorded in his Log Book, but in September some brief details started to be noted. Generally it is either 'shoot' or 'flash patrol'. 'Shoots' involved co-

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ H.A. Jones, *The War in the Air, Volume IV*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1934, p.175.

²⁹ Chaz Bowyer(ed), *Royal Flying Corps Communiqués 1917-1918*, London: Grub Street, 1998, p.108.

operation with the Army, identifying the fall of artillery shot, and relaying corrections to improve the barrage. 'Flash Patrols' involved the identification of enemy artillery locations from their muzzle flashes when firing, so that Allied artillery could respond with counter-fire. By 30 September he had flown 179 hours, recording 71 hours in the month. Even though he made the notation 'Dud Weather' on 6 September, he still flew 6 hours 40 minutes on that day. This solid pace continued into October, and by 18 October he had accumulated 217 hours flying, or 175 hours in just over two months at the Front.³⁰

On 23 October Isitt took leave through until 8 November. He did not record where he spent this leave, but family members know that he spent the majority of his free time in London. He maintained close contacts with various relatives, one of whom was his cousin Tom Isitt, who was married to a prominent ballerina Adeline Genae. Isitt stayed with them and the ballerina gave him a pair of ballet shoes as a good luck charm. Isitt always flew with them in combat. Adeline later became Dame Adeline Genae-Isitt, D.B.E.³¹

When Isitt returned after his leave, it was again to the Ypres sector, as No 7 Squadron had again come under the control of the 2nd Wing, II Brigade, and for the remainder of the month he was bedevilled with bad weather and unreliable equipment, reflecting the onset of winter. Of the nine flights he made during the month, he described seven as being 'Dud'. There were

³⁰ Isitt, *Pilot's Flying Log Book*.

³¹ *Interview by author: Peter Thodey, interviewed 23 May 2006.*

wireless failures, as well as engine problems causing flights to be terminated prematurely, and he recorded only fifteen hours in November.³²

Engine problems continued in December, and on 4 December he came down three times with engine failure, while there was a further engine failure on 5 December. His regular mount at this time was A3424, but after this date, no further engine problems occurred. The weather continued to be a factor, with only 16 flights being recorded, two of them being tests of 5 minutes duration. The patrols involved either 'Shoots' or 'Flash Patrols'. On 17 December, together with Observer Williamson, when on a 375 Shoot, his aircraft was attacked by an Albatros, which was shot down by a Nieuport. By the end of 1917, Isitt's flying totalled 263 hours.³³

January 1918 continued the solid workload, involving 'Shoots', 'Artillery Observation' and 'Flash Reconnaissance.' From February 1918 Isitt ceased to record any further individual flights with No 7 Squadron, but indicated in his Log Book a total of 341 hours 20 minutes by the end of March 1918, of which the hours in France were 300.³⁴ Just as his tour was ending, the *History of No 7 Squadron* records:

'March 25, 1918.

McClurg made Flt. Cdr. Of 'B' Flight. Abundant indignation at the passing over of old pilots like Wattie, Gillie, Isitt.'³⁵

³² Isitt, *Pilot's Flying Log Book*.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ A.G.W., *No. 7 Squadron RFC: The Diary of A.G.W.*, Aylesbury: Hunt, Barwood and Co, n.d., p.40.

No doubt Isitt's pending posting to Home Establishment was a factor in the apparent overlooking for promotion, but even although Isitt was only on his first tour of operations, the casualty rate for pilots was such that he was classified among the more experienced.

At the beginning of April 1918, he was transferred back to the United Kingdom and posted to the Headquarters of the South Training Brigade, where he carried out a number of temporary assignments at various stations in Wiltshire, including Boscombe Down and Upavon. He had been promoted Lieutenant on 1 April 1918, on which date the Royal Air Force was formed, and initially served on temporary duty with No 105 Squadron and 6 Training Depot Station, before becoming an Instructor.³⁶

No individual flight times are recorded from February to April, but for May the following summary was included in Isitt's Log Book:

DH 6 ³⁷	15.50
AW ³⁸	8.10
BE	2.40
DH 4	3.25
DH 9	1.00
	—————
	31.05 ³⁹

³⁶ Isitt, *Record of Service*, Royal Flying Corps.

³⁷ Eden, Paul and Moeng, Soph (eds), *The Encyclopedia of World Aircraft*, p.186. The de Havilland DH 6 was a training aircraft designed to have safe flying characteristics as well as being easily produced, with structural simplicity paramount.

³⁸ Eden and Moeng, p.12. The AW was probably an Armstrong Whitworth FK3, which were used extensively for training at the time. It was a biplane noted for its viceless flying characteristics.

These were a varied selection of aircraft, and all were single-engine, two seat biplanes.

Most interesting were the DH 4 and DH 9. These were both De Havilland designs, and when introduced the DH 4 showed a significant performance improvement over its contemporaries. One of the features of the DH 4 was the considerable distance between the pilot and the observer, and this drew criticism on the grounds that it would impair cooperation between them and prevent the aircraft being fought as effectively as possible.⁴⁰ To overcome this perceived deficiency, the DH 9 was designed as a development of the DH 4, with the pilot and observer's cockpits close together.⁴¹

Isitt again recorded his June flights in total, following a similar pattern to May. The summary was:

DH 6	14.30
AW	3.15
BE 2e	3.25
DH 4	4.35
DH 9	1.25
	—
	27.10 ⁴²

By the end of June his flying hours had totalled just on 400.

³⁹ Isitt, *Pilot's Flying Log Book*.

⁴⁰ Bridgman, pp. 104-5.

⁴¹ *ibid*, pp.106-8.

⁴² Isitt, *Pilot's Flying Log Book*.

For a fortnight in July he resumed recording individual flights, flying the same mixture of aircraft, mainly on short flights of an instructional nature. On 3 July he undertook a significant cross-country flight in a DH 6, landing at Grantham and staying overnight, before returning the following day. He overflew Witney, Buckminster, Oxford and Harshalton and took 6 hours 15 minutes for the journey. However, after entering 21 hours flying in fourteen days, Isitt recorded no more individual flights in his Log Book until 1924. This Log Book estimates that Isitt flew 85 hours during his instructional period in England.⁴³

On 6 July 1918 Isitt was promoted Temporary Captain, and volunteered for a second tour of operational duty, returning to France with No 98 Bomber Squadron as a flight commander in August.⁴⁴ This squadron, equipped with DH 9's, was employed in daylight bombing, being based at Clairmarais. After moving to Blangermont in October, from 1 November the squadron was employed chiefly in reconnaissance work. Isitt estimated that he flew 200 hours on operations with No. 98 Squadron.⁴⁵ During Isitt's time with No. 98 Squadron, numerous bombing raids were carried out against a wide range of targets, mainly in occupied France, but also in Germany.⁴⁶ With the wind down to the Armistice in November 1918, offensive operations became secondary, and an emphasis was placed on reconnaissance, in order to

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Isitt, *Record of Service*, Royal Flying Corps.

⁴⁵ Isitt, *Pilot's Flying Log Book*.

⁴⁶ H.A. Jones, *The War in the Air, Volume VI*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937, pp.480-1, pp. 490-1, p.529, p.542, p.548.

ascertain the movement of the retreating German army. On 11 November 1918, No. 98 Squadron was based at Abscon.⁴⁷

Following the end of the War, during November and December 1918, as an acting squadron commander, Isitt was employed in flying a number of German aircraft handed over to France and Britain under the terms of the Armistice. The types of aircraft he flew, described in a 1936 Attestation, were an Aviatik 12 hours, Fokker D5 6 hours, Roland Halberstadt 22 hours and an LVG 30 hours. The Aviatik was probably a C1 used initially in the bomber reconnaissance role, but as the war progressed it was converted into a trainer.⁴⁸ Isitt was most specific in identifying the Fokker D5, which was a single-seat training biplane of which only 299 were built. It was used in flying schools to introduce pupils to the operating characteristics of a rotary engine.⁴⁹ The Halberstadt was probably a CV two-seater which in 1918 was regarded as the best German reconnaissance and artillery aircraft. Because of its high performance, the Germans were loath to part with the aircraft, and only 20 were ceded to the British as part of the Armistice requirements.⁵⁰ The LVG could have been a CV or a CVI. Both were two seat biplanes used for artillery spotting, and both were in wide use in 1918.⁵¹

Returning to the United Kingdom early in 1919, Isitt was selected for the first of the long navigational courses at that time being introduced by the

⁴⁷ *ibid*, p.98.

⁴⁸ P.M. Grosz, *Windsock Datafile 63 Aviatik C1*, Berkhamsted: Albatros, 1997, pp.1-6.

⁴⁹ P.M. Grosz, *Windsock Mini Datafile 11 Fokker D. V*, Berkhamsted: Albatros, 1997, pp.1-4.

⁵⁰ P.M. Grosz, *Windsock Datafile 69, Halberstadt C.V*, Berkhamsted: Albatros, 1998, pp.1-11.

⁵¹ W.M. Lamberton, *Reconnaissance and Bomber Aircraft of the 1914-1918 War*, Letchworth: Harleyford, 1962, p. 138.

Royal Air Force. In February 1919 he commenced this course at the School of Air Pilotage, Andover, Hants. The course lasted three months and covered Map Reading, Dead Reckoning Navigation, Direction Finding Wireless and Direction Finding Navigation. In his Confidential Report at the end of the course, Isitt was rated as Exceptionally Good as an Instructor, and in his qualification as an Aerial Navigator his work was excellent.

The Chief Technical Officer rated him as follows:

‘This Officer has passed out, and is recommended as a First Class Pilot Navigator. He steers an excellent course, and is one of the few pilots who rely on their Navigator and help with their own knowledge.’

The School Commandant concurred in this assessment: ‘A very sound pilot navigator by day or night.’⁵²

Isitt was also issued by the Commandant with a certificate stating that:

‘Captain L.M. Isitt is efficient Day and Night Pilot, and has flown all types of machines including single-seaters SE5,⁵³ Sopwith Pup,⁵⁴ Snipes,⁵⁵ and Twin - Engine Handley Page O400.’⁵⁶

In his 1936 Attestation, Isitt states that he flew the Snipe for 18 hours, and the Handley Page O400 for 150 hours.⁵⁷ At that time the Sopwith Snipe was the premier Royal Air Force single seat fighter, and stayed in front-line use

⁵² Isitt, *Personal File NZ1002*.

⁵³ Eden and Moeng, p.1069. A single seat biplane, designed by the Royal Aircraft Factory, which developed into one of the most successful fighters of the First World War.

⁵⁴ *ibid*, p.1097. A small biplane, designed by Sopwith, which proved a capable fighter aircraft despite its low power.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p.1096. This was a very successful biplane fighter, designed by Sopwith, introduced at the end of the First World War.

⁵⁶ *ibid*. C.A. Owers, *Windsock Datafile 116 Handley Page O/400*, Berkhamsted: Albatros, 2006, pp.6-24

⁵⁷ Isitt, *Personal File NZ1002*.

for another ten years.⁵⁸ The O400 was a large (100 feet span) twin engine bomber, which was used extensively in the latter stages of the War to bomb Germany. It was Isitt's first experience of a multi-engine aircraft.⁵⁹

On 13 June 1919, the Commandant of the School of Aerial Navigation, Lieutenant Colonel M.G. Christie wrote to Lieutenant Colonel A.V. Bettington, then Aviation Advisory Officer to the New Zealand Government. In the letter Christie mentions that Isitt had been sent to take the special course in Navigation by the Postmaster General of New Zealand - Sir Joseph Ward, who was friend of Captain Isitt and his family. Christie then stated:

‘On his return to New Zealand Captain Isitt would very much like to take up some position in Civil or Military Aviation. You will find him a most reliable and intelligent officer.’⁶⁰

As a result of the course, Isitt obtained the first Navigator's License issued to anyone by the Air Ministry. This license reads as follows:

‘Air Ministry - Air Navigation Acts 1911 to 1919. License No.1
Licensed as a Navigator, 2nd Class, of Aircraft carrying passengers or goods for hire or reward, for day and night flights over land, including flights of not more than 100 kilometres (60 miles) over sea, for 12 months from 18/8/19 to 17/8/20.’⁶¹

Isitt also obtained his Commercial or ‘B’ Pilot's License on 1 July 1919.

⁶⁰ Isitt, *Personal File NZ1002*.

⁶¹ *ibid.*

Whilst these formalities were being carried out, Isitt was making preparations to return to New Zealand. He sailed in early August on the *Bremen*, transshipping at Melbourne to the *Port Melbourne*, before arriving in Auckland on 9 September 1919.⁶² A number of other officers returned with him, including Captain R.B. Bannerman, New Zealand's leading fighter ace, and who later served with Isitt on the Air Board in the Second World War. Isitt had been absent from New Zealand for three years and eleven months, and as a result of this overseas service was entitled to wear the 1914-15 Star, British War Medal and Victory Medal. The 1914-15 Star was forwarded by the New Zealand Government, but the other medals were issued by the Imperial authorities.⁶³

In many ways Isitt had a 'good' war, and although he was wounded, he made a satisfactory recovery. He was a survivor in an environment where casualties were extremely high.⁶⁴ For this he had to be lucky, but he was also skilful. This was demonstrated by his shooting down an aircraft while piloting an RE8, for which he received favourable mention in *The War in the Air*.⁶⁵ In his second tour he became a Flight Commander, exhibiting leadership skills to accompany his growing experience. He desired to return to New Zealand as part of an embryo Air Force, and to prepare for this role undertook advanced courses in navigation. When he did return he was among the most experienced airmen available to serve in the nascent Air Force, and his selection was a logical choice. The only question mark

⁶² *Southland Times*, 9 September 1919, p.8.

⁶³ Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

⁶⁴ I. McGibbon (Ed), 2000, p.8.

⁶⁵ Jones, *The War in the Air, Vol. IV*, p.175.

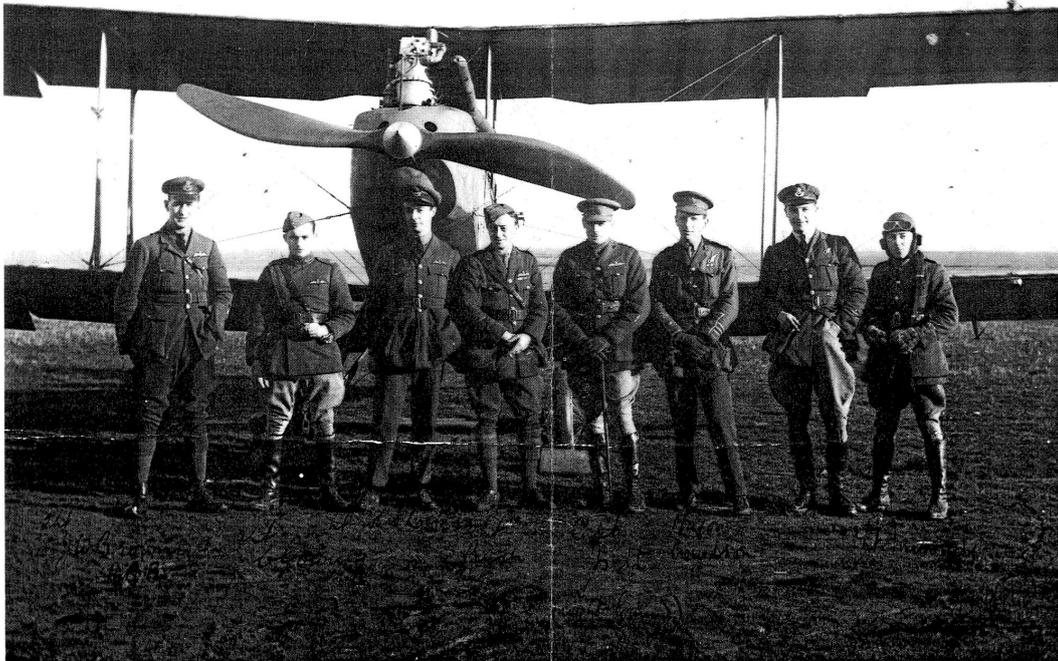
concerns his Pilot's Log Book entries. He did not shirk from administrative detail, so perhaps he did not consider that the Log Book was important, being a mere recording of past events. When recording was important, as required by his attendance at the RAF Central Flying School in 1927, his entries were impeccable.

Isitt took the opportunity to learn from the war and to outline a pathway to the future. He ensured that he had the widest experience possible, and undertook instructing duties at a range of stations between his operational tours. His navigation course after the war imparted to him a skill which few other pilots possessed at the time. Undoubtedly he could have stayed with the RAF in a similar manner to fellow New Zealanders Coningham and Park, but instead he chose to return to New Zealand. He had discovered his life's work, which enabled him to experience satisfaction at a role in which he was not only competent, but also enjoyed. A service career also helped fulfil a sense of duty engendered by his Methodist upbringing.

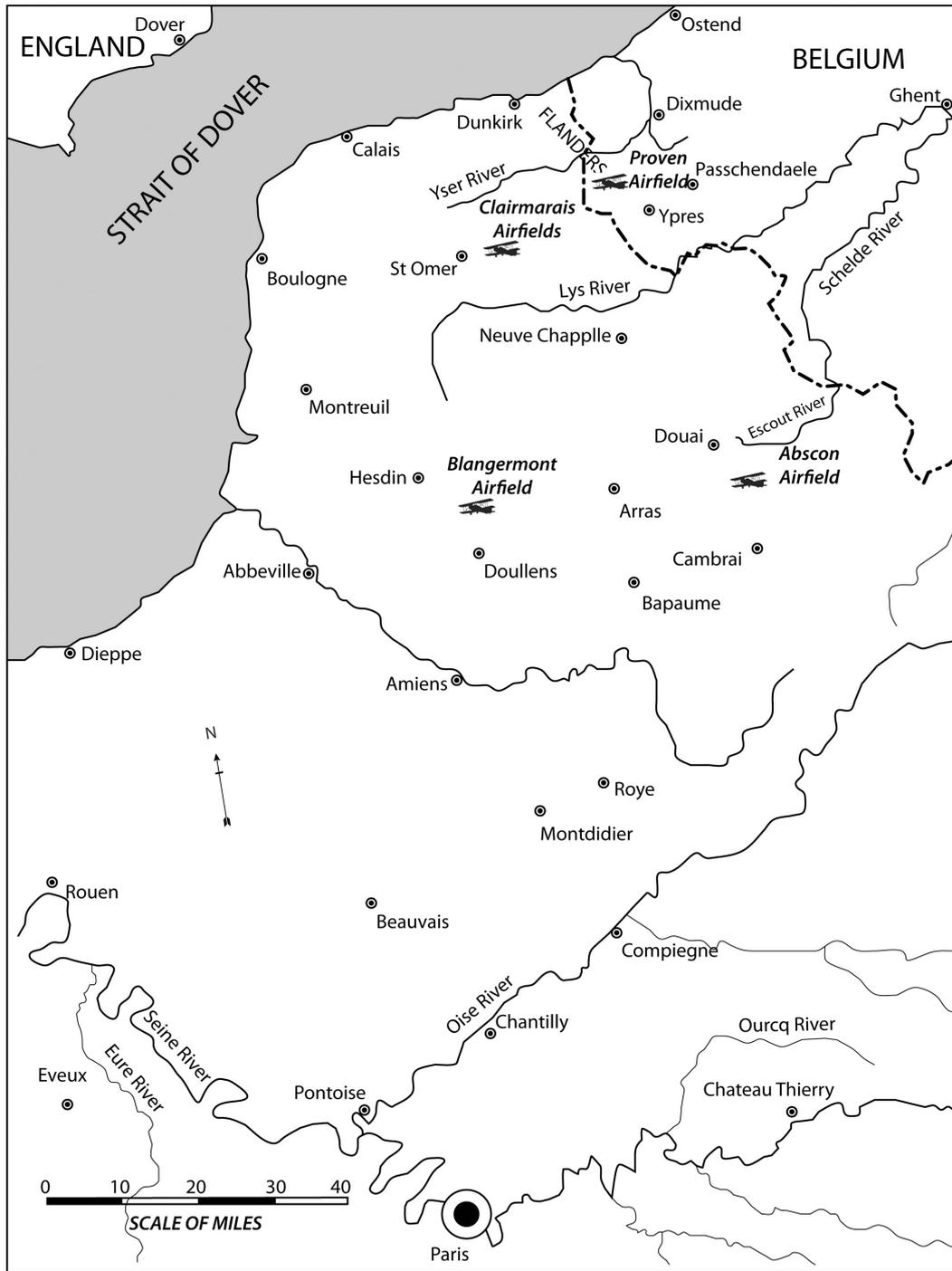
Overall, Isitt did not suffer from his wartime experiences, although the effects from his injuries never went away. He enjoyed the experience of command, and was ready to make the adjustment to a peacetime world. He set the highest standards for his own conduct and performance, providing positive leadership for those who served under him.



*Isitt (third from right) on first tour of operations with fellow RE8 pilots.
(RNZAF Museum)*



*Isitt (fourth from right) on second tour of operations as Flight Commander,
C Flight, 98 Squadron, RAF Abscon, late 1918. (Cross and Cockade)*



RFC/RAF Airfields - France and Belgium 1917 -18

Chapter 3: New Zealand and Abroad 1919-1929

When Isitt returned to New Zealand in 1919, the country was showing the effects of its involvement in the Great War. He came back to his mother country in the hope of serving in a rudimentary Air Force. Economically the country was not in a position to fund an Air Force, and could afford only the nucleus of an air arm attached to the Army. Notwithstanding the paucity of funding, and assisted by the generosity of benefactors such as Henry Wigram, the Air Arm was able to sustain itself through the 1920's, before entering a period of steady progress in the early 1930's. Isitt returned to New Zealand on Tuesday 9 September 1919, disembarking at Auckland from the *Port Melbourne*.¹

Earlier in the year, Isitt had written to the General Officer Commanding, New Zealand Expeditionary Force, on his understanding that a New Zealand Wing of the Royal Air Force was to be established, and he wished to submit an application for a commission in the Force.² The response to this application was swift:

¹ *Southland Times*, 9 September 1919, p.8.

² *Isitt Personal File 1002*, NZDF Personnel Archives, Trentham

The attached application by Captain L.M. Isitt is returned.

The application may be re-submitted if and when a New Zealand Wing is formed.³

Isitt was more successful with his next job application to the Air force Advisor in New Zealand.⁴ On 29 October 1919 he was informed in a handwritten letter on a Department of Defence letterhead:

Dear Isitt,

Am glad to inform you that you have been selected for the Chch job.

Hope you like it. You start on 15 November.

Yours sincerely,

J.L. Sleeman.⁵

Lieutenant-Colonel J.L. Sleeman, C.B.E. was an Imperial Staff Officer on loan to the New Zealand Army, serving as Director of Military Training. He had a keen interest in aviation, and had chaired an advisory committee to review the Bettington Report. Colonel A.V. Bettington was a serving Royal Air Force (RAF) officer who was offered to the New Zealand Government to provide a report on air bases and the technical aspects of future air requirements. He had arrived in New Zealand on 17 March 1919, bringing with him four aircraft and a small team of advisors. In the first draft of his report, Bettington recommended an air establishment consisting of seven

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

squadrons comprising fighters, bombers and flying boats which he considered the minimum for an operational air force.⁶

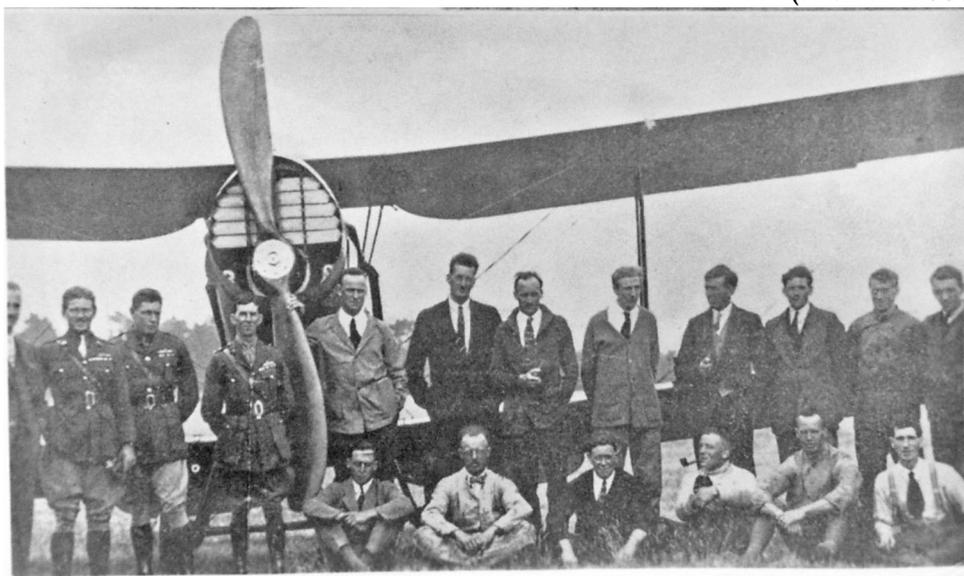
The cost for this proposed scheme amounted to just over £2,500,000 in the first eight years of operation, which was too high for the New Zealand Government to accept. Bettington was requested to reduce the scale of his recommendations, and pared in excess of £1,000,000 from his second scheme. Even this was too much, with Cabinet in August 1919 eventually approving estimates for £25,000 as an appropriate amount for Aviation activities. While the amount involved may have been small, at least there was a tangible recognition that aviation was maturing and required funding. Bettington submitted his original report in June 1919, coinciding with a British Government offer to donate 100 aircraft to any Dominion for assistance in creating own air force. Bettington strongly urged the acceptance of this offer, but when he finally sailed from New Zealand in September 1919, no decision had been reached on the creation of an air force or the acceptance of the British gift offer. Eventually, in January 1920 New Zealand requested 35 aircraft, but because of the lateness of the request, only 20 Avro 504 basic trainers and 9 DH 9's were eventually despatched. These twenty nine aircraft, plus the four brought by Bettington, gave New Zealand a stock of thirty three military aircraft, with the Army retaining control of all aviation matters.⁷

⁶ ANZ Air 1 102/3/1, *Bettington Report*.

⁷ Ross, p.10.



*Second TAF Refresher Course at Wigram 1924.
 Top: John Seabrook, Tiny White, George Bolt.
 Middle: Ken Hall, Ian Keith, Gary Stedman, Bill Harrison, Maurice Buckley.
 Front: John Findlay, Tom Wilkes, Isitt, Gordon Coull, T.J. Denton.
 (RNZAF Museum)*



*Refresher Course at Wigram in front of Bristol Fighter.
 Isitt third from left c.1925. (ANZ Air 118 64 Vol. 20 p.113)*

While he was in New Zealand, Bettington had three officers with RAF experience attached to him as staff. One, Captain J.H. Don was appointed to take charge of the four aircraft brought by Bettington, and which were based at Sockburn. Don had tested the first aircraft to be assembled, a Bristol Fighter, on 9 September 1919, in his role as Military Equipment and Instructional Officer, New Zealand Air Service. However, his tenure in this role was short, and it was announced that he was relinquishing the appointment at his own request, as he desired to return to private life.⁸ The same newspaper notice announced the appointment of Captain L.M. Isitt to succeed Don.⁹

Isitt's duties in his new role involved looking after the aircraft brought by Bettington, as well as the subsequent gift aircraft; acting as liaison officer between the Canterbury Aviation Company and the Government; and supervising military flying training when a coherent policy had been put in place.¹⁰ Although Isitt resumed flying on his appointment, his Log Books for the period 1920-1924 are incomplete. It was not until 1925, when he commenced a new Log Book that he started listing total flight hours for individual aircraft which he had flown. In the beginning of this Book he had summarised his previous experience and the following note was appended to this summary:

⁸ *Southland Times*, 1 November 1919, p.8

⁹ Isitt *Personal File 1002*. Isitt had been appointed Military Equipment and Instructional Officer, New Zealand Air Service, with the rank of Captain, vide Gazette 145/1919 dated 15 November 1919.

¹⁰ Ross, p.13.

Period 1920-1924 incomplete returns available, time shown extracted from records.

T.M. Wilkes Capt.

Director of Air Services.¹¹

In this summary, no flying hours are listed for 1923 and 1924, while an average of only 50 hours per year for the period 1920-22 appears uncharacteristically low, particularly as in 1925 he recorded over 300 hours flying and a further 250 hours in the first three months of 1926 alone.¹²

In the first weeks following his return to New Zealand in 1919, Isitt found the love of his life. He became engaged to Elsie Gladys Caverhill and they were married by the Reverend H. Briggs at the Presbyterian Church, Roseneath, Wellington on 26 April 1920.¹³ Elsie was Isitt's third cousin, and they had in fact met prior to the First World War. No romantic attachment arose from this pre-war meeting, and it was not until Isitt returned to New Zealand after the war that they met again, and love blossomed. It would seem that the wedding was a low key event, as it was not reported in the social pages of either the *Dominion* or the *Evening Post*. Isitt's mother's maiden name was Caverhill, and she was descended from a prominent early North Canterbury settler family.¹⁴ One branch of this family moved on from Canterbury to settle in the Wairarapa, and it was from this branch that Elsie descended.

¹¹ Isitt *Pilot's Flying Log Book*.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Isitt *Personal File 1002*.

¹⁴ G.R. Macdonald, *Dictionary of Canterbury Biography*, Canterbury Museum, p.C196.

Len and Elsie Isitt set up married life together in a house adjacent to Sockburn Aerodrome, living in Service accommodation for the first seventeen years of their married life. They had two daughters, the first being Adeline Caverhill, who was always known as Nina, and who was born in Christchurch on 10 June 1921. The second daughter, Annette Elizabeth, known to the family as Annie, was also born in Christchurch on 9 April 1925.¹⁵

But changes were also happening in the wider world of aviation, and in view of the probable future developments in aviation, involving the use of land, sea and air forces; a Defence Committee was formed in 1920 to ensure the effective co-ordination of these forces. This Committee met only once, but concurrently an Air Board was established to consider all questions relating to aviation and to advise the Minister of Defence. In July 1920 it was formed into a permanent Air Board with Captain T.M. Wilkes as Secretary. It had no executive powers and acted purely in an advisory capacity. Wilkes was the only officer of the New Zealand Staff Corps who had graduated as a pilot with the RFC.¹⁶

In September 1920 the Government approved New Zealand's first aviation policy, seeking to foster civil aviation in the expectation that it could be employed to assist defence in time of need. The Government was acting on the recommendation of the Air Board, and the policy meant that some positive direction was being supplied in a time of financial stringency.¹⁷

¹⁵ Isitt *Personal File 1002*.

¹⁶ I. McGibbon (Ed), p.611; Ross, p.10.

¹⁷ Ross, p.12.

Isitt had initially been alone at Sockburn since late 1919, but his staff eventually grew to three, with the first being Lieutenant T.J. Denton as Equipment Officer. Outside help was required from mechanics to keep the aircraft serviceable.¹⁸ Early in 1921, Isitt was joined by two further Army personnel as ledger keeper and storeman. These four comprised the original aviation corps.¹⁹ In addition to his regular duties, Isitt also became involved in proving flights at the behest of the Air Board. On 8 September 1920 Isitt and Wilkes flew from Washdyke near Timaru, to Mount Cook and back. The flight attracted considerable attention and was reported in the United Kingdom magazine *Aeroplane* in November 1920.

In January 1921, Captain Euan Dickson of the Canterbury Aviation Company and Isitt had carried out a ground survey of a proposed Christchurch - Blenheim air route in order to report to the Air Board on the possibilities of instituting an air mail service.²⁰ Earlier, there had been considerable acrimony between Dickson and Isitt, arising from comments Dickson had made concerning aircraft spares which had been stored at Sockburn, and which Isitt felt reflected on him. The whole matter had come to a head in late September 1920, with high level correspondence between Henry Wigram of the Canterbury Aviation Company, and various Ministers as well as officials.

¹⁸ *ibid*, pp.10-12.

¹⁹ *ibid*, p.13.

²⁰ L.M. Noble, *Sir Henry Wigram*, Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1952, p.85; Wigram Papers, *Inwards and Outwards Correspondence 1920*, Box 2, Folder 6, Catalogue No 48/52.

As Noble said, in his biography of Wigram, while the matter in retrospect may appear to be of little consequence, at the time it was a matter of extreme importance. Bad feeling had been aggravated by the belief that Rt. Hon. Gordon Coates was the Minister in Charge of the Air Board, and all correspondence had been directed to him, which had the effect of arousing inter-departmental jealousies. Had the situation not been handled diplomatically by both sides, the very real possibility existed that the whole future of New Zealand aviation could be jeopardised.²¹

However, in 1921 one of Bettington's recommendations became a reality, and the proposal to give refresher training to ex-RAF pilots was put into effect. The Canterbury Aviation Company provided refresher courses to about forty officers during the period 1921-3.²² Isitt supervised the training, and also became involved in the other duties of the developing Air Force, including the control of civil aviation. At the time this embraced the inspection of civil aircraft, and of aerodromes, which were being laid all over the country; the granting of licenses to pilots, and the control of Government assistance to civil companies.²³

In 1923 the Government finally decided that it must take positive decisions relating to service flying, and a permanent Air Force was required to administer all phases of aviation. Consequently on 14 June 1923, the New Zealand Permanent Air Force (NZPAF) was created as part of the New Zealand Military Forces, and the New Zealand Air Force (NZAF) as part of

²¹ Noble, p.83.

²² Ross, p.13.

²³ *ibid.*

the territorial forces. Both were controlled by the Army. The NZPAF was to be composed of regular officers and other ranks, and its primary responsibility was to be the training and administration of the NZAF. To accommodate the new air force required a military aerodrome, and the New Zealand Government purchased the assets of the Canterbury Aviation Company, which included the aerodrome at Sockburn as well as the buildings, aircraft and spares. The purchase had been facilitated by a £10,000 donation by Hon. Henry Wigram, and in recognition of the gift the airfield was renamed Wigram Aerodrome.²⁴

The creation of the NZPAF had a considerable impact on Isitt's personal situation, and he was finally in a position to make the Air Force his career. On 1 September 1923 General Headquarters in Wellington advised the Headquarters, Southern Military Command in Christchurch, that Isitt had been selected for appointment as a Pilot in the N.Z. Permanent Forces on probation for six months, for duty at Wigram Aerodrome. Isitt's appointment finally appeared in the *New Zealand Gazette* No.75 of 25 October 1923:

N.Z. Permanent Air Force

Captain L.M. Isitt, Military Equipment and Instructional Officer, N.Z. Air Service (Unattached List, General List) to be Captain, and is appointed to command the N.Z. Air Force Depot, Wigram Aerodrome, Christchurch, with seniority in the N.Z. Permanent Forces as from 15 November 1919.

Dated 14 June 1923.²⁵

²⁴ Ross, p.14; Geoffrey Bentley, *RNZAF: A Short History*, Wellington: Collins, 1965, p.10.

²⁵ Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

By the end of 1923 the strength of the NZPAF had more than doubled, and while Wilkes, now promoted to Major, was in command at Defence Headquarters in Wellington. Captain J.L. Findlay had been appointed Flying Instructor to assist Isitt at Wigram. In addition Lieutenant Denton was transferred from the Army as full-time equipment officer, and three other ranks were appointed for maintenance and equipment duties.²⁶

Early in the new year, Isitt was the subject of a Court of Inquiry assembled at Wigram Aerodrome to inquire into and report on the cause of an injury sustained by him on 11 January 1924. He had been assisting a mechanic to lift a cylinder block out of a car. Although not commenting at the time, Isitt had noticed a lump in his groin that night and was diagnosed as suffering from a Right Inguinal Hernia. The Court of Inquiry found that Isitt had been injured while performing his duty, and no blame was attributable to any person. As a result, the Court of Inquiry recommended that he be treated at Christchurch Hospital, with all costs in connection with the operation and treatment being a charge against the Public Account.²⁷ The operation was eventually performed in April 1924.

Immediately prior to this event, Wilkes had carried out the Annual Confidential Assessment of Isitt for 1923. Isitt was regarded as being fit for his present employment, and rated as either Good or Satisfactory for the criteria listed. The Report was counter-signed by the Superior Reporting Officer, Major General Sir Robert Young, who was less reserved than Wilkes:

²⁶ Ross, p.14.

²⁷ Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

This officer is carrying out his duties well. His administration is good, also his liaison with the General Public.
31 January 1924.

The report is noted as having been seen by the GOC.²⁸

During 1924 and 1925 the NZPAF expanded the scope of its activities, and aircraft from Wigram carried out liaison work with the Army's Southern Command in their annual manoeuvres, and cooperated in exercises with artillery and signals units.²⁹ Refresher courses, each of two weeks, continued to be held. A number of civilian tasks were also undertaken, including aerial photography and training civilian pilots.³⁰

During 1923 the Walsh Brothers in Auckland approached the Government requesting them to take over their Flying School, which was operating at a heavy loss. Interim subsidy arrangements were put in place, and this enabled the School to continue operations until September 1924. The Government then made a final decision to send Wilkes and Isitt to Kohimarama, accompanied by several valuers. Agreement was reached on a price, and the activities of the New Zealand Flying School were concluded. It would appear that the Government's action in taking over the equipment was to avoid the subsidy, and no effort was made to use the aircraft, which lay idle for many years before being sold as junk.³¹

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Ross, p.15.

³⁰ R. Ewing and D. McPherson, *History of New Zealand Aviation*, Wellington: Reed, 1986, p.76.

³¹ A.G. Lester, *History and Development of RNZAF Station Hobsonville*, Wellington: RNZAF, 1947, pp.19-20.

Isitt resumed recording his Pilot's Log Book in 1925, although initially he did not list individual flights, and recorded flights in individual aircraft instead. During 1925 Isitt's total flying amounted to just over 312 hours. In 1926, he made numerous flights involving Infantry Cooperation, Artillery Cooperation, Photography and Machine Gun Tests. His total had increased to 1386 hours 55 minutes by the end of May, which covered the period to the relinquishment of Isitt's direct role with Wigram,³² certified as correct by T.M. Wilkes.

Isitt's Annual Report for 1924 was made by Major General Sir Robert Young as Reporting Officer, who stated that 'This officer is carrying out his duties most efficiently', and assessed Isitt as being 'Good' in his various qualities.³³

By 1925 Wilkes again carried out the assessment, rating Isitt as Average or Above Average in all categories. Wilkes on this occasion was less conservative in his ratings than he had been two years previously.³⁴

While Wigram had been developing under Isitt, the need for an aerodrome and flying-boat base near Auckland had not been overlooked, and various possible sites had been investigated, with Isitt being involved in these inspections. Finally, in 1925 167.5 acres were bought at Hobsonville, which had sufficient flat land for an aerodrome and access to the upper reaches of the Waitemata Harbour for flying-boats. It was intended that Isitt should command the new Hobsonville station when it was built, and in June 1926

³² Isitt, *Pilot's Flying Log Book*.

³³ Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

³⁴ *ibid.*

he transferred command of Wigram to Captain Findlay and was seconded to the Royal Air Force to gain experience.³⁵ Hobsonville was conceived primarily as a flying-boat base, and as no officers in the Air Force had flying-boat experience, it was considered appropriate that Isitt gain first-hand knowledge of maritime aviation matters while in the UK, as well as other relevant areas of New Zealand's defence aviation requirements.

For Isitt this created an immediate problem for him and his family with two young daughters. After considerable reflection, it was decided to leave the daughters with relatives in Christchurch, an outcome for which the daughters never really forgave their parents, and which rankled for the rest of their lives.³⁶

Because of the circumstances of Isitt's assignment, it was covered by a three page agreement between His Majesty the King and Isitt listing the conditions of the attachment. The Agreement was signed by the Governor General's Deputy, the Honourable C.P. Skerrett on behalf of His Majesty. Supplementing this Agreement were *Instructions and Notes* issued to Isitt by Wilkes, who was anxious that the maximum benefit possible be obtained from the visit.³⁷

³⁵ Ross, p.16. Isitt's departure was recorded in the *New Zealand Gazette*, No. 47, p,1149, 15 July 1926:

The N.Z. Permanent Air Force

Captain L.M. Isitt, having proceeded for attachment to the Air Ministry for a period of eighteen months, relinquishes the appointment of O.C. N.Z. Air Force Depot, Wigram Aerodrome, as from 3 June 1926, and is seconded.
Dated 10 June 1926.³⁵

³⁶ *Interview by author: Mrs A. Wood, interviewed 31 August 2006.*

³⁷ Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

The Prime Minister advised the High Commissioner in London, of Isitt's departure from New Zealand and requested that the Chief of Air Staff, with whom the attachment had been arranged, be informed. Isitt had left from Wellington, with his wife, by the *S.S. Ionic* on the 10 June. On arrival in England he was to undertake courses as recommended by the Air Ministry. The main object in sending him to England was for him to study the layout and administration of seaplane stations, and to obtain instruction in seaplanes and post-war developments.³⁸

While he was in the United Kingdom, Isitt produced quarterly reports which he forwarded to Defence Headquarters in Wellington, as well as a Diary, listing the main appointments which he carried out. Isitt's reports were forwarded by the High Commissioner in London to the Prime Minister, after which they were seen by both the GOC and CGS.

His first Report was in fact a handwritten one, consisting of six pages, and represents possibly the largest document remaining of his handwriting, with the exception of his Pilots Flying Log Books. The Report is neat and tidy, as well as being legible, none of which were common characteristics of Isitt's handwriting.³⁹ Isitt's Report was factual, listing the contacts he had met at the Air Ministry, as well as covering the various air establishments he had visited. This was the pattern he followed for the remainder of his visit.

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ ANZ, AD1 39/2/25 *Isitt Reports*.

Isitt arrived in London on 19 July 1926 and reported to the New Zealand High Commission on that day. The following day he reported to the Air Ministry, and was seen by the Chief of the Air Staff and also the Director of Organisation and Staff Duties. While his RAF uniform was being made, Isitt remained at the Air Ministry, attached to the office of the Australian Liaison Officer, which gave him the opportunity to visit most of the departments at the Ministry. It was considered important that Isitt become conversant with new types of aircraft as well as general progress in armaments and instruments.⁴⁰ His semi-official attachment to the Australian Liaison Office was most beneficial, as the office was well structured and could supply him with the best avenues of approach if he had a problem, thus saving him time.⁴¹

On 14 September Isitt reported to RAF Calshot to commence what he regarded as his main course. He came to Calshot expecting to do the three month 'Seaplane Pilots Course' but found that it had been cancelled, and the five month 'Coastal Reconnaissance Pilots Course' had been substituted instead.⁴²

Isitt raised in his reports the question the question of a permanent New Zealand Liaison Officer at the Air Ministry, to oversee communication between the Air Ministry and New Zealand.⁴³ Isitt was also able to arrange a conference with the Air Member for Personnel to put in place arrangements

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

⁴³ *ibid.*

for New Zealanders to serve in the RAF, although the full impact of these measures did not reach fruition for another ten years.⁴⁴

While Isitt was in the United Kingdom, Wilkes carried out his Annual Confidential Report for 1926. As usual, Wilkes was conservative in his assessment, rating Isitt as 'Average' in most respects, but 'Above Average' for zeal in performance of his duties, in technical knowledge, and in power to impart knowledge.⁴⁵

The next Quarterly Report covered the period 25 April - 31 July 1927, during which the greater part of the period was spent at the Central Flying School. Isitt graduated as an A1 instructor, which was the highest category.⁴⁶

Isitt visited Venice in the period 21-30 September 1927, for the Schneider Trophy Races. The opportunity had occurred for flying there and Isitt had sought permission, which was granted, to make the flight. This approach had required the highest level attention from both sides of the world. It had been initiated at Isitt's request by the High Commissioner, who cabled the Prime Minister on 24 August, with approval being received two days later.⁴⁷

The trip gave Isitt the opportunity to see something of continental air organisation, and he also visited French and Italian seaplane stations. Many

⁴⁴ Ross, p.28.

⁴⁵ ANZ, AD1 39/2/25 *Isitt Reports*.

⁴⁶ Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

people involved in the aircraft industry attended Venice, and Isitt had the opportunity of extending his wide list of acquaintances as a result.⁴⁸

Isitt had been invited by Douglas Mill to accompany him on the flight to Venice. Mill was an Aucklander, who had learnt to fly during the First World War, and had travelled to the United Kingdom to purchase a de Havilland Moth. While there, de Havilland offered Mill the loan of a Moth⁴⁹ for the Venice flight.⁵⁰

On returning from Venice, Isitt joined *HMS Furious* aircraft carrier during naval manoeuvres.⁵¹ Isitt's final assignment was to RAF Base Calshot attached to a Coastal Flight, which was engaged in Naval Cooperation.

Prior to leaving the United Kingdom, Isitt had a concluding interview with the Chief of the Air Staff, who by now had been promoted Marshal of the Royal Air Force.

The sequel to this interview was a handwritten letter on Government House letterhead:

The Hon. Minister of Defence

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Edén and Moeng, p.547. The de Havilland DH 60 Moth was the forerunner of a whole family of Moth aircraft which were very successful in the 1920's and 30's. Generally used as an elementary trainer.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ ANZ, AD1 39/2/25, *Isitt Reports*.

I beg to forward an extract from a private letter received by me from Sir Hugh Trenchard, Marshal of the Air Force, relating to Captain Isitt and the N.Z. Air Force, which you may wish recorded.

Charles Ferguson

Governor General

The extract was as follows:

Extract from letter from Marshal of the Royal Air Force, Sir Hugh Trenchard, Bart, dated 3 January 1928.

Captain Isitt is returning to New Zealand from this country on 5 January.

Captain Isitt has been doing several Aviation Courses, and has learnt a good deal. He did exceptionally well at the Coastal Reconnaissance Pilots' Course at the RAF Base at Calshot, getting 80%, and at the Central Flying School, where he flew all types of machines, he got as much as 84% and his report said that he should make an excellent instructor.

From what I have seen of this officer personally, though he is only thirty six, I have a good opinion of him, he is older than his years and has much sound knowledge and sound judgement, and I thought you might like to know this so that you can tell anybody out there who takes an interest in it.

This letter and extract were attached to Isitt's Personal File.⁵²

There is no doubt that Isitt maximised his opportunity to learn as much as he could from the RAF during his 1926-1928 secondment. He devised a programme, working with RAF advisers, to visit a wide range of

⁵² Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

establishments and aircraft manufacturers, which covered most aspects of service activities. To this end he did not concentrate purely on operational aspects, but included administrative matters as well. He also spent considerable time at the Air Ministry itself, learning from the inside how a major service operated. By the end of his secondment he was familiar with current developments in a wide range of matters, including maritime reconnaissance, flight training, armaments and supply. He was able to bring this knowledge and experience back to New Zealand, and applied the lessons he learned not only at Hobsonville, but also in wider applications over the next decade. The secondment was extremely useful in that it exposed Isitt to a wider range of activities not available to him in New Zealand, but there were also ongoing benefits in terms of the contacts he made, as well as the commitments he negotiated with the RAF to accept New Zealanders for service in the years leading up to the war.

No Annual Confidential Report for 1927 was completed, although his file was noted. 'He was out of N.Z. throughout 1927 and no report on him has been rec'd except that from Air Marshal Sir H. Trenchard on file.'⁵³

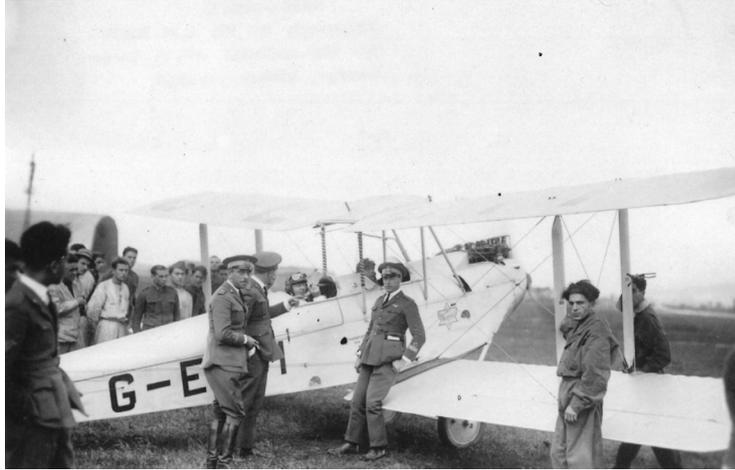
Little information remains covering the Canadian portion of Isitt's return trip to New Zealand, although he had a number of flights in ski-planes.⁵⁴

Isitt returned to New Zealand on the *SS Niagara*, docking in Auckland on 27 February.⁵⁵

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Isitt, *Pilot's Flying Log Book*.

⁵⁵ Isitt's return was recorded in the *New Zealand Gazette*, No. 41, p.1069, of 10 May 1928:



DH 60 Moth Venice Italy 1927. Isitt in front seat, D.Mill in rear. (RNZAF Museum)



Isitt, Italian Officer and D. Mill. Schneider Trophy visit, Italy 1927. (Thodey Collection)

N.Z. Permanent Air Force

Captain L.M. Isitt having returned from his tour of duty with the Royal Air Force in England, ceases to be seconded, and is attached for instructional duties to the Wigram Aerodrome. Dated 28 February 1928.

Captain L.M. Isitt ceases to be attached and is appointed Officer Commanding Hobsonville Aerodrome. Dated 17 April 1928.

Isitt reverted to his previous untidy Log Book practices, recording 45 hours as being spent 'During refresher courses at Sockburn 1928', followed by 'Records incomplete for 1928 - LMI.'⁵⁶

Hobsonville had arisen from the awakening Government interest in the use of air power, combined with the recognition that Auckland was an important strategic base.⁵⁷ Very little progress was made after acquisition of the site until July 1927, when a start was made on levelling work. Meanwhile, as Hobsonville had been chosen as the centre of aviation in Auckland, F.D. Mill, Isitt's companion on the Venice Schneider Trophy flight, had obtained the New Zealand de Havilland agency, and established his hangar and workshop on the northern perimeter of the aerodrome.⁵⁸ Mill and his staff provided valuable support to Isitt in the early days of the Station, while Isitt in turn reciprocated wherever possible.

The work immediately necessary for housing and use of both seaplanes and landplanes was being put in hand as soon as the plans and specifications had been completed.

Isitt received welcome personal news with his promotion to Major on 12 August 1928. He had been a Captain for ten years, and as the officers of the NZPAF still numbered only five, promotion could not be other than slow.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Isitt, *Pilot's Flying Log Book*.

⁵⁷ Lester, pp.19-20.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

The situation was the same in other countries. Eisenhower, for example, was a major for fourteen years, despite his outstanding ability.⁶⁰ At this time Isitt was the only officer at Hobsonville. He was assisted by four servicemen, and together they carried out all the actual Air Force business on Hobsonville, while a large number of workmen occupied themselves on the development of the airfield and buildings.⁶¹

Meanwhile, in September 1928, Air Marshal Sir John Salmond, who had been visiting Australia to investigate and make recommendations upon the defence of the Commonwealth, extended his visit to carry out a similar exercise in New Zealand. During the next month he toured the country before making his report, with Wilkes accompanying him at Ministerial direction. In his draft *RNZAF History*, Ross stated that the GOC was not in favour of the mission, and forbade Wilkes to discuss aviation with them and 'put ideas in their heads.'⁶² However, this did not prevent Wilkes from summoning Isitt by telegram to report to Wellington, and then proceed to Wigram to accompany the mission.⁶³

In general terms Salmond's brief was to report on the minimum organisation in permanent personnel and material for immediate requirements, as well as the maximum organisation to be aimed at, divided between Permanent and Territorial staff. He was also to report on whether the Air Force could substitute for the Army in coastal defence.

⁶⁰ Maule Miller, *Ike the Soldier*, New York: Putnam, 1987, p.278.

⁶¹ Lester, Part 2, p.5.; B. Dawson, *Hobsonville*, Auckland: Random House, 2008, pp.31-2.

⁶² ANZ 118/12 Ross, *Draft History*, p.20.

⁶³ ANZ AD1 42/152 *Salmond Visit*.

Salmond's Report was hard hitting, stating that the Dominion lacked an Air Force capable of either sustained cooperation with the Army or Navy, or acting independently in defence against an attack. Salmond recommended the creation of nine permanent units, and in addition he made a number of administrative recommendations. Salmond also issued a second Secret part to his Report devoted to defence against seaborne raids, which he felt was the most likely potential form of attack. He provided costings for the implementation of his Report, but the scale of the suggested force was far greater than the Government felt could be afforded in straightened economic circumstances, and almost none of the recommendations were taken up. In addition to an initial capital cost of £348,300, the future annual cost was £168,000, which was five times the air expenditure in 1928.⁶⁴ Unsurprisingly, the Salmond Report was not released publicly at the time.

In August 1929 Isitt relinquished his command at Hobsonville, and temporarily assumed the duties of Director of Air Services following the transfer of Wilkes to London, and pending the arrival of his replacement Wing Commander Grant-Dalton from England. Isitt resumed his appointment at Hobsonville in October 1929.⁶⁵

With Isitt's return to New Zealand, Annual Confidential Reports were carried out in 1928 and 1929. The first of these was carried out by Wilkes, but the 1929 assessment was carried out by Grant-Dalton. The 1928 Report was similar in the gradings assessed to previous reports. In 1929, Grant-Dalton

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

was slightly more generous, rating Isitt as 'Above the Average' in relation to his present duties, and ranking him 'A thoroughly capable officer.'⁶⁶

By 30 November 1929, the first two aircraft allotted to Hobsonville had arrived and were ready to fly, but the delay in the arrival of spare parts meant that no flying was possible for a further three months. By then, Isitt had been joined at Hobsonville by two more officers, Flight Lieutenants S. Wallingford and A. de T. Nevill, both of whom subsequently had distinguished careers with the RNZAF. Early in 1930 the flying field was complete, and the Fairey III F's⁶⁷ were flown for the first time from land, followed in July by the first launching from the slipway.⁶⁸

Dawson records that the first aircraft, civil or military, to land at Hobsonville was a de Havilland Moth, flown by Douglas Mill, while the first military aircraft to land was a Bristol Fighter captained by Isitt, in 1928.⁶⁹

The 1920's were a satisfactory decade for Isitt. Aside from his initial hernia problems, he had happily married, and had established a career in the Air Force which included command of the two New Zealand Air Force stations. His secondment to the Royal Air Force had been of particular importance to his career, and was to have enduring benefits in terms of the relations he established. But financial constraints were to have an inhibiting effect,

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ Edén and Moeng, p.654. The Fairey III F was a mainstay of the RAF and Fleet Air Arm between the two world wars. The New Zealand version was a three seat spotter reconnaissance aircraft, and could be fitted out as either a landplane or seaplane.

⁶⁸ Lester, Part 2, pp.3-4.

⁶⁹ Dawson, p 40.

arising from the period of economic difficulties into which the world was now entering.

Chapter 4: A New Service and the Coming of War -

1930's

Finally the Air Force was starting to receive some recognition, arising from the appointment of the Hon. Thomas Wilford as Minister of Defence. Wilford was the first Minister of Defence who actively supported the claims of the Air Force for greater financial and political assistance.¹ An illustration of his practical interest occurred in 1929, when the Army and Navy carried out combined exercises near Auckland, where a mock landing was staged. Isitt, flying from the partially completed Hobsonville, and carrying the Minister of Defence as a passenger, flew over the exercises on observation and photographic flights. This was the first time that land, sea and air forces had all cooperated on an exercise in New Zealand.² Ross suggests that the flights took place in February 1929, whereas Isitt records taking Wilford on a 2 hour 20 minute flight in Bristol Fighter 1558 on 24 April 1929.³

Isitt's Log Book does not record many flights in the remainder of 1929, noting in not untypical fashion 'Records incomplete 1929.'⁴

In December 1929, RAF ranks and methods of organisation were introduced into the NZPAF in place of Army titles and practices which had been used up

¹ Ross, p.19.

² *ibid*, p.20.

³ Isitt, *Pilot's Flying Log Book*.

⁴ *ibid*.

until then. Isitt's U.K. attachment would have proved very useful in this regard, and he assumed the rank of Squadron Leader as a result of the change.⁵

During 1930, Fairey III F and Moth seaplanes from Hobsonville cooperated with the navy in torpedo, gunnery and anti-aircraft exercises. The Fairey III F carried a 'drogue' for anti-aircraft practice, while the Moth was used to spot the fall of shot from heavy calibre practice at a sea target.

The effects of the Depression were now starting to make themselves felt, and expenditure on aviation was progressively reduced. Development work on Hobsonville was stopped. Although the seaplane base was regarded as complete, no machine equipment, which was essential for aircraft and engine maintenance, was installed for another two years.⁶ One event to brighten the drabness was the arrival of a Cutty Sark flying boat intended to be used for training pilots in handling the larger type flying boats which had been recommended in the 1928 Salmond Report.

A further illustration of the growing usefulness of aviation was provided with the Hawkes Bay earthquake in February 1931, where Hobsonville personnel and aircraft played an important part in the relief measures. When news of the first big quake was received, Isitt was at lunch aboard *HMS Diomedé* discussing the forthcoming naval exercises. He was shown a message from *HMS Veronica* describing the position briefly, and after offering all possible

⁵ Ross, p.19.

⁶ *ibid*, p.22.

cooperation to the Navy, he despatched a signal to General Headquarters requesting instructions, before returning to Hobsonville.⁷

On his arrival, he pressed for the construction of a portable wireless transmitter and receiver, which subsequently proved of significant value in maintaining contact with base from Hastings Aerodrome. In addition, all available Moth aircraft in the Auckland area were prepared and loaded with supplies for a detachment of indefinite duration. Instructions arrived the next morning, and Isitt set out carrying the dismantled parts of a water chlorination plant urgently required for Napier. On arrival the party was besieged with urgent requests for the carriage of mail and telegrams out, and doctors, nurses and medical supplies into the area. These were to be the main tasks of the detachment for the next ten days.⁸

Isitt produced two reports on the earthquake detachment, the first covering the period 3 - 12 February, when the operation was deemed complete, only for a major after shock which protracted the period from 13 to 20 February. During the first four days of the period, the control of Hastings Aerodrome was in the hands of the Hawkes Bay Aero Club, but control of operations was taken over by the NZPAF on the morning of 7 February. The Director of Air Services arrived by air from Wellington, and after a conference with the Hawkes Bay Aero Club and the Minister of Defence, issued instructions that the Hastings Aerodrome was to be taken over by the Defence Department under the control of Isitt. Aircraft were placed at the disposal of various

⁷ Lester, Part 2, pp.18-19.

⁸ *ibid.*

authorities while doctors and nurses, together with medical and urgent supplies were conveyed by air. Reconnaissance of roads and back country districts was made to detect damage and any families in distress, with doctors and food supplies being conveyed to isolated families. A regular mail service for urgent mail and telegrams was arranged between Hastings and Wellington; Hastings and Auckland; and Hastings, Wairoa and Gisborne. One hundred and seventy two cross country flights involving 22 different aircraft, and totalling 416 hours 55 minutes, were undertaken by 24 pilots, of which Isitt contributed 14 hours 15 minutes.⁹

The aftershock of 13 February further damaged roads, which required additional reconnaissance for the Public Works Department. By the time the operation was completed, 521 hours flying time had been expended, involving 246 cross country flights. The majority of aircraft utilised were de Havilland Gypsy Moths, and their Gypsy engines 'ran with unflinching reliability.'¹⁰

One of the pilots employed in the operation was Flight Lieutenant F.C. Chichester of Wellington, who was serving with the Territorial Air Force. A month later Chichester was involved in another notable event, during which Hobsonville personnel were required for the preparation of Chichester's Moth for a solo crossing of the Tasman Sea via Norfolk and Lord Howe Islands. While Chichester had faith in his own ability and aircraft, this faith was not shared by the personnel at Hobsonville. Officially the flight was

⁹ *ibid*, Lester, Appendix C.

¹⁰ *ibid*, Lester, Appendix C (ii).

given no encouragement, and Isitt told Chichester bluntly that he did not like his chances. Isitt spoke practical common sense, which Chichester realised. But Isitt was a sportsman too, and after having given the official warning, he did all that he could to help, particularly in converting the Moth into a seaplane. Eventually, on 28 March 1931 Chichester left Hobsonville, to arrive in Australia some ten weeks later. He had damaged his plane at Norfolk Island, which required extensive repairs, and delayed his arrival.¹¹

With the return of Wilkes to New Zealand, Isitt's Annual Confidential Reports for 1931 and 1932 were carried out on 'New Zealand Military Forces' Forms, rather than the NZPAF forms used previously. Wilkes assessed Isitt as being 'Good' in most respects, but only 'Satisfactory' for administration and organising ability. Both Reports were signed off by Major General Sinclair- Burgess, as Commanding N.Z. Military Forces.¹²

The period 1932-1934 contained little of special interest and was described as a dormant expansion period.¹³ While the staff waited with misplaced confidence for the increase in equipment heralded by the Salmond Report, the effects of the world depression meant that the Government was in no position to increase its financial commitments, and Air expenditure was actually cut by 40%.¹⁴ In 1933, Nevill produced a paper which reviewed developments since the Salmond Report, in which he stated that the NZPAF was actually no more than an administration and maintenance organisation,

¹¹ Leslie Jillett, *Across the Tasman*, Wellington: Reed, 1953, pp.71-2; Anita Leslie, *Francis Chichester*, London; Hutchinson, 1975, pp.76-7.

¹² Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

¹³ Lester, p.32.

¹⁴ Ross, p.22.

existing solely for the benefit of the Territorial units. The paper was referred for comment to Isitt and Wallingford, who concurred with Nevill's assessment, with Wallingford even declaring that the NZPAF, 'as it exists today is useless as an active force.'¹⁵

Isitt meanwhile was having further physical problems and required a second hernia operation in October 1932, which was also carried out in Christchurch. The operation was not a complete success, and the procedure had to be repeated in August 1939. The remedial operation was successful, but Isitt henceforth had to be careful, particularly when lifting weights.



Isitt at Hobsonville c.1930. (RNZAF Museum)

¹⁵ ANZ Air 1 102/3/3, *Wilkes Reports*.



Isitt standing on nose of Cutty Sark c.1930. (RNZAF Museum)

But while the world situation may have been grave, this did not prevent enjoyment from being sought wherever possible. Douglas Mill had built a large two-storey residence 'Windover' adjacent to Hobsonville aerodrome, complete with private beach and tennis court. The Mills were a sociable and outgoing couple who loved to entertain. Family friends and neighbours, the Isitts, were frequent guests at the Mill household, and often reciprocated with great warmth. Simon Mill, son of Douglas, recalled their wonderful hospitality, hearty Sunday lunches and happy days playing with the Isitt girls, Nina and Annie. He used to ride out onto the airfield on his bicycle, while the Isitt girls rode out on their ponies. Simon said that the Mills and the Isitts were particular friends, because both had been at Hobsonville from the very beginning. Simon also had vivid memories of Isitt:

I thought he was a great chap. He was a terrific fellow. I don't know, because I'm too young to really assess this, but I think Hobsonville was almost his fiefdom. There weren't many there of course, but I think that what he said went, and he could do anything he liked...He was the Air Force and the Air Force was Len Isitt.¹⁶

Another Hobsonville identity from this period was Sir Tom Clark, of Ceramco and Crown Lynn fame. He went to school at Hobsonville at the same time as the Isitt girls. His mother and Elsie Isitt were great friends. Clark thought the Isitts were wonderful people, and enjoyed playing badminton on a court erected in the flying boat hangar. Clark said that Elsie Isitt was just a wonderful, bubbly personality. Some further indication of Elsie Isitt's personality, can be gauged by the fact that she was up at 4.00 a.m. to cook Chichester a breakfast of bacon and eggs before he departed to Norfolk Island, as well as supplying him with a picnic lunch.¹⁷ Clark admired Isitt as one of the chosen few gentlemen around. Isitt took a great interest in Clark's development, and arranged interviews when Clark expressed an interest in joining the RAF.¹⁸

In February 1934, a Royal Warrant conferred permission for the New Zealand Permanent Air Force to change its name to the Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF). Improved economic conditions enabled additional funding to be allocated to the RNZAF.¹⁹

¹⁶ Dawson Papers.

¹⁷ Jillet, p.78.

¹⁸ Dawson Papers.

¹⁹ Ross, p.24.

Emergencies continued to occur and in 1935, at around noon on a Sunday, a telephone call from Muriwai Beach notified the Duty Officer at Hobsonville of a swimmer washed to sea beyond the breakers, and pleaded for something to be done. Wallingford was the Duty Officer, and he arranged to attempt the rescue in the Fairey III F seaplane. By 1400 hours he was aloft, whilst as an additional precaution, a standby launch was organised from the Manukau Harbour. On arrival at the scene, Wallingford sighted the swimmer and landed alongside the inert body, which was eventually lifted into the aircraft. Isitt meanwhile had taken off in a Moth, and was able to witness the successful rescue and subsequent take off, which enabled him to drop a message cancelling the standby launch in the Manukau Harbour. When the Fairey III F returned to Hobsonville, prompt medical attention resuscitated the inert swimmer, who was sent to Auckland Hospital.²⁰ Isitt recorded the flight as being on 3 February 1935.²¹

In 1935 the RNZAF received twelve Vickers Vildebeeste torpedo-bombers.²² They were stationed at Hobsonville and Wigram, where bomber-reconnaissance flights were formed, and became the equipment of the first properly constituted operational units of the RNZAF.²³ New Zealand was becoming more aware of the need for air power, and the change of Government which had occurred in 1935, had resulted in a Labour Party

²⁰ Lester, Part 2, pp.12-13

²¹ Isitt, *Pilot's Flying Log Book*.

²² Eden and Moeng, p.1120. A single engine biplane used for general purpose duties including flying and gunnery training, as well as communications.

²³ Ross, p.24; Ewing and McPherson, p.118.

administration more focused on the development of the Air Force than previous Governments.²⁴

The expansion resulted in a marked improvement in the morale of all personnel, with a desire to follow RAF methods, and an increase in Naval and Army cooperation. In 1935 a further four pilots were posted to the Hobsonville to meet the additional demands created by the arrival of the *Vildebeestes*. In April 1935, a visit by an Australian Naval Squadron increased the scope of naval cooperation, and in the exercises with the New Zealand Naval Division, a significant role was played by aircraft from Hobsonville. The Australian flying personnel and *Seagull* aircraft were accommodated at Hobsonville, establishing a sound base for future Australian naval cooperation.²⁵

Isitt's Log Book records that he reached 2,000 flying hours in July 1931. Much of the flying was routine, with the majority of the flights relating to Army and Navy cooperation, or the visiting of various centres to carry out flight tests of civilian private pilots. Occasionally there were flights which highlighted his special position. Nevertheless, Isitt recorded 200 hours for the year.²⁶

On 1 April 1933 he flew to Paihia and back to collect the Governor General, Lord Bledisloe in the *Cutty Sark*, and at the end of the month flew another important passenger, his wife, to Rotorua and return. The contemporary

²⁴ Ross, p.23.

²⁵ Lester, p.24.

²⁶ Isitt, *Pilot's Flying Log Book*.

magazine *Wings* records a number of instances where Isitt arrived at an aerodrome in NZPAF aircraft, with his wife as passenger, but Isitt noted only two such flights in his Log Book. He took Minister of Finance and former Prime Minister Gordon Coates and Squadron Leader Wilkes for an inspection flight of the Waitemata Harbour in the Cutty Sark, before ferrying Coates to Rotorua in a Moth. Isitt's total flying time for 1933 was 273 hours.²⁷

In March 1935 he brought his total flying hours to 3,000, of which the last 1,000 hours had taken place since July 1931. It was a significant achievement to record this amount of flying in a period of economic depression and when stringent economies were being placed on Defence spending. On 24 May 1935, he undertook the first test flight of a Vildebeeste from Hobsonville, and on 4 June there was a full dress field day organised at Hobsonville, involving a visit by Major General W.L.H. Sinclair-Burgess, General Officer Commanding and the Governor-General Lord Galway.²⁸

Isitt's Annual Confidential Reports for the period were all carried out by Wilkes, who continued with his conservative ratings in 1932 and 1933, and echoed his remarks of preceding years. In 1934 Wilkes rated Isitt as 'A thoroughly reliable officer with a sound knowledge of his work.' However, in 1935 Wilkes reverted to his standard assessment, merely considering Isitt as being fit for his present appointment in the event of mobilisation. All the Reports were noted by Sinclair-Burgess, the GOC.²⁹

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Dawson, p.81.

²⁹ Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

But the tides of change were beginning to flow, and at a meeting in late 1935 or early 1936, J.A. Lee M.P. (Under Secretary to the Prime Minister) told Wilkes that the Government had decided to form the Air Force as a separate service, and asked him to propose a scheme and work out costs. With the experience of fifteen year's frustration, and two major Reports which had been ignored, Wilkes responded that any scheme he drew up would almost certainly be shelved on account of cost, and advised that an expert should be asked for from the Air Ministry. With expert opinion behind them, the Government could then go ahead and develop the Service, and the country would be less likely to complain about the cost. Wilkes thus threw away the opportunity to be the founder of the modern RNZAF, but ensured that his ambition, the divorce of the Air Force from the Army, would be realised. In a post-war interview, Isitt revealed that the Governor General, and the Military Secretary, also worked on the Government, urging them to take action.³⁰

In September 1936, Wing Commander R.A. Cochrane, then on the Air Staff, Headquarters Training Command, received an invitation to go to New Zealand and write a report on its air defence.³¹ Cochrane accepted, sailing from Southampton and arriving in Auckland on 7 November 1936. He had spent the voyage writing his draft report, being 'based on a good map and certain assumptions about the possible scale of attack which the Air Ministry

³⁰ ANZ Air 118/12, *RNZAF History Draft*. The information contained in this paragraph was a handwritten addition to the original draft.

³¹ Brian Lockstone, *Into Wind*, Christchurch: Air Force Museum, 2007, p.13.

had given me.’³² Cochrane travelled to Wellington immediately, and during his initial days had several discussions with Cabinet Ministers, especially Fraser and Jones, as well as with Wilkes. He sent his draft report to the printers on 23 November, and the final report was submitted on 4 December.³³ This was considered by Cabinet on 8 December, with their reviewing it paragraph by paragraph, before accepting it in full.³⁴ Among Cochrane’s recommendations were that the Royal New Zealand Air Force should be constituted as a separate service controlled by an Air Board under the direction of the Minister of Defence; that it should consist initially of two permanent squadrons equipped with medium bomber aircraft; that Wigram should be developed as the main training base; the Territorial Air Force should be expanded; and that the two bombing squadrons be located at a new aerodrome to be built near Auckland.³⁵

At the request of the New Zealand Government, Cochrane remained in the Dominion and became New Zealand’s first Chief of the Air Staff, but only after consultation with Wilkes and Isitt to ensure that they did not mind.³⁶ Cochrane had requested of the GOC early in January that Isitt and Nevill be attached to him, because he wished to be in a situation where planning could be kept separate from administration.³⁷ In his Memoirs, Cochrane said that the Air Force had three thoroughly capable officers - Wilkes, Isitt and Nevill who had to be the nucleus of the new force.³⁸

³² Air Force Museum, *Cochrane Papers*, Reminiscences, p.1.

³³ Lockstone, p. 50.

³⁴ *Cochrane Papers*, Diary 8 December 1936.

³⁵ ANZ Air 100/1 *Cochrane Report*, pp.9-13.

³⁶ ANZ Air 118/12 *Royal New Zealand Air Force Draft*, p.31.

³⁷ *Cochrane Papers*, Diary 12 January 1937.

³⁸ *ibid*, *Memoirs*, p. 3.

Isitt did not waste any time reporting to Wellington, and Cochrane records spending a good day's work on establishments on 21 January.³⁹ He had dinner with Isitt on 25 January, and on 30 January he and Isitt met with the Secretary of the New Zealand Aero Club, to discuss the future role of Aero Clubs, which played a pivotal role in Cochrane's plans. Most of January and February was taken up with planning.

It was not until March 1937 that the details of Cochrane's proposals were announced publicly by the Minister of Defence, the Hon. Frederick Jones. Among the proposals announced was the creation of an Air Board with a civilian secretary responsible for finance, the setting up of an Air Headquarters in Wellington, and the separation of the Royal New Zealand Air Force from the Defence Department, all of which required legislation to be brought down in the next session of Parliament.⁴⁰ Pending the legislation, various appointments of key personnel were made with effect from 1 April 1937, including Cochrane as Chief of the Air Staff, Barrow as Air Secretary and Isitt as Chief Staff Officer - Personnel.⁴¹ Isitt's transfer to Wellington also took effect from this date, although he had been physically located there from January. He lived in a residence at Melling, Lower Hutt and commuted to work each morning with his colleague J.S. Hunter, whom he

³⁹ *ibid*, *Diary*, 21 January 1937.

⁴⁰ Lockstone, pp 70-71.

⁴¹ *ibid*.

had met at the 1926 Imperial Conference in London. He was also promoted to Wing Commander with effect from 1 April.⁴²

The Air Force Act 1937 was not finally passed until 6 November 1937, although it was deemed to have come into force on 1 April 1937. It was a short Act, consisting of a mere six pages, and gave effect to the creation of the Royal New Zealand Air Force as well as the Air Board.⁴³ With the passing of the Act, the first appointments could be made to the Air Board with effect from 1 December 1937. Isitt was named Air Force Member for Personnel, and relinquished the appointment of Chief Staff Officer-Personnel, which position was abolished.⁴⁴

The strength of the RNZAF at its creation was 21 officers and 156 other ranks.⁴⁵ An immediate start was made in putting Cochrane's recommendations into effect. A survey was carried out for the location of an aerodrome to accommodate the bomber squadrons, and it was eventually decided to build two stations instead of one. Land was bought at Whenuapai, four miles from Hobsonville and at Ohakea, near Bulls in the Manawatu.⁴⁶ Isitt was closely involved with these decisions, accompanying Cochrane and Gibson⁴⁷ in their survey visits.⁴⁸ One area of expansion in which Isitt was intimately connected, involved the Aero Clubs. A Civil

⁴² Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

⁴³ Air Force Act 1937.

⁴⁴ Isitt, *Personal File 1002*, N.Z. Gazette No. 79, 9 December 1937, p.2662.

⁴⁵ Air 118 12 *Draft RNZAF History*, p.30.

⁴⁶ *ibid*, p.32.

⁴⁷ Wing Commander E.A. Gibson, Engineer. Prior to the Second World War, Gibson had been an engineer with the Public Works Department, responsible for the building of civil aerodromes. Post-war he served as Director of Civil Aviation.

⁴⁸ *Cochrane Papers*, Memoirs pp.4-5.

Reserve of Pilots was instituted which was open to candidates who reached the required standard of education and physical fitness, and who volunteered to serve in the RNZAF in case of emergency. The Government agreed to pay Aero Clubs for the initial flying training of Civil Reservists. The scheme was under the general supervision of Isitt as AMP.

Under the Chairmanship of the Minister of Defence, Hon. F. Jones, regular meetings of the Air Board were held. In the initial stages, nearly all decisions to a relatively low level had to be authorised by the Board, but as experience was gained it was possible to raise the delegation level for routine matters.⁴⁹ One of the effects of the various expansion schemes was a marked growth in personnel. Isitt was particularly concerned with the quality of the officer personnel, and ensured that all annual personnel assessments were forwarded to him, so that he was aware of the qualities of individual officers. Very often, in the case of individual promotions, he knew more than the recommending officer, and sometimes either vetoed a recommendation or suggested an alternative candidate for the position.⁵⁰

Once Isitt moved to Wellington he did little regular flying. In the initial period he still flew, and occasionally joined Cochrane on cross-country trips to interview aircrew applicants. Isitt's last recorded total of flying hours was 3,259, but scrappy notes indicate that at least another 40 hours took place.⁵¹

⁴⁹ ANZ Air 1 105/8/1, *Air Board Minutes*.

⁵⁰ ANZ Air 1 5/6/1, *Officers' Promotions*.

⁵¹ Isitt, *Pilot's Flying Log Book*.

Later in 1938, the RNZAF arranged a major air display at Rongotai on Saturday 4 June, to show the Government and the public what had been achieved during the formation period. It was the first occasion on which the RNZAF had given a large scale demonstration of service flying, and responsibility for the organisation of the day fell to Isitt. The day opened with the Governor-General, Lord Galway, accompanied by Cochrane, inspecting a parade of officers and airmen lined up in front of the 22 aircraft taking part. Among the guests were the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence watching from the VIP enclosure. At 2.00 p.m. the flying display commenced, and was a tremendous success, firmly indicating that the RNZAF was well established as a part of the New Zealand defence environment.

Shortly after this event, Isitt received another promotion, this time to Group Captain with effect from 1 July 1938. It had only been fifteen months since his last promotion, and after the slow progress of the initial inter-war years, the imminent threat of another war required mobilization measures that needed appropriate staffing.⁵²

Isitt's Personal File reveals that he was nominated for a CBE on 14 November 1938. The Minister of Defence had requested nominations for awards, and Barrow forwarded the recommendation with a summary of Isitt's service record. Barrow continued with 'On the formation of the Air Force on the 1 December 1937 he was appointed Air Force Member for Personnel. Group Captain Isitt has had over 21 years' service as a General

⁵² Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

Duties Officer. His work is of outstanding merit. He has the overall responsibility for the selection of personnel for the Royal New Zealand Air Force under the expansion programmes.’⁵³

Isitt was not recognised for an award on this occasion, as Cochrane was also nominated for a CBE, which was awarded in the 1939 New Year Honours.

Cochrane’s time in New Zealand was also coming to an end, and on 26 September 1938, the announcement was made that he would be succeeded by Group Captain H.W.L. Saunders, another RAF officer, in January 1939. It was announced that Saunders’ term would be for two years, and it was hoped by then that a New Zealander would be ‘sufficiently trained’ to take over.⁵⁴ Although Isitt and Cochrane were never personally close, they had a productive professional relationship, working together to translate Cochrane’s aims into reality. Strangely, although both had a common interest in fishing, there are no surviving records which indicate they went fishing together. Isitt’s daughter does not recall Cochrane with any great affection, stating that he had a very dry personality, and was a person who never proffered thanks.⁵⁵

In April 1939, the most ambitious initiative in defence policy taken by a New Zealand Government took place in Wellington. During the period 14-26 April, the Pacific Defence Conference was held at Parliament Buildings, and senior delegates from Australia and Britain met with New Zealand Ministers,

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Lockstone, p.100.

⁵⁵ *Interview by author: Mrs A. Wood, interviewed 31 August 2006.*

civil servants and the Chiefs of Staff.⁵⁶ The Conference broke into three sections which discussed strategy, supply problems and trans-Pacific aviation. Isitt was an observer at the Conference, and arranged to be attached to the strategy section.⁵⁷ The origins of the Pacific Defence Conference were to be found in the growing importance of air power and the realisation that the Pacific Islands were important as stepping stones for air routes. By 1938-39 these two aspects were starting to converge in the minds of air staff members,⁵⁸ and Isitt had realised this from the early 1930's, having seen the need for an Auckland - Hawaii air route which would have a military value.⁵⁹ Isitt raised the matter with Cochrane, who gave no indication as to whether or not he agreed, but later included it in his Report. Shortly afterwards Gibson raised the subject with Cochrane, knowing that Isitt had spoken to him about it, but Cochrane refused to discuss the matter. Isitt told Gibson he had had the same response. 'Even the man who thought of the idea was not to be allowed to know about it.'⁶⁰

Nothing really new came out of the Conference, apart from an agreement that Australia and New Zealand should make a reconnaissance line to give early warning of the approach of a Japanese raiding force, while preparations were to go ahead for building two airfields and stockpiling fuel and bombs in Fiji, and surveying airfields in Tonga.⁶¹

⁵⁶ W. David McIntyre, *New Zealand Prepares for War*, University of Canterbury Press, Christchurch: 1988, p.193.

⁵⁷ ANZ Air 1 103/6, *Defence Conference 1939*.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Driscoll, p.22.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ McIntyre, pp.212-5.

In June 1939 the announcement was made that Cabinet approval had been obtained for Isitt to proceed to the United Kingdom in October for a short term of duty at the Air Ministry, and to attend the Imperial Defence College during 1940.⁶² However, the outbreak of war prevented him from taking up the course, although a number of biographical sources suggest that he did attend the course. An example of this is his entry in the *Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*.⁶³

The initiative for Isitt's attending the course at the Imperial Defence College undoubtedly came from the new Chief of the Air Staff, Saunders, who carried out Isitt's Confidential Report on 3 August 1939. In the Report, Saunders had assessed Isitt as being 'Above the Average' in the 'Handling of Men', and 'Exceptional' in the performance of his duties, as well as in other personal qualities. Saunders confirmed the recommendation for the course at the Imperial Defence College, and concluded by rating Isitt as 'An extremely capable officer.'⁶⁴

When War broke out in September 1939, the RNZAF had the framework of an organisation which could be developed to cope with increasing pressures. The structure, modelled as it was on the RAF, was sound, and capable of progressive development. In the two and one half years since its creation, the RNZAF had made tremendous strides, and was ready to face the demands of war.

⁶² Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

⁶³ I. McGibbon (ed), p.247.

⁶⁴ Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

The twenty year period from 1919-1939 was a very important one in Isitt's service career. He served as the inaugural commanding Officer at two Air Force Stations; initially at Wigram, which was a training station; and then at Hobsonville, which was New Zealand's first operational Air Force Station. His secondment to the RAF prepared him for higher command, and it was only the slow growth of the Air Force which prevented his further promotion. The establishment of the RNZAF in 1937, coupled with expansion schemes then put in place, gave him the opportunity to utilise the knowledge and experience which he had gained, and his qualities were recognised by Saunders as being worthy of higher office.

Chapter 5: Service Abroad 1939-1943

When War was declared in September 1939, the total strength of RNZAF personnel was 756,¹ and the force had no current operational aircraft in New Zealand. New Zealand was also far removed from the direct conflict, and the only immediate course open was to increase the size of the force. There was an ample pool of keen volunteers, and the main emphasis was in creating a suitable training organisation to meet RAF commitments. For the first six months of the War, Isitt was deeply engaged in ensuring that steady progress towards meeting this objective was attained, and that when additional demands were made on him, he was prepared to take the next step to assist his country and the war effort.

The RNZAF was mobilised - the Territorial and Air Force Reserves were called up, and a number of personnel on the Civil Register were posted to service units. Practically all civil aircraft from the Aero Clubs were taken over for use in the Elementary Flying Training Schools, and ten airliners were taken over from commercial operators. The transfer to a war footing was made smoothly, with the result that when the United Kingdom Government submitted the proposal which brought into being the Empire Air

¹ Ross, p.39.

Training Scheme, New Zealand was able to implement its commitments with a minimum of delay.²

The genesis for the Empire Air Training Scheme stemmed from a telegram sent from the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to the Governor General of New Zealand on 26 September 1939. The United Kingdom (UK) was most concerned by the rapid German advance into Poland, and felt that vast increases in trained aircrew personnel were required in order to combat Germany in the air. It was estimated that about 90 elementary and advanced flying training schools were required, and it was not physically possible to accommodate such a number in the United Kingdom, given the requirement for additional operational airfields as well. For this reason, the United Kingdom Government felt that centralising training in Canada would be the best approach, because of the nearness to the UK, Canada's greater potential to manufacture service type aircraft, and the proximity to United States of America resources. It was suggested that joint discussions be held in Canada to explore the issue.³

The Governor General responded, advising that the New Zealand Government approved in principle that discussions be held,⁴ which, understandably, was warmly appreciated in the United Kingdom.⁵ Within a week, the UK was being informed that the New Zealand representatives at the Conference to be held in Ottawa were Group Captain H.W.L. Saunders,

² ANZ Air 103 7, *Ministerial Reports, Report on RNZAF covering the period 1939 to December 1941 by H.W.L. Saunders.*

³ ANZ Air 107/1/2 Vol 1, *Empire Air Training Scheme*, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs/Governor General, 26 September 1939.

⁴ *ibid*, Governor General/Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, 3 October 1939.

⁵ *ibid*, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs / Governor General, 4 October 1939.

Chief of the Air Staff, and Mr T.A. Barrow, the Air Secretary. The absence from New Zealand of Saunders and Barrow required that they be replaced on the Air Board, with Isitt as acting as Chief of the Air Staff from 16 October 1939. Squadron Leader E.G. Olson acted as Air Force Member for Personnel during the period of Isitt's appointment.⁶ Saunders resumed his role as Chief of the Air Staff on 23 December 1939, with Isitt reverting to his role as Air Force Member for Personnel.⁷

Although it had been announced in mid-1939 that Isitt was to proceed to the UK for duty at the Air Ministry and to attend a Staff College Course, the outbreak of war saw the cancellation of these assignments. In anticipation of the appointments being taken up, *Wings* had announced the temporary appointment of Olson to replace Isitt,⁸ as well as stating that Isitt was to leave New Zealand on 3 October.⁹ Meanwhile Isitt continued at Air Department in Wellington, undertaking Saunders' duties, while Olson assisted on the personnel side. Isitt took the salute at the first passing out parade held at the RNZAF Training Depot at Weraroa, Levin on 19 November 1939. Isitt reviewed the men on the parade ground, and then addressed them indoors, after rain caused a cancellation of the ceremonial parade.¹⁰ These initial trainees inaugurated the pattern which was to remain throughout the war, whereby recruits carried out their basic training at an Initial Training Wing, first at Levin and then at Rotorua, before proceeding to the Elementary Training Schools.

⁶ Isitt Personal File 1002, *New Zealand Gazette* No. 133, 26 October 1939, p. 2985.

⁷ *ibid*, *New Zealand Gazette*, No. 2, 18 January 1940, p.53.

⁸ *Wings*, 5 August 1939, p. 13.

⁹ *ibid*, 5 September 1939, p.11.

¹⁰*ibid*, 5 December 1939, p. 9.

At Air Department, Isitt fielded a blizzard of cables from Saunders and Barrow, updating progress on the discussions which were taking place in Ottawa. The British Air Mission was pushing for an output of trainees from New Zealand that was 50% higher than Barrow or Saunders felt could be met. In addition, New Zealand was expected to contribute to the cost of training in Canada.¹¹

Barrow updated Isitt on the discussions, and in a cable drafted in consultation with Saunders, suggested an increase in flying training within New Zealand. On the same day Isitt was cabling Barrow, advising him that the Defence Council had approved the proposed Canadian training arrangements in principle, but the Cabinet was concerned at the financial implications involved, which required further attention. Isitt stressed that the information he supplied was unofficial.¹²

The New Zealand Government was choking over the costs of the proposed scheme and Saunders was informed by the Prime Minister that approval could not be given to a scheme involving annual costs of £3,000,000, until discussions could be held in the United Kingdom.¹³ In an endeavour to clarify the issues, Isitt wrote to the Permanent Head of the Prime Minister's Department, summarising the New Zealand costs of the proposed enlarged scheme for the numbers to be trained in New Zealand, and concluded with a

¹¹ Air 107/1/2, Barrow/Jones, 8 November 1939.

¹² *ibid*, Isitt/ Barrow, 10 November 1939.

¹³ *Ibid*, Prime Minister/Saunders, 11 November 1939.

review of the contribution required to be paid to Canada.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Barrow was becoming anxious and sent two further messages asking for some action. Isitt responded by short-circuiting the normal procedures and by-passed Minister of Defence Jones to discuss them with Minister of Finance Nash, who in turn contacted Fraser. Isitt took the precaution of copying Jones with all the messages received.¹⁵

A further week went by, during which the question of New Zealand training its whole quota of pilots in New Zealand was examined in an effort to mitigate the costs, before another communication from Ottawa suggested that the original levels of training in New Zealand should be retained.¹⁶ Meanwhile in Ottawa, matters were becoming tense, as agreement was delayed pending a response from New Zealand.¹⁷ Isitt again took this to Nash direct, so that he could contact Fraser, before advising Jones of the action.¹⁸ Saunders had also been negotiating for the increased supply of modern training aircraft, all to be delivered by mid-1941.¹⁹

Saunders and Barrow finally reached agreement in principle for New Zealand's contribution to the scheme be 8.08% or \$CAN28,603,000 spread over three and one-third years. Isitt conveyed this information to Jones, advising that the Prime Minister's Department had informed him that they believed the necessary sterling funding to meet the commitment could be obtained. He also felt it desirable that general agreement to the scheme be

¹⁴ *ibid*, Isitt/Prime Minister's Department, 13 November 1939.

¹⁵ *ibid*, Isitt/Jones, 17 November 1939.

¹⁶ *ibid*, Ottawa Air Mission/ Jones, 23 November 1939.

¹⁷ *ibid*, Saunders/Jones, 25 November 1939.

¹⁸ *ibid*, Isitt/Jones, 25 November 1939.

¹⁹ *ibid*, Saunders/Isitt 25 November 1939.

cabled, subject to the necessary provision of sterling funds.²⁰ Fraser finally cabled that the funding lines were in place on 5 December,²¹ and Cabinet approved the additional funding on 8 December.²²

After Saunders' return, Isitt reverted to his normal role, but for a short period only, as *Wings* in their March 1940 issue announced that Cabinet had approved Isitt's appointment as the representative of the New Zealand Government on the Supervisory Board set up to administer the Empire Air Training Scheme in Canada.

As a requirement of his posting, Isitt needed to obtain a passport for the first time in his career. Elsie obtained her passport at the same time, covering not only herself, but also daughter Annette, who was only fourteen at the time. Isitt did not repeat his error of 1926, and this time he took his whole family with him. Although elder daughter Nina was not quite twenty-one, she obtained an individual passport, which gave her the freedom to travel independently. They travelled on *S.S. Aorangī*, which also called at Suva while on the voyage, and which eventually reached Vancouver on 4 April 1940. The Isitts were to be away from New Zealand for nearly three years, as they did not return until early in 1943.

Shortly after Isitt's arrival in Canada, the Chief of the Air Staff was recommending him for the award of a C.B.E. The recommendation read as follows:

²⁰ *ibid*, Isitt/Jones, 29 November 1939.

²¹ *ibid*, Fraser/ Prime Minister's Department, 5 December 1939.

²² *ibid*, Cabinet Minute, 8 December 1939.

Group Captain L.M. Isitt RNZAF. This officer joined the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in 1915. He served with the New Zealand Rifle Brigade, and from 1917 onwards with the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Air Force. He joined the New Zealand Air Force in 1919 and has served with it continuously since then. He commanded Wigram and Hobsonville and on the formation of the Air Board on the 1 December 1937, he was appointed Air Force Member for Personnel. This officer has always shown marked ability and zeal in the performance of his duty. His work throughout the expansion period has been of an exceptionally high order. Group Captain Isitt was recommended for the C.B.E. in 1938 and he is once more very strongly recommended for that award.²³

This time the nomination progressed smoothly, and the award was announced in the King's Birthday Honours of June 1940. The citation which accompanied the honour used an identical wording to Saunders' recommendation.²⁴ The Minister of Internal Affairs, Hon. W.E. Parry wrote to Isitt on 22 July 1940, enclosing a copy of the New Zealand Gazette Notice containing notification of the Honour conferred.²⁵ Isitt did not physically receive the award until nearly twelve months later, when a special investiture was held at Government House in Ottawa on 21 June 1941.²⁶

The Isitts arrived in Ottawa on 11 April, and moved into an apartment a few days later. Office accommodation had been arranged within the suite of the United Kingdom Air Liaison Mission, and this proved to be most useful. Initially Isitt had to establish his credentials, which involved making numerous calls, although this proved difficult with politicians, as most of

²³ Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

²⁴ C.M. Hanson, *By Such Deeds*, Christchurch: Volplane, 2001, p.271.

²⁵ *New Zealand Gazette*, No. 74, 18 July 1940, p. 1725.

²⁶ Thodey Papers.

them were out of town. During his time in Ottawa, Isitt wrote regularly to both Saunders and Barrow, keeping them informed of particular matters in which they were interested.

Within a few days of his arrival, Isitt was off to Toronto to discuss purchasing arrangements, and followed this with visits to a number of training units.²⁷ He started at Toronto with No. 1 Training Command, and then spent some days at Montreal with No. 2 Training Command.²⁸ Meanwhile, Rae²⁹ was also writing to Barrow with a progress report, and comments regarding Isitt: 'I am sure no one could work with a finer superior than the Group Captain. He is rapidly becoming as popular here as he was in New Zealand.'³⁰

When writing to Saunders at the end of May, Isitt explained that he had been confined to Ottawa with meetings involving an acceleration of the Joint Air Training Plan in an effort to supply assistance to the RAF, who were transferring much of their training activities to Canada owing to Luftwaffe activities and airfield congestion.³¹

For his part Saunders wrote to Isitt regularly, updating him on service matters. Isitt in turn was concerned with a series of matters to which he referred in each of his letters over a series of months. These involved the

²⁷ ANZ Air 220 2, Isitt/ Saunders, 15 May 1940.

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ B.R. Rae, Administrative Officer, RNZAF Legation Ottawa, 1942-45. Appointed Air Secretary 1953.

³⁰ ANZ Air 220 1, Rae/Barrow, 2 May 1940.

³¹ ANZ Air 220 2, Isitt/Saunders, 31 May 1940.

necessity for trainees to receive instructions whilst on the voyage from New Zealand to Canada as well as physical training; the criteria to be employed in commissioning aircrew; the granting of embarkation leave at the end of the course; and the ongoing necessity of distinguishing badges for New Zealanders. Whilst none of these matters were critical, each was significant and had to be rectified. Isitt also had a comment about the Harvard trainers which were on order for the RNZAF.³² 'Everyone has a good word to say for it in the service. However, citizens in the neighbourhood of SFTS's not so enthusiastic. It certainly has a crackle.'³³

Barrow wrote congratulating on the award of the CBE. 'In my humble opinion... thoroughly earned and long overdue.' Barrow also acknowledged the advice from Isitt that he had been in hospital for an operation, from which he had successfully recovered. 'It should not be too long before you are fit and well and I hope that on this occasion the operation is an entire success and that the trouble you have had in the past will not recur.'³⁴ Although Isitt's original letter of advice regarding the operation has not survived, he repeated the information 'I was off duty from June 15 to July 18 while in Hospital for as a result of a breakdown of the operation I had in New Zealand in August 1939.'³⁵ Isitt coyly left the name of the condition blank in the carbon copy of his letter, but there is no doubt that it was a recurrence of his hernia troubles. Saunders was also sympathetic to Isitt's health worries. 'I am glad to hear that you are now back at work and to all

³² Eden and Moeng, p.1029. The North American T6 Harvard has been the most extensively used trainer of all time, with over 17,000 being built. It was a monoplane fitted with enclosed tandem cockpits and a retractable undercarriage.

³³ *ibid*, Isitt/Saunders, 16 August 1940.

³⁴ ANZ Air 220 1, Barrow/Isitt, 19 July 1940.

³⁵ *ibid*, Isitt/Barrow, 20 September 1940.

intents and purposes in full health. For goodness sake don't overdo it, otherwise you will certainly have a recurrence of your troubles.'³⁶

Isitt was starting to become progressively more concerned about Supply matters and felt that New Zealand personnel did not appreciate the complexities of the situation, while the increasing demands for war priority material meant that he required systems in place which would allow him to move rapidly in order to secure orders. To obtain one order he had to make twenty telephone calls, conduct four interviews, send four memos and two signals plus undertake a trip to Montreal from Ottawa.³⁷ Within two days Isitt was writing again after having been called to New York at the request of the British Purchasing Commission. He stressed the importance of coordinating through one channel all New Zealand orders, as well as forecasting requirements to the end of 1941. Stark realities also dictated that money be available immediately in New York for any orders placed. Many firms would not accept orders unless the full value was deposited with the order, and the best that Isitt could negotiate was 25 per cent with order, the remainder on delivery from the factory.³⁸

Another recurring theme also manifested itself in a letter to Barrow: 'I have just come back from meeting the Air Gunners in BC - a nice lot of lads.... But a small percentage are pretty dumb, and I doubt if they will make the grade. They are well below the standard of education of the Canadians, and

³⁶ ANZ Air 220 2, Saunders/Isitt, 29 August 1940.

³⁷ ANZ Air 220 1, Isitt/Barrow, 20 September 1940.

³⁸ *ibid.*

so far as I could gather had not completed the Caradus special education course before leaving New Zealand.’³⁹ Isitt also reminded Saunders to keep New Zealand supply orders being directed to the correct purchasing authority so as to avoid complications. ‘After all “the Directors of the Company lay down the policy, but it is the man behind the counter with whom the customer deals,” and the New York people can do a great deal to facilitate our orders.’⁴⁰

Saunders had been pressing Isitt for information on aircraft being produced in Canada suitable for coastal reconnaissance, so Isitt arranged a tour of a number of aircraft factories in Montreal. He was impressed with the high standard applying in all factories. It would have been possible to place New Zealand orders for the Supermarine Stranraer, which was a twin-engine biplane flying boat of UK design, being produced under licence in Canada. While it was smaller than Saunders preferred, it was rugged, reliable and had a good endurance.⁴¹ In the dark days of 1941, before supplies of the Catalina⁴² became available to the RNZAF, the Stranraer would have been a better practical aircraft than the obsolete Short Singapore⁴³ obtained from the RAF in Singapore, and operated from Fiji, but the Stranraer cost 200,000 Canadian dollars each, and the Singapores were available as free issue.

³⁹ *ibid*, Isitt/Barrow, 31 October 1940.

⁴⁰ ANZ Air 220 2, Isitt/Saunders, 31 October 1940.

⁴¹ *ibid*, Isitt/Saunders, 19 November 1940.

⁴² Eden and Moeng, p.482-3. The Consolidated PBY Catalina was a twin engine monoplane flying boat built in the United States of America. The Catalina served in all theatres of the war.

⁴³ Four Short Singapore four engine biplane flying boats were transferred from the RAF to the RNZAF, and flown to Fiji in late 1941. They served as the sole water based patrol aircraft, until replaced by Catalinas in 1943.

Saunders was sympathetic to Isitt's problems with New Zealand orders. He had spoken to Nevill and Dawson and 'impressed on both the absolute necessity of keeping you well advised as to our requirements. Whether they will do so is another matter.'⁴⁴

Isitt's concerns about Supply had not been overcome, and he advised Saunders that he had had a worrying day with telegrams and telephone calls from the BPC, New York, regarding New Zealand orders on the USA which were being placed independently. 'I, like a poor fool, had to say I didn't know anything about the order,' which related to New Zealand Railways rather than the RNZAF. 'I don't want the job, but it is the only way of making sure of getting it.'⁴⁵

Isitt also had the practical suggestion that all Air Observers and Air Gunners be given an Air Test before coming to Canada. A number of candidates had proven susceptible to air sickness, and had been unable to continue with their courses, requiring their return to New Zealand.⁴⁶ Isitt had made a good recovery from his operation, and was enjoying the Canadian Winter. 'I feel somehow that I should be putting a bigger effort into this war, but we are getting more and more to do.' However, he belied this statement with 'I dash off to Montreal on Friday to see our trainees at No. 2 Wireless Training School, then to London, Ontario to the official opening of No. 4 Air

⁴⁴ *ibid*, Saunders/Isitt, 3 December 1940.

⁴⁵ *ibid*, Isitt/Saunders, 10 December 1940.

⁴⁶ *ibid*.

Observers School... I then leave on 18th for Vancouver to meet the next batch, taking Calgary in on the way.'



Prime Minister Fraser and Isitt in Canada 1942. (RNZAF Museum)



Wings Parade, Wigram 1943. From left: Air Commodore Sir Robert Clark-Hall, Colonel H.E. Barrowclough, Isitt, Group Captain K.L. Caldwell, Air Commodore G.S. Hodgson (RNZAF Official).

Isitt had found it necessary to meet all drafts - 'there is always a good deal to straighten out, and a good deal to tell the trainees.' Rae had met the last two drafts, 'but I don't like to put it on him every time as it is quite a tough trip if done quickly and he also finds himself well out of pocket on Flight Lieutenant's allowance.'⁴⁷

Isitt returned from his trip west just on Christmas, after having covered 8000 miles in the ten days he was away. He was appalled to find the chaotic condition of the airmen's personal kits, which had not been checked prior to embarkation. Another comment concerned 'the shocking fit of New Zealand great coats,' which the tailor at Levin refused to alter, claiming that they were going to be worn over many pullovers. 'The fit of collars when done up to the neck is atrocious... the only advantage of the faulty fitting great coat is that in the absence of New Zealand identification badges, you can always pick out the New Zealanders.'⁴⁸

Early in the New Year, Isitt was briefed by the CNS, Commodore W.E. Parry regarding the forthcoming naval talks which were to take place in Washington. The United States Government was very concerned about representation, and would only allow local representatives to attend. Isitt was thus to be the New Zealand eyes and ears at the talks, and was required to submit reports to amplify the official ones.⁴⁹ Saunders confirmed Parry's

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ *ibid*, Isitt/Saunders, 26 December 1940.

⁴⁹ *ibid*, Parry/Isitt, 4 January 1941.

request, and advised 'You will therefore have to hold the baby for both the Air Force and the Navy.'⁵⁰

Supply matters had still not improved, but Isitt felt that the Harvard order was now proceeding satisfactorily after he had intervened, and for which he had received the sage advice 'You should be a bit more Aussie.'⁵¹ However, in general the position regarding supplies was frustrating, and Isitt boiled over;

These are a headache, and I am not getting the support from New Zealand I require. If I am to get anything, I must have the authority and finance to say yes, and place a hard and fast order on the dot. It is no good enquiring as to delivery and price, we get nowhere, but if I go and say to these buying agencies that I want so and so, and they reply we can have it and can ship on a given date, then that offer must be closed at once... I am 'small potatoes' here, and it is only my charm of manner or lack of it that I can get away with what we do... I am up against some of the junior and senior clerks who are more interested in the letter of the act than my bright smile.'⁵²

Isitt concluded by commenting that he had been terribly busy of late, having had only ten days in Ottawa in the last thirty-five.⁵³

Finance proved to be a problem in other areas as well. Isitt had been forced to write to Barrow about contributions under the JATP Agreement, which were £3,500,000 in arrears, as well as payments which Isitt had negotiated

⁵⁰ *ibid*, Saunders/Isitt, 4 January 1941.

⁵¹ *ibid*, Isitt/Saunders, 22 January 1941

⁵² *ibid*.

⁵³ *ibid*.

with the Canadian Treasury for emergency funding.⁵⁴ New Zealand orders with the British Purchasing Commission were nearing two million dollars, and appropriate measures were not in place for funding these orders. In a handwritten note to Barrow, Isitt admitted he was 'having a hell of a time.'⁵⁵ He repeated the funding problems raised with Saunders, and concluded with:

I don't mind the work entailed in handling and placing the orders, it is interesting and I make good contacts, but unless I am properly backed up, I will not have much success...

That's a hell of a grouse, isn't it, but I feel a bit strongly.'⁵⁶

By February 1941, Isitt was able to report positive progress regarding aircraft deliveries. The Harvards of the initial RNZAF order were almost ready for delivery, but Isitt felt that if he had not been available to monitor progress or apply pressure, the RNZAF would not have got them in time or possibly at all.

Saunders had not been insensitive to Isitt's concerns, and had set up a conference with the Department of Industries and Commerce held in Barrow's office. As a result of this conference, recommendations had been submitted to Government to set up a proper purchasing organisation in Canada with authority to place orders and close offers immediately.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ ANZ Air 220 1, Isitt/ Barrow 9 December 1940, 23 January 1941.

⁵⁵ *ibid*, Isitt/Barrow, 23 January 1941.

⁵⁶ *ibid*, Isitt/Barrow, 19 February 1941

⁵⁷ *ibid*, Saunders/Isitt, 26 February 1941.

Isitt had been able to make two trips to Washington for the naval conference, which he found most interesting and an education. He would have liked to have sat in full time on the discussions but could not spare the time.⁵⁸ He was delighted to learn that the Government had accepted the proposal to open a New Zealand purchasing office in North America, as his purchasing duties as well as other requirements had caused him to spend too much time in Washington and New York, with the result that he was not really doing justice to either job.⁵⁹

But another problem was raising its head. Isitt had just visited the Headquarters of No. 1 Training Command, where he had seen Pilot and Observer trainees from New Zealand. Whilst he had no qualms about the Pilots, he still had real concerns about the Observers, owing to lack of basic education. They were well below the average standard of education, but by application and hard work had managed to pass out within the average percentage of passes. He wanted a more rigorous standard applied to trainees in New Zealand, and that all trainees completed the pre-embarkation education syllabus.⁶⁰

Isitt was looking forward to transferring his Supply responsibilities from 1 May, with the opening of New Zealand Purchasing Offices in New York and Washington. 'I will be glad to see it go.'⁶¹ But he was also concerned about

⁵⁸ ANZ Air 220 2, Isitt/Saunders, 12 March 1941.

⁵⁹ *ibid*, Isitt/Saunders, 2 April 1941.

⁶⁰ *ibid*.

⁶¹ *ibid*, Isitt/Saunders, 16 April 1941.

his own future, and with time going on wished to have something definite decided, although he did not like to press his own case:

You will remember that when I came over here my appointment was for one year, or if you were recalled, I was to return to New Zealand. I see that they have swung another year on to you, so I conclude I stay on here.

The question is, am I to come back to New Zealand to take on your job when you go home? If so, I feel that it is absolutely essential that before I return to New Zealand, I should have at least three months in the U.K.

The reasons put forward for this deployment included a need to get some operational experience; to see New Zealand personnel in the UK; and finally, to improve his prestige and standing in order to assist him in the 'Political and Financial Battles in New Zealand.'⁶² If the programme met with Saunders' approval, Isitt's relief would be required by October, so that Isitt could proceed to the UK and be back in New Zealand early in 1942. 'On the other hand, you feel that pressure on you to remain in New Zealand is going to over-ride your inclination and efforts to get away, I would be glad if you could let me know.'⁶³

Isitt took the precaution of writing to Barrow the same day, traversing the same ground, and asking Barrow to discuss the matter of Isitt's future with Saunders. The letter finished with a plea:

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *ibid.*

Write me soon. Set aside an evening, have dinner in town on me and then go back to the office and write me a long, chatty letter and finish the evening at the club.⁶⁴

Isitt's last letter to Barrow concerned a recommendation for the promotion of his two assistants. 'They are doing well and taking responsibility which in RCAF would qualify them for at least two ranks higher. I know that in the RNZAF we grade down all jobs at least by one rank, but I think two is a bit steep.'⁶⁵

After spending twelve days in Washington during early June, Isitt was back later in the month with Mr Coates. He met 'great men', including Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris.⁶⁶ Isitt was able to discuss New Zealand's strategic position with him, and the need for further operational aircraft. From these meetings, Harris had arranged for telegrams to be sent requesting the release of a further 30 Lockheed Hudsons⁶⁷ to New Zealand.⁶⁸ Life was a 'bit of a scramble at the moment.' He had arrived back from Washington on a Friday, and was leaving for Winnipeg on the Monday to visit trainees. From there he was going to Regina and visiting the three Service Flying Training Schools at Moose Jaw, Brandon and Dauphin.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ ANZ Air 220 1, Isitt/Barrow, 16 April 1941.

⁶⁵ *ibid*, Isitt/Barrow, 10 May 1941.

⁶⁶ I.C.B. Dear, (Gen. Ed.), *The Oxford Companion to the Second World War*, New York: Oxford, 1995, p.524. At this stage of the War, Harris was head of the RAF delegation in Washington. He became C-in-C of Bomber Command in February 1942, and served in this role for the remainder of the War.

⁶⁷ Eden and Moeng, p.901. The Lockheed Hudson was a twin engine maritime reconnaissance aircraft of American origin, and was the first modern operational aircraft used by the RNZAF.

⁶⁸ ANZ Air 220 2, Isitt/Saunders, 28 June 1941.

⁶⁹ *ibid*.

Saunders finally managed to respond to Isitt's numerous letters, and apologised because he had been out of New Zealand holding discussions in Singapore and Australia. The latter had involved the question of cooperation between New Zealand and Australia - 'Very necessary I can assure you as Australia is a little inclined to look upon us as a small brother and not as an equal partner.'⁷⁰

Saunders then responded to Isitt's questions about his prospects:

The question of your future, which in large measure is linked with mine, will be taken up in the next few days. I shall be up in Auckland on Monday, and intend to discuss my position with H.E.

I am not particularly anxious to stay after the end of this year, for a variety of reasons, some of which you can guess. If I am told that I must stay, then of course that is all there is to be said about it. On the other hand, if they intend to release me at the end of this year, the question of my relief, your relief and a number of other moves will have to be considered well in advance.

As I understand it, you are to relieve me when I go. Before you do, I consider it absolutely essential that you should have three months with the Royal Air Force to ensure that you are up to date in all respects before you return to New Zealand. That means you will have to be relieved at a comparatively early date. Nevill seems the only solution. Who is to take over from him is a problem. We both think Hewlett may be the solution. However, you can rest assured that the question is

⁷⁰ *ibid*, Saunders/Isitt, 24 May 1941.

under active consideration and will be decided within the next few weeks. I will let you know by telegram immediately a decision is reached.⁷¹

No documentation remains of the subsequent decision, and the next public step was an announcement by the Prime Minister Peter Fraser that Air Commodore R.V. Goddard CBE, RAF would replace Air Commodore H.W.L. Saunders as Chief of the Air Staff. Saunders, who was shortly to return to the United Kingdom, had served an extended term in New Zealand at the request of the Government, and desired to resume close contact with air operations overseas. Fraser added that he had met Goddard in London, and felt that he would be a worthy successor to Saunders.⁷²

The story behind this position had its origin almost twelve months earlier, when Prime Minister Fraser had been in the United Kingdom on a protracted overseas visit. He forwarded the following telegram to Acting Prime Minister Nash:

I have discussed the matter of Saunders' replacement with the Secretary of State for Air and the Senior Air Officer and they agree it would be undesirable for Saunders to remain in New Zealand too long, provided the situation in the Far East looks reasonably stable but his intimate knowledge of local conditions would be exceedingly valuable should the situation deteriorate. They have undertaken to consider the question of a successor should this be required. There are it seems to me three alternatives:

(a) To appoint Isitt. I agree that this is impossible until he has been given the opportunity for up to date experience in the United Kingdom.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² ANZ Air 117 56, *Newspaper Clippings, Dominion*, 30 September 1941.

(b) To extend Saunders' period for a further twelve months with a view to appointing Isitt at the end of that time.

(c) Release Saunders as suggested and arrange for successor from the United Kingdom until such time as Isitt is qualified.

If Saunders were willing to stay until Isitt has opportunity to qualify, I should much prefer this course but if not I am inclined to think third project is best. Please advise me ...⁷³

Nash responded somewhat tardily:

Minister of Defence has now discussed your suggestion with Saunders that he should continue in New Zealand for a further 12 months, but he is still anxious to return Home to serve in an actual theatre of war unless the Air Ministry decides that in view of any new and threatening situation in the Far East he should remain at his present post. If the Air Ministry so direct Saunders would willingly agree to remain though he would at the same time request from them an assurance that his career would be safeguarded by so remaining. Saunders feels that the choice should not rest with him. In these circumstances War Cabinet have given further consideration to your proposals and they must now accept alternative (3) namely to release Saunders as suggested and arrange for a successor from the United Kingdom until such time as Isitt is qualified. They would be grateful if you would take an early opportunity of discussing with the Air Ministry the question of a suitable successor. While they are not without doubt as to the choice of Isitt as a future Chief of the Air Staff they feel that it would be unfair not to give him the opportunity to qualify. It will be necessary if Isitt is sent to the United Kingdom for twelve months

⁷³ ANZ EA 1 87/4/6, *Part 1A Air Force Appointments 1927-50*, Inward Telegram Fraser/Nash, 4 July 1941.

to find a suitable officer to replace him in Ottawa and this question is now receiving consideration.⁷⁴

While Nash and Fraser had been corresponding, the Air Ministry, who were anxious to reclaim Saunders as soon as possible, wrote offering the services in August or September of Air Commodore R.V. Goddard CBE, graduate of the RAF Staff College, whom they felt would be suitable in every way. If Goddard was accepted by New Zealand, he would be able to arrive and be in place at the termination of Saunders' current posting.⁷⁵ Nash forwarded this information to Fraser, who responded quickly:

Telegram 31 July was despatched in ignorance of my negotiations with the Air Ministry. I have now discussed the matter with the Secretary of State for Air with Air Vice Marshal Babington and with Air Commodore Cochrane who all speak most highly of Goddard and consider that he would be a worthy successor to Saunders. I have seen Goddard who is young and energetic and who impressed me favourably. In the circumstances I do not think we can do better and I suggest you accept him.⁷⁶

Nash immediately sent a telegram to the Air Ministry accepting Goddard on the same terms as the loan of Saunders

At this stage of the War, the RNZAF was desperately short of top-level administrators, and relied on loaned RAF officers. Goddard filled the requirements for the position, and played a pivotal role for a period of some eighteen months. This period allowed various staff positions to be

⁷⁴ *ibid*, Outward Telegram Nash/Fraser, 27 July 1941.

⁷⁵ *ibid*, Air Ministry/Air Headquarters, 1 August 1941.

⁷⁶ *ibid*, Fraser/Nash, 12 August 1941.

consolidated, and for New Zealanders to hold key roles for the remainder of the War.

Meanwhile, Isitt continued to visit trainees at RCAF Stations and during July made a trip to Manitoba and Saskatchewan. He had encountered a new problem, in that New Zealand pilot trainees started very slowly, and required a great deal of dual instruction before starting to make progress. It was common to require ten to twelve hours of dual before going solo on a Harvard, and this increased to nineteen hours on a multi-engine Cessna Crane. Isitt felt that New Zealand trainees had less flying time at Elementary Flying Schools than did other nationalities and also there was a long break necessitated by the voyage to Canada.⁷⁷

Wings reported on the first class of New Zealand pilots to get their wings under the Commonwealth air training scheme had received them on a Sunday afternoon at an impressive ceremony at a Royal Canadian Air Force flying school, which was unnamed owing to wartime censorship, but was in the province of Ontario. 'The parade was more significant than any before, because it marked the completion of the first step in the Empire scheme to build in Canada a force of fighting and bombing pilots to stop the Germans in the air.' Isitt also addressed the parade, and commented that he had read the reports of the graduates. 'On many of them I found these words: "Very satisfactory. Sustained effort throughout." What better motto than that for these young men to adopt as they go into service? "Sustained effort

⁷⁷ ANZ Air 220 2, Isitt/Saunders, 10 July 1941.

throughout.” It means much. If you make your best effort and sustain it throughout your service, you will be a credit to yourselves and your country.’⁷⁸

Isitt’s next letter was very short, as Prime Minister Fraser had been in North America, and Isitt had been involved with him. Fraser had met some New Zealand trainees and ‘was very definitely pleased with what he saw.’⁷⁹

In his subsequent letter to Saunders, Isitt opened with: ‘It is some time since I wrote you a ream of a letter. I have kept on the move pretty regularly since June, with one thing and another, and barely managed to do one week in three in Ottawa.’ Saunders had responded to Isitt’s concern by increasing the number of hours flown by pilot trainees in the New Zealand Elementary Flying Training Schools before going to Canada, and Isitt thought that this should eliminate most of the trouble. ‘Our fellows are in the main, doing well. Although slow to start, they usually finish pretty well. Their most pleasing feature is their keenness and their consistent hard work.’ Isitt mentioned that the new Chief of the Air Staff, Air Commodore Goddard was expected on 10 October in Ottawa, and Isitt was available to show Goddard anything he wished to see. Finally, Isitt made a plea for a visit to the United Kingdom. There were a number of matters which concerned him and which he wished to follow up, because they could not be dealt with from Canada.

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⁷⁸ *Wings*, 5 August 1941, p.7.

⁷⁹ ANZ Air 220 2, Isitt/Saunders, 4 September 1941.

⁸⁰ *ibid*, Isitt/Saunders, 29 September 1941.

Goddard duly arrived in Ottawa, and spent some days with Isitt looking at the operations of the Empire Air Training Scheme. Coincidentally, Barrow was also in Ottawa, and both Goddard and Barrow thought that Isitt's going to the UK would fulfil a useful purpose.⁸¹

Saunders signalled approval for the UK visit on 20 October, and Isitt immediately set about making arrangements for the visit. Saunders then referred to Isitt's personal situation:

With regard to yourself. I am submitting a memorandum to the Minister recommending that you should be relieved by Nevill at some time next year and that you should proceed to the United Kingdom for six to nine months attachment to the RAF. At the end of this period, the intention is that you should return to New Zealand.⁸²

In keeping with this promise, Saunders wrote to Minister of Defence Jones, under the heading 'Reshuffle of Senior Officers of the Royal New Zealand Air Force':

I have always understood that Group Captain Isitt will in due course become Chief of the Air Staff in New Zealand and I assume he will relieve Air Commodore Goddard at the end of the latter's period of loan in January or February 1944. In order that Group Captain Isitt may be fully qualified for these duties, it is essential that he be attached to the Royal Air Force for approximately one year to gain Air Staff experience and a sound grounding in all aspects of air defence and air training problems. On completion of this attachment Group Captain Isitt should return to New Zealand via the Far East in

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² *ibid.*, Saunders/Isitt, 23 October 1941.

sufficient time to enable him to understudy Air Commodore Goddard for approximately two months. If these proposals are approved, Group Captain Isitt should leave Canada for the United Kingdom about 1 October 1942.⁸³

The recommendations were approved by War Cabinet on 31 October 1941, and Minister of Defence Jones authorised the Air Secretary to proceed on 5 November 1941.⁸⁴

Isitt was next writing disconsolately to Saunders about having to give up on his trip to the UK and returning to Ottawa. He had set out on 31 October, and by 5 November had managed to reach Gander, Newfoundland. Here he was held up for fifteen days owing to bad weather and unserviceable aircraft, being unable to move either East or West. No aircraft appeared to be available for another fourteen days, so Isitt elected to return to Ottawa, and managed an RCAF flight back to Montreal. Isitt, as a result of this experience, had decided to delay his trip indefinitely.⁸⁵

From this time, until Isitt's return to New Zealand in February 1943, no specific files relating to his activities exist. For a period of just on twelve months all references to him must be inferred from actions reported in peripheral files.

Early in 1942 Isitt received another posting, and one which was not reported in the national press at the time. War Cabinet had approved Isitt's

⁸³ Isitt *Personal File 1002*, Saunders/Jones, 23 October 1941.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ ANZ Air 220 2, Isitt/Saunders, 24 November 1941.

appointment as Air Attaché on Hon. Mr Nash's staff at Washington on 7 January 1942.⁸⁶

Isitt's Personal File records that he was appointed Air Attaché at Washington with effect from 9 March 1942,⁸⁷ but a signal from Isitt to Goddard indicated on 3 February 1942 that he had taken up his duties, which he found most interesting.⁸⁸ This is consistent with Nash's arrival in Washington on 23 January as the New Zealand Minister in the United States capital, sent to underline the extreme importance which New Zealand placed on cooperation with the United States.⁸⁹

Some idea as to Isitt's activities over the next few months can be gained from the weekly cables which Nash used to send Fraser, reporting on the activities for the period. One of the earliest stated 'Isitt has been in Ottawa and returned today to discuss urgent questions with United States Chief of Air Staff Arnold.'⁹⁰ Two weeks later, 'Isitt has been engaged in discussions with senior Royal Air Force officers in connection with the air defence requirements in New Zealand and Fiji.'⁹¹ 'Isitt has spent the week in following through our need of aircraft and equipment, and ensuring that Joint Planners have full up to date information on Dominion of New Zealand. He is pressing appointment of Equipment Officer in Washington which I recommend for approval.'⁹² 'Isitt reports general activity endeavouring

⁸⁶ ANZ EA1 87/4/6 Pt 1, *War Cabinet Minutes*, 7 January 1942.

⁸⁷ Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ Michael Bassett and Michael King, *Tomorrow Becomes the Song*, Auckland: Penguin Books, 2000, p.205.

⁹⁰ ANZ Air 102/5/4, *NZ Minister - Washington*, Inward Telegram, 15 February 1942.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, Inward Telegram, 3 March 1942.

⁹² *ibid.*, Inward Telegram, 17 March 1942.

obtain construction plant, petrol tanks and radar equipment and introducing Bevan to necessary United States and United Kingdom staffs.’⁹³ ‘Air Attaché reports discussions on operational plans and air strengths in the South West Pacific and New Zealand.’⁹⁴ Isitt reported that ‘No definite recommendations to Combined Chiefs of Staff have yet been made by United States Navy Department regarding air strength in SW Pacific and New Zealand.’ He had just returned from Ottawa on 15 April from the monthly meeting of the JATP Board.⁹⁵

The following week Isitt visited New York to meet RNZAF airmen en route to England, before returning to Washington for discussions on defence and alternative channels of communication.⁹⁶ Isitt spent the second half of May in Ottawa, first attending the normal monthly meeting of the Supervisory Board with Mr Langstone, and then continuing with the Air Training Plan Conference, followed by the Commonwealth Air Training Plan Conference., from which he was not expected to return until 29 May.⁹⁷ However, his stay in Ottawa was protracted and he did not return to Washington until 5 June.⁹⁸ In the next two weeks he dealt with a variety of matters including a meeting with the Combined Meteorological Committee to discuss dividing the world into meteorological zones and developing a code for world reports. Isitt also represented New Zealand at a ceremony to mark the official acceptance by Mexico and the Philippines of the United Nations

⁹³ *ibid*, Inward Telegram, 5 April 1942.

⁹⁴ *ibid*, Inward Telegram, 12 April 1942.

⁹⁵ *ibid*, Inward Telegram, 19 April 1942.

⁹⁶ *ibid*, Inward Telegram, 4 May 1942.

⁹⁷ *ibid*, Inward Telegrams 11, 19 and 27 May 1942.

⁹⁸ *ibid*, 2 June 1942.

Pact.⁹⁹ Isitt continued his discussions with the Joint Staff Mission on the assignment of aircraft to New Zealand, before visiting the New York Headquarters of Interceptor Command.¹⁰⁰ Nash's final advice was that Isitt had left the Legation for Canada.¹⁰¹

Meanwhile on the other side of the world, Goddard was writing to the Minister of Defence, recommending Isitt's promotion to Air Commodore as a proper reward for loyal, competent and devoted service, as well as enhancing the interest of the RNZAF.¹⁰²

At almost the same time a telegram was being composed by the New Zealand Minister, Washington which was forwarded to the Prime Minister on 6 May 1942:

After 3 months close examination of the work of Group Captain Isitt I think his duties experience and competency warrant consideration of his promotion and I would recommend that the Air Commodore be asked to report to the Minister of Defence on Isitt's qualifications and whether they do not warrant his advance to Air Commodore.

Not only has Isitt done splendid work in supervising our participation in the Empire Air Training Scheme but he is available at all times with experience that is invaluable to the Government. Another factor which must have weight alongside knowledge experience and ability is the fact that he would be able to meet those

⁹⁹ *ibid*, 16 June 1942.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*, 21 June 1942.

¹⁰¹ *ibid*, 1 July 1942.

¹⁰² Isitt *Personal File 1002*, Goddard/Jones, 1 May 1942.

with whom he has to negotiate on better terms if he were more equal to them in rank. It would I believe be helpful to the Dominion and Isitt at the forthcoming conference in Ottawa if you could consider his qualification for promotion if possible prior to 18th of the present month.

Nash¹⁰³

Jones had handwritten on this telegram, 'Air Secretary. This has already been dealt with. F.J. 9.5.42.' By this Jones meant that he had approved Goddard's recommendation for promotion on 5 May and steps had already been set in place for the Gazette notification. This notification appeared in the *N.Z. Gazette* No. 51, 21 May 1942 at page 1433, and stipulated that the effective date was 1 May 1942.¹⁰⁴ With his promotion, Isitt's salary increased from £1,150 to £1,250 per annum.¹⁰⁵

Nash's mention of Isitt's attendance at the ceremony to mark Mexico and the Philippines pledging their commitment to the United Nations actually downplayed a very significant event. Isitt received a personal invitation from President Roosevelt to attend the White House on 14 June. He joined the diplomatic representatives of the twenty-six United Nations, plus the two who were to join, and the group were ushered into the Blue Room. The diplomats were then taken to the State Dining Room on the East Side of the White House, where President Roosevelt was seated at a table with the Mexican and Philippines diplomats, and Secretary of State Cordell Hull. Each of the other diplomats took their places in front of the flags of their

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*

countries which had been arranged in the form of a V. Roosevelt read his prepared speech in which he referred to the evils of Axis tyranny and pledged to fight for the freedoms of common humanity - 'to have freedom of speech and religion, freedom from want and fear.' After the signing by Mexico and the Philippines, the President concluded the ceremony by shaking hands with all the diplomats.¹⁰⁶



*Flag Day Ceremony at White House 14 June 1942. Isitt fourth from left.
(ANZ Misc. 46)*

¹⁰⁶ ANZ Misc 46, *Isitt Papers*, *New York Times*, 15 June 1942.

The other matter to which Nash had referred was the Joint Air Training Plan Conference held at Ottawa in May 1942. This was a particularly important conference covering all aspects of air training, and involved delegates from a number of countries not part of the Commonwealth Air Training Plan. After the Conference, member nations of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan stayed on to renegotiate the continuation of the plan through until 1945. It was the first time all partners had been together since the initial discussions setting up the Plan in November 1939. The negotiations took several more days, but on 5 June 1942, the New Zealand Air Mission advised that a revised Agreement had been signed by the UK, Canada and Australia, but no approval for New Zealand had been received, and in order to keep faith with the other signatories, Isitt initialled the agreement on behalf of New Zealand.¹⁰⁷

Shortly after Isitt returned from Ottawa, Goddard sent him a three page signal updating him on New Zealand developments and the refusal by Admiral Ghormley to accept New Zealand's defence as being part of his responsibility. Goddard suspected that Nash could possibly have misrepresented New Zealand's position to Admiral King, but had no proof to support his concern. However, he wished Isitt to discuss the position with Nash, as Goddard felt that a politically desirable but strategically undesirable situation existed arising from a misinterpretation of motives.¹⁰⁸ Isitt did as he was requested, discussing the matter with Nash, who

¹⁰⁷ ANZ Air 107/1/2 Vol 2, *Empire Air Training Scheme*, NZAM Ottawa/RNZAF HQ, 5 June 1942.

¹⁰⁸ ANZ Air 1 130/4/4, *Plans Pacific Area*, Goddard/Isitt 8 June 1942, also Air 118 81 F, *Defence of Pacific 1942*, pp. 95-99.

considered the position most serious, and then coming back to Goddard with a request for a COS Paper and War Cabinet recommendation with which Nash could take to appropriate American personnel.¹⁰⁹ Goddard had anticipated this request, and had already drafted a COS Paper for submission to War Cabinet.¹¹⁰ He was finally able to advise Isitt that a revised War Cabinet directive had been forwarded to Nash on 20 June and in the same message was able to inform Isitt 'Expect you will receive approval immediately for your departure.'¹¹¹

Isitt made a positive contribution during his time in Washington. He established an excellent relationship with Walter Nash, the New Zealand Minister, and was able to provide a service perspective on the many issues which Nash had to confront, as well as deputising for him on occasion. Most importantly, Isitt had ready access to top-ranking service personnel, particularly RAF, which enabled him to build relationships which were to prove useful for the remainder of the war. While based in Washington, Isitt also had to travel to Canada frequently in order to oversee progress in relation to the BCATP, and in conferences to oversee the changes necessary to take the Plan through until 1945. He was very busy, obviously impressed Nash, and played a significant role in ensuring that New Zealand would make a worthwhile contribution to the Allied cause.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*, Isitt/Goddard, 10 June 1942.

¹¹⁰ *ibid*, Goddard/Isitt, 11 June 1942.

¹¹¹ *ibid*, Goddard/Isitt, 20 June 1942.

When Isitt left Washington to proceed to the UK, he took a circuitous route, travelling via Ottawa. White had arranged a farewell party at the Chateau Laurier.¹¹² He reported to Barrow and said that the visit was most rushed, as Isitt arrived one day with his family, and left the next day for Baltimore. The farewell party consisted of a large gathering at the Chateau, so that the staffs of the Air Mission, Supply Mission and Isitt's friends could say farewell.¹¹³

No public announcement was made regarding Isitt's posting to the UK until the middle of December when his time was at an end. The announcement was that War Cabinet had approved setting up in London of RNZAF Headquarters for the United Kingdom, and had appointed Air Commodore L.M. Isitt CBE as Air Officer Commanding the new headquarters. According to the Minister of Defence, the number of New Zealanders serving with the RAF in the United Kingdom, the Middle East and India had reached a substantial figure, and the task of looking after the welfare and personal interests had overtaxed the small liaison staff, necessitating a more comprehensive organisation. The Air Ministry was quoted as being appreciative of the manner in which New Zealand had responded to calls for support, 'and to let you know that the proposal to appoint Air Commodore Isitt, who is well known, respected and liked throughout the Air Ministry and Royal Air Force, as first Air Officer Commanding, has given special pleasure.'¹¹⁴

¹¹² ANZ Air 220 1, White/Barrow, 24 June 1942.

¹¹³ *ibid*, White/Barrow, 8 July 1942.

¹¹⁴ ANZ Air 117 56, *Newspaper Clippings - Isitt File, Dominion*, 15 December 1942.

Goddard, in particular, was anxious that Isitt derive as much benefit as possible from his relatively short stay, and in turn contacted a number of colleagues to request assistance for Isitt.¹¹⁵

During his early days in the UK, Isitt was involved in discussions with the RAF regarding aircraft allocations, as provisional allotments of Kittyhawks and Hudsons for the RNZAF from RAF allocations had been cancelled. The cancellation of the aircraft was caused by the demands of the Middle East, which were paramount, and New Zealand could only be supplied at the expense of this theatre. However, Isitt had managed to negotiate the release of 14 Kittyhawks to offset those which had been cancelled.

Goddard responded promptly, grateful for Isitt's representations regarding Kittyhawks, and appreciated the competing demands 'so New Zealand must not overstate its claim.'¹¹⁶

Isitt was also involved with Barrow in attending a Joint Air Training Plan Conference in the UK during November/December 1942 in connection with the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, in which Barrow was able to negotiate very favourable terms for New Zealand.¹¹⁷

As Isitt's time was coming to an end, Goddard contacted him with observations regarding his return;

¹¹⁵ Isitt *Personal File 1002*, Goddard/Air Ministry 22 October 1942.

¹¹⁶ ANZ Air 1 130/4/4 Goddard/Isitt 20 July 1942.

¹¹⁷ ANZ Air 107/1/2 Vol 3.

Personal for Isitt from Goddard. Thanks your letter per Barrow received today. Trust that Nevill has now arrived. Regret cannot endorse proposed extension of your tour abroad. Vincent's period of loan terminates end of February. Consider it essential for RNZAF that you should have considerable period of experience as DCAS prior to my departure. This will include experience in the islands.¹¹⁸

In response Isitt advised that Nevill had not yet arrived, and with this delay he would not have time to visit the Middle East. Movement was most difficult and uncertain, so for this reason he proposed to return direct after Nevill's arrival.¹¹⁹

Isitt's time in the UK with this posting was short, but he was able to accomplish a number of material achievements. The opening of the RNZAF Headquarters in London meant that the RNZAF had a significant presence in the UK in their own right, and reflected the number of New Zealand personnel flying with the RAF. Second, Isitt had the opportunity to view the operational workings of the RAF through their various Headquarters, and was able to visit RAF Stations and meet many New Zealanders who were serving in RAF Squadrons. This gave him the opportunity to learn of their experiences, as well as their problems, and as he was the highest ranking New Zealand officer to carry out this task, it proved a positive morale booster. Finally, his working with Barrow to arrange eminently satisfactory financial terms for the revised BCATP proved of major material benefit to New Zealand. While the assignment may not have been as long as Goddard

¹¹⁸ Isitt *Personal File 1002*, Goddard/Isitt, 5 December 1942.

¹¹⁹ *ibid*, Isitt/Goddard, 9 December 1942.

originally sought, it proved extremely useful to Isitt, and he was able to return to New Zealand with a current understanding of service conditions and problems in the UK.

Because of the problems Isitt had been experiencing in endeavouring to reach the Middle East, the Prime Minister sent a message to the High Commissioner in London requesting assistance to arrange a passage. Unfortunately, the Prime Minister's effort was too late, as Isitt was already on his way back to New Zealand.

There was one final signal from Goddard to Isitt in Washington:

Your action in returning to America is approved but you should not repeat not now proceed to Middle East. Remain in Washington for a few days only to renew contacts. Take brief leave with family if desired and proceed by air to Pearl Harbor reporting to CINCPAC. Will request CINCPAC to arrange onward journey through Islands visiting RNZAF units. Your arrival New Zealand early February after tour will probably approximate to arrival of family when you could if desired take further period of leave resuming duty about end of February. You may make alternative proposal if you desire.¹²⁰

Isitt's departure from the UK was reported in New Zealand newspapers, with the statement that he had arrived in Washington after several months in London. After Isitt returned to New Zealand in February 1943, further details regarding his London assignment were published. He was initially attached to the Air Ministry, and after taking part in the negotiations for a

¹²⁰ *ibid*, Goddard/Isitt, 29 December 1942.

new Empire Air Training Agreement, prepared a report on the New Zealand squadrons and personnel in the UK, the Middle East and India.¹²¹

Isitt's return journey to New Zealand was circuitous, and after Washington he was accompanied by Seabrook¹²² on a visit to a number of aircraft manufacturers on the West Coast of the United States.¹²³ Isitt was not in a position to acknowledge Seabrook's assistance for a month, during which time he had visited all the North and South Island RNZAF Stations. On his trip to New Zealand, Isitt had spent a week in Fiji, and fourteen days in the New Hebrides and Solomons area. He was most impressed with the state of the RNZAF, and with the growth which had occurred in his absence. It was now accepted that the security of New Zealand was more or less assured, resulting from the latest American operations in the South Pacific, and the future organisation would be based on the assumption that there would be considerable warning before New Zealand would be subject to other than sporadic raids or interference with shipping.¹²⁴

In his letter to Seabrook, Isitt mentioned that Elsie and Annette had arrived back in New Zealand. They had had a good trip by boat to Melbourne, and then by air across the Tasman.¹²⁵ Life for them had not been straightforward during the previous twelve months, as they had shifted to Washington from Ottawa at the beginning of 1942. When Isitt moved to the UK, they were left behind living an almost nomadic existence. They had returned to

¹²¹ ANZ Air 117 56, *Southland News* 9 March 1943.

¹²² Wing Commander John Seabrook, RNZAF Liaison Officer, Washington.

¹²³ ANZ Air 100 5, *Isitt Washington Correspondence*, Seabrook/Isitt 25 February 1943.

¹²⁴ *ibid*, Isitt/Seabrook, 31 March 1943.

¹²⁵ *ibid*.

Ottawa, and from there travelled by train to Los Angeles, where they had spent three months, awaiting passage on a boat. Eventually they left from San Francisco, arriving at Melbourne on 15 March,¹²⁶

Isitt's return to New Zealand was reported in the local press, and in the six weeks after his return, a number of features were published about him. The *Evening Post* and the *New Zealand Herald* both featured Press Association handouts, announcing his return and incorporating a brief biography.¹²⁷ A few days later there was a major press release, in which Isitt's return was used as an opportunity to publicise the RNZAF.¹²⁸ Then within a few more days he was the spokesman for a lengthy article explaining the criteria for commissioning aircrew trainees, which was a subject the general public, not surprisingly, found difficult to grasp.¹²⁹

Also signalling Isitt's return was a letter written by Barrow to White¹³⁰:

Air Commodore Isitt arrived in Wellington this morning, fit and well, and we are delighted to have him back with us again... It can be said that generally speaking all senior posts are held by members of the RAF, the only exception being that of Bannerman who is AMP. Isitt now being back in this country and Freeman who is here also, will make some difference. There has been a great deal of comment here about the fact that we have not secured New Zealanders to fill these posts but as you know the New Zealanders have not been available, and when there have been the odd ones available, they have been unwilling to accept employment which would be a bar to their eventual promotion. In addition you will know that the RAF people who have been out here have given us wonderful service. The time has

¹²⁶ E.C. Isitt Passport No. 6106.

¹²⁷ ANZ Air 117 56, *Evening Post*, 25 February 1943, *New Zealand Herald*, 26 February 1943.

¹²⁸ *ibid*, *Dominion*, 10 March 1943.

¹²⁹ *ibid*, *Otago Daily Times*, 17 March 1943.

¹³⁰ Group Captain T.W. White. RNZAF Liaison Officer, Ottawa, 1942-46.

arrived, however, for us to secure the service of operations experienced New Zealand personnel and we are pushing forward with this as speedily as possible.¹³¹

The official machinery was also grinding, and on 4 March 1943, Group Captain R.B. Bannerman, as Air Force Member for Personnel, minuted the Air Board that Air Commodore Isitt had returned from overseas on 24 February 1943 to take over the post of Deputy Chief of the Air Staff. Bannerman also recommended that Isitt be appointed a member of the Air Board,¹³² which the Board accepted at a meeting held on 13 March 1943.¹³³

Isitt very quickly settled into his new position, keeping up a regular correspondence with Nevill in London, Seabrook in Washington, White in Ottawa and Wallingford in the Pacific. He also wrote numerous letters to relatives of servicemen, many of whom wrote to Air Department when they felt that no other avenue was open to them.

Isitt did not waste any time introducing into the RNZAF a form of passing out ceremony for graduating aircrew similar to that which had been adopted by the RCAF. He was the Inspecting Officer at the first 'Wings' ceremony featuring the new procedure at Wigram on 7 April 1943.¹³⁴

Typical of his correspondence was a very long letter responding to a Mrs White of College Street, Wanganui. She felt that her son, who had served in

¹³¹ ANZ Air 220 1, Barrow/White, 26 February 1943.

¹³² Isitt, *Personal File 1002*.

¹³³ *ibid.*

¹³⁴ *ibid.*, Bannerman/Isitt, March 1943.

the UK and then returned to serve in the Pacific, had not been treated with the consideration he deserved, and she raised a number of pertinent points which Isitt felt required a proper response, and to which he dealt with individually. He felt that his last three years' experience had proven to him that with few exceptions, everyone felt that they could do a better job somewhere other than in their present job and were critical of their advancement. The few who seemed content were those engaged in actual operations. Isitt concluded with:

I hope to do something to ensure that everyone gets a fair spin. I want very much to visit Wanganui to look up some of my old friends, but so far have not had the opportunity to take a day off since I got back. This is one of the doubtful privileges of my so-called exalted rank. I would much prefer to hold my last-war rank of Sergeant, so far as one's personal interests go.¹³⁵

Isitt introduced the first of his Monthly Liaison Letters in April 1943. He had decided on a personal letter to complement the regular official reports. The first letter consisted of only two foolscap typed pages.¹³⁶ The May Newsletter was approximately twice as long as the initial April Newsletter, and set the pattern which Isitt follow for the rest of the War.¹³⁷

Measures were being taken for the orderly transition of power from Goddard to Isitt. The Prime Minister forwarded the following signal to the Minister of Defence, who was then in London:

¹³⁵ ANZ Air 100/7, Isitt/White, April 1943.

¹³⁶ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letter* April 1943.

¹³⁷ *ibid*, May 1943.

Goddard has recommended that Isitt should assume post of the Chief of the Air Staff in July and that the post of Deputy Chief of the Air Staff should be filled by an officer with full operational and training experience from the RAF who should be a New Zealander if available. Goddard and Isitt both recommend Acting Air Commodore E. (sic) T. Jarman and it is suggested you interview him and any alternatives suggested by Air Ministry and if you are satisfied then the loan of the selected Air Commodore should be put into effect immediately.¹³⁸

Jones moved promptly and after interviewing Jarman was able to arrange his loan from the Air Ministry for a period of one year, with an option to extend to two years.¹³⁹

Within a few days, Goddard had to write to the Prime Minister again:

I fear that I must remind you with profound personal reluctance that, I believe, you decided some two months ago that Air Commodore Isitt should assume the post of Chief of the Air Staff about the middle of next month. It was accordingly arranged that Air Commodore Jarman should arrive early in July to take over the post of Deputy Chief of the Air Staff... If you see no reason for altering your previous decision, may I ask you to confirm that I should arrange to handover to Air Commodore Isitt with effect from 19 July. May I recommend at the same time that Air Commodore Isitt should be granted acting rank of Air Vice Marshal with effect from the same date.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ ANZ EA1 87/4/6, Fraser/Jones, 9 June 1943.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, Goddard/Fraser, 23 June 1943.

Anticipating Fraser's approval, Goddard had already written to the Secretary of the War Cabinet with a suggested Press Release for Isitt's appointment, and thought that the Governor General should endorse Isitt's promotion and his appointment prior to the public announcement. Goddard also felt that the Chief of the Air Staff should be given the designation - Air Officer Commanding New Zealand Air Force, instead of Air Officer Commanding, Royal New Zealand Air Force. The change was put forward to overcome any confusion with American usage, particularly with No. 1 (Islands) Group, and to create a better parallel with the Army General Officer Commanding, New Zealand Military Forces. The latter title was popularly supposed to represent command of all New Zealand Military Forces, land, sea and air, but the new title would tend to correct that supposition.¹⁴¹

The Press Release put forward by Goddard was incorporated in the final Press Release which was circulated throughout New Zealand and published in all the main dailies on 21/22 July.¹⁴² The response was universally favourable, particularly with the choice of a New Zealander for the position.

Finally, the *New Zealand Gazette* announced Isitt's promotion and appointment on 22 July 1943.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ *ibid*, Goddard/Secretary War Cabinet, 16 July 1943.

¹⁴² ANZ Air 117 56, *Newspaper Clippings Isitt File*.

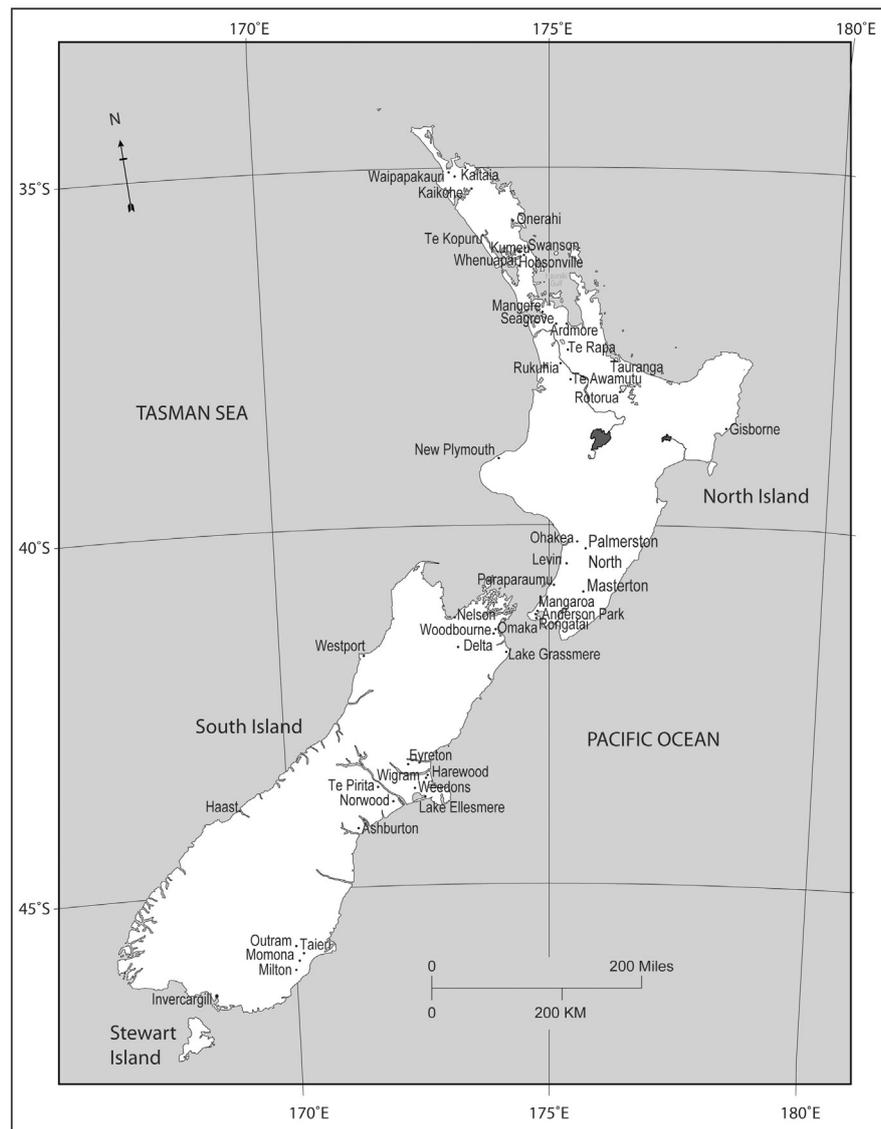
¹⁴³ Isitt *Personal File 1002*, *New Zealand Gazette* No. 57, 22 July 1943, p.821.

Isitt, at the start of the War, was planning to go to the UK for attachment to the Air Ministry and attendance at a Staff College Course. This was intended to fit him for the position of Chief of the Air Staff in succession to Saunders. However, the demands of war caused these plans to be shelved, and instead Isitt went to Ottawa, and later Washington, where he performed a very difficult role in an exemplary manner. In the early stages, the demands placed upon him with inadequate resources in Supply matters, reflected a naivety of thinking in New Zealand financial circles. Had it not been for Isitt's continuing efforts in these initial stages, New Zealand would have been even shorter of vital materials. Eventually, proper arrangements were put in place, and Isitt was able to focus on his primary role. On his transfer to Washington in early 1942, he developed a strong working relationship with the New Zealand Minister Nash, who was impressed with Isitt's qualities, whilst Isitt, in turn felt that Nash was under-recognised in New Zealand for the efforts he made in Washington.

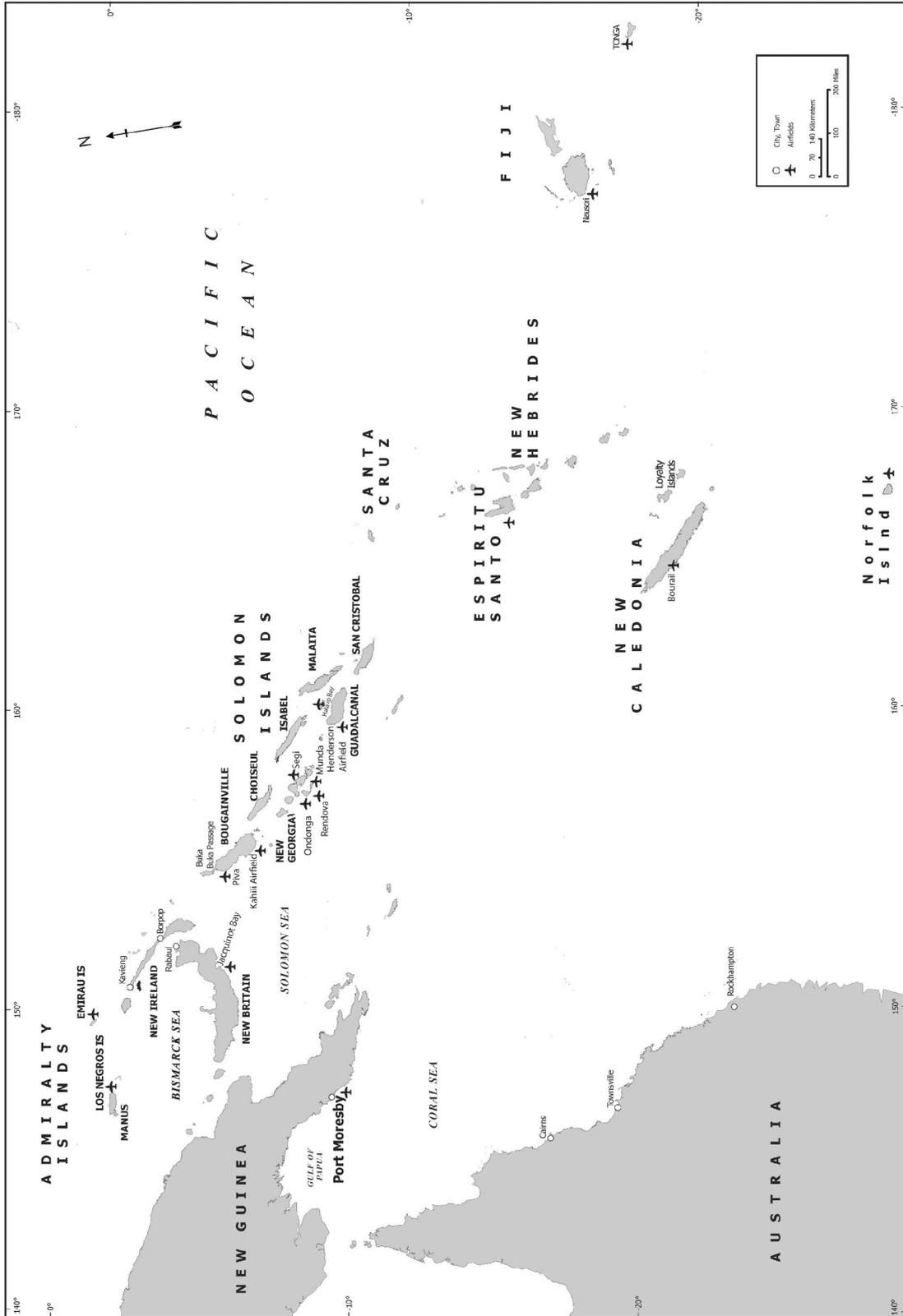
When Isitt returned to New Zealand in 1943, it was nearly twenty-five years since the end of the First World War. During the intervening years, Isitt had prepared himself for the top position in the RNZAF, and was well qualified in terms of experience for the role. He may not have attended a Staff College Course, but in every other respect he met the requirements needed to fulfil the role.

Isitt's appointment was a signal that the RNZAF had come of age. The Government was seeking to establish a more independent role for New Zealand, and the placing of New Zealanders in the top roles of the RNZAF

was part of that policy. The appointment was significant for two reasons: first, the New Zealand Government felt that it no longer had to rely upon the UK and the RAF for assistance to fill the top positions in the RNZAF; and second, that the Government regarded Isitt as being fit for the role of CAS in a time of conflict. While matters had improved as the massive United States of America industrial machine turned to wartime production, the same progress was not yet being achieved during the war in the Pacific. The potential still existed for the Japanese armed forces to effect a telling blow, and it was essential that the RNZAF was commanded in a manner which could withstand such a blow.



Principal RNZAF Stations - 1939-45



Solomons Theatre of Operations 1942 - 45
Principal RNZAF Stations

Chapter 6: Chief of the Air Staff 1943-1944

In mid-1943 the progress of the War in the Pacific had swung in favour of the Allies, whose war machine was approaching full momentum after a slow start. United States forces were making progress in recapturing Japanese held territory, and supplies, particularly of aircraft, were becoming more freely available. The threat of invasion had receded from New Zealand's shores, and manpower shortages were not yet apparent. A start had been made in equipping the RNZAF with modern aircraft like the Hudson and Kittyhawk, while the build-up of squadrons initiated by Goddard was making steady progress. Isitt was taking charge of an Air Force which was in a sustained growth phase and poised to make a positive contribution to the Allied cause in the war in the Pacific.

Isitt assumed the role of Chief of the Air Staff, and was promoted to Air Vice-Marshal, on 19 July 1943,¹ in an appointment made by the War Cabinet. He was the first New Zealander to be appointed to the rank of Air Vice-Marshal within New Zealand, although Park and Coningham had preceded him in the RAF, attaining the rank in March and September 1940, respectively.² Foss Shanahan, a Deputy Secretary to the War Cabinet, took a deep interest in aviation matters and wrote a glowing letter of congratulations to Isitt on his appointment:

¹ *Isitt Personal File 1002*, NZDF Personnel Archives, Trentham.

² V. Orange, *Sir Keith Park*, Methuen: London, 1984, p.83; V. Orange, *Coningham*, p.68.

Dear CAS,

I have not had the opportunity of addressing you as such before, and do so on this occasion, so that I may say, firstly, how pleased I am that that you have succeeded to the appointment which you have very well earned, and secondly, how gratifying it is to know that a New Zealander is now head of the establishment. Be assured that you will carry all my good wishes during your period of office, and any assistance which I at any time might be able to give you will always be a pleasure.

Yours sincerely,

Foss Shanahan³

When Saunders had been appointed Chief of Air Staff in August 1940, the duties of the role had been updated and spelled out in broad terms. These duties included all questions of policy; conduct of air operations; fighting efficiency and training of the RNZAF; control of training under the Commonwealth Air Training Scheme; communications and intelligence; air defence; liaison with the Army and Navy; inspection of the RNZAF, and War Cabinet matters. No record exists of any updating to these responsibilities, and because of their general nature, they would have applied to Isitt with equal validity.⁴

Shortly before Isitt assumed his new role, there had been an exchange of telegrams between the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs in London and the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Wellington. A secret telegram, despatched on 1 March 1943 stated:

³ANZ 100/13 *Shanahan* to Isitt, 22 July 1943.

⁴ANZ 100/7, *Duties CAS*. .

The Air Ministry are strongly of the opinion that the time has come to upgrade the New Zealand Chief of Air Staff to Air Vice-Marshal.

2. Similar responsibilities in the RAF would undoubtedly carry the higher rank.
3. Goddard is moreover ripe for promotion to Air Vice-Marshal.
4. Please explain to the New Zealand Government and suggest to them that the post should be upgraded and that they should recommend the promotion of Goddard.
5. It is realised that Isitt is due to succeed Goddard later this year, and the Air Ministry will be willing then to supply an Air Commodore to be his deputy if the New Zealand Government so wishes.⁵

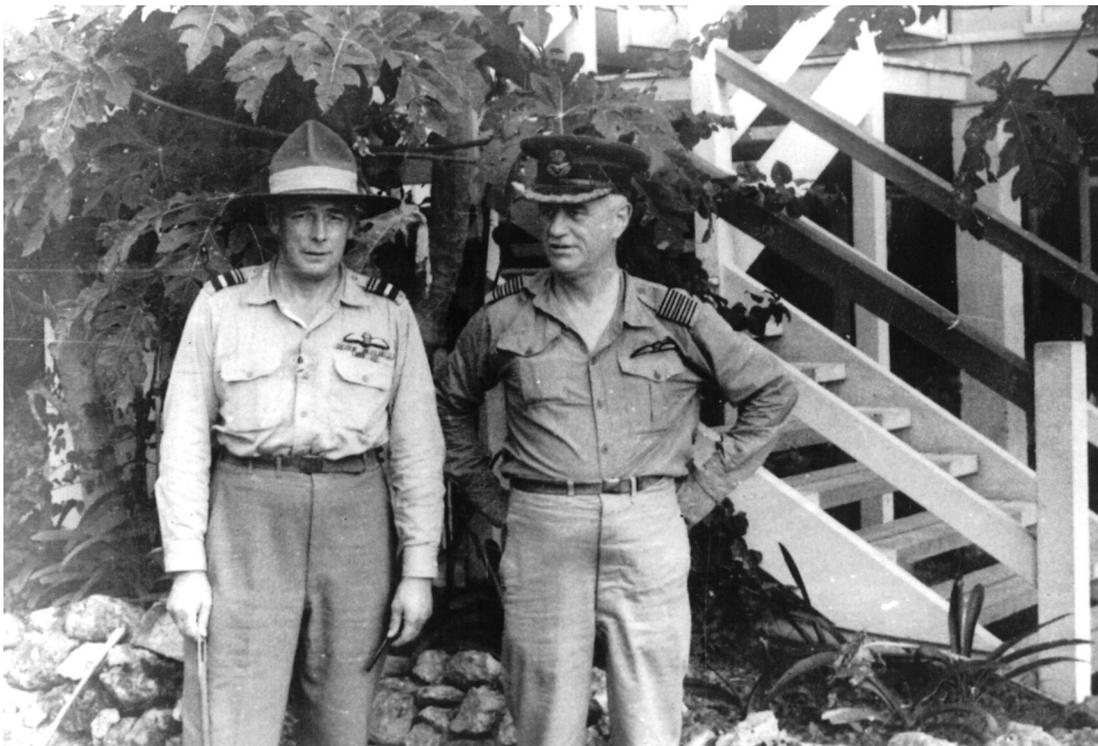
It is telling that even at this stage of the War, the request was routed through the High Commission. The RNZAF, because of its small size, had generally operated at least one rank below their RAF equivalents for similar responsibilities, and with the increasing size of the RNZAF it was felt that recognition for equivalent responsibilities should be made. Significant reliance on RAF officers had been made by the RNZAF during the early stages of the War, simply because suitable New Zealand officers were not available.

The New Zealand War Cabinet responded quickly and on 19 March 1943 approved a resolution promoting the CAS from Air Commodore to Air Vice-Marshal. To ensure that relativity was maintained, by the same resolution

⁵ ANZ EA1 81/3/3 (AAFD 809 Acc 1367), *War Cabinet Minutes*, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs/ High Commissioner for New Zealand, 1 March 1943.

the Group Captains holding the positions of Air Member for Personnel and Air Member for Supply were promoted to Air Commodore.⁶

Isitt was replacing R.V. Goddard, who had assumed office in succession to Saunders on 13 December 1941, five days after the outbreak of war with Japan. When Goddard completed his term as CAS, he produced a report covering his period in office. It reviewed the evolving development of the RNZAF during Goddard's tenure, and supplied a snapshot of its status at the time Isitt assumed responsibility for the service.



Isitt and Group Captain T.M. Wilkes, Port Moresby, New Guinea, March 1944.

(RNZAF Museum)

⁶ ANZ, EA1 81/3/3, *War Cabinet Minutes Vol 11.*

VISIT TO ISLAND OUTPOSTS



AIR VICE-MARSHAL L. M. ISITT, C.B.E., Chief of Air Staff in New Zealand, recently made an official inspection of island outposts of the Royal New Zealand Air Force in the South Pacific war area. The photograph shows Air Vice-Marshal Isitt accompanied by Air Commodore S. G. Wallingford, Air Officer Commanding in the Islands (wearing topee) going ashore in a native canoe at one of the island outposts.

Isitt in dugout canoe 'ANZ Air 118 64 Vol.20'

When the Japanese entered the war, the RNZAF were desperately short of modern combat aircraft. Indeed, for the first year of the war against Japan, no United States allotments of aircraft were received in New Zealand.⁷ The RNZAF was entirely dependent upon aircraft allotted by Great Britain, and

⁷ Ross, pp. 126-7.

the first 55 Kittyhawk fighters received were from British allotments in the United States.⁸ It was not until after Goddard had been to Washington in August 1942 that the supply position was resolved with the allocation of 540 United States operational aircraft for delivery before April 1944 and the placing of the RNZAF under United States authority for command and supply. On the strength of these arrangements, War Cabinet authorised the expansion of the RNZAF to 20 operational squadrons by April 1944.⁹

The improvement in strategic position allowed the War Cabinet to inform the United States that New Zealand would reduce its defensive requirements to two squadrons of Hudsons and two squadrons of Kittyhawks,¹⁰ responsible for the protection of shipping in New Zealand waters against raiders and submarines, protection of Auckland and Wellington and the defence of Norfolk Island. It was hoped that this would leave New Zealand with a total of 12 squadrons available for service in the forward area during 1943.¹¹

At the end of Goddard's term, the establishment of the RNZAF consisted of the following squadrons:

<u>Type</u>	<u>Aircraft Type</u>	<u>Aircraft Strength</u>
5 Bomber-Reconnaissance	Hudsons/Venturas	90

⁸ ANZ, Air 103/18 *Final Report AVM Goddard*, p.2.

⁹ *ibid*, p.5.

¹⁰ Eden and Moeng pp.518-9. The Curtiss P40 Kittyhawk/Warhawk was one of the most extensively built American fighters, but could not be numbered among the great fighter aircraft of the Second World War. It was moderately effective as a fighter up to the late stages of 1942, although only at low level. Thereafter, it was used almost exclusively in the ground attack role, in which its armament was little more than adequate, but its sturdiness and stability were decided assets.

¹¹ *ibid*.

1 Army-Cooperation	Harvards	9
1 Transport	Dakotas/Lodestars	15
1 Flying-boat	Catalinas	12
5 Fighter	Kittyhawk	105
1 Torpedo-Bomber	Avenger	18
1 Dive-Bomber	Dauntless	<u>21</u>
		<u>270</u> ¹²

Of these squadrons, eight were based overseas on active service, with three fighter and two bomber-reconnaissance squadrons on Santo, one fighter squadron on Guadalcanal, and one bomber-reconnaissance and the flying-boat squadron in Fiji. The majority of the squadrons in New Zealand were devoted to operational training, preparing for active duty in the forward zone.¹³

At this stage of the war it would have been difficult to choose a more balanced aircraft fleet, or one which could have better served the RNZAF. While the Hudson had performed capably in its reconnaissance role, it was being replaced by the higher performance Ventura. In retrospect, the North American B25 Mitchell would have been a better choice to replace the Hudson, but the Mitchell was a USAAF aircraft, and this would have created logistical support problems. Although the Ventura was demanding, when properly handled with strict adherence to procedures, it could perform adequately the various tasks required of the RNZAF. The Dakota,¹⁴

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Ross, pp.321-221

¹⁴ Eden and Moeng, pp.597-9. The Douglas C47 Dakota was a twin engine transport aircraft of American origin. It was the most successful transport aircraft used by the Allies in the Second World War, and subsequently was used by many civil airlines, including New Zealand National Airways Corporation(NAC).

Lodestar,¹⁵ Catalina and Avenger¹⁶ were all excellent aircraft, and the top performers in their respective roles. Even the Kittyhawk gave good service in an interim capacity, pending the availability of the better performing Corsair and Mustang. The Dauntless¹⁷ was employed for an outdated concept, but it was capable in a role which was soon to be phased out. During World War II, the Harvard was the best advanced trainer in service, and performed equally well in the army co-operation role.

Supporting the combat units were six flying training schools; three stores depots; five overhaul and repair depots; a technical training school; nine ground training units (aircrew); and five ground training units (ground personnel).¹⁸

¹⁵ Eden and Moeng, p.902. The Lockheed Lodestar was a twin engine aircraft of American origin, which performed a useful medium-range transport role, both for the RNZAF and post-war for NAC.

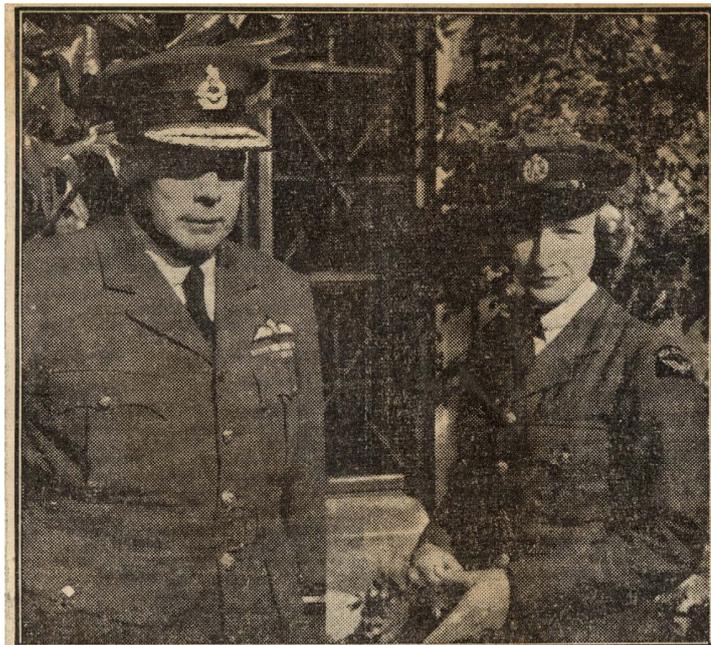
¹⁶ Eden and Moeng, pp. 767-8. The Grumman TBF Avenger was a single engine torpedo bomber of American origin.

¹⁷ Eden and Moeng, p.615. The Douglas SBD Dauntless was a single engine dive bomber of American origin, employed by one RNZAF squadron.

¹⁸ *ibid.*



Isitt welcomes Elsie and Annette on their return to New Zealand in February 1943. (ANZ Air 118 64 Vol. 20 p.94)



AIR OFFICER'S RETURN.—Air Commodore L. M. Isitt, formerly officer commanding at R.N.Z.A.F. Headquarters, London, with his daughter, Miss Nina Isitt, who is serving in the W.A.A.F. Air Commodore Isitt is returning to take up duties with the R.N.Z.A.F. in New Zealand.

Isitt with elder daughter Nina, early 1943. (ANZ Air 117 56 p.9)

At this time, the total personnel in the RNZAF were 39,239, with 30,071 stationed in New Zealand, 3,096 in the Pacific Islands and the balance of 6,072 in other overseas postings. The build-up had created pressures on manpower, and this problem was to dog Isitt during his tenure as CAS. However, the full extent of the difficulties was not yet apparent, and overall Goddard left a service which was in a strong position to make a positive contribution to winning the war in the Pacific.¹⁹

Isitt produced his first Monthly Liaison Letter as CAS on 1 August 1943.²⁰ The circulation list still comprised only eight recipients, and the letter followed the pattern which he had set earlier in the year as VCAS. He opened by being grateful for the messages of congratulations sent to him, and 'I would like to say on this occasion how much I do appreciate and value your telegrams'. Goddard was still in New Zealand at that date, pending his departure a few days later. 'I must say that we shall be sorry to lose him. His work and far-sighted planning during a difficult period have been invaluable, and he leaves us with an established reputation as probably the most able administrator the RNZAF has had'.²¹

Isitt did not produce any papers setting out his goals when he became CAS. His style was less aloof than Goddard, and he preferred personal contact, as illustrated by the regular visits he made to overseas stations during his tenure as CAS. On these visits, Isitt also maintained liaison with other Allied commanders.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters, 1 August 1943.*

²¹ *ibid.*

In his review of activities, Isitt was able to highlight that most bomber-reconnaissance and the flying-boat squadrons were primarily involved in training following receipt of the new aircraft types of Ventura and Catalina. The Venturas were replacing Hudsons. Seventeen Catalinas had been air delivered to Lauthala Bay, Fiji. The Catalinas were to be used for shipping protection against Japanese submarines, a vital role at the time. Progress was also being made in the establishment of a torpedo-bomber squadron, using Harvards, while it awaited delivery of its Avengers, and a dive-bomber squadron was being formed with nine Dauntless aircraft on loan from the Americans. Both of these squadrons were being formed at the direction of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to perform roles hitherto not attempted by the RNZAF. 'These aircraft will remain with us on loan for six weeks'.

While questions could be asked about the wisdom of forming a dive-bomber squadron at this stage of the war, the Germans had used their Junkers JU87 Stuka dive-bombers in the tactical support role to great effect, early in the war, in conditions of air superiority. However, the Stukas were vulnerable without adequate fighter cover, as highlighted in the Battle of Britain, with the result that they were withdrawn from operations in Western Europe.²² A similar situation occurred with the USAAF in the Pacific, where Dauntlesses were used outside the limited role of a dive-bomber, requiring their withdrawal.²³ But the United States Navy used them successfully, and in

²² P. Eden and S. Moeng, *The Encyclopedia of World Aircraft*, Enderby: Silverdale Books, 2002, p.860.

²³ *ibid*, p.615.

effect, the New Zealand Dauntlesses operated against only one target, Rabaul.²⁴ The United States Navy also used the Curtiss SB2C Helldiver in this role, employing over 7,000 of them during World War II.²⁵

An indication of how close-run the war was at this point is revealed by the comment of ‘the Japanese Navy having been successful in reinforcing New Georgia to some extent. Japanese front line aircraft strength, shore based, in the South Pacific has passed the 1000 mark for the first time’.²⁶ At this stage of the War American submarines had not experienced significant success in reducing the Japanese merchant fleet, with the result that supplies continued to flow.

Isitt was continuing his correspondence with Wallingford regarding the employment of Bomber-Reconnaissance Squadrons.²⁷ He wanted to use the Venturas more aggressively, provided search requirements permitted. ‘The only reason for the suggestion is that these BR squadrons should be given a more offensive role... and I know you will agree that the odd strike or bomb raid has an encouraging effect on the outlook of the crews’. Isitt had noted that when crews had returned from a tour of operations in the islands they had all expressed the desire for the opportunity to take part in aggressive operations.²⁸ It was thought that this would greatly boost the morale of the BR Squadrons. After the recent successes of the fighter squadrons, a

²⁴ C.F.L. Jenks, *Allied Wings No. 5, The Dauntless in RNZAF Service*, Paris: Paul Listermann, 2008, p.9.

²⁵ P. Eden and S. Moeng, p.520.

²⁶ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, 1 August 1943.

²⁷ ANZ 100/4 *Correspondence with Groups*, Isitt to Wallingford, 3 August 1943.

²⁸ *ibid*, Isitt to Wallingford 26 June 1943.

tremendous change of attitude was noticed in the home based squadrons, against increased Japanese fighter activity in defence of Guadalcanal²⁹ which changed their outlook on the P40 completely, and there had also been increased applications for instructors to be posted to fighters.³⁰

Isitt's next Liaison Letter of 1 September 1943³¹ opened in an informal manner, aiming to give a human and personal touch to his message:

Spring is with us and we notice a decided improvement in the weather and a lengthening of the hours of daylight. We shall all be glad to rid ourselves of an epidemic of colds and sore throats which have been prevalent in the Air Department during the past few weeks.³²

Isitt reported on a recent visit to the forward area of the DCAS, the Air Member for Personnel (AMP) and the Assistant Director of Operations. Air Commodore R.B. Bannerman, the AMP, had undertaken the journey with the prime purpose of negotiating with Major-General H.E. Barrowclough, the GOC of the New Zealand 3rd Division in New Caledonia, a system for the recruitment from the Army of sufficient personnel to ensure fulfilment of the aircrew training programme. The recruiting drive was spectacularly successful, much to Barrowclough's chagrin. 'Barrowclough was staggered by the response we got and is proving very hostile'.³³ At this stage of the

²⁹ Ross, pp.184-9; Rudge,C, *Air-to-Air*, Lyttelton: Adventure Air, 2003, pp.91-105.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ ANZ 100/8 *Monthly Liaison Letters*. This Liaison Letter was duplicated for the first time, and consisted of eight single-spaced foolscap paged, to set the pattern for the remainder of the War.

³² *ibid*, *Monthly Liaison Letter*, 1 September 1943.

³³ *ibid.*

war, virtually all men of military age had been called up,³⁴ with the Army having first call on suitable recruits. The Air Force was also continuing to grow and was having difficulty in meeting its requirements, prompting Bannerman's visit. The 3rd Division was always smaller than optimum, and any reduction in numbers had operational implications, hence Barrowclough's reaction.³⁵

Isitt adopted a practice in his Liaison Letters of covering one aspect of RNZAF activities in depth each month, and in September concentrated on Operational matters. The biggest change during the month was the reorganisation of all combat squadrons into two separate units, one comprising a flying echelon to include aircrews, adjutant, intelligence and operations officers, and secondly, maintenance units consisting of the balance of the ground personnel. The flying echelon would retain the number by which the squadron was now known, and the maintenance units would have a new number assigned to them. This arrangement was necessitated by the varying durations for tours of duty which were required, and the impossibility of harmonising the air and ground requirements. Fighter squadrons rotated on a three month basis, bomber-reconnaissance four months, and flying boat squadrons could be as long as six months, whereas ground crews could be absent from New Zealand for as long as two years. The rotations were affected by the intensity of the various activities,

³⁴ I. McGibbon (Ed), p.119.

³⁵ *ibid.*

combined with the length of training necessary to become combat proficient.³⁶

The degree of detail supplied by Isitt supplies a snapshot of the condition of the RNZAF at the time he assumed command. The Bomber-reconnaissance Squadrons continued to operate from Guadalcanal and Espiritu Santo carrying out local anti-submarine patrols. The Squadrons were being re-equipped with Ventura aircraft, and it was expected that the Venturas would offer a significant improvement in speed, range and bomb capacity.³⁷

W.J. (Bill) Edhouse was part of the first RNZAF Squadron (No. 1) to convert to Venturas. He recalled that no instructors were available, and the squadron had to teach themselves to fly the aircraft. It was very fast, being able to exceed 350 m.p.h. and could easily keep up with F4U Corsair and P38 Lightning fighter aircraft. But the performance came at a price: 'A good plane in good hands, but in the wrong hands - *kaput*.'³⁸

Problems had also arisen with Ventura B34 aircraft that were to have re-equipped No. 4 BR Squadron, which was based in Fiji. These aircraft, which were the American Army version of the Ventura, as opposed to the Navy version PV1, were shipped to New Zealand. They were not brand new, and in some cases required a considerable amount of repair and overhaul before they could be flown to Fiji. The fuel system of the B34 also differed

³⁶ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, 1 September 1943.

³⁷ *ibid*.

³⁸ Bruce M. Petty, *New Zealand in the Pacific War*, Jefferson: McFarland, 2008, p.73.

significantly from the PV1, and additional maintenance problems prompted the decision to retain all Ventura B34 aircraft in New Zealand. Meanwhile No. 4 BR Squadron would remain equipped with Hudsons, which with their greater endurance, were more suitable than the Ventura B34 aircraft for convoy escorts, which formed the bulk of the operational flying carried out from Fiji. ³⁹



Isitt greets Halsey, Wellington Airport, 1944.
(ANZ Air 118 54 Vol. 20 p.40)

³⁹ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, 1 September 1943.



Isitt with Buckley (ANZ Air 118 54 Vol. 20 p.94)

A development had occurred with the Army Co-Operation Squadron, where as a result of the reduction of the Army in New Zealand to a cadre basis, the requirements for such a squadron had virtually ceased to exist. The amount of operational flying carried out by No. 21 Army Cooperation Squadron, equipped with Harvards, had been negligible in the preceding months, and in view of the acute shortage of skilled maintenance personnel, the unit could not be allowed to remain only partially employed. As a result representations had been made to the General Officer Commanding New Zealand Military Forces, Lieutenant General E. Puttick, which had agreed to the disbandment of squadron. Future requirements for air cooperation were to be met by specific requests, which would allow a more effective use of resources.⁴⁰

Isitt acknowledged the value of No. 40 Transport Squadron for the transportation of RNZAF aircrew and ground personnel to the forward area. The weekly freight services to the Islands were being carried out by Dakota aircraft, while Lodestar aircraft assisted with mail.⁴¹

Considerable activity was also occurring at RNZAF Stations in New Zealand. At Palmerston North, the aerodrome was to revert to civil use. The AOC No 1 Islands Group had made frequent representations regarding the importance of all personnel in the forward area being trained in the use of rifles, automatic weapons and grenades, owing to their concern that

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

possible Japanese infiltration attacks could occur. As result it had been decided to take over an Army camp at Swanson near Auckland, with accommodation for 500 personnel and full range facilities. This arrangement would allow the necessary weapons training to personnel immediately prior to their embarkation for the forward area. In the South Island, steady progress was being achieved in the conversion of Delta from Army to Air Force use as the major ground training station.⁴²

At the conclusion of his Liaison Letter, Isitt commented that he had originally intended them to be more of a personal nature, but they were growing into a somewhat weighty bulletin. Notwithstanding the change of emphasis, he felt it important that they contained a fairly full account of RNZAF activities for the month.⁴³ In this regard they performed an admirable role, encapsulating the diverse activities in a concise manner, and identifying the relative importance of these activities through contemporary eyes. The Letters were also appreciated by the overseas recipients, as they were kept in the overall picture, thus enabling them to assess the significance of their own contribution. The Liaison Letters were marked 'Confidential' and distributed to RNZAF Groups and offices overseas such as Melbourne, Washington, Ottawa and London before eventually embracing all RNZAF Stations. Seabrook and Findlay from Washington, and White in Ottawa made numerous references in their correspondence to the value they placed on the Liaison Letters. In the latter months of the war, the Letters were also circulated to the War Cabinet.

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ *ibid.*

The October 1943 Liaison Letter was classic Isitt - he aimed to describe matters from a personal perspective, but still endeavoured to supply as much information as he could.⁴⁴ September had involved his first visit to the forward area as CAS, and he was absent from New Zealand about fourteen days. Throughout the trip he used a Lodestar aircraft of NO. 40 Squadron, which he found very fast and comfortable. The first leg was from Auckland to Noumea, where he called to see Admiral Halsey and his Staff, whom he found full of confidence for the outcome of operations which were then under way.⁴⁵

At Espiritu Santo, now regarded as a back number, there was still a heavy emphasis on anti-submarine and ship control work.⁴⁶ Isitt also visited the United States flying boat base, which was shortly to become the home of No. 6 (Catalina) Squadron. His visit coincided with the arrival of No. 15 Fighter Squadron, which had flown their Kittyhawks from New Zealand via Norfolk Island and Tontouta.⁴⁷

Isitt's next move was to Guadalcanal, where the RNZAF had one Ventura Bomber-Reconnaissance Squadron and two Kittyhawk Fighter Squadrons. He was impressed with the job they were doing 'and maintaining their

⁴⁴ *ibid*, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, October 1943.

⁴⁵ *ibid*.

⁴⁶ *ibid*.

⁴⁷ *ibid*.

reputation for thoroughness and reliability which the RNZAF has established and are maintaining in all theatres of the war where they are operating.⁴⁸

From Guadalcanal, Isitt went forward to Munda, which had recently been captured from the Japanese. RNZAF fighters on long escorts made frequent use of it, and occasionally went forward and worked from this strip and the other strip on New Georgia, situated at Segi. Isitt spent a day seeing the current operations, and discussing future planning. He was optimistic that within six weeks there would be two fighter squadrons forward in the area, and he expected that New Zealanders would take a more active role in the operation of aerodromes and in the actual planning and direction of operations.⁴⁹

Isitt met General Barrowclough (N.Z. 3rd Division) at Munda, and later had dinner with him at Guadalcanal. Isitt thought that the Division looked very fit, having established a sound reputation for energy and hard work, and if given the opportunity to fight, would give a good account of themselves.⁵⁰

While at Guadalcanal, Isitt took the opportunity to visit one of the New Zealand radar units situated on Malita. The island was off the beaten track of the war, and the only troops on it were a small contingent of RNZAF radar personnel. Isitt had been concerned about its protection, but found that a large number of friendly natives had been enlisted as guards and lookout

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

men. Malita was a beautiful tropical island, and the section was getting well installed, with the local natives constructing a camp of native style houses:

For a quiet life, it appeared ideal while I was there, but I have no doubt that the weather can be very trying and there will probably be plenty of mosquitoes and other pests, and I am afraid that a few months will satisfy most people that this sort of life is not all that it is cracked up to be in the books.⁵¹

Isitt spent a week in the forward area and was able to witness the operations of New Zealand squadrons, particularly the intensive neutralisation of Bougainville airfields to cover the move forward of the New Zealand Brigade to Vella Lavella. That the effort was successful was proved by the fact that the Brigade landed under surface and air protection without any enemy air interference.⁵²

On the way back to New Zealand, Isitt called in at New Caledonia, where he attended a Governor's reception and also a parade of Allied troops. From there he flew to Norfolk Island which at that stage of the war had become remote from strategic activities, but it was a most useful transit base for aircraft.⁵³

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ *ibid.*



*Isitt as CAS with personal assistant Flying Officer A.M. Haldane.
(ANZ Air 118 64 Vol. 20 p.99)*



Isitt at Desk (ANZ Air 118 64 Vol. 20 p.112)

Whilst Isitt was away, the General Election had taken place. One unsuccessful Air Force candidate, who managed to embroil himself in political controversy, was Flying Officer L.S. Dromgoole. Dromgoole was an

RAF Reserve Officer, serving in the RNZAF, and he was a candidate for a North Shore seat. He managed to arrange with a United States Marine Officer to drop some election leaflets from a United States C47. The reaction was immediate, and Jones, the Minister of Defence, wrote a furious letter to Isitt, demanding an explanation as to how an RNZAF aircraft could be used for political purposes, and requiring the severest penalties of the culprit. Isitt was able to advise that it was not an RNZAF aircraft, but a United States one, and that an immediate investigation would be instituted. Isitt carefully referred the matter to Bannerman, the Air Member for Personnel. Subsequent enquiries revealed that Dromgoole had committed no offence under Air Force Law, and the matter petered out, although Dromgoole was quietly discharged from the RNZAF some six months later.⁵⁴

Isitt carried out his regular review of operations, with comments about each of the Squadrons. The final implementation of the fighter squadron rotation was now starting to take effect. The policy required an intricate marshalling of the squadrons, rotating them forward from advanced operational training, to active service before returning to New Zealand.⁵⁵

In New Zealand No. 30 Torpedo Bomber Squadron was still based at Gisborne awaiting delivery of its new TBF Avenger aircraft. However, six Avenger aircraft had been delivered to New Zealand, and were to be allotted immediately to the Squadron.⁵⁶ Delays were also occurring with No. 25 Dive

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

Bomber Squadron which was still based at Seagrove carrying out training on old type SBD's loaned from the American Marines. In an effort to assist, the Marines had agreed to loan more aircraft, and it was anticipated that in the future, 18 aircraft would be available for training purposes.⁵⁷

No. 40 Transport Squadron continued to operate smoothly despite increasing demands being placed on it for air transportation of passengers, freight and mail. The regular weekly services had been run with 'clockwork regularity'. With the re-equipment of bomber-reconnaissance squadrons by Venturas, twelve surplus Hudsons were being modified as troop carriers to augment the Dakotas and Lodestars.⁵⁸

Isitt regretted that his Letter was much longer than he intended, and he hoped that the recipients found it interesting and informative. There were so many matters to relate that he found it difficult to delete anything that had been written.⁵⁹

In his Operational Summary, Isitt advised that in Fiji the operational commitments for anti-submarine patrols and convoy escort work had increased considerably owing to the removal of an American squadron from Nadi. Two fighter squadrons, previously stationed at Guadalcanal, had been transferred to Ondonga Field, close by Munda.⁶⁰ No. 40 Transport Squadron continued to operate most successfully, and arrangements were being made

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

to extend the bi-weekly C47 flights as far as Ondonga. The RNZAF Pacific Ferry had almost completed the fifth delivery of nine Ventura aircraft, and Isitt observed 'These delivery flights are taking place with almost clockwork regularity.'⁶¹

Isitt then proceeded to undertake a comprehensive review of Operational Training Units which he had omitted previously as 'news of our operational squadrons has been of paramount interest.' However, the Operational Training Units (OTU's) were working at full speed to provide pilots and crews for the bomber-reconnaissance and fighter squadrons. The figures given by Isitt illustrated the complexity of the training organisation required in New Zealand to feed the combat squadrons, and provided some explanation for the number of personnel required by the RNZAF in New Zealand.⁶²

Isitt concluded his newsletter by referring to the current manning position. With the exception of one or two specialist trades, there were no immediate enlistment problems in respect of non-flying personnel. With aircrew, there were a sufficient number to meet intakes until April 1944.⁶³

An interesting response to Isitt's November Letter came from Group Captain Sir Robert Clark-Hall, at that time CO at Southern Group HQ, Christchurch. 'I much appreciate getting a general idea of your policy on broad lines, as it

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *ibid.*

prevents me getting too parochial and concerning myself too much with matters in connection with such things as SODOMY and SANITARY TOWELS both of which have recently been worrying me, to say nothing of flying accidents.’⁶⁴ Although Clark-Hall had written in humorous vein, he was illustrating the very real human problems faced by station commanders. Stations were self-contained entities, and while volunteers comprised many of the personnel, they were still separated from their normal environment and problems were inevitable. Resolving these difficulties ultimately devolved to the station commanders.

Very shortly after despatching his Liaison Letter, Isitt wrote to Wallingford, who at that time was with No. 1 (Islands) Group.⁶⁵ Isitt was concerned with the delays which had occurred with No. 25 Dive-Bomber Squadron, and wished to highlight some of the difficulties which had caused the delays.⁶⁶

Within a week Isitt was writing to Wallingford again, and allowed full emotions regarding a very frustrating situation to come into play.⁶⁷ Generally he was very concise and business-like, but on occasions he devoted considerable length to his replies. Almost invariably, longer letters were limited to colleagues, and it was extremely rare for him to write at length to other than a close acquaintance. Isitt was explaining the reasons for the delay in the working up of the Dauntless Dive-Bomber Squadron, and of the difficulties which had occurred, but training was now progressing

⁶⁴ ANZ Air 100/4, Clark-Hall to Isitt, 9 November 1943.

⁶⁵ *ibid*, Isitt to Wallingford, 12 November 1943.

⁶⁶ *ibid*.

⁶⁷ *ibid*, Isitt to Wallingford, 17 November 1943.

satisfactorily. Isitt was responding to pressure from Wallingford, who, in turn, was reacting to American questions as to why the RNZAF dive-bomber squadrons had not arrived earlier. The situation was frustrating to all concerned, and although ultimately successful, only one dive-bomber squadron was ever commissioned.⁶⁸

Isitt then answered a Wallingford request for retaining No. 3 Squadron using Hudsons, for a further period. The response illustrates the differing perspectives of an operational commander with limited knowledge, from those of the supreme commander with an overall knowledge of a necessity for more than tactical considerations:

I know I would not get the support of the other Chiefs of Staff if I made a recommendation to War Cabinet that B-R Squadrons were not required in New Zealand, and I doubt if I could get Cabinet authority to form an additional B-R Squadron, and should we do so, we have not the manpower to produce the Servicing Unit.⁶⁹

Wallingford tended to view situations as either black or white, whereas Isitt perceived matters as subtler shades of grey. He knew what the political repercussions would be if he tried to implement Wallingford's request.

Isitt also wrote to Nevill on 1 September 1943,⁷⁰ commenting that progress was being made towards the 20 Squadron Plan, put forward by Goddard and

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ ANZ Air 100/3 *Correspondence with London*, Isitt to Nevill, 1 September 1943.

approved by the War Cabinet. This led to a response to Nevill's enquiry regarding the use of RNZAF personnel in the RAF, following the end of the European war. Nevill had suggested that they might be brought back, re-armed with aircraft under American allocation, and serve in the Pacific. Whilst this appeared superficially sound, the lack of maintenance personnel and the very serious manpower situation developing in New Zealand, made it impossible to extend beyond the 20 Squadron Plan. In addition, a clause in the 1942 agreement lay down that should New Zealand withdraw squadrons from the RAF for service in the Pacific, the full costs of aircraft, pay, fuel and munitions used by the squadrons would be a charge against New Zealand. 'So you will see that the finance people will not wish to get further into the red on our war expenses in the Pacific.'⁷¹



Isitt at desk in relaxed mode. (ANZ Air 118 64 Vol. 20 p.113)

⁷¹ *ibid.*

Another problem area concerned the employment of New Zealand ex-operational officers from the United Kingdom, the experience of which had not been the happiest. Generally, these officers were very independent, slow to fit in, and once they have been back four or five months, were anxious to return to the U.K. again.⁷² Spurdle explained how difficult it was to fit back into the New Zealand environment after having been on active service in the United Kingdom. In particular, he found it almost impossible to gain acceptance from New Zealand officers who had not served overseas.⁷³ Another problem was the rapid promotion in the RAF by comparison to the New Zealand theatre, with the RAF officers well ahead in seniority to officers who had enlisted at the same time and remained throughout in New Zealand. Wherever possible Isitt tried to find a suitable position for officers returning from the United Kingdom, but many went back for further tours or were discharged to the Active Reserve. The sheer size of the RAF, coupled with the high rate of casualties incurred, meant that more opportunities for promotion were available.⁷⁴

More difficulties concerned aircrew who had completed three years or more in England, and who concluded they should be entitled to return to New Zealand, if not for duty, at least on leave. Isitt was prepared to take up a three month leave period with the Government, as the precedent existed with the First Echelon of the 2nd Division, although at the time of Isitt's

⁷² *ibid.*

⁷³ R.L. Spurdle, *The Blue Arena*, William Kimber: London, 1986, pp.132-5.

⁷⁴ ANZ Air 100/3 *Correspondence with London*, Isitt to Nevill, 1 September 1943.

writing, the full downside in relation to the First Echelon was still to be experienced. Many of the First Echelon soldiers who had returned to New Zealand for a six month furlough, refused to re-embark at the end of their leave. As a result of this experience, no comparable schemes were attempted by the RNZAF.⁷⁵

As Isitt was writing to Nevill, another letter was on its way to New Zealand, from the CAS of the RAF, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal:

My dear Isitt,

As you know, for some considerable time past a very great deal of effort has been devoted to trying to reduce the accident rate in the RAF. During the last eighteen months a very substantial improvement has been made and the figures for June show that the number of accidents per 10,000 hours flying was lower in that month than in any previous month since the beginning of the War. By comparison with the numbers we should have lost if the accident rate for June 1942 had been maintained, the figures show that the equivalents of 200 aircraft and about the same number of aircrew were saved.

Much of the credit for this outstanding achievement is undoubtedly due to the good work being done by the Overseas Training Schools, and I would like to congratulate you and all those working under you on this great task for a magnificent contribution to the great results which have been obtained. I am sure that if we all persist in our efforts, the accident rate will be still further reduced and still more aircraft and crew saved.

Yours sincerely,

C. Portal.⁷⁶

Isitt was also able to advise Goddard:

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ *ibid*, Portal to Isitt, 31 August 1943.

Due in no small measure to the splendid organisation built up during your term of office, the RNZAF continues to function efficiently and without any untoward incidents. My task on that account is made comparatively easy. Our main problem at the moment is the dwindling source of aircrew, but Bannerman is hopeful that we may, with a forceful publicity campaign, and another raid on the Army, get enough material to carry us through the first three or four months of next year.

Our aircraft allocations for 1944 are due to be reviewed in November. We are pressing for future allocations to be restricted as far as possible to two types - fighters and bombers - and I am satisfied that our case in that respect will be capably handled by Findlay and Seabrook.⁷⁷

Other correspondence was in a lighter vein, evidenced by a letter from George C. Hartgill of Palmerston North:

May I say how grateful we all are for your coming and carrying out inspections of ATC cadet units in both Gisborne and Napier. To both officers and cadets it has been a real thrill - giving all ranks confidence in the fact that they really mean something in the set up of the RNZAF.⁷⁸

Isitt's next monthly Liaison Letter, dated December 1, 1943, opened with news of RNZAF Stations, mirroring the rapidly changing circumstances of the times.⁷⁹ A new station at New Georgia was opened to administer and control the two fighter squadrons based at Ondonga. In New Zealand, Ardmore was in the final stages of construction for units of the United States Marine Air

⁷⁷ *ibid*, Isitt to Goddard, 12 October 1943.

⁷⁸ ANZ Air 100/7, Hartgill to Isitt, 25 October 1943.

⁷⁹ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, 1 December 1943.

Corps, as part of a plan to build airfields in the upper North Island. However, United States requirements changed, which meant that the RNZAF was presented with a modern airfield, complete with buildings and accommodation. At the time, Ardmore was the equivalent of Whenuapai and Ohakea, and provided the opportunity to institute fighter training at a station near Auckland.⁸⁰

Isitt then reflected on the war in the Pacific, where recent events had to be considered in relation to New Britain, and in particular to Rabaul, which was Japan's major air and naval base in the Bismarck Sea, and the keystone of the defensive organisation in the area. The recent landings on Bougainville Island had created the opportunity to use either captured Japanese airfields or to create new strips within 250 miles of Rabaul, while airfields on New Georgia and Vella Lavella, had enabled the successful neutralisation of all Japanese airfields on Bougainville. Isitt thought that Japanese losses of shipping and aircraft at Rabaul were making it difficult for them to retain the base, and there were some indications of withdrawal to Kavieng, in northern New Ireland, or to airfields and bases in the Admiralty Islands. He was obviously privy to intelligence information, although he made no reference to a possible source.⁸¹

In Operations, the Bomber-Reconnaissance Squadrons had adopted a more aggressive role, so that the Venturas, in addition to routine patrols were

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ *ibid.*

being employed on strikes and special missions.⁸² No. 6 Flying Boat Squadron operating from Espiritu Santo at Segond Channel now had 12 Catalinas which were operating 12½ hour patrols per day. While it had not had any operational success, Isitt considered that it was performing an important part of a patrol plan that was essential to the success of current operations.⁸³ The fighter squadrons operating from Ondonga had been busy during the month. They had been engaged in escorting strike forces to Bougainville, and in maintaining standing patrols over Empress Augusta Bay as well as sweeps, barge hunting and strafing missions around the coast of Bougainville.⁸⁴

No. 30 Torpedo-Bombing Squadron was progressing well with operational training on TBF Avenger aircraft. A positive development was the Navy making available the services of their mine-sweeping trawlers for use as target vessels.⁸⁵ The painfully slow working-up of No. 25 Dive Bomber Squadron had shown little improvement, but through dint of hard work and major overhauls for all aircraft, a serviceability rate of 12/13 aircraft had been achieved. The earlier lack of aircraft had seriously delayed operational training, and it was not anticipated that the squadron would move overseas before early 1944. On the bright side, Isitt felt that the experience gained in the training of this unit had been invaluable, and the formation of further SBD units would be a relatively simple matter. This was not to be, as even

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

though further dive-bomber squadrons were formed, they were equipped with Avengers, rather than with SBD Dauntlesses.⁸⁶

Isitt concluded his Liaison Letter with a heartfelt plea regarding manpower, which had assumed probably a greater significance than any other single issue at the time:

It is worthy of record that our personnel strength now exceeds 40,000. There is no doubt that 1943 has been our peak year. I am sure that none of us would have dared prophesy at the beginning of the year that the strength of the RNZAF would have reached such a large figure. Dwindling manpower resources, however, will affect our future recruitment. We are about to embark on another publicity campaign for aircrew trainees and we are still hopeful that we will get sufficient recruits to carry us well into next year. I am afraid that there is an attitude of mind in New Zealand that this war can now be won without drawing further on our manpower resources. The Government is being pressed to produce more foodstuffs, wool etc. for the troops in the Pacific and the United Kingdom and is inclined to give more consideration to this than the requirements of the Service. By way of example, I was asked recently to make available for seasonal work about 4,000 airmen for a period of four months. As you can well imagine this would seriously hamper both our Pacific commitments, and our Empire Air Training Programme and the request, if acted on, would prove embarrassing.⁸⁷

Normally the most cautious of men when expressing himself in writing, Isitt would not have commented in such a forthright manner if his Liaison Letter

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

had been circulated to the War Cabinet as it was later in the war.⁸⁸ This was an exceptional instance of his criticising a potential Government action, and indicated the stresses to which he was subject relating to manpower availability. The action had the potential for serious repercussions, but there was no Government reaction.

Isitt opened his first Liaison Letter of 1944⁸⁹ by advising that Nevill had returned to Wellington as Vice-Chief of Air Staff, with his principal duty being coordination and supervision of organisation and management.⁹⁰

Considerable movement was taking place at New Zealand Stations. Delta, a former Army camp near Woodbourne, was being refurbished so that it could accommodate all aircrew trainees from enlistment until the time of passing out to an Elementary Training School. Wigram was in the midst of extensive upgrading and 'has probably had to take more pounding than any other grass surface in New Zealand.'⁹¹

The war in the Pacific against the Japanese in the South and South-West Pacific Areas had seen two recent developments of great importance. The first was that fighter aircraft from the Solomons had been able to take the offensive in earnest against Rabaul, and the other was the American landing at Cape Gloucester on New Britain. This landing had the potential to create new airfields which would bring Rabaul under attack from two directions:

⁸⁸ ANZ EA 1, 84/3/22 *Chief of Air Staff Reports*.

⁸⁹ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, January 1944.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

⁹¹ *ibid.*

It should only be a matter of time before the South Pacific fighters will be escorting the short-range light bombers (Dauntlesses and Avengers) which have proved so effective in reducing the enemy's airfields and centres of resistance in the Solomons. Then Rabaul, though it will be the toughest proposition they have yet tackled, should be in for a hard time.⁹²

Isitt then pondered the interesting question as to the extent the enemy would hazard his aircraft to resist the New Britain challenge. For a long period the Japanese had husbanded them by keeping their offensive operations at a very low level. Since the Cape Gloucester landings they had reacted fairly strongly. It remained to see how long this would continue, for they were faced with the necessity of choosing between unpalatable alternatives.⁹³

Isitt then commented on operations, with the big news of the month being the employment of New Zealand fighter squadrons over the great Japanese stronghold of Rabaul in New Britain. Three of the squadrons had taken part in fierce actions over Rabaul, of which the fiercest occurred on Christmas Eve, when the biggest day's score was achieved. They destroyed twelve Zeros confirmed, four probables and badly damaged five more. This score was the highest of all the various fighter types in action that day, and brought the grand total to eighty one confirmed and ten probable.⁹⁴ This

⁹² *ibid.*

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

was part of the strategy aimed at the neutralisation of Rabaul, reducing its offensive capability without the costs of a direct attack.⁹⁵

With improved serviceability of their Dauntless aircraft, No. 30 Dive Bomber Squadron had been able to intensify its operational training, and was ready to move forward, with all pilots in the squadron having completed 100 hours operational training.⁹⁶

No. 40 Transport Squadron had received the balance of its Lodestar aircraft, and Hudson aircraft were being modified to bring the squadron up to strength.⁹⁷ Demand for greater quantities of freight and larger numbers of personnel required urgently in the forward area, had increased steadily, and Isitt felt that when the squadron had been brought to establishment, its value in relation to activities in the forward area would be better appreciated.⁹⁸

The fine weather experienced in December had enabled all training units to perform ahead of syllabi. Isitt looked forward to 1944 as the peak year for the RNZAF, because at that time allocations of combat aircraft from America were satisfactory, which would enable the RNZAF to play a greater part in operations in the Pacific area.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Ross, p.237.

⁹⁶ ANZ, Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, January 1944.

⁹⁷ ANZ Air 118, *81L Air Transport and the Pacific Ferry*.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

He continued his wide ranging correspondence with friends, relations and concerned parents as well as those requests put to him in an official capacity. The Editor of the RSA Magazine wrote on 11 November 1943, requesting a Christmas message for the December issue. Isitt supplied a contribution which commenced:

Our fifth Christmas of the war is remarkably different from those which have gone before, when there appeared nothing ahead but the most appalling difficulties and dangers, and it required the utmost of our courage and determination to keep thrusting into the unknown future, with but little beside our faith to fortify us. Today we have great and powerful allies at our side, and our mutual enemies have suffered great and disastrous defeats.¹⁰⁰

The Headmaster of Christchurch Boys' High School, A.E. Caddick wrote requesting Isitt to speak at the 'Break Up Function' to be held in the School Hall on Wednesday 8 December at 7.45 p.m. which Isitt accepted.¹⁰¹ J.E. Barton wrote referring to the fact that he had just been listening to a broadcast made by Isitt, and enquiring about the progress being made by his son, who was then training at the Delta. Isitt acknowledged Barton's letter and followed up with an enquiry to the C.O. at Delta.¹⁰² Dr Arthur Nelson of Christchurch Public Hospital enquired of Isitt about a colleague, which Isitt referred to the AMP. Nelson said 'I always remember you for being so decently grateful to the staff.'¹⁰³ Bill Murphy, then a Colonel with the Headquarters of the 3rd Division wrote offering Christmas wishes, and ended

¹⁰⁰ ANZ Air 100/7, Isitt to RSA Magazine, 18 November 1943.

¹⁰¹ *ibid*, Isitt to Caddick, 26 November 1943.

¹⁰² *ibid*, Isitt to Barton, 1 December 1943...

¹⁰³ *ibid*, Nelson to Isitt, 27 November 1943.

with a P.S. 'My missus greatly appreciated your telephone call and messages'.¹⁰⁴ David L. Isaacs on 13 December 1943 thanked Isitt for his assistance in obtaining details of his son's death 'I received a final report of the inquest but have not told my wife more than necessary'.¹⁰⁵ In a letter to Mr R. Simpson, Isitt responded 'I have arranged that Trevor will be seen by the Air Member for Personnel and the position straightened out'.¹⁰⁶ Mrs H.J. Murdoch in her letter thanking Isitt, referred to a telephone conversation with Isitt regarding her son, who was a Squadron Leader serving in the Royal Air Force.¹⁰⁷

In many instances the letter came to Isitt from a distraught parent who was unsure as to the appropriate lines of communication. Isitt always answered promptly, often referring the matter to others for a response, but he always followed up this response. Similarly, wherever possible he would follow up with a telephone call, in an effort to supply a personal touch. Such behaviour would have been time consuming for a busy man, but Isitt regarded it as part of his duty. He was a compassionate man who did not shelter behind his position.

An old friend, Phil Bennett of Te Horo, had written to Isitt requesting his help to prevent publication of Court Martial details affecting a relative of Bennett. Isitt responded 'Courts Martial must be as open to the Press as any other court of law, and unless there are security grounds on which we can

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*, Murphy to Isitt, 27 November 1943.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*, Isaacs to Isitt, 13 December 1943.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*, Isitt to Simpson, 14 December 1943.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*, Murdoch to Isitt, 14 December 1943.

exclude the press, it is impossible for us and it would be most unwise for me to interfere with normal publicity'.¹⁰⁸ This was a matter of principle, on which Isitt was not prepared to waiver, even though it meant disappointing a friend.

The February 1944 Liaison Letter was slightly later than normal in being published.¹⁰⁹ There had been a visit from RAAF officers to discuss the policy of the RAAF in regard to Postings, Promotions, Reclassifications and Remusterings of airmen and airwomen. This was an area in which the RNZAF had not been robust, mainly owing to lack of suitably qualified officers in peacetime, and the large wartime growth in numbers of personnel had created many problems. The RAAF appeared to have the answers, and their approach was adopted as a model for future development.¹¹⁰

The most important recent overseas visit had been that of the Prime Minister and Minister of Defence to Australia, accompanied by Air Commodore Nevill. The visit was made at the request of the Australian Government with the objective of concluding an agreement on many matters, the chief of which was collaboration in the Pacific area on security and post-war aviation. The Agreement became known as the Canberra Pact. Isitt was prescient to observe that comment had been passed in American papers over the apparent non-recognition of American interests in the Pacific Zone and the assumption that Australia and New Zealand would deal

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*, Isitt to Bennett, 28 January 1944.

¹⁰⁹ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, February 1944.

¹¹⁰ *ibid*.

with the problems alone. Such a view had not been intended, but Isitt regretted that no reference to the interests of America in Pacific defence had appeared in the text of the agreement. This hostile response from the United States was going to haunt Isitt for the rest of the war, as he battled to deal with the unintended consequences arising from the Canberra Pact.¹¹¹

The initial American response was to remove New Zealand forces from front line activities and to confine them to garrison type operations.¹¹²

The fighter squadrons had continued to take an active part in fighter sweeps and bomber sorties over Rabaul. During January, New Zealand pilots had accounted for 16 Zeros, all shot down in the vicinity of Rabaul. Isitt then enthusiastically claimed that the victories 'take us past the first century, and we are hoping that when our squadrons are re-equipped with the fast and more up to date Corsair, the second century will be reached in a much shorter time.'¹¹³ This was not to be: subsequent re-evaluation reduced the score to 99, and there was no chance of improving this score as nearly all Japanese aircraft in the South West Pacific had been destroyed or transferred out, although this fact was not appreciated at the time.¹¹⁴

No. 25 Dive Bomber Squadron finally moved forward at the end of January, and was carrying out advanced training at Espiritu Santo prior to its move to the combat area at the beginning of March. The problems created in

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² I. McGibbon (ed); Peddie, J.G., *The Canberra Pact*, Wellington: Royal College of Defence Studies, 1991, p.1,p.9.; Long, Gavin, *The Six Years War*, Canberra: The Australian War Memorial, 1973, p.399-401.

¹¹³ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, February 1944.

¹¹⁴ Ross p.243, Chris Rudge, *Air -to-air*, Lyttelton: Adventure Air, 2003, p.299, McGibbon (ed) p.461.

establishing this squadron led to the simplification programme for operational squadrons which had been introduced. For its size, Isitt had long thought that the RNZAF had operated too many types of squadrons. To rationalise, Isitt was abandoning the four dive-bomber and two torpedo-bomber squadrons planned under the 1943/44 programme, and was substituting five new fighter squadrons and one additional bomber-reconnaissance squadron.¹¹⁵

No. 6 Flying Boat Squadron had moved to Halavo Bay, Florida Island. No. 40 Transport Squadron was now operating six Douglas Dakotas, eight Lodestars and five Hudson troop transports. These aircraft were entirely responsible for the rotational relief of crews in the Pacific, and it was estimated that they would transport some 320 personnel each way each month, rising to 480 personnel per month at the end of March.¹¹⁶

Some indication of the improvement in the running of the RNZAF can be gained from the statement that the Operational Training Units were continuing to function satisfactorily, and sufficient fully trained pilots and crews were being turned out to maintain the various types of squadrons at full strength in the forward area. The complete programme of operational training for 1944 had already been finalised.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ ANZ, Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, February 1944.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*

Isitt had received a letter from Major-General R.J. Mitchell, of the United States Marine Corps, and Commander Aircraft, Solomon Islands.¹¹⁸ The letter contained a copy of Operations Plan 1 - 44, which detailed the role of RNZAF squadrons in the Solomons area. Isitt forwarded a copy of this plan to Group Captain G.N. Roberts, who was on the point of departing to the forward area with No. 1 (Islands) Group.¹¹⁹ Roberts returned the plan after perusal, and acknowledged that the information had been useful. 'The scene is now set for my departure and I hope sincerely that I can justify the trust you have placed in me.'¹²⁰ Isitt had established an excellent rapport with Mitchell, who was pleased with the positive contribution being made by the RNZAF.

Mitchell wrote to Isitt again in early March, advising that he was coming to New Zealand fishing.¹²¹ He concluded with a tribute to the RNZAF crews who flew under his command:

Your boys have been wonderful. Never have I served with better. They have established an unbeatable reputation for daring and have gone on with their business in a most inspiring, uncomplaining and determined manner. It is a source of distinct satisfaction for me to have had your squadrons attached to my command...Looking forward to seeing you in the near future and always with the hope (quoting you) 'big fish in New Zealand, bigger fish in the Pacific.'¹²²

¹¹⁸ ANZ Air 100/9 *Correspondence with American Officers*, Mitchell to Isitt, 28 January 1944.

¹¹⁹ ANZ Air 100/4, Isitt to Roberts, 24 February 1944.

¹²⁰ *ibid*, Roberts to Isitt, 1 March 1944.

¹²¹ ANZ Air 100/9, Mitchell to Isitt, 2 March 1944.

¹²² *ibid*.

Isitt acknowledged Mitchell's letter, and regretted that he was going to be overseas at the time of Mitchell's visit.¹²³

Isitt commenced his March Liaison Letter by referring to the opening of Parliament on February 22.¹²⁴ Although Isitt could not attend the opening through being overseas, he had been present at the secret session which was still continuing.¹²⁵

The remainder of the Liaison Letter was devoted to Isitt's trip to the forward area. He again travelled in a Lodestar, and was away from 10 to 23 February.¹²⁶ Isitt was very pleased with what he saw of No. 1 (Islands) Group, where the morale was high. Movement between the islands called for a high degree of accurate navigation. Blind flying had to be good to cope with any sudden and probably intensive weather disturbances. Any maintenance problems resulted in 'very sticky' forced landings, either in the jungle or in the sea. Fortunately, the air/sea rescue organisation, utilising Catalinas which were nick-named Dumbos, was excellent, and the last four fighter pilots who had been forced down at sea had been collected within a few hours by Catalina.¹²⁷

With the progressive northwest move of operations, the RNZAF organisation at New Caledonia had practically disappeared and the supply organisation

¹²³ *ibid*, Isitt to Mitchell, 10 March 1944.

¹²⁴ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, March 1944.

¹²⁵ *ibid*.

¹²⁶ ANZ Air 118, *81L Air Transport and Pacific Ferry*, Chapter V, p.3.

¹²⁷ ANZ, Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, March 1944.

was in the process of being transferred from there to Espiritu Santo. The Group Headquarters had moved forward to Guadalcanal.¹²⁸

Isitt went forward and spent the night at Munda. Nothing very exciting happened while he was there, 'except that one of our Venturas was attacked by two Australian Beaufighters - a fairly determined attack which was not broken off until our mid-tail gunner smoked one of them.' From there he went to Torokino, where two fighter squadrons were based. 'As you may have seen in the press, the American bomber squadrons prefer our escort to their own.' Since the middle of February, the Japanese air strength in the Solomons and Bismarck area had diminished to such an extent 'that our fellows can get no reaction and have not made a contact for over a fortnight.'¹²⁹

On the way back to Guadalcanal, Isitt visited Treasury Island. From there he flew to No. 6 Squadron's base at Halavo on Florida Island, and stayed the night with Admiral Halsey, who was on his way forward to inspect the results of the successful operation on Nissan Island, which had been captured by New Zealanders some two days before. Nissan was only 120 miles from Rabaul, and 20 miles north of Bougainville, which was still in Japanese hands.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ *ibid.*

¹²⁹ *ibid.*

¹³⁰ *ibid.*

Isitt returned to New Zealand via Fiji and Tonga. As he expected, Isitt was forced to field complaints, 'that they feel they are too far away from the war'.¹³¹

Isitt concluded by commenting:

I wish I could convey to you what a very fine organisation Admiral Halsey has in his South Pacific Force. It is made up of American navy, army and marines, and of New Zealand navy, army and air force. Staffs and commands are made up of mixed officers from all three services and, strange as it may seem, the show works. Admiral Halsey is a great leader and his drive and enthusiasm get through to the smallest unit. It is a team to be proud of and the RNZAF have earned their place in the team.¹³²

On his return to New Zealand, Isitt wrote to Goddard again:

We are going for the simplified plan and getting F4U's this month. The first of them will go straight to Guadalcanal and we can man our squadrons with them there. They should be in operation early in March...My chief uncertainty and worry at the moment is the employment of the RNZAF once we cross the Equator, and that is not many months away. Of course we are part of Admiral Halsey's force as long as he can employ us and from conversations with both him and Admiral Fitch I know that they want us to keep in with them, but I have visions of Admiral Halsey's force assuming the same role and composition as the Central Pacific Task Force, and unless we embark on ships I doubt if Halsey will have a role for us. This brings up the question of alternative employment which, as I see it, either to become part of the Allied Air Force in the South-West Pacific under General MacArthur or, possibly, to ask for a role in the South East Asia Command. I can see many difficulties in the

¹³¹ *ibid.*

¹³² *ibid.*

latter but would appreciate any information which you can give me as to its possibility. Regarding the Allied Air Force in the South-West Pacific, this I am not keen on for various reasons, but the recent inter-Government Conference will probably result in greater collaboration and may force me to move in this direction.

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Isitt was facing a critical crossroads involving the future direction of the RNZAF. American attitudes regarding the future active use of the RNZAF were hardening; Halsey was preparing to leave the South Pacific Area, and it was unlikely that the RNZAF could follow him unless they converted to carrier operations. The sounding out of Goddard regarding use of the RNZAF with South East Asia Command was to ascertain the possibility of a plausible alternative. Isitt was not keen on being forced to operate in the South West Pacific Area, but the direction of the war meant that this was the likely outcome.

At 31 March 1944, Isitt commenced an Annual Report which was submitted subsequently to the Minister of Defence in what was described as a 'brief report'.¹³⁴ The report is exceptionally detailed, with every aspect of RNZAF activities being covered in attached appendices. During the year the strength of the RNZAF had increased by 7,848 of which the strength in the Pacific Area had more than doubled. All commitments had been met under the Empire Air Training Plan, which was reflected in the increased number

¹³³ ANZ Air 100/3, Isitt to Goddard, March 1944.

¹³³ *ibid*, Isitt to Goddard, March 1944.

¹³⁴ ANZ Air 103/20, *Annual Report CAS 1944*.

of aircrew overseas, while increases in the Pacific necessarily involved additions to the New Zealand establishment.

	Strength at 31 March 1943	Strength as at 31 March 1944	Increase
New Zealand	25,590	28,466	2,876
Pacific	2,610	5,921	3,311
Overseas	<u>5,366</u>	<u>7,027</u>	<u>1,661</u>
Grand Total	33,566	41,414	7,848 ¹³⁵

During the year, 2,280 trainees comprising 973 pilots, 627 Navigator/Air Bombers and 680 Wireless Operator/Air Gunners had been despatched to Canada under the Empire Air Training Scheme against a commitment of 2,054. In addition, a further 951 pilots had been fully trained in New Zealand.¹³⁶

During the course of the year, the decision was made to discontinue recruiting for the Women's' Auxiliary Air Force. Despite this decision, there were 109 officers and 3,502 other ranks on strength at 31 March 1944, an increase of 526 in the year.¹³⁷

Isitt highlighted that at the beginning of the period, operations were passing from a defensive to an attacking role, and most squadrons were still

¹³⁵ *ibid.*

¹³⁶ *ibid.*

¹³⁷ *ibid.*

equipped with obsolete aircraft. Aircraft strength at 31 March 1944 was 1,035, a net increase of 241 during the year.¹³⁸

Manning had been a problem all year, but with the transference of 5,331 personnel from the Army during the year, it was anticipated that all obligations under the Empire Air Training Scheme could be met on the basis of the existing commitments, which were due to expire on 31 March 1945.¹³⁹

The harshness of the physical demands on service in the tropics was emphasised. During the year 3,010 personnel - 640 aircrew and 2,370 groundcrew returned from their first period of service in the Pacific. On being medically examined, only 79% of aircrew and 74% of groundcrew were fit for return after regular leave. The remainder required up to six months' rehabilitation, and even then nearly 10% were regarded as permanently unfit for further service.¹⁴⁰

By the end of 1943, the tide of war was running strongly against Japan in the South Pacific. From having sufficient supplies of aircraft, materials and foodstuffs, shipping losses prevented replacement stocks from arriving and there was a steady attrition, particularly in aircraft numbers. The RNZAF had built up its capability, both in New Zealand and in the forward zone, with the training system providing more and more aircrew for the

¹³⁸ *ibid.*

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*

establishment of new squadrons and the rotation of existing units. This meant that the RNZAF could make a positive contribution to the war in the South Pacific.

By his frequent visits to the forward zone, Isitt was able to carry out a number of positive activities. He kept in close touch with American commanders, which enabled him to stay abreast of their plans, as well as ensuring that RNZAF forces were available when and where needed. He was able to inspect forward installations as well as the various Headquarters, including operations, administration and supply. His inspections were thorough.

Isitt was also able to meet RNZAF personnel of all ranks, and to discuss with them their concerns. Wherever possible he endeavoured to overcome grievances and correct problems. He also directed that bomber crews had his approval for the opportunity to engage in offensive activities, once their primary mission had been achieved, which added significantly to the morale of the crews involved.

The RNZAF had reached its peak strength in New Zealand of 30,500 in September 1943,¹⁴¹ and after this time home establishments were gradually reduced. Manning was starting to be a major problem, and the expansion of the RNZAF had outstripped suitable reserves of manpower. The problem was going to remain with Isitt for the remainder of the war.

¹⁴¹ Ross, p.283.

Overall, Isitt performed capably in his first few months as CAS. Personnel numbers continued to rise, new aircraft types were coming to hand, and the steady build-up of squadrons meant that the RNZAF was making a positive contribution in the South Pacific. Aside from manpower considerations, he had had a smooth run, but as the next chapter shows, this dream run was about to end abruptly.

CHAPTER 7: DIFFICULTIES ARISE 1944

The adverse reaction of the United States to the Canberra Pact was soon to make itself evident, and governed Isitt's actions for the remainder of the war as he sought a continuing active role for the RNZAF. Manpower difficulties were also to create another lasting problem for Isitt, and forced him to devote considerable time in an effort to ensure that the RNZAF remained a balanced force and did not suffer from wholesale manning cuts. These two problems, combined with the operational needs of the RNZAF, ensured that Isitt was kept very busy indeed.

Isitt had not returned to New Zealand for long before he was off again to Australia and New Guinea.¹ The purpose of his visit to Australia was to see something of the operations in the South West Pacific Area, and to discuss with Air Vice-Marshal G. Jones (Royal Australian Air Force CAS) various matters of common interest, and, in particular, the implications of the Canberra Pact.²

Isitt travelled in a No. 40 Transport Squadron Lodestar, and was away from 16 March until 3 April 1944.³ While in Australia, he visited several aircraft production facilities, seeing the Commonwealth and Beaufort plants in

¹ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, 11 April 1944.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

Melbourne; the Beaufort subsidiary plant in Adelaide; and De Havilland's Mosquito assembly and fuselage production plant in Sydney. Isitt felt that from what he saw of the industry, it was evident that it had more than the capacity to meet its peacetime requirements.⁴

In Canberra, he attended a meeting of the Defence Committee and met Mr Curtin (Prime Minister), as well as a number of Cabinet members. Isitt was most impressed with Mr Curtin, who struck him as being one of the best Chairmen he had seen running a meeting. The problems being dealt with at the meeting were very similar to the ones experienced in New Zealand, and 'problems seem to run in the same groove throughout our part of the world'.⁵

At Brisbane he saw Air Vice-Marshal Bostock, operational commander of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), General Kenney and General Douglas MacArthur. All of them were friendly and helpful, and gave Isitt all the information he required.⁶ Bostock was on Kenney's staff and controlled all RAAF operations, both within Australia, and the two operational groups in New Guinea and the Bismarcks. Isitt had a long talk with General Kenney, whom he regarded as a very shrewd and practical man. In addition:

General MacArthur gave me an hour of his valuable time and discussed many aspects of the war and war strategy, not the least of these was his plan for re-entry into the Philippines. He has a very forceful personality and he marshals his facts and expresses himself most clearly and concisely, but does not encourage

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

interruption or discussion. He looked very fit, but his staff looked a bit worn and jaded.⁷

Isitt took a long flight to Darwin, where he met Air Vice-Marshal Cole, who commanded the RAAF North-Western Area. Their main role was reconnaissance of the islands to the north of Australia to give warning of any attacks, as well as the defence of Darwin and bases in the area. Offensive air strikes were much less frequent than the Air Force would wish, while defence had become simply a matter of standby.⁸

From Darwin he went to Merauke in Dutch New Guinea, where the RAAF had three squadrons, but their work was largely confined to shipping patrols. Cape York was the next stop, where there were seven squadrons, on very good strips, but the climate was harsh and there were the usual complaints of 'no war and very little to do.' After Cape York, the next stop after crossing Torres Strait was Port Moresby, which was then a staging post for supplies to the forward area. Over the ranges took Isitt to Nadzab, which was the main base, complete with six strips and 600/700 aircraft. Notwithstanding the importance of the base, there were the usual complaints of not enough to do and not enough war. The B24 and B25 aircraft based there were the only aircraft with sufficient range to reach the main Japanese targets of Wewak and Hollandia. Although the RAAF had fighters forward at Cape Gloucester and the Admiralty Islands, these

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

fighters were tied down to a base protection job with little to do, as there was no Japanese air aggression.⁹

Isitt then visited the air strip at Lae, before returning to Nadzab, and proceeding to Goodenough Island. This was the headquarters of a RAAF operational group, the aircraft of which were dispersed over Goodenough, Kiriwina and Woodlark Islands. Operations were limited to routine shipping patrols and base protection, resulting in the same complaints of no war.¹⁰

Isitt lamented that the collapse of Japanese air strength in the forward Pacific area had been so rapid that any but long-range aircraft were hopelessly out of touch with the enemy, and it was very evident that that until the allies could again establish forward strips within fighter range, there would be little or no air fighting and few targets within the range of the majority of the aircraft.¹¹

From Goodenough, Isitt proceeded direct to Guadalcanal, spending the night with the RNZAF Group there. The New Zealand squadrons in the New Hebrides were also complaining about lack of air opposition and no air contacts, but they were doing a good job bombing and ground strafing on Rabaul, as well as on targets on Bougainville and in New Ireland. The last

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

night's stop was at Noumea to see COMSOPAC, before returning direct to New Zealand.¹²

One of the purposes of the trip was to discuss with Admirals Halsey and Fitch the future employment of the RNZAF, but neither of these Admirals knew what was to be the future. Isitt felt that it would be a pity if the RNZAF could not 'continue to serve under these very fine officers as the mutual esteem which has grown out of our association over the last 18 months would be a great asset in future operations'.¹³ Strategy was controlled by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington, and at this stage their decisions had not yet been determined and conveyed down the chain of command.

Isitt's first trip overseas in 1944 was a particularly important one. He could envisage the steady progress of the Allied offensive as the Japanese forces were driven westwards. The time was fast approaching when the South Pacific Area would become a garrison zone, and Isitt needed to determine possible future opportunities for the active employment of the RNZAF.¹⁴ He had not visited Australia as CAS, and Wilkes was able to arrange a comprehensive tour of major defence facilities. More importantly, Isitt had the opportunity to meet all the important South-West Pacific Area personalities, including MacArthur, Kenney and Bostock. He was able to

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Ross, pp. 259-262.

establish a relationship with them which proved invaluable in the difficult period which was about to erupt.

Isitt then devoted a considerable portion of his Liaison Letter to a review of operations, indicating the high level of activity in which the RNZAF was then involved. The move of the main supply bases from New Caledonia to Guadalcanal had greatly increased the shipping traffic in the area, and New Zealand squadrons had been fully involved in protection duties. The Venturas had also been required to maintain standing patrols between New Ireland and Bougainville while single-engine strikes were in progress, in order to search for aircrew that had been forced to ditch or bale out, and report their position to 'Dumbo' Catalinas. Many successful rescues had been accomplished, and the total number of men picked up was now in excess of 50.¹⁵ After months of training, No. 25 Dive Bomber Squadron had finally reached the combat zone, and gone immediately into action.¹⁶

The middle of February marked the end of any Japanese aviation resistance in the New Britain area. New Zealand squadrons continued to be employed on bomber escorts, but it soon became apparent that this duty was a waste of time, and at the end of February the decision taken to convert them into 'Kitty' bombers. The employment of P40's as fighter-bombers against targets in the Rabaul area was only made possible by the 3rd New Zealand Division capture of Green Island and the construction of a fighter strip, thus

¹⁵ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, 11 April 1944.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

enabling the aircraft to dispense with belly tanks by staging through Green Island on both the outward and inward journeys.¹⁷

When Isitt had been overseas, he had received a letter from J.D. Greenland, Managing Director of the Union S.S. Co. Ltd.¹⁸ There had been a reported sighting from a Union Airways Electra airliner on a scheduled flight, of a submarine 7 miles NE of Kaikoura, heading due south at about 5-7 knots, just below the surface with the periscope showing. The inter-island ferry *Rangatira* was about 10 miles SSW of the submarine at the time of the sighting.

Isitt responded at some length, raising a number of issues in his reply. As the aircraft had not come below 6000 feet, the sea was rough, and whales were known to be in the vicinity, both Navy and Air Operations discounted the sighting as being one of a hump-backed whale. However, this conclusion was not relayed back to the Union Company, and about 7.00 p.m. Mr Maurice Clarke had rung Isitt to query what action had been taken. Isitt promised to initiate enquiries and to return to Clarke when he had answers. Clarke, in turn, did not await Isitt's response, and rang the Prime Minister's Department to complain about lack of action by the Air Department. Isitt was irate at Clarke's actions, which he considered most discourteous.¹⁹

Even though it was not a submarine, there is no doubt that both sides were at fault on this occasion. The Operations Room should have responded to

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ ANZ Air 100/13 Vol. 1, *Miscellaneous Correspondence*, Greenland to Isitt, 15 March 1944,

¹⁹ *ibid.*, Isitt to Greenland, 4 April 1944,

the Union Company, while Clarke should have awaited Isitt's return call. Wartime security would have had a bearing on both actions. This letter is interesting because it reveals Isitt's flash temper which was only displayed on isolated occasions, as well as Maurice Clarke's propensity to interfere at a Prime Ministerial level.

Isitt continued to correspond with Air Commodore E.G. Olson in London, outlining some of his current problems:

Manpower problems are extremely difficult here now and something resembling a freeze is proceeding through the Dominion. The general public is somewhat apathetic about the War and censorious of the number of Air Force personnel retained in the Dominion. There is a failure to appreciate the fact that we still are proceeding with the Empire Air Training Scheme, and that a considerable number of Air Force personnel in New Zealand are associated with the maintenance of our squadrons in the Pacific Area... My personal view is that the interests of the RNZAF and of the Dominion would best be served after the conclusion of hostilities in Europe by transferring our RNZAF personnel attached to the RAF to the South East Asia Command. This would bring them nearer home, would afford an opportunity for maintaining our reputation in the war against Japan, and would, I think, permit of easier administration. If such a move took place, Headquarters would probably be established in India or, let us hope, China, to carry out the functions in respect of RNZAF personnel which are now carried out by London, and which would have direct contact with London.²⁰

²⁰ ANZ 100/3, Isitt to Olson, 23 March 1944.

Isitt was exploring a potentially difficult situation, and was contemplating the possibility of working more closely with the RAF, in the event that relations with the United States continued to deteriorate.

Isitt was writing to Olson again a few days later, because the Prime Minister was proceeding overseas, and Isitt wished to brief Olson on possible problem areas which could be raised by the Prime Minister.²¹ This letter also foreshadowed two of the major problems that were going to affect Isitt during the remainder of the year, the Empire Air Training Scheme and the operational employment of the RNZAF in the Pacific Theatre.

Isitt was concerned that with the Empire Air Training Scheme planners were looking too far ahead and were unable to forecast the future with any clarity. As a result Isitt was concentrating on an outcome of completing the training of all trainees then in the scheme. This amounted to 2,600 at the time, from which he thought that it would be possible to maintain a full quota to Canada, plus all other commitments, to the end of the calendar year. Thereafter, the contribution would drop to 500 per annum for training in Canada, but this reduction should not be felt by the squadrons in England before the middle of 1945 at the earliest. 'I feel that this is a pretty satisfactory position and if by the end of the year, the position has not clarified or has shifted and we have to make a greater effort, it will be time enough then to take the necessary steps'.²²

²¹ *ibid*, Isitt to Olson, 6 April 1944.

²² *ibid*.

With the employment of the RNZAF:

It is now obvious that the South Pacific is to be squeezed out and it looks as though, if we are not careful, we will be left on a purely local and garrison defence job. This does not meet with either my or the Government's desire....

My visit to the Southwest Pacific area more than ever confirmed my previously formed opinion that we should not join up with them except as a last resort.²³

Isitt was more explicit in this letter to Olson than he had been a week earlier. He specifically requested Olson to contact his counterparts in the RAF in order to raise the prospects of the RNZAF operating in the South East Asia Command. Similarly, he expressed his concerns about the prospects of operating in the South West Pacific region with the American Army Air Force and the Australians. It would appear that he had not been able to establish the same degree of rapport with General Kenney as he had with the American Navy and Marine Commanders, while he obviously had concerns about working with the Australian force commander.

The final paragraph of this letter illustrates that Isitt was not immune to Machiavellian intrigue:

There is one small matter which you might be able to straighten out. There was some small lash-up on the despatch of the 'J-P' (Jet Propulsion) party of engineers. In effect I despatched them without due War Cabinet authority and the PM is a little sceptical as to whether such a large and strong party was essential for the purpose. It might help if an expression of this very strong support could be passed to the PM by a senior official of the Air Ministry. There is no doubt that we did send a strong party, that War Cabinet knew at the time that New Zealand was not in

²³ *ibid.*

itself going to get any very direct benefit, but G/C Watt sold his project well and those people were sent very much as a contribution to the Empire effort. If this is done, it must be spontaneous with no suggestion of any collusion.²⁴

In this action, Isitt was motivated by the greater need of the Allied war effort, rather than the specific requirements of the RNZAF. There were no immediate prospects of benefit for the RNZAF, but the opportunity existed to enhance the development of a system which had the potential to assist in shortening the war.

On one point Isitt was in error, as War Cabinet authority was in fact given for the despatch of the engineers.²⁵

Isitt was leaving no stone unturned in his efforts on behalf of the RNZAF, and conveyed his thoughts in a letter to Halsey's Chief of Staff, Admiral Carney:

I had a note this morning from General Mitchell who has spent the last 15 days fishing at Taupo and Tongariro....Regarding our future employment, I have talked to the Prime Minister who agrees that an active role is essential for the satisfactory employment of our Air Force and the prestige of New Zealand. There are no strings on where they may be employed so long as there is something for them to fight. I suggested to him that I should go to Washington to discuss this, to which he agreed, but is anxious that I should delay my trip until June so that I can see him there on his way back from Europe. In the meantime I have briefed my fellow in Washington to talk 'off the record' with Admiral McCain and Air Vice-Marshal Welsh RAF with a view to finding us an active role somewhere.²⁶

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ ANZ EA1 81/3/3, *War Cabinet Minutes*, Part 15, 21 February 1944.

²⁶ ANZ Air 100/13 Vol. 1, Isitt to Carney, 11 April 1944.

In all Isitt's endeavours at this time, he claimed that he had the full support of the Prime Minister in seeking to retain an active role for the RNZAF. Because the Prime Minister wished to accompany Isitt on any discussions held in Washington, informal lines of communication were the only avenues left to Isitt at that time. In addition the Joint Chiefs of Staff had not yet explicitly announced a secondary role for the RNZAF.

A few days later Isitt was writing to Major General R.J. Mitchell and repeating his plea for an active role for the RNZAF. He was most anxious to avoid the South-West Pacific Area, as the RAAF had some 50 Squadrons in this area, of which only 5% were actively deployed, and if the RNZAF was transferred to this sector, it would be the last to be deployed.²⁷

Carney responded on 20 April 1944, and advised that Admiral Halsey was likely to visit New Zealand around mid-May. 'This is strictly "off the record" - do not pass it on'.²⁸ Carney could only proffer a Delphic utterance regarding the redeployment of the RNZAF. 'It looks as though your outfit would continue on the present tasks until the northern end of the axis is cleaned up, or Southwest Pacific takes it over, or your outfit is moved by the Combined Chiefs of Staff to some other territory.'²⁹

Isitt replied to this letter as follows:

I was very thankful to get your message from Colonel Ashwill and also from your letter to note that we are now tied to your skirts. I am quite satisfied that it is in

²⁷ ANZ Air 100/13 Vol. 1, Isitt to Mitchell, 15 April 1944.

²⁸ ANZ Air 100/9, Carney to Isitt, 20 April 1944.

²⁹ *ibid.*

our best interests to remain with you, if possible, and I am more than sure that we could not hope for a happier association in any other area...I made a quick decision yesterday to take a week's leave and dash off for a week's fishing, so all I can promise to do is to think of you every time I catch a fish.³⁰

Isitt was obviously optimistic that the current situation would continue, and he felt that the prospects for an active role with Halsey's forces were good. In retrospect, this confidence was ill-founded and mis-placed.

The tone of Isitt's May 1944 Liaison Letter was more subdued than in previous letters, explained by the comment that operations carried out by RNZAF Squadrons in the South Pacific area continued on the same lines as described in his previous letters.³¹

The main news concerning the fighter squadrons was the rearming with Corsair aircraft. These aircraft had been shipped direct to Espiritu Santo, where they had been examined and test flown. In spite of the fact that none of the squadron personnel had previously flown this type of aircraft, all training and the subsequent ferrying of the aircraft to Guadalcanal, were carried out without incident. The squadron personnel were delighted with their new aircraft, and the remaining fighter squadrons were eagerly waiting re-arming with the new type. The two remaining Warhawk squadrons in the combat area continued to operate as fighter-bombers, in which they had reached a high standard, as illustrated by the fact that no

³⁰ *ibid*, Isitt to Carney, 2 May 1944.

³¹ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, May 1944.

operational losses had been incurred by any aircraft engaged in this type of sortie.³²

Isitt devoted most of his Letter to Operational Training, which he claimed was now operating satisfactorily.³³ What Isitt did not highlight was the level of manning in the RNZAF, which reached a peak of 42,488 in May 1944. From this point on a gradual reduction took place.³⁴

Isitt had obviously experienced foreboding about the future active role for the RNZAF when he forwarded an appreciation to the Prime Minister, who was about to embark for the 1944 Premiers' Conference, on the 'Operational Employment of RNZAF in the Pacific Theatre.' He regretted that the lack of forward planning by the higher United States Staffs in Washington seemed to relegate the bulk of the RNZAF in the South Pacific zone to garrison duties in the immediate future. The latest Joint Chiefs of Staff paper, the full text of which had not yet been made available, had apparently restricted the RNZAF to the employment of a limited number of squadrons on garrison duties, and made no provision for the use of the fighter squadrons. Whilst the RNZAF had to be prepared to accept a semi-passive role for a number of squadrons for certain periods during the war, it could not accept such a role indefinitely, and should continue planning for a more active role.³⁵

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ ANZ Air 1 39/1/3, *RNZAF Annual Report 1945*.

³⁵ ANZ EA1 87/4/5 Pt. 2. *RNZAF Policy*, Isitt to Fraser, 5 April 1944.

At almost the same time, Group Captains Pirie and Spencer were discussing the position with COMAIRSOPAC, and the indications seemed sufficiently positive for Isitt to signal Findlay in Washington. 'Prospects now appear good RNZAF remaining with Admiral Halsey, also believe we will get active role. I know this is the Prime Minister's wish, you should tell McIntosh confidentially.'³⁶

However, the optimism was premature, and within a few days, Isitt was signalling Findlay, who responded with a summary of his activities. Findlay had been very active and had finally obtained confirmation from the Secretary of the J.C.S. that the planners for the J.C.S. had recommended a garrison role for the RNZAF. In turn, Findlay had discussed the matter with Field Marshal Dill, Air Marshal Welsh and Admiral McCain. Prime Minister Fraser meanwhile had arrived in Washington, where he had discussions with Admiral King, General Marshall and Cordell Hull from whom an assurance of a continuing active role for the RNZAF was received. Findlay had also drafted a letter stating that it had always been the desire of the New Zealand Government to take as active a role in the Pacific as resources would permit, but Nash felt that if this got to the ears of the New Zealand public, they would think that the Government was recommending the slaughter of New Zealand airmen, and asked Findlay to withhold the letter.³⁷

Findlay carried out an excellent representation of New Zealand's requirements to American Navy and RAF representatives at a high level.

³⁶ ANZ Air 100/5, Isitt to Findlay, 20 April 1944.

³⁷ *ibid*, Findlay to Isitt, 29 April 1944.

Coupled with the response to Fraser's meeting with King, Marshall and Hull, some assurance regarding the continued active role for the RNZAF could be felt. Nash's reaction to Findlay's draft letter, also suggested that Nash did not share Fraser's enthusiasm for this role.

At this point the situation appeared to be clear and under control, but in mid-May Isitt was again writing to Jones:

I have today received the following advice from the New Zealand Air Mission, regarding this matter:-

'Following is summary of conversation with COMINCH today. RNZAF will not be employed north of present operational area. I have reason to believe this decision due largely to repercussions from Australia-New Zealand Agreement which does not favour participation Australian New Zealand forces in Japanese mandated islands. Decision however is service one not political. There appears to be no further employment in view in Pacific or for RNZAF except in conjunction with COMSOUWEST for garrison duty after completion of present neutralising operations estimated three months or longer.'

The present information is much more definite and unsatisfactory from the point of view of our employment than I expected, and I feel that it is necessary that I should, in the first place, visit Washington to discuss with the Commander in Chief and the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, as to the number of squadrons required for garrison duty in the Solomons and New Hebrides.³⁸

This was the first official intimation that New Zealand was being frozen out, and confined to garrison duties, as a result of the United States reaction to the Canberra Pact, contrary to the views expressed by Admiral King to

³⁸ ANZ EA1 87/4/5 Pt. 2, Isitt to Jones, 12 May 1944.

Fraser and Nash. Isitt's information, with the additional statement that 'following completion of Bismarck campaign there is no prospect of active employment of RNZAF squadrons in Pacific west of longitude 159 east or north of Equator' was cabled by External Affairs to the Prime Minister in London,³⁹ who responded with a cable to Nash, who was still in Washington. 'The decision from Washington is so completely at variance with our understanding with King that I think you should see him immediately and advise me of his views.'⁴⁰

Fraser also replied to External Affairs with the following cable:

Mr Nash and I discussed future operational employment of RNZAF in Pacific under Admiral King in Washington and he agreed that while undertaking its proportion of garrison duty New Zealand should share its operational role. I am therefore surprised to learn of contrary arrangement and I am cabling Mr Nash to ask him to discuss matter again with King. Decision as to Isitt's visit should therefore be postponed until Mr Nash has had an opportunity of ascertaining King's views.⁴¹

Events were moving swiftly against New Zealand, as Isitt informed the Minister of Defence:

The following signal has been received from the Air Officer Commanding No. 1 (Islands) Group, RNZAF 'Movement 18 Squadron to combat area cancelled by CASP in view no employment for RNZAF Fighters or TBF Squadrons. CASP instructs 14 Squadron and 31 Squadron be retained New Zealand.'⁴²

³⁹ *ibid*, Cable External Affairs to Prime Minister, 13 May 1944.

⁴⁰ *ibid*, Fraser to Nash, 16 May 1944.

⁴¹ *ibid*, Fraser to External Affairs, 17 May 1944.

⁴² *ibid*, Isitt to Jones, 21 May 1944.

Nash returned to the Prime Minister with an interim report prior to seeing King, advising that King had been reported as opposing Clause 26 of the Canberra Agreement, and would keep New Zealand out of any action in the Marshalls and Carolines by allocating the RNZAF squadrons to MacArthur for use in the Bismarck Archipelago and Rabaul zone for mopping up operations.⁴³

Nash had been able to arrange an interview, and reported once more to the Prime Minister. King had more forces at his disposal than he could use in the mid-Pacific, and for this reason proposals had been made to use a small proportion of the RNZAF Squadrons for garrison duty, while the remainder would be transferred to the South-West Pacific Area under General MacArthur:

At the conclusion of our conversation King promised to discuss the whole question with the Joint Chiefs of Staff (USA) after I left him, but I am doubtful whether he will do any more than recommend that our forces be seconded to McArthur for use in the south-west Pacific.⁴⁴

⁴³ *ibid*, Nash to Fraser, 23 May 1944,
⁴⁴ *ibid*.

Later that day Nash was again cabling Fraser:

Ref to my cable May 16... Provided he had left out the reference to the Canberra agreement, King, it appears to me, has a complete case on the disposition of our forces.⁴⁵

A third cable from Nash to Fraser alerted the Prime Minister to Group Captain Spencer, who had been through the South Pacific and had been present at Findlay's interview with King.⁴⁶ Spencer was also well informed on the minds of U.S. personnel in the South Pacific, including Halsey. As Spencer was en route to London, the Prime Minister could discuss the position with him should Fraser so desire.⁴⁷ Nash, for his own reasons was happy to put a positive spin on King's remarks. Meanwhile Isitt had been forced to remain in Wellington, unable meanwhile to do anything to clarify the situation. From King's remarks, Isitt's request of Olson to sound out the possibility of the RNZAF working in the South East Asia Command was a prudent one.

Spencer in fact had already written to Isitt, covering his discussions with COMSOPAC before proceeding to Washington via Honolulu and San Francisco. While the discussions with COMSOPAC had been positive, with the prospects of the RNZAF continuing on in operational employment with Admiral Halsey's forces appearing reasonably good, these hopes had been dashed

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

when Spencer reached San Francisco and spoke with Admiral Carney. Carney and Halsey had been in discussion with Admiral King, and Carney reported that in regard to future RNZAF operations, from the New Zealand point of view, it was not as satisfactory as he had hoped would be the case. The U.S. Air Forces in the Pacific were already larger than could be employed at that time, and it appeared unlikely that RNZAF squadrons would be employed further forward. Carney could only suggest that Spencer took up the matter with Admiral King when he reached Washington. Findlay and Spencer met with Admiral King on 10 May:

He informed us that he had definitely decided that the RNZAF Squadrons would not be employed in operations any further north than the Bismarck area in which they were now operating. It appeared to him judging from the Australia-New Zealand Agreement recently made in regard to their joint interests in the Pacific area, that the two Dominions were quite happy working together and that it appeared natural, therefore, that the RNZAF should go into the South-West area and operate with the RAAF. He further stated that on his own responsibility he had taken the decision that he would not in any circumstances give either Australia or New Zealand any claim to interest themselves in the Japanese mandated islands and that the position might arise at a later date if their forces were employed in operations in the Islands.⁴⁸ He also stated that it was his intention to restore the line of demarcation through 159 degrees and that on the conclusion of the mopping up operations in the Bismarck area, the whole area west of that line would come under the command of General McArthur.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ ANZ Air 100/5, Spencer to Isitt, 11 May 1944,

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

Spencer also confirmed that Prime Minister Fraser had re-iterated to Admiral King the desire of the New Zealand Government that the RNZAF should continue to be employed to the utmost in operations. Mr Nash was inclined to hedge on the grounds that the Government might be accused of exposing New Zealand forces unnecessarily to the risk of casualties, and appeared to be convinced that the war was as good as won. Spencer felt that in analysing the reasons for the situation, it came down to political repercussions arising out of the Canberra Pact, which had met with very caustic comments in the United States.⁵⁰

A few days later, Findlay wrote again to Isitt, updating progress on the events which had occurred since Spencer's letter:

Mr Nash then saw Admiral King again and on this occasion Admiral King repeated statements made to Spencer and myself regarding the future role of the RNZAF. We have repeated the gist of this interview to the Prime Minister...There is no doubt that Admiral King alone is responsible for the unhappy position in which we find ourselves, but apart from the political reasons, which are nearly indefensible, he has three good arguments to support his decision -

- (a) US Navy have more than ample aircraft and crews of their own in the Pacific.
- (b) Operations in the future will demand a preponderance of carrier borne aircraft.
- (c) The oft repeated desire of New Zealand to be associated with Australia in the prosecution of the war.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

(This was a new one on me, but is confirmed by Mr Nash, who says that although it was not the Prime Minister's or his wish, it was the wish of the majority of War Cabinet and the Government as a whole.)⁵¹

Isitt realised that it was not possible to make any arrangements for the future employment of the RNZAF from New Zealand, and decided to go to the Islands to have discussions in person. While forward he had received a signal from Nevill advising that the RNZAF was likely to be included in a loaned force to SOUWESPAC.⁵² He responded by signal to Nevill, advising that such a move would have the full support of COMSOPAC and COMAIRSOPAC, but an urgent decision was required as orders had already been issued for the withdrawal of RNZAF squadrons to the South Pacific Area by 15 June.⁵³ Isitt had been in discussions with Admiral Halsey and General Mel Harmon. It was the latter who suggested an attachment to the 13th Air Force, which would avoid the dual control USAAF and RAAF, and bring the RNZAF into SOUWESPAC with a separate identity. Harman suggested that Isitt discuss this with General Arnold.⁵⁴

In a post-war letter to Sir Howard Kippenberger, Isitt said that he also had discussions with the Commander of the South Pacific Area (Admiral Newton), pointing out that the number of RNZAF squadrons was far in excess of the number required for purely garrison duty, and with his approval, then went further forward to see Generals McArthur, Kenney and Sutherland with

⁵¹ *ibid*, Findlay to Isitt, 23 May 1944.

⁵² ANZ, EA1 87/4/5 Pt.2, Nevill to Isitt, 23 May 1944.

⁵³ *ibid*, Isitt to Nevill, 25 May 1944.

⁵⁴ *ibid*.

a view to transferring any squadrons declared surplus by the Commander South Pacific area, for operations under the South-West Pacific Command.⁵⁵

As a result Isitt signalled Deputy Secretary of the War Cabinet, Foss Shanahan, that any decision regarding the future deployment of the RNZAF would be determined at a Joint Chiefs of Staff level, and Isitt felt that this would require his visiting Washington.⁵⁶ Shanahan cabled Fraser requesting a decision on this visit, to which Fraser finally agreed.⁵⁷

When he returned to New Zealand, Isitt submitted a report to the War Cabinet covering his visit to the Headquarters of the Commander, South Pacific Forces, and the Commander, Aircraft, South Pacific, between 23 and 29 May 1944.⁵⁸ Everyone with whom Isitt had met, was most anxious that the RNZAF should remain actively employed in the forward area, and as a result representations were being made to Admiral King to rescind the order for the withdrawal of New Zealand forces to the rear area by June 15. Isitt accepted that some part of the RNZAF would be required to provide garrison duty in British possessions, but this force would be kept to a minimum. For that part of the RNZAF combat force which was likely to be surplus to the requirements for garrison duty, it was proposed to suggest to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington, that the surplus units should be attached to the 13th United States Army Air Force, and operate under the operational

⁵⁵ ANZ Air 118, 81N, *The Manpower Situation in 1944/45*, Appendix 3a, Isitt to Kippenberger, 7 November 1947.

⁵⁶ ANZ EA1 87/4/5 Pt.2, Isitt to Shanahan, 23 May 1944.

⁵⁷ *ibid*, External Affairs to Fraser, 24 May 1944.

⁵⁸ *ibid*, Isitt to War Cabinet, 30 May 1944.

control of the Commander of that Force. The Force at that time was operating in New Guinea under General McArthur. The decision had been arrived at after long discussions with Admiral Halsey and his Chief of Staff; with Lieutenant General Harmon and his Chief of Staff; with the Commander, Aircraft, South Pacific and with the Commanding General, 13th Air Force.⁵⁹

Isitt outlined a number of reasons which had led to the decision. There was no immediate prospect of an active role for shore-based squadrons under Admiral Halsey's command, and the proposed role with the 13th Air Force was similar to that in which the New Zealand squadrons had been trained. The area in which the 13th Air Force was to be deployed could be reached by air from the garrison area, and also direct from New Zealand. The RNZAF had already worked harmoniously with the 13th Air Force, and there was no reason why this relationship should not continue. The RNZAF would be working in association with the RAAF, although not subordinate to them, and operations would continue with the existing type of fighter aircraft. Approval for the general plan had to be given by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but as General Arnold was most deeply concerned, the recommendation of the various Commanders was that Isitt should initially discuss the project with him.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

Subsequent to Isitt's report, the whole matter was discussed in the War Cabinet, with Isitt's suggestions being approved in principle, and summarised in a letter from the Acting Prime Minister D.G. Sullivan to the Prime Minister of 7 June 1944.⁶¹ This letter was referred to in a cable forwarded by Nash to Fraser, which reiterated the continuing desire by Nash to reduce the active involvement of the RNZAF:

Sullivan has sent memo to you re use of air force which Isitt will bring. Present position is as per last cable but whilst we should ensure making our major contribution by air or other service I have some reluctance in unduly pressing the use of our men if King still states they are not required. You are fully seized of position for use our forces but there appears to be a case for reconsideration of present and future use of all services and if it is decided to bring back and discharge men of long service we could give further consideration to utilisation of grade 'A' men who are still working in civilian employment and who have not yet seen active service.⁶²

Isitt, in his post-war letter to Kippenberger, briefly outlined his Washington visit, where he discussed the matter with the Chiefs of Staff Committee, who approved of his proposals.⁶³ He then saw Admiral King's staff, but did not see King himself, although King later agreed to the proposals. 'I then went to London and reported to Mr Fraser what was proposed, and conferred with Air Chief Marshal Portal who concurred with my proposal that it was the correct employment of the RNZAF.' In concluding his letter

⁶¹ *ibid*, Sullivan to Fraser, 7 June 1944.

⁶² *ibid*, Nash to Fraser, 20 June 1944.

⁶³ ANZ, Air 118/81N, *The Manpower Situation in New Zealand 1944/45*, Appendix 3a, Isitt to Kippenberger, 7 November 1947.

to Kippenberger, Isitt said he had no complaint about the treatment and support he had from Admiral Nimitz and all Commanders in the Pacific.

We did have some trouble with Admiral King which can be laid at the door of the Australia-NZ Pact which was very badly worded and very badly publicised and gave to Admiral King and many senior officers in Washington a very definite opinion, right or wrong, that Australia and New Zealand were getting together to resist any American entry into the Pacific. I know this for a fact as I came up against it in my conversations in Washington when I was trying to get agreement to the transfer of RNZAF squadrons to the S.W. Pacific.⁶⁴

The upshot of all the negotiations was a signal from COMSOPAC to Nevill advising that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had approved Isitt's proposals. Nevill advised Isitt immediately, and he in turn advised Fraser and Nash.⁶⁵ On 8 July, Isitt cabled Nevill that Fraser had agreed to the proposals, and was recommending acceptance by War Cabinet. Even Nash approved of the outcome, and cabled Acting Prime Minister Sullivan as follows:

I had a very satisfactory interview with Admiral King and Isitt has seen Admiral Fitch and General Arnold.

JCS have agreed and directed that RNZAF provide minimum force required for garrison duty in SOPAC area and that RNZAF Squadrons available and not so required may be given operational employment in South-West Pacific.

Recommendation for such transfer is to be made by Comsopac.

It is desired that the force with Comsopac be maintained at operational level.

I fully concur with proposed arrangements and recommend it be placed before War Cabinet.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ ANZ EA1 87/4/5 Pt. 2, Nevill to Isitt, 6 July 1944,

⁶⁶ *ibid*, Nash to Sullivan, 8 July 1944.

Many of the difficulties which arose during this period could have been avoided, had the Canberra Pact been better explained to the United States of America. There is little doubt that publicity following the signing of the Pact created the wrong impression in the American State Department, which was reflected in the attitude of Admiral King. Exclusive garrison duties could have been carried out by the RNZAF, which would have incurred few casualties, but the New Zealand Government argued for a more active role. Isitt was able to buttress these arguments in his direct discussions with service chiefs, and the final compromise decision was the best that could be achieved. King had more than enough forces at his disposal north of the Equator, and the employment of the RNZAF in the South-West Pacific was sensible.

This was an exceptionally difficult period for Isitt, and forced him to spend significant periods away from New Zealand, which required extensive air travel, in an effort to secure satisfactory utilisation of the RNZAF. He received positive support from Peter Fraser and Walter Nash, which assisted in the discussions Isitt carried out with service chiefs.

Isitt was now entering his most critical period as CAS, and one which required all of his skills in order to effect the most satisfactory resolution possible at the time. He opened his June 1944 Liaison Letter with the heading 'Visit to Headquarters COMSOPAC and to COMAIRSOPAC'.⁶⁷ The visit

⁶⁷ ANZ Air 100/8 *Monthly Liaison Letters*, June 1944.

was triggered by conflicting information regarding United States proposals for both the immediate and future employment of the RNZAF contact force. Isitt visited Admiral Halsey and General Mitchell between May 23 and 29, in an endeavour to clarify the situation regarding the deployment of forces then in the forward area. Although the various commanders in the South Pacific had recommended that the RNZAF be included in the task force to be loaned to the Commander, South West Pacific, pending the elimination of the Japanese in the Bismarck Archipelago, this recommendation had not been accepted by Washington, and instructions had been issued for the withdrawal of all RNZAF units on Bougainville to Guadalcanal.⁶⁸ Following discussions with Admirals Halsey and Gunther, Isitt had succeeded in delaying the withdrawal for a short period, and the latest instructions were that the New Zealand squadrons would remain as they were deployed at present, and would continue to be employed until the end of the Bismarck campaign.⁶⁹

Acting on Halsey's advice, and with War Cabinet approval, Isitt was scheduled to leave for Washington within a few days. There he hoped to obtain final agreement to the continued employment of New Zealand squadrons within the South Pacific task force.⁷⁰

While he could not give any forecast as to where New Zealand forces could be operating, it was definite that the RNZAF would be required to provide a

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

proportion of the air forces required for garrison duty in the British possessions lying to the North and North West of New Zealand. The balance of the combat force, which would probably consist largely of fighters, would be available for active operations in any theatre where they could be employed. Isitt had formulated suggestions covering these activities, and proposed submitting them to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington for their examination. Prime Minister Fraser was also planning to be in Washington at the same time, returning from his United Kingdom trip, and would assist in buttressing Isitt's arguments.⁷¹

At this time Isitt was seeking any avenues for the employment of the RNZAF. He had the choice of allowing the RNZAF to become a garrison operation, which had the potential to free manpower, as well as reducing the possibility of casualties, which may have met with some popular as well as political approval. The alternative course of seeking action offered the chance to make a different and positive contribution to defeating Japan, while retaining the superb fighting machine into which the RNZAF had developed. While Walter Nash may have raised some concerns about a continuing active role, in general this was the course preferred by the New Zealand Government. Isitt concurred with this approach, and it was to govern his actions for the remainder of the war.

While Isitt was preparing to depart, New Zealand had received a visit from Admiral W.F. Halsey, USN, Commander South Pacific Area, who arrived on a brief, informal visit to the country. He had reached Auckland on 31 May and

⁷¹ *ibid.*

arrived on Wellington on 1 June, where he was guest of honour at a Government luncheon on the following day. He also met with the War Cabinet, but Isitt did not have the opportunity of briefing him before this important meeting, so a letter was required to Halsey's ADC, Lieutenant W.J. Kitchell, USN. Isitt was seeking an active role attached to the 13th Air Force, and requested Halsey's support for this approach.⁷²

Shortly after this Isitt received a letter from Mick Carney, the last he was to send from his position with the South Pacific Force of the United States Pacific Fleet. Carney expressed the deep satisfaction which Halsey had experienced working with the RNZAF and Isitt. Every commitment had been met, and the highest confidence was held in New Zealand fliers. Carney concluded with: 'I have never... felt a warmer feeling of friendship than I do for the Chief of the Ruddy Air Staff.'⁷³

The next Liaison Letter of 12 July 1944 was signed off by Nevill, who followed the same approach as Isitt by supplying a broad coverage of RNZAF activities, but, in addition he covered events which were to have significant influence on RNZAF operations for the remainder of the war.⁷⁴

Isitt had left, on the single most important journey he undertook as CAS, on 6 June for Washington. The journey was critical because the whole future of the RNZAF hinged on the discussions. If the RNZAF was committed to a

⁷² ANZ Air 100/9, *Correspondence with American Officers*, Isitt to Kitchell, 1 June 1944.

⁷³ *ibid*, Carney to Isitt, 10 June 1944.

⁷⁴ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, 12 July 1944.

garrison role only, half the fighter squadrons could be disbanded, and the New Zealand training school intake could be reduced significantly.⁷⁵ However, if a combat role could be maintained, no major reorganisation or manpower reductions would be required. After Washington, Isitt proceeded to London for preliminary discussions with Prime Minister Fraser, and then returned once more to Washington. Nevill thought it unlikely that any definite decision regarding the employment of the RNZAF would be reached until Isitt had finally conferred with the Commander, Allied Air Forces, in Brisbane, following his return to New Zealand about the end of July.⁷⁶

Nevill also wrote of the uncertainty facing the Empire Air Training Scheme. There had been a considerable build-up of personnel in Canada, and because of this build-up, delays in the forwarding of New Zealand intakes were suggested.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

CHAPTER 8: UNDER ATTACK: A DIFFICULT PERIOD.

1944

Isitt was now entering his most critical period as CAS, and one which required all of his skills in order to effect the most satisfactory resolution possible at the time. He opened his June 1944 Liaison Letter with the heading 'Visit to Headquarters COMSOPAC and to COMAIRSOPAC'. The visit was triggered by conflicting information regarding United States proposals for both the immediate and future employment of the RNZAF contact force. Isitt visited Admiral Halsey and General Mitchell between May 23 and 29, in an endeavour to clarify the situation regarding the deployment of forces then in the forward area. Although the various commanders in the South Pacific had recommended that the RNZAF be included in the task force to be loaned to the Commander, South West Pacific, pending the elimination of the Japanese in the Bismarck Archipelago, this recommendation had not been accepted by Washington, and instructions had been issued for the withdrawal of all RNZAF units on Bougainville to Guadalcanal. Following discussions with Admirals Halsey and Gunther, Isitt had succeeded in delaying the withdrawal for a short period, and the latest instructions were that the New Zealand squadrons would remain as they were deployed at present, and would continue to be employed until the end of the Bismarck campaign.

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While he could not give any forecast as to where New Zealand forces could be operating, it was definite that the RNZAF would be required to provide a proportion of the air forces required for garrison duty in the British possessions lying to the North and North West of New Zealand. The balance of the combat force, which would probably consist largely of fighters, would be available for active operations in any theatre where they could be employed. Isitt had formulated suggestions covering these activities, and proposed submitting them to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington for their examination. Prime Minister Fraser was also planning to be in Washington at the same time, returning from his United Kingdom trip, and would assist in buttressing Isitt's arguments.

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fighting machine into which the RNZAF had developed. While Walter Nash may have raised some concerns about a continuing active role, in general this was the course preferred by the New Zealand Government. Isitt concurred with this approach, and it was to govern his actions for the remainder of the war.

New Zealand was now entering a critical phase in the war, with manpower shortages evident in all areas. The Government had decided that the demands of industry were of parallel importance with the requirements of the armed forces, and there was to be the utmost economy in the employment of manpower throughout all branches of the Service.¹ This policy had led to the appointment of a Defence Service Personnel Committee, which was charged with the responsibility of advising the Government on the employment of manpower throughout the services.²

Isitt's next Liaison Letter was not published until 10 August 1944.³ He had returned from the United Kingdom on 28 July, but had had to leave almost at once for conferences in the South Pacific and in Brisbane with the South West Pacific Area commanders. It had been decided that seven squadrons (four fighter, two bomber-reconnaissance, and one flying boat) would remain on garrison duty in the South Pacific based at Guadalcanal, Espiritu

¹ Ross, p. 290.

² ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, 10 August 1944

³ *ibid.*

Santo, Funafuti and Fiji.⁴ The remaining seven squadrons would form an air task force that would operate under the direction of Commander, Air, Northern Solomons, for deployment in the Admiralty Islands, Emirau Island, Bougainville and Green Island. When operations against the Bismarck Islands, New Britain and New Ireland were completed, the task force was likely to move forward to operate under the direction of the 13th Air Force in the Southern Philippines. As the war progressed, they would move further forward with either the 13th or the 5th Air Force. These arrangements were the result of many conferences in the Pacific, Washington, London and finally in Brisbane. Isitt was optimistic that it appeared to be the best employment offering to the Pacific squadrons, and hoped that it proved as satisfactory as it appeared on paper.⁵ The latest conference in Brisbane with Lieutenant General Kenney had been very satisfactory in tone, and the staff appreciated Isitt's desire, mirroring that of the New Zealand Government, to keep as large a proportion as possible of New Zealand squadrons actively employed.⁶ This summary was the substance of Isitt's report to the War Cabinet. At that stage their confirmation was still awaited, but Isitt had little doubt that it would be confirmed in the near future.⁷

Isitt felt that his trip was successful, as well as being interesting and of value. It was physically demanding, but Isitt made no complaint of tiredness, and appears to have operated efficiently at the many conferences he attended. He left New Zealand when an anti-New Zealand sentiment

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Ross, pp. 261-2.

⁶ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, 10 August 1944.

⁷ *ibid.*

existed at the highest level in the United States Navy, but he was able to overcome this hostile attitude, and emerge with a solution which was acceptable to the RNZAF and the New Zealand Government.

A significant proportion of the credit for attaining this objective must lie with Isitt. While Nash and Fraser were working at the highest level with King, Isitt made sure that he gathered a wide range of support from influential United States Navy and Air Force commanders. He obtained their approval, first on his visit to the South-West Pacific Command, and then in Washington with various influential officers, such as Arnold, so that internal pressure could be brought to bear on influencing King.⁸ Nash and Fraser could assuage King's concerns at a strategic level, while other officers could act at an operational level. Isitt worked to ensure that the sequence of approvals was obtained in an appropriate order, each buttressing the other. This necessitated ensuring that South-West Pacific Command did not withdraw any RNZAF Squadrons for garrison duty, and then Isitt obtained South-West Pacific Command agreement as to future active deployment, before selling this concept to the New Zealand War Cabinet, and finally the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The redistribution of RNZAF squadrons in the forward area involved an increase in the number of operational squadrons overseas, together with a potential reorganisation of No. 1 Islands Group. With the increased transport commitments which would arise when the RNZAF operated squadrons in the

⁸ Ross, p. 261.

South West Pacific Area, it had been decided to create two transport squadrons.⁹

Another change affected No. 4 Bomber-Reconnaissance Squadron, based at Fiji. It had remained equipped with Hudson aircraft, and had not been included in the general B-R squadron rotation scheme between New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. However, the new plan for the deployment of the B-R Squadrons between the South Pacific and the South West Pacific Areas made it necessary to include No. 4 B-R Squadron in the rotation scheme if an effective level of four B-R Squadrons was to be maintained in the forward area. The Hudson aircraft had all completed over 1,000 flying hours, which was causing maintenance problems, so the decision had been made to re-arm with Ventura aircraft.¹⁰

Isitt concluded his Letter by commenting that work was still continuing at high pressure:

And our task is not made any easier by a measure of criticism which has recently appeared in some newspapers covering the size and employment of the Air Force. Though the substance of these newspaper articles is mostly uninformed and misleading, it has been disturbing nevertheless. Some of you will have seen these articles in the newspaper cuttings. I do not propose to refer to them further. The business we have on hand is much too important.¹¹

⁹ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, 10 August 1944.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

While Isitt may have adopted this stiff upper lip attitude in his Liaison Letter, the reality went far deeper with the repercussions being felt for the remainder of the war.

In a post-war letter, Isitt felt that much of the publicity stemmed from a perceived slur on Leslie Munro, the then editor of the *New Zealand Herald*.¹² Leslie Munro, took umbrage at comments made by the former CAS, Air Vice-Marshal Goddard,¹³ and led the attack with articles in the *New Zealand Herald* on Saturday 15 July 1944 headed : 'Need for Pruning - Top-Heavy Air Force', with a follow-up the next Saturday, 'Top Heavy Air Force.' The weekly *Truth* also waded into the fray on 28 June 1944, with an article headed 'Air Force allegedly trying to hide personnel.'¹⁴

Isitt went into an immediate defensive mode, writing to the Minister of Defence on the 19, 27 and 31 July. He also commissioned a rebuttal of the original *Herald* article of 15 July which ran to eight foolscap pages, typed double spaced. There were 'always idle chatterers, gossips, malicious scandal-mongers and those who, passing as authorities, would claim to run anything better than those people actually in charge.' The rebuttal summary concluded with 'Finally, the view is expressed that as the war has receded from the shores of the Dominion, there is no real need for further effort, and that, in the Pacific, the Royal New Zealand Air Force should

¹² ANZ Air 118, 81N *The Manpower Situation in 1944/45*, Appendix 3a, Isitt to Kippenberger, 7 November 1947.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ ANZ Air 118, 81 K *Publicity, N.Z. Truth*, 28 June 1944, p.3.

cease further participation...’ The followed a detailed examination of each of the *Herald’s* claims accompanied by a refutation in detail.¹⁵

Isitt forwarded a copy of the rebuttal to the Minister of Defence, requesting that it be submitted to the War Cabinet for their attention. ‘The spate of misinformed and vicious publicity to which the Air Force is now being subjected by the leading daily papers of the Dominion, will have such an effect on the Service that, unless prompt counter-measures are taken, the Air Force may be unable to discharge its present responsibilities.’ Isitt also commented on allegations raised in the *Truth* article, and then concluded with a plea to allow the Air Department more latitude to institute a programme to keep the public better informed of Air Force activities.¹⁶

Ross claims that public criticism of the Air Force was so severe, and the effect on morale within the service so marked, that it should have been countered at the time.¹⁷ No authoritative statement was issued to refute the charges, so people continued to believe them and the RNZAF fell badly in public esteem.

At the end of the month Isitt went on the offensive again, writing to the Minister of Defence.¹⁸ He attached a draft Press Release which referred to an increase in RNZAF striking power in the Pacific, as well as a reduction in the commitment to the Empire Air Training Scheme following the successful

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ ANZ Air 100/13 *Miscellaneous Correspondence Pt. 1*, Isitt to Jones, 27 July 1944.

¹⁷ Ross, p. 290.

¹⁸ ANZ Air 100/13 *Miscellaneous Correspondence Pt. 1*, Isitt to Jones, 31 July 1944.

Allied invasion of Europe and the marked reduction in casualties.¹⁹ This Press Release was not issued, although the Prime Minister did make a statement later in August which was summarised in Isitt's September Liaison Letter.²⁰

Because of the significant events which had occurred in August, Isitt felt that his September Liaison Letter should receive a wider circulation to all stations and units of the RNZAF. 'I am doing this on account of the fact that the letter contains a review of matters affecting the reorganisation of the RNZAF, in which I think you would be interested. You will understand that a good deal of information in this letter is secret and confidential and I ask you to treat it as such.'²¹

Isitt opened by stating that he proposed to devote a major portion of his Liaison Letter to a review of matters affecting the reorganisation of the RNZAF. He had been able to sell his proposed changes to the War Cabinet, and on 23 August 1944 the Prime Minister made a statement in the House of Representatives. It was no longer necessary to send New Zealand aircrew to Canada, and this would result in a substantial reduction in aircrew enlistment requirements in New Zealand. As a result of the plan, some 2,000 men would be released in the next few weeks, and further releases would occur as the war progressed positively.²²

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ ANZ Air 100/8 *Monthly Liaison Letters*, September 1944.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

This statement, although short on specifics, did follow the probable course of events suggested by Isitt in his August Letter. It was obviously designed to appeal to a number of audiences, especially the reference to 2,000 men being released, with a prospect of more to follow. The announcement of the cessation of the Empire Air Training Scheme was also significant, in that it affected the recruiting needs for the RNZAF, and took long term strain off the detailed requirements for manpower planning. Because of the deliberate vagueness in the writing of the statement, it would have required a very perceptive and astute observer to identify the precise nature of the changes which were being highlighted.

Isitt then went on to detail the consequent changes which would arise from the announcement, which was to prove a watershed in the development of the RNZAF. During the twelve months ending June 1944, the RNZAF had passed through a phase of consolidation and expansion. The largest jump in manning had occurred in the year ended 31 March 1943, when the levels had almost doubled from 17,243 to 33,566. In the ensuing year, they had increased to 41,414 peaking at 42,488 in May 1944.²³ The ensuing twelve months up to June 1945, would see a period of further consolidation in New Zealand, which would permit a reduction in personnel strength, although this would be partially offset by an increase in Pacific requirements. This was indeed to be the case as manning in the Pacific rose from 5,921 to 8,568 in the year ended 31 March 1945.²⁴

²³ ANZ Air 39/1/3 Part 45, *Annual Report 1945/46*.

²⁴ *ibid.*

Isitt also signalled the imminent demise of the Empire Air Training Plan. Anticipating a wind down, the Government had decided to despatch no more aircrew to Canada for training, and no more trained pilots to the United Kingdom. As a result, the future RNZAF training programmes would be required to produce the complete range of fully trained aircrew personnel necessary for the manning of RNZAF Squadrons in New Zealand and the Pacific. The Pacific requirements called for a total of 1,000 fully trained aircrew per annum, which, to allow for wastage, necessitated an intake of approximately 1,900 per annum or 150 per month.²⁵

The immediate steps taken to meet the revised programme included the elimination of the September intake into the Preliminary Training School, Delta; the elimination of one Elementary Flying Training School (Harewood); and the elimination of the bulk of twin-engine pilot training at Wigram.²⁶

The sudden and unexpected cancellation of aircrew drafts already fully trained or partially-trained for service in the Royal Air Force, and the decision to repatriate the large number of trainees (in excess of 500) who were then in Canada, left the New Zealand training organisation with large surpluses of aircrew to absorb.²⁷ This required the transfer of displaced New Zealand trainees, together with the balance of Canadian trainees to the Aircrew Reserve where they were employed on duties involving the

²⁵ ANZ 100/8 *Monthly Liaison Letters, September 1944.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ ANZ Air 39/1/3 Part 44, *Annual Report 1944/45.*

operation and maintenance of aircraft, pending their resumption of aircrew training.²⁸

Any Squadrons in excess of the requirements for the South Pacific Area were to be attached to a new formation called the New Zealand Air Task Force, designated ZEIRTAF. The Commander ZEIRTAF was to be responsible direct to COMAIRNORSOLS for the operational sub-control of his units, functioning independently of No. 1 Islands Group. This latter Group would retain responsibility for administration, personnel and supply matters. The new Task Force would necessitate the formation of a further three squadrons, together with their associated servicing units, and would involve a further 2400 personnel being transferred overseas. It was estimated that the total personnel required for the Pacific Force would be 8500, of which 1000 would be aircrew.²⁹

While Isitt anticipated that it should be possible to meet the 150 recruit aircrew required monthly for the revised flying training programme, the increased number of recruits available provided an opportunity for more rigorous selection methods and a return to the higher standards of the early war years.³⁰

With ground staff the position was rather more complicated. As the Air Force had sufficient trained ground personnel in terms of numbers to meet the new commitments, ostensibly it would appear that a recruiting rate to

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ ANZ 100/8 *Monthly Liaison Letters, September 1944.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

meet only the normal wastage would be sufficient. However, the recruiting policy of the previous four years, imposed by necessity, had resulted in a relatively high proportion of ground personnel who could not be posted overseas. The numbers involved were 10,000 out of a force of 28,000, and were too high to permit a normal rotation, based on twelve months in the tropics, between New Zealand and the Pacific Air Force. It was proposed to discharge a considerable number of such men on the grounds of unfitness, age or family reasons. In addition, the approach of the sixth year of the war made it necessary to consider the release of long-service personnel, while the demands of essential industries were resulting in the release of increasing numbers of key personnel. These factors necessitated an increase in the rate of recruiting up to 500 per month.³¹

Isitt concluded his review of the reorganisation process by supplying forecasts for his estimates of personnel strength in the RNZAF for the coming year:

Date	New Zealand	Pacific	Total
July 1944	28,504	6,127	34,631
December 1944	23,923	8,500	32,423
July 1945	23,023	8,500	31,523 ³²

In late August Isitt received a Secret Cypher message from Findlay of the New Zealand Air Mission, Washington. Because the majority of the overseas squadrons were going to operate under the USAAF, Findlay had been asked

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*

to explore the possibility of Army Air Force aircraft being made available to the RNZAF from 1945 allocations, thus replacing the Navy aircraft they were presently operating. Findlay advised that the production was sufficient only for USAAF requirements, and there was no possibility of any allocation for the RNZAF at this stage.³³

Isitt immediately conveyed this information to Kenney, and suggested that it probably be more practical to continue with the existing aircraft types operated by the RNZAF than converting to P51 and B25 Army types. The existing Corsairs and Venturas were satisfactory in their role, and provided that logistical support for them could continue, any disruption caused by converting to new types would be avoided.³⁴

Within a few days Isitt was exploring the possibilities of hedging his bets with the Royal Air Force, and accordingly wrote to Sir Douglas Evill, Vice Chief of Air Staff. Government pressure was coming on Isitt to reduce the Air Force size to 27,000, excluding those already serving with the RAF and in the EATS. Notwithstanding these reductions in staffing levels, Isitt still felt that a potential New Zealand contribution to a possible Commonwealth Force, then being planned by the RAF, could be fifteen Squadrons.³⁵

Copies of this letter were forwarded to Findlay and Olson so that they would be aware of Isitt's thoughts in the event that contact was made with them.

³³ ANZ Air 100/5, Findlay to Isitt, 28 August 1944.

³⁴ ANZ Air 100/9, Isitt to Kenney, 31 August 1944.

³⁵ ANZ Air 100/3, Isitt to Evill, 29 August 1944.

Evill did not respond until six weeks later, his reply having been delayed by discussions which took place at the Quebec Conference. As a result of these discussions, it was unlikely that a Commonwealth Task Force would be formed, and Evill suggested that the best course would be for the RNZAF to continue to operate as they already were in the South and South West Pacific.³⁶

Isitt demonstrated again his human touch in his treatment of a trainee pilot nearing the end of his Wings Course at Woodbourne. Because the trainee's gunnery was not up to standard, he was held back for further training, and the Wings award withheld. Unfortunately, an invitation to his parents for the ceremony had already been sent out, and the irate father later complained to Isitt. After checking the facts, Isitt wrote to the trainee airman. This letter illustrates Isitt at his best. The fact that he would even write to a trainee was most unusual, but the letter was pitched in exactly the right tone to lift the airman out of his despair. Not many in Isitt's position would have written such a letter relating to a matter which was small in the affairs of the RNZAF, but large in the lives of the airman and his family.³⁷

The Empire Air Training Scheme had been the subject of considerable correspondence between the RNZAF Headquarters in London and Air Department in Wellington. Isitt had become dissatisfied at the lack of any

³⁶ *ibid*, Evill to Isitt, 14 October 1944.

³⁷ ANZ Air 100/13 Pt. 1, Isitt to Brown, 21 September 1944.

positive direction from the Royal Air Force, and accordingly despatched a signal to London in early August 1944.³⁸

Before sending this message, Isitt had written to the Minister of Defence a long letter which he entitled, 'Variation of N.Z. Participation in Empire Air Training Scheme,' and in which he sought ratification for his proposed actions.³⁹ Isitt recommended that New Zealand's contribution to the Empire Air Training Scheme be cancelled, while the training organisation in New Zealand would support the manning of and attrition of RNZAF Squadrons in New Zealand and the Pacific only.⁴⁰ Because of the international repercussions to the course of action he was suggesting, Isitt prudently requested the concurrence of Jones.⁴¹

This was forthcoming, and provoked an Air Ministry response which Isitt conveyed to Jones. The Royal Air Force had reduced their planning requirements down to a period of only twelve months, and was prepared to accept Isitt's suggestions.⁴² The effect of the above changes was to reduce the trained aircrew requirements in New Zealand to provide for Pacific requirements only. The output required each six weeks would be:

Pilots - single engine	46
- multi engine	18
Wireless Operator/Air Gunners	22
Navigators	12

³⁸ *ibid*, Isitt to RNZAF Headquarters, London, 2 August 1944.

³⁹ *ibid*, Isitt to Jones, 2 August 1944.

⁴⁰ *ibid*.

⁴¹ *ibid*.

⁴² *ibid*, Isitt to Jones, 8 August 1944.

Earlier in the month Isitt had written to the Minister of Defence with a four page letter listing changes and reductions which had been put into effect since 31 March 1944.⁴⁴ The matters referred to all had a bearing on economy in manpower or on finance. The listing had been prepared as a result of the pressures which were coming on manpower, and were a pre-emptive strike against the recently established Defence Forces Personnel Committee. This Committee was meeting regularly and had forwarded Isitt a series of requests for information.⁴⁵

At this time Isitt was being subject to attack on all sides. The Prime Minister had heard that the Royal Air Force had transferred surplus airmen to the Army, and wondered if the RNZAF could do the same. Isitt checked out the story, and found that no transfer had in fact taken place.⁴⁶ The Army had been permitted to call up some men who had been earmarked for the Air Force, but not called up.⁴⁷ The Prime Minister had been alerted to the RAF transfer by an article in the *Truth* of July 26, 1944, which went on to mention that in Canada, Air Force recruiting had been put on hold. *Truth* then went on the attack:

‘It is more and more important that the Prime Minister should make a ministerial statement as to where New Zealand stands and what is to be the policy of the

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, Isitt to Jones, 2 August 1944.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, Isitt to Defence Forces Personnel Committee, 2 August 1944.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, Isitt to Fraser, 7 August 1944.

⁴⁷ Morgan, Frederick, *Overture to Overlord*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1950, p.178.

Government in relation to the Air Force...The country must be told by the Government without further delay.⁴⁸

In addition to all the other matters occupying his time, queries arose relating to RNZAF aircraft. Isitt was again writing to the Minister of Defence, justifying the purchase of five Walrus aircraft, which had been approved by War Cabinet in June. Queries had been raised regarding the price and condition of these aircraft. Isitt had been able to confirm the price quoted to the War Cabinet, and while the aircraft were not new, they had been reconditioned to new condition. Because they were not new, some price abatement would be made. Isitt concluded his letter with the following riposte 'These aircraft are urgently required to cope with the Flying Boat Training Programme, which can only otherwise be met by the use of Catalinas at greatly increased capital and operational costs.'⁴⁹

There had also been a recent crash of a Ventura at Bougainville which was causing serious concern to technical staff, as no reason could be identified. As a result the Ventura fleet had been grounded until the cause of the failure could be established, and any necessary modifications incorporated. Fortunately, the problem was quickly identified as being the spark plugs, which were breaking down under load. A change to a different type of spark plug was easily effected, and the Venturas were soon back in the air.⁵⁰ However, questions remained about them, and would resurface in the future.

⁴⁸ ANZ Air 117/44 *Press Cuttings - Complaints, Truth*, 26 July 1944, p.11.

⁴⁹ ANZ Air 100/13 Pt. 1, Isitt to Jones, 10 August 1944.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

A more serious event was the loss of two Hudsons en route from Nausori to Whenuapai on 20 August 1944.⁵¹ The file covering the loss opens with a hand written note from Isitt to Air Commodore G.T. Jarman, DCAS:

The question of the missing aircraft is receiving more and more attention. I've had another talk with the P.M. who expresses himself as far from satisfied and requires the most searching inquiry, as to whether everything was in order, and whether the flight should have been undertaken in view of the weather conditions.⁵²

In view of the high political interest in the loss, exacerbated by mis-handling within the Prime Minister's Department, Isitt kept the Minister of Defence informed as to the circumstances of the flight.⁵³ The seven Hudsons en route from Fiji were being brought back to enable the conversion of No. 4 Squadron to Ventura aircraft. Isitt regarded the flight as being a normal operation, for which the weather forecast was satisfactory.⁵⁴ The passengers were service personnel returning on leave. An exhaustive search was being carried out.⁵⁵

Meanwhile Haldane, Isitt's PA, had produced a memo for Isitt, who did not see it until 1 September because of an overseas visit, proving that the Prime Minister's Office had been kept fully informed about the missing aircraft.⁵⁶

⁵¹ ANZ, Air 25/2/1752 *Loss of two Hudsons, 20 August 1944.*

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ ANZ Air 100/13 Pt. 1, Isitt to Jones, 21 August 1944.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ ANZ Air 25/2/1752, Haldane to Isitt, 21 August 1944.

In Haldane's view the RNZAF organisation did not break down in advising the Prime Minister's Department.⁵⁷

The Court of Inquiry brought down its findings at the beginning of September, but was unable to establish an exact cause of the loss of the Hudsons. The primary cause was assumed to be lack of oxygen, resulting in loss of consciousness on the part of the pilots. The secondary cause was that the aircraft became out of control, probably in cloud, and crashed before the pilots had time to recover consciousness; or the aircraft collided when flying in formation.⁵⁸

From the Inquiry it was determined that oxygen was not fitted in any of the Hudsons. Generally, the discipline displayed on the flight was not of a high order, and resulted in the worst wartime disaster affecting RNZAF aircraft, in terms of the number of airmen lost.⁵⁹ Fourteen servicemen lost their lives.⁶⁰

Isitt forwarded a copy of the Court of Inquiry findings to the Minister of Defence, stating that the probable cause of the accident was conjectured by the Court on the evidence of the Captains of the aircraft who had completed the flight.⁶¹ Isitt concluded by advising that the recommendations of the Court of Inquiry had been implemented. Certainly no criticism could be laid at the feet of Isitt regarding the Inquiry. The

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ C. Rudge, *Missing!*, Lyttelton: Adventure Air, 2001, pp. 61-8.

⁶¹ ANZ Air 100/13 Pt.1, Isitt to Jones, 1 September 1944.

Court had convened, flown to Fiji, interviewed numerous witnesses, and then brought down their findings in the space of 10 days. After the initial confusion, no further political criticism was levelled at Isitt over the matter.

Earlier in the month Isitt had forwarded the Minister of Defence a summary of the decisions reached at the Noumea Conference of 2 August 1944 to consider the physical transference of RNZAF squadrons to the Commander in Chief South West Pacific which were not required by the Commander, South Pacific.⁶² Further conferences were held at Brisbane on August 3 and 4 at the headquarters of the Commander in Chief, South West Pacific Area, and with the Commander of the Allied Air Forces and his staff on questions of command, organisation and deployment.⁶³

The authority for the decisions reached had been confirmed by a New Zealand War Cabinet decision of 14 July 1944 and United States Chiefs of Staff instructions to the Commander, South Pacific. Isitt then carefully hedged his bets with the following comment: 'It should also be noted that the Chief of Air Staff, RAF, has advised that the proposed deployment fits in with the British longer-term proposals, and will not affect our ultimate ability to join in with any British forces eventually deployed in the Pacific Area.'⁶⁴

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

The Joint Chiefs of Staff had laid down that the total air forces required by the commander, South Pacific Area, to ensure security in that area were 11 squadrons, of which New Zealand would supply seven and the United States Navy four. It was agreed in Washington that the composition and size of this force would be reviewed in December, or at the latest, in January 1945. Control had been worked out by having the operation directed by the Commander in Chief, SWPA, through the Commander of the Allied Air Forces (General Kenney). Actual operational control in the first instance was to continue to be exercised by the Commander, Northern Solomons Air Force until the establishment of the New Zealand Air Task Force, at which point operational control would be exercised by the RNZAF Task Force Commander. The chain of command for policy, organisation, planning and administration was to be from the New Zealand Task Force through the New Zealand Chief of Air Staff to the Commander, Allied Air Forces. For operational control, the New Zealand Task Force Commander was under the direction of the Commander, Allied Air Force.⁶⁵

Logistically, the RNZAF while in the garrison area, would be supplied through the Commander, South Pacific, but when they moved west and north, they would be supplied by the United States 7th Fleet, Logistics Section. Isitt advised that the conversations had been most satisfactory in tone, and that the Commander of the Allied Air Forces fully appreciated the

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

New Zealand Government's desire that the RNZAF should be employed in an active role, and had advised his willingness to comply with this desire.⁶⁶

Later in the month Isitt was again writing to the Minister of Defence with a further Report on the reorganisation of the RNZAF.⁶⁷ Isitt also made a copy of the Report available to the Chairman of the Defence Force Personnel Committee for his confidential information and for the release of such portions as he considered necessary for the guidance of his inspectors.

While Isitt was involved in all these time consuming activities, he still managed to give an address to the Marsden School Parents' Association on 7 August 1944.⁶⁸ The address covered certain aspects of the Pacific Islands, and was followed by a short film on the operations of the RNZAF in the Solomons and Bismarck Islands.⁶⁹

He concluded with a few words of pragmatic realism:

I can see no reason to assume that Japanese morale will suddenly crumble. War is such that victory remains uncertain until it is actually won. Both sides expect either to win or to produce a satisfactory stalemate. There is no reason for irrational optimism which in itself is definitely transferred to the war effort.⁷⁰

It was interesting that Isitt had embraced the opportunity to publicise the RNZAF. He was always alert to any opportunity which arose, and the post-

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, Isitt to Jones, 22 August 1944.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, Marsden School Address, 7 August 1944.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

war unofficial Narrative on Publicity cited the RNZAF Department of Public Relations as being a most effective body, particularly after the appointment of Isitt as CAS. The film shown would have been made by the National Film Unit, and two were made in mid-1944, one being entitled *RNZAF Corsairs*, which was released on 2 June 1944 and the other, entitled *NZ Squadron Strikes for Rabaul*, which was released on 24 July 1944.⁷¹

Towards the end of August, Isitt was again writing to A.D. Park, Chairman of the Defence Forces Personnel Committee, endeavouring to enlist Park's support to counter the recent adverse publicity of the RNZAF. He was seeking a statement from Park disproving the allegations that the RNZAF was posting airmen around the country to disrupt the investigations of the Committee.⁷² Park acceded to Isitt's request of 28 August and enclosed a draft press release. Isitt very much appreciated Park's helpful attitude.⁷³

The following day Isitt was again writing to the Defence Forces Personnel Committee, this time regarding the possible disbandment of School Units for the Air Training Corps (ATC). He was opposed to such a disbandment, because the ATC had a proven track record in supplying quality recruits to the RNZAF. Up to half of all recruits were drawn from the ATC, and they had proved very keen. In Isitt's eyes - 'Volunteers are worth more than

⁷¹ ANZ Air 118, 81K *Publicity*, Appendix J.

⁷² ANZ Air 100/13 Pt. 1, Isitt to Park, 28 August 1944.

⁷³ *ibid*, Isitt to Park, 1 September 1944.

conscripts'. On this occasion, Isitt's representations were accepted, and no change was made to the ATC system of operation.⁷⁴

Meanwhile some clarity was starting to emerge regarding the RAF requirements under the Empire Air Training Scheme. A signal had been received from the Air Ministry, who had reconsidered their requirements as the 'defeat of Germany was now within reasonable distance.' New Zealand was invited to consider the immediate cessation of all drafts to the United Kingdom either direct or through Canada, as well as withdrawing from Canada any aircrew needed to meet Pacific requirements.⁷⁵

Isitt responded immediately to this news, forwarding a copy of the signal to the Minister of Defence, together with a letter setting out the immediate consequences of the decision.⁷⁶ He promised to report back to the Minister once he had received the requested information from Canada.⁷⁷

To this end, Isitt himself drafted a discussion paper on 'Aircrew Manning Policy.'⁷⁸ This paper endeavoured to bring together a number of strands of activity, and illustrated Isitt's thinking in response to the collapse of the Empire Air Training Scheme. The intention was to reduce as quickly as possible the present over-manning in aircrew, against the requirements to produce every six weeks:

⁷⁴ *ibid*, Isitt to Defence Forces Personnel Committee, 29 August 1944.

⁷⁵ *ibid*, RNZAF Headquarters, London to Isitt, 3 September 1944.

⁷⁶ *ibid*, Isitt to Jones, 4 September 1944.

⁷⁷ *ibid*.

⁷⁸ *ibid*.

14 ME Pilots

40 SE Pilots

12 Navs

14/16 WO/AGs

20 AGs

102⁷⁹

There were sufficient ME pilots to meet requirements for 18 months, and Isitt had decided to post to reserve all ME pilots surplus to requirements. With SE pilots, he had decided to continue training 40 per week, until the number returning from Canada and the UK could be established, when the trainees would be reduced by this number. With Navigators the decision was to maintain present output pending availability from Canada, then reduce local training accordingly. WO/AGs requirements could be met by withdrawing aircrew from Canada, while Air Gunner training would continue in New Zealand, absorbing the limited number which may return from Canada.⁸⁰

Given this position, one EFTS will be sufficient to produce the intakes to SFTS for SE training. One SFTS should handle SE training. At ITW Delta, aircrew would be reduced to six months' supply immediately, with no further enlistments for aircrew until the stock dropped below three months' supply.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

All surplus aircrew would be posted to the Reserve, but earmarked for recall to Air Force, although available to the Army if they volunteered for overseas service. Re-location for operations would be limited to single men.⁸¹

Isitt was not wasting any time in making the decision to reduce the training intake, and he did this in advance of definite information being available on the numbers returning from Canada. In the category of multi-engine Pilots, numbers available were far higher than the expected needs, but in all other categories training was to continue at a much reduced level. The decision to close stations was also in keeping with the general policy of reducing establishments when their utility had ceased.

While planning occupied much of Isitt's time during this period, there were other matters which required his attention. Questions had been asked in Parliament about the destruction of Air Force stores, which caused Isitt to write to Group Captain Lewis, the Inspector-General of the RNZAF, requesting him to proceed to Hamilton in order to enquire into a Board of Survey which had ordered the destruction of stores condemned by the Board and which were alleged to be wastefully destroyed.⁸² Isitt was reacting to a situation which had the potential to be damaging to the RNZAF, and as usual, he chose the most appropriate person to conduct the enquiry. He was mindful of the damage caused by the earlier newspaper publicity, and did not desire a repeat.⁸³

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² ANZ Air 100/13 Pt. 1, Isitt to Lewis, 6 September 1944.

⁸³ *ibid.*

There had been two newspaper articles in the previous week which had caused Isitt to react in this manner. The first was in the *NZ Truth* of 30 August 1944: 'Thousands of pairs of boots as well as other useful material have been wantonly and wickedly destroyed by the RNZAF in Hamilton to the disgust of lower ranking men forced to carry out the orders of higher ranks.' *Truth* had visited the Hamilton Borough Council rubbish tip and there saw 'the ashes and remains of thousands of boots which had been burned under the strict supervision of an Air Force officer who stood by until the end.' The boots were not new, and had been worn, but *Truth* claimed that thousands of farmers, miners and gardeners would gladly have acquired them even at a fairly nominal price to cover the cost of distribution.⁸⁴

A few days later the *Auckland Star* of 6 September 1944 reported on an allegation made in the House of Representatives the day before, that two long loads of boots, clothing and ground sheets had been taken to a dump in Hamilton and burnt with the use of oil and petrol. A pair of boots were held up by Mr Findlay, and had been closely examined by the Minister of Defence, Mr Jones. Mr Findlay claimed that there were dozens and dozens of boots that had been half soled and never used. 'He would make a plea to the Minister of Defence that whoever was to blame - "Should be shot" interjected several Government and Opposition members.'⁸⁵

⁸⁴ ANZ Air 117/44, *Newspaper Clippings - Complaints*.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

Almost immediately another equipment case erupted. It was reported in the *New Zealand Herald*, but not before the Prime Minister had rung Isitt direct to raise the matter, which involved two khaki drill tunics which had been classified as cleaning material. There is no doubt that the issues which had been raised in the press during the preceding two months were contributing to the Government's edginess, and the fact that the Prime Minister rang direct, illustrates the level of concern being expressed. Isitt was quick to respond, threatening punishment to the officers responsible if they could be identified.⁸⁶ Unfortunately, no further records appear to exist relating to this incident, and the merits of Isitt's suitable punishment cannot be determined.

Within a few days Isitt was writing to the Minister of Defence, outlining his latest proposals for the reduction in aircrew training.⁸⁷ Isitt accordingly recommended for the approval of War Cabinet, that the training organisation in New Zealand be re-organised in the following manner by closing as early as possible the following stations: Elementary Flying Training Schools at Taieri and Ashburton; Initial Training Wing at Delta; Central Flying School at Tauranga; the Training School at Levin; and Service Flying Training School at Woodbourne. The Service Flying Training School at Wigram would be developed for the required output of 'single-engine' pilots, and the training of 'multi-engine' pilots abandoned.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ ANZ Air 100/13 Pt. 1, Isitt to Fraser, 21 September 1944.

⁸⁷ *ibid*, Isitt to Jones, 18 September 1944.

⁸⁸ *ibid*.

Any surplus aircrew arising from the reorganisation, from whatever source, were to be posted to the RNZAF Reserve. Their service would become available to the National Service Department. However, to ensure that the greater portion of these men would be available to the RNZAF when required, Isitt recommended that they should be 'screened' from Army service unless they specifically volunteered for this duty. All personnel in the Reserve Pool would be reviewed in January 1945, and the size of the Pool would be re-adjusted in collaboration with the Controller of Manpower, with whom the matter had already been discussed. With Ground Staff, a somewhat lower entry of recruits appeared to be possible. Instead of an intake of 500 per month, it was thought possible to maintain the programme on a basis of approximately 300 new enlistments per month. Since 31 July 1944, the total strength of the RNZAF had decreased by 1,600, and the new reorganisation involved further reductions of approximately 2,800 ground personnel, which together with the aircrew personnel involved, would mean that over 5,000 personnel would be released by the Air Force before the end of the year.⁸⁹

Immediately prior to proceeding overseas, Isitt made a broadcast over National Radio in a Sunday Evening Talk at 8.45 p.m. on September 17, 1944 in support of the Victory Loan. The broadcast had duration of 11 minutes 20 seconds, and is unique as it is the only one retained in Radio New Zealand Archives of the numerous broadcasts which Isitt made during the war.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ Radio New Zealand Archives DCDR 623A - D Series, Isitt Speech, 17 September 1944.

He spoke first about the efforts of New Zealand aircrews in Europe. He had been in England just after D-Day and had visited all New Zealand fighter squadrons before they transferred to Normandy. One squadron had shot down 239 flying bombs, and their successes had made Isitt proud of what he had seen and heard. He had also visited 75 Squadron, the oldest New Zealand squadron with the Royal Air Force, which was now equipped with Lancasters.⁹¹

Isitt then switched to the RNZAF in the Pacific, where he spoke of the build-up of activities since 1942, initially for the protection of New Zealand itself but extending to Fiji and New Caledonia before embracing the New Hebrides and the Solomons. The cost had been great, and even more in precious young lives, but not as much as was initially feared. Complete units of the RNZAF were now working in conjunction with American forces, and Isitt highlighted the efforts of the ground services in support of aircrew. He could not resist adding that men were no longer being sent to Canada and Europe. The Allies were faced by a determined and fanatical enemy, whose objective was to hold out as long as they could, and it was expected that Japanese resistance would stiffen as the Allies advanced. Even a small country like New Zealand could produce an air force of formidable striking power, and Isitt cited the differences in strength when comparing 1939 with 1944.⁹²

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² *ibid.*

But victory could not be achieved without money, and Isitt made his selling pitch for new aircraft and equipment, in order to defeat Japan outright. Japan was hopeful of prolonging the war and concluding a peace not based on an unconditional surrender. Unless the war was won outright, the potential existed for possible future conflicts.⁹³

Isitt spoke in a relaxed, confident manner and in a pleasant, well-educated voice. He made no mistakes in his delivery, with perhaps his only idiosyncrasy being his pronunciation of Luftwaffe as LUFT-WAFF, rather than the German pronunciation with an accent on the E.

Isitt obviously could not please everybody, because a few days later the following letter appeared in the *New Zealand Herald*:

Our Airmen in India

In a recent letter my son, who has been in India for the past two and a half years, speaks of men in his unit as the 'Forgotten NZers'. After listening to Air Vice-Marshal Isitt broadcasting on Sunday night, I am convinced that what my son said was true. For not one word was uttered by the marshal about the Air Force boys in India.

R.A.F. Mother⁹⁴

At the time there were less than 200 New Zealanders with the Royal Air Force in the Indian theatre of operations. Because of the small numbers involved, it was difficult to justify a full-time appointment to follow the activities of New Zealanders, and it was not until a New Zealander, Mrs

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ ANZ Air 117/44 *Newspaper Clippings - Complaints, July-December 1944.*

Dorothy Cranstone assumed the role of Acting New Zealand Public Relations Officer in Delhi that the position improved. Mrs Cranstone was the wife of an RNZAF officer serving with the RAF in India.⁹⁵

While Isitt was overseas in September, Nevill had been summoned to speak with the Prime Minister on the operation of the Sunderland flying boats, the departure of which was imminent from the United Kingdom. Fraser had obviously been placed under pressure by the United States State Department with their interpretation of the Canberra Pact. The State Department did not wish the RNZAF to set up a de facto civil airline operation which could potentially disadvantage any American post-war equivalent, and wished Nevill, as Isitt's deputy, to be very clear about the situation. Nevill covered the meeting in a minute to the Director of Operations, advising that Fraser required the boats be operated to meet military requirements, and was opposed to the use of the boats in any manner resembling a civil air transport line, which could cause unfavourable comment from the United States.⁹⁶

The whole situation was very delicate, because of the deterioration which had occurred in political relations between the United States and New Zealand since the signing of the Canberra Pact in early 1944. As a result, the Prime Minister was loath to give the United States Government any further cause for unfavourable comment, resulting in his attitude reflected in Nevill's letter.

⁹⁵ ANZ Air 118, *81K Publicity*.

⁹⁶ ANZ Air 100/13 Pt. 1, Nevill to Pirie, 19 September 1944.

In Washington, Findlay had been concerned about the possible repercussions on New Zealand aircraft allocations, and had asked to be kept informed. Isitt had been forced to respond:

I agree that you should have been kept in the picture but, unfortunately, on many matters this is not possible. For instance, the Sunderland question until two or three days ago had been on the level of the Prime Minister and the Under Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, and has only come down to our level now that the RAF have decided to allot four Sunderlands for transport purposes in the Pacific. As far as we can tell now, these will be used mainly to meet the requirements of the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific in covering all British and Mandated islands, to supplement the Auckland -Sydney service, and any surplus operational time will be available to us in our transportation problems with our forward squadrons.⁹⁷

It was decided to use the Sunderlands to augment existing air transport squadrons between Noumea, Santos, Lauthala Bay and New Zealand.⁹⁸ Isitt thought that the remaining requirements of the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific could be met by authorising special flights by the most suitable aircraft when required.⁹⁹ For international reasons, it was decided to make no charge for civilian passengers carried on these occasions.

Civil aviation matters again intruded into Isitt's sphere, when the Prime Minister invited his views on the future of Civil Aviation Planning and

⁹⁷ ANZ Air 100/5, Isitt to Findlay, 14 March 1944.

⁹⁸ ANZ Air 118, 81L *Air Transport and Pacific Ferry*, Chapter ii, p.8.

⁹⁹ ANZ Air 131/3/1, Isitt to Jones, 19 October 1944.

Organisation. Isitt had no doubt that eventually civil aviation should be entirely divorced from the RNZAF, but the decision should not be made at that time, while the RNZAF was operating a very considerable air transport organisation and would be required to develop and operate base facilities in the Pacific for Air Transport requirements.¹⁰⁰ During the war, and until the Air Transport organisation could be placed on a civil footing, it appeared desirable that the planning and administration of the two organisations - RNZAF Air Transport and Civil Aviation - should be co-ordinated by one officer, and as the greater volume of work was Air Force, this officer should be an RNZAF officer.¹⁰¹ Isitt was certainly creating the framework for an air transport organisation, which had the ability to be transformed into a civil operation at the cessation of hostilities.¹⁰²

Isitt was again writing to the Minister of Defence about his proposed visit to the Commander South Pacific and RNZAF units in the Pacific area. The Prime Minister had requested Isitt to discuss with the Commander South Pacific, the question of the operations and maintenance of airports and facilities at various islands in the Pacific which had been, or were being evacuated by American forces. COMSOPAC had also made a request to the RNZAF to initiate a weekly Fiji - Tutuila shuttle to handle passengers, mail and freight requirements. As the request was in line with New Zealand

¹⁰⁰ ANZ Air 100/13 Pt. 1, Isitt to Jones, 21 September 1944.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

¹⁰² *ibid.*

Government policy, it could be integrated as an extension of existing services.¹⁰³

Isitt proposed meeting Admiral Newton in Noumea on 25 September, to discuss the matters raised by Fraser and other questions relating to RNZAF squadrons in the South Pacific area. After Noumea, Isitt intended to meet the Commander, Air, South Pacific at Guadalcanal, and while in the area he wished to take the opportunity of visiting New Zealand units which he had not visited since the preceding May. Ever mindful of protocol, he requested the Minister's concurrence to the proposed visit.¹⁰⁴

Isitt had also made an offer that the RNZAF was ready to accept responsibility for the operation and maintenance of airports and facilities in the South Pacific area no longer required by the United States. Newton responded that this matter was the subject of detailed direction from Washington and was designed to meet United States requirements to the end of the war in Europe. As a result, Isitt requested an update on the facilities at all airports in which the RNZAF was interested, after ascertaining that if any facilities were desired to be retained, representations would have to be made to Washington.¹⁰⁵

During Isitt's absence a letter was received from his predecessor Goddard, with an interesting response to the Liaison Letter of 4 September, and

¹⁰³ *ibid*, Isitt to Jones, 21 September 1944.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*.

offering congratulations on the new organisation contrived with the Americans.¹⁰⁶ 'Having some sort of idea of what is involved by change in the structure of the RNZAF, I am sure you have had an anxious and difficult time.' Goddard then observed that it would be interesting to know what corresponding organisational change had not occurred with the Army. Although it was inevitable that the RNZAF could not, for the time being, hold a place in the forefront of battle, there did seem a good prospect of getting back there again before too long. 'All this gives me a feeling of personal satisfaction for having stressed the need for the RNZAF to make and maintain a proper place for itself in the Pacific.'¹⁰⁷ Goddard concluded by asking when Isitt was going to pay a visit. 'I feel you ought to associate yourself with this part of the world.'¹⁰⁸

It was not until 12 October 1944 that Isitt produced his next Monthly Liaison Letter.¹⁰⁹ He had just returned on 6 October, after leaving on 25 September, and visited RNZAF Units at Noumea, Espiritu Santo, Guadalcanal, Florida and Bougainville. Arrangements had been made for the RNZAF to move forward to new camps on Manus Island and Emirau Island.¹¹⁰ Green Island was going to be the base for one Fighter squadron and one Bomber-Reconnaissance squadron, each with its servicing unit.¹¹¹

Isitt felt that generally, although living conditions at these advanced bases were not quite up to the standard of established stations in the forward

¹⁰⁶ ANZ Air 100/13 Pt. 2, Goddard to Isitt, 6 October 1944.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, 12 October 1944.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

area, it would not be too long before more comforts and amenities would be available.¹¹² Isitt felt that he had to mention he had found living conditions throughout the area to be first rate and the morale of the personnel was good, with a very low sickness rate.¹¹³ He was correct in his assertion about the sickness rate, as a post-war report identified that the rate at the time was the low point for the whole war.¹¹⁴ At Guadalcanal a rest camp had been set up on the seashore to provide rest and recreation for personnel on short leave in the Islands. The policy was to provide all personnel in the area with three days leave at the camp every four months.¹¹⁵

He then covered a number of matters which, while not operational, had a bearing on operational matters. Attrition of Catalina aircraft allotted to the RNZAF had been almost negligible, and it was proposed to return 15 of them to New Zealand, and to place them in storage.¹¹⁶ Approval had been given for the extension of the period of physical and weapons training courses for personnel proceeding to the Pacific, on the grounds that a greater degree of physical fitness was needed for personnel required to serve further north in the new stations. The previous course of 10 working days was to be increased to 25 working days.¹¹⁷

With the disbandment of the Northern and Southern Groups, some reorganisation was necessary to manage the Communication Flight which

¹¹² *ibid.*

¹¹³ *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ RNZAF Museum, *The Health of the RNZAF in the Pacific 1943-1945* by C.F. Wrigley, 15 September 1945.

¹¹⁵ ANZ, Air 100/8 *Monthly Liaison Letters*, 12 October 1944.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*

had been operated by each of the Groups. As a result, No. 42 Squadron had been formed, divided into two sections. One was an Air Transport Section operating aircraft on scheduled services, while the other was an Air Taxi Section. The Transport Section required the creation of a Despatching Organisation to handle all bookings, waybills, loading sheets, statistical returns of traffic as well as all other administrative work required. Effectively, with the creation of the Transport Section, the RNZAF was operating scheduled transport services throughout New Zealand as well as scheduled services north, both to the west and east, out of Whenuapai. This nucleus was to prove useful in the immediate post-war years.¹¹⁸

Isitt did not devote much space to Operations, as the operational role of the RNZAF had not changed since his last Letter. Most squadrons seemed to be involved in patrolling activities with occasional bombing and strafing missions or fighter-bomber attacks around Rabaul or on Bougainville.¹¹⁹

While Isitt was in the forward area, Nevill was again grappling with the intended use of the four Sunderland flying boats, and in correspondence with the Director of Operations revealed that the United Kingdom had originally hoped two of the Sunderlands could be used by Tasman Empire Airways Ltd.¹²⁰ The New Zealand Government had objected to this, although they had no objection to the RNZAF providing additional Tasman services if this proved necessary. Nevill concluded by stating that the aircraft could be

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

¹²⁰ ANZ Air 100/13 Pt. 1, Nevill to Pirie, 3 October 1944.

used fully by dovetailing them into the existing RNZAF Transport organisation. Isitt requested, and received approval from Jones to this procedure, and the Sunderland aircraft carried out a worthwhile role, as their freight capacity was approximately twice that of a Dakota.¹²¹

While he was in the Islands, Isitt had encountered a number of problems which he dealt with on his return. He requested information as to whether any special issue of Christmas rations was contemplated, and whether any facilities could be set up to enable personnel in the forward area to telegraph flowers to relatives and friends during the Christmas period.¹²²

Within a few days Isitt was again writing to the Minister of Defence regarding some information he had received privately. The Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington had considered the number of squadrons employed on garrison duty in the South Pacific and were likely to recommend a reduction of two fighter squadrons in this area for transfer to the South West Pacific Area. No action could be taken until the matter became official, and a request for the transfer was received from the Commander, South Pacific or the Commander, South West Pacific.¹²³

Isitt did not waste any time, and followed up the matter with Lieutenant General Kenney, Commander South West Pacific, the same day.¹²⁴ Isitt went on to repeat the unofficial information he had received, and assumed that if

¹²¹ *ibid*, Isitt to Jones, 19 October 1944.

¹²² *ibid*.

¹²³ *ibid*, Isitt to Jones, 16 October 1944.

¹²⁴ *ibid*, Isitt to Kenney, 16 October 1944.

Kenney could use the two fighter squadrons, he would make the request for their transfer to his Command, and advise the deployment desired.¹²⁵

Meanwhile, Nevill had carried out an analysis of Ventura aircraft losses, following concerns expressed by the Minister of Defence after questions had been raised in Parliament.¹²⁶ The analysis showed that rumours circulating concerning the dangerous characteristics of the aircraft were without foundation. Nearly all the accidents had been avoidable, being caused by carelessness, errors of judgment or lack of appreciation in handling an aircraft of considerable complexity. Nevill then compared wastage rates experienced by the RNZAF against expected rates planned by United States forces:

<u>Over a 12 month period</u>	<u>Permissible</u>	<u>Actual</u>
Within New Zealand	33.33% p.a.	8.58% p.a.
In forward area	10% per month	4.45% per month

He then commented on recent Ventura accidents, and was scathing of an accident near Opunake, saying it was a result of foolhardiness and disregard of orders. 'The pilot just flew into a hill in bad visibility.'¹²⁷

In his summary, Nevill felt that Ventura aircraft were perfectly suited for the tasks for the tasks in which they were employed, as well as being safe and airworthy, if they were properly flown. Most of the accidents had been due to carelessness, errors of judgment, or disregard of orders, with the

¹²⁵ *ibid.*

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, Nevill to Jones, 16 October 1944.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*

exception of three due to enemy action. No inherent fault of the aircraft was discoverable. 'The rumour that these aircraft are dangerous is entirely without foundation.'¹²⁸

There is no doubt that Ventura aircraft were high powered and complicated in their operation, which necessitated a strict adherence to operating procedures by the pilots. When the necessity for these enhanced handling procedures was appreciated, loss rates fell and no further questions were asked in Parliament concerning the suitability of the aircraft.¹²⁹

When he had been in the United Kingdom earlier in the year, Isitt had just missed meeting Goddard who had returned temporarily from his India posting. In a subsequent exchange of letters, Isitt revealed that 'I am very satisfied with the arrangements I made for the continued and future employment of the RNZAF.' But he was a little worried about the future, being concerned that in the Philippines, the United States Navy and Navy Air strength would pre-empt Kenney being able to develop his land based air strength, before another move forward was made.¹³⁰

Isitt was brought close to the realities of life with a gracious letter to Mr Ken Abbott of The Esplanade, Petone over a potentially dangerous situation:

¹²⁸ *ibid.*

¹²⁹ Glyn Harper and Colin Richardson, *The Face of the Enemy*, HarperCollins:Auckland, 2006, p. 210.

¹³⁰ ANZ Air 100/13 Pt. 1, Isitt to Goddard, 25 October 1944.

I want to thank you for your very prompt action last Saturday in going to the assistance of the RNZN whaler which capsized off Petone and rescuing my daughter and another Wren. You and your two friends are to be congratulated on the quick decision you made to go out under adverse circumstances, the expedition with which you got your boat away, and the excellent seamanship you showed in picking up the two girls.

I am sorry this letter did not reach you a little more quickly, but I had some difficulty in getting your address.¹³¹

It was fortunate that the incident did not have any further consequences, as the capsize seems to have an element of bravado associated with it, and was not caused completely by adverse weather.¹³²

Even in the midst of war, the Prime Minister's Department endeavoured to involve Isitt in civil aviation. The New Plymouth Borough Council was most anxious that Bell Block Aerodrome be upgraded for overseas flights and was applying political pressure to the Prime Minister. Isitt queried whether the expenditure was warranted,¹³³ and felt that the existing New Plymouth facilities were sufficient to meet all internal air traffic needs for the immediate future. He concluded with a typically astute statement, 'I have written this to you as Confidential and Personal as I realise the political aspects of this statement, and that it would probably be better if it were the results of the deliberations of an independent Committee.'¹³⁴

¹³¹ *ibid*, Isitt to Abbott, 28 October 1944.

¹³² *Interview by author*: P. Thodey interviewed 23 May 2006.

¹³³ ANZ Air 100/13 Pt. 1, Isitt to Shanahan, 18 November 1944.

¹³⁴ *ibid*.

If Isitt thought that he was going to avoid a political morass with this response, he was wrong, as within a few days he was writing to the Mayor of New Plymouth. 'Further to our recent discussion, I have now conferred with the Prime Minister, who desires that I should visit New Plymouth as early as possible to inspect the aerodrome at Bell Block and submit a report on the New Plymouth Airport Project.'¹³⁵ No record remains of the visit and subsequent report.

Meanwhile, Nevill was sweating in a very hot Montreal Hotel attending the International Air Transport Conference. He reported to Isitt, in a long handwritten letter, that the conference had been an illuminating study of political manoeuvring. Although the discussions had been of good value in many ways, nothing really concrete had emerged.¹³⁶

Isitt's November 1944 Liaison Letter was very short, as well as being prosaic in its contents. Operationally there had been little to report. All the squadrons had been kept busy, but their missions were relatively routine at this stage of the war.¹³⁷

Isitt was still in correspondence with Olson regarding the supply of aircrew to the Royal Air Force.¹³⁸ He felt that the Government, quite rightly in his opinion, did not wish to send men to the United Kingdom whom the RAF did not want and whom they were not able to use, and incoming signals had failed to clarify 'whether the RAF really want our people or whether they

¹³⁵ *ibid*, Isitt to Gilmour, 30 November 1944,

¹³⁶ *ibid*, Nevill to Isitt, 29 October 1944.

¹³⁷ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, November 1944.

¹³⁸ ANZ Air 100/3, Isitt to Olson, 8 November 1944.

are trying to help us out.’ Cabinet was also lukewarm. ‘They considered from the wording of your signal that the RAF were half-hearted about it.’ Isitt ended with the sage advice ‘In any further requests, make them as strong and definite as you can.’¹³⁹

In his December Liaison Letter, Isitt was again complaining about the dearth of news.¹⁴⁰ The most important item was the move forward of three squadrons from the South Pacific Area to the South-West Pacific Area.¹⁴¹ The logistic support of all squadrons west of Meridian 159 was to be taken over by the 7th U.S. Fleet, whose Headquarters were at Manus in the Admiralty Islands. It was proposed to bring all squadrons and units in the Pacific under one RNZAF Commander, whose administrative headquarters were also to be at Manus alongside the U.S. supporting force. The new Headquarters was to be known as ‘RNZAF Pacific Command’, with the additional responsibility for the command of the units remaining in the South Pacific Area. While the RNZAF Station at Guadalcanal would remain at the current level, Fiji and Tonga would cease to be operational areas.¹⁴²

A continuing source of concern was aircraft allocations. While the 1944/45 allocations of fighters, transport and flying boat types had been effected in full, the position in regard to Ventura aircraft was difficult. Advice had been received in March 1944 that 48 PV2 aircraft would be supplied to the RNZAF during the second half of the year. Isitt always referred to the PV2 as a

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, December 1944.

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*

¹⁴² *ibid.*

Ventura, but the extensive modifications to the original design culminated in the allotment of a separate type name of Harpoon. It was intended that the Harpoon would replace the PV1 Ventura in all RNZAF Bomber-Reconnaissance Squadrons. However, owing to delays in production, the allotment of Harpoons was reduced progressively. Finally, advice had been received that it was doubtful if any PV2 aircraft would be available before the beginning of 1945, and should any become available, no more than four would be allotted to the RNZAF. This was going to cause problems as the RNZAF did not have sufficient PV1 aircraft to provide for attrition in squadrons and servicing units. To overcome this difficulty, it had been necessary to withdraw Ventura B34 aircraft from storage for use in New Zealand for advanced training. Isitt was adamantly opposed to sending the B34's overseas in order to provide for attrition, because of their limited range and differing service requirements.¹⁴³

One of the most penetrating criticisms of the Ventura came in a paper entitled '*Operational Role, Present and Future - RNZAF in the Pacific*' by Wing Commander G.H. Pirie, Director of Operations.¹⁴⁴ He contended that the Ventura PV1 was not filling satisfactorily the current operational commitment for the RNZAF bomber-reconnaissance squadrons, either in a strike role in the Northern Solomons, or on garrison duties in the South Pacific. When the decision had been made to re-arm the Hudson squadrons, it was decided that the Ventura PV1 would be preferable to the Mitchell B25, as at that time the RNZAF was an integral part of a Naval force, and as

¹⁴³ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ ANZ Air 130/30/1 Pt. 2, Pirie to Isitt, 9 November 1944.

such entirely dependent on naval supplies. The introduction of an Army type into so small an Air Force would at that time created added complications which were not justified. Furthermore, it appeared from information available at the time on the Ventura PV1, that this type of aircraft would prove suitable for the intended RNZAF role.¹⁴⁵

On delivery it was found that the Ventura, although possessing many advantages - mainly in speed and armament - was even at that time in most respects not as satisfactory as the Hudson which it superseded. It soon became apparent that the Ventura did not have the range to perform effective anti-submarine patrols and that it could not carry the bomb load or possess the necessary bomb aiming equipment to permit its satisfactory operation as a medium bomber. Furthermore, as the aircraft came into operational service, it was necessary to contend with many maintenance difficulties. Despite all the efforts of the maintenance staffs, engine failure had been frequent, and while many of the failures could be attributed to error on the part of the pilot, the engines were not proving as reliable as those fitted to other types of operational aircraft in service with the RNZAF.¹⁴⁶

Early in 1944 the RNZAF Liaison Officer in Washington had received advice that the Ventura PV1 would cease production in May 1944, and that it would be replaced by a modified and improved Ventura design designated the PV2. However, difficulties with the development of the PV2 led to delivery

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*

delays, and it was anticipated that none would be delivered in 1944. The result was that by November 1944, the RNZAF no longer had sufficient aircraft to fill the usual equipment of the five bomber-reconnaissance squadrons and OTU, let alone provide for attrition to the end of the year. The paucity of aircraft could be met to some extent by withdrawing B34's from storage, for use in New Zealand only, but this would necessitate the advanced training of squadrons to be carried out on a type different from that which they would be required to operate in the forward area. Although outwardly the two aircraft PV1 Ventura and B34 were identical and equipped with the same engine, the B34 was outfitted to Army specifications, with different armament and an altered tank system which gave it considerably less range than the PV1.¹⁴⁷

Pirie then summarised the position, with the RNZAF finding itself with insufficient aircraft for the equipment of its existing bomber-reconnaissance units, and with little prospect of obtaining further aircraft of the PV2 type until early in 1945. The final clincher to Pirie was that the cost of the Ventura was considerable, with the Douglas Dakota being only two-thirds the price of a Ventura.¹⁴⁸

Pirie felt that the time had now come to raise the question of whether the RNZAF should still continue to operate bomber-reconnaissance squadrons of the Ventura type. He queried whether the Ventura squadrons were serving any real purpose in the prosecution of the war. From a Tactical

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*

Commander's point of view, there were a number of points which needed to be taken into account. The Ventura was inadequate as a medium bomber aircraft as it could only be used for low-level bombing and did not have the bomb-aiming equipment for utilisation at medium levels. It had too limited a range, thereby rendering it unusable for long-range patrol and uneconomical for shorter-range A/S patrol and convoy escort duties. It was a US Navy type, with which only a limited number of United States squadrons had been equipped. The provision of spares in the Far Eastern Air Force would be a serious problem. The degree of maintenance required and the unreliability were not positive points in favour of introducing this type of squadron into a more forward location. Taking these points into consideration, the tactical role of the aircraft was extremely limited and could be better carried out by other types of aircraft which were more versatile, and with which a greater number of squadrons were equipped.¹⁴⁹

Because of these problems, and the possible public reaction in seizing on any opportunity to urge for a reduction in the overall establishment of the RNZAF, Pirie felt that only two alternatives were worthy of consideration. The first was re-armament with a different type of bomber-reconnaissance aircraft. Although Pirie did not name any particular types, the front-runner was the B25 Mitchell, and which was already extensively employed by the USAAF and RAAF in the South-West Pacific.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*

The second choice was for a change in function of the existing bomber - reconnaissance squadrons, by converting them to transport operators, and the following reasons were supplied in justification for this course. The change in function could be readily effected, and would meet a need which existed in every theatre of war. The range of transport aircraft was such that they could be ferried to, and operate in any part of the theatre, permitting close liaison with New Zealand, and the rotation of both air and ground crew personnel. The experience of the existing bomber-reconnaissance captains would allow their smooth transfer to air transport duties. Straight air gunners would no longer be necessary, and the training requirement in New Zealand would be reduced. The requirement to provide two pilots for transport operations would absorb large numbers of multi-engine trained pilots. Transport aircraft were very reliable and this would be of great assistance in raising the general morale of the bomber-reconnaissance aircrew, which was now beginning to show signs of lowering. There would be better prospects of the RNZAF being able to operate in theatres of war closer to the enemy, and overcoming the criticism that the RNZAF was employed solely on garrison operations. The employment of crews in this type of work would assist their eventual rehabilitation in the post-war period. Finally, the RNZAF and New Zealand would acquire an invaluable knowledge of transport operations in the Pacific, which again would be useful post-war. Pirie felt that the Transport option overcame many of the existing problems, and urged that approval be sought for a change.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ *ibid.*

The proposals put forward by Pirie illustrated his ability to analyse a complex problem, and propound a solution to many of the difficulties which the RNZAF faced. Isitt had been seeking solutions utilising the existing aircraft fleet, whereas Pirie felt that the Bomber-Reconnaissance Squadrons were not being used in an efficient manner. By suggesting the conversion of these squadrons to transport aircraft, he was putting forward a possible lifeline which could improve morale, reduce costs and staffing, as well as leaving the RNZAF in a stronger position post-war.

Isitt responded with a minute the following day and went into considerable detail in his two page analysis.¹⁵² He suggested that Pirie should have been less concerned with the present unsatisfactory performance and operations of the PV1, but instead based the analysis on the suitability of the replacement type PV2. The PV2 was designed to overcome the shortcomings of the PV1, and was expected to be great advance on the existing type. In fact the PV2 did work out to be a successful design, and stayed in operation for fifteen years after the end of World War Two, as well as being exported to a number of countries.¹⁵³

Isitt pointed out that it was impossible to obtain an early decision for any change, and his reply reflected the very real obstacles which the proposal

¹⁵² *ibid*, Isitt to Pirie, 9 November 1944.

¹⁵³ Charles L. Scrivner and William E. Scarborough, *Lockheed PV-1 Ventura in Action*, Carrollton :Squadron/ Signal , 1981, pp.39-40; R.J. Francillon, *Lockheed Aircraft Since 1913*, London: Conway, 1987. pp.211-2.

faced.¹⁵⁴ Because the overall role of the RNZAF in the Pacific was determined at a strategic level by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington, they had a final say on RNZAF deployment. Any suggested changes had to be channelled upwards from the operational level, with approval being required at each level. Should approval be withheld at any stage, the whole process would cease. The critical approval, to commence the process, had to come from the New Zealand War Cabinet.

Another point which Isitt felt could not be ignored was the post-war role of the RNZAF, which had to be based to a large extent on General Reconnaissance and Bombing. The RNZAF, because it was such a small force, could not support the luxury of specialised reconnaissance aircraft, and was forced to utilise medium bombers in this role, being the only aircraft available to them. Isitt disagreed with Pirie's statement that 'the sole avenue along which the RNZAF can readily advance...is transport' stating that the position was most obscure and it was dangerous to forecast in such definite terms.¹⁵⁵ At this point, the New Zealand Government had given no direction as to the possible peacetime composition of the RNZAF, despite attempts by Isitt to produce some response.

The problem with the RNZAF at that time was to keep the force intact and efficient in order to be in a position to move forward with United States forces when the opportunity offered. Every possibility of a more active role had been and would continue to be explored. Consistent with this approach,

¹⁵⁴ ANZ, Air 130/30/1 Pt 2, Isitt to Pirie, 9 November 1944.

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*

Isitt was anxious that Pirie's report should be further investigated. With this in mind he had forwarded a copy of the report to Findlay in Washington to gauge the reaction of US and RAF officers to the general proposal, as well as the prospects for transport types in lieu of PV2 aircraft in 1945. Isitt also planned to explore the possibility with General Kenney, and if successful, would take up the matter with the Commander, South Pacific, who effectively held the right of veto, as he controlled the release of any bomber-reconnaissance squadrons.

Isitt wrote to Findlay on 8 November 1944, bemoaning 'our future in the Pacific is more obscure than ever.' He then referred to Pirie's paper, but:

I have not completely swallowed the idea... If I do come to the conclusion that the change is right it will not be easy to make such a change - so many authorities have to be carried along and then it has to have the blessing and approval of War Cabinet and, if they are to be carried, the request must come from the US authorities to me and not as approval to a suggestion put up by me.¹⁵⁶

Notwithstanding Isitt's efforts, the possibility of a more active role for the RNZAF did not appear any brighter. The United States were reluctant to use New Zealand forces north of the Equator, and air operations, apart from strategic bombing, were generally conducted from carriers. Again, because of its small size, it was difficult to insert the RNZAF into many roles while retaining its identity. While it could have been broken down into its component parts, the integrity of the force would have been lost.

¹⁵⁶ ANZ Air 100/5, Isitt to Findlay, 8 November 1944.

In his initial response, Findlay had not had an opportunity to progress the question of transport aircraft further, and had been forced to submit his 1945 aircraft bids on old information. This had resulted in submitting requests to the Joint Chiefs of Staff covering the following replacement aircraft:

	1st Half 1945	2 nd Half 1945
Harpoon	47	32
Dakota	20	11
Corsair	89	242 ¹⁵⁷

But Isitt received an unwelcome Christmas present in the form of what he assumed to be an anonymous letter criticising the Ventura aircraft, and which had been forwarded to the *Auckland Star* for publication. The letter had been passed to Isitt from K. Green, a Sub-Editor at the *Star*. Isitt responded about the letter to Green at length, expressing his concern that ‘its publication could have a very unsatisfactory reaction both on the public and on the RNZAF.’¹⁵⁸ He did admit that some months previously that concerns had arisen over the Ventura crash rate, but investigations revealed the crash rate was not abnormal. In fact the majority of the accidents had been caused by bad flying, faulty techniques, navigation and foolhardiness. On his recent trip to the Islands, Isitt had visited three Ventura Squadrons, and had made a point of talking to the crews, who responded that they had

¹⁵⁷ *ibid*, Findlay to Isitt, 21 November 1944.

¹⁵⁸ ANZ Air 100/13 Pt. 3, Isitt to Green, 28 December 1944.

full confidence in the aircraft. It had to be realised that the Ventura was a service aircraft, heavily loaded, and was operating under service conditions from indifferent aerodromes, and very often under bad weather conditions. Isitt limited himself to describing one crash raised by the anonymous correspondent relating to the Commanding Officer of a Squadron, and did not pull any punches. 'This was due to foolhardiness and poor flying on the part of the C.O. in coming in too slowly at Rongotai and dropping his aeroplane with resultant damage to his undercarriage.' Isitt offered to place all the facts of Ventura operations before Green if the latter ever came to Wellington, 'But I do say that the publication of this letter would be definitely detrimental to our own war effort.'¹⁵⁹

But the next paragraph encapsulated Isitt's worries and frustrations caused by a difficult six months:

At the moment I am very concerned about the attitude of mind of the New Zealand public to the war as a whole, and the repercussions of this outlook within the Service. The optimism which was engendered by the successful invasion of France has now been reflected in many of our difficulties in Europe. Had it not been assumed in July and August that the war would be over by the end of the year, it is in my opinion that we would be in a much better position today, and that the state of affairs in occupied countries would be easier. I have talked to many senior people from Europe, and they are by no means now prepared to place any estimated date on the termination of that struggle.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*

Isitt felt that the Battle of the Ardennes, which was then under way, would only gain the Germans one thing - time.¹⁶¹ He also felt that the Japanese successes in China would prevent the establishment of air bases in that country, thus prolonging the war. With the RNZAF in the Pacific, practically all the Squadrons were in the South-West Pacific Area, and the prospects of moving further forward now looked brighter, although the contract in the present theatre still had to be fulfilled. 'The maintenance of the morale of the troops depends on public support during this unspectacular period and it is with this that I am chiefly concerned, and I am sure that the publication of the letter referred to would do nothing but harm.'¹⁶²

Isitt concluded by requesting Green to treat the letter as personal and confidential, although he had no problems with Green showing it to his Editor.

Green responded promptly and corrected Isitt's misapprehension about the original letter - it was actually a draft article intended to 'get something done.' Green knew that the article did represent a section of opinion in the RNZAF, and outlined some of the deficiencies in Ventura aircraft which had been brought to his attention. However, he did add that 'the Editor was very pleased with the frankness of your reply, and with the goodwill which prompted you to take the action you did.' He concluded with 'I can assure you that we have the best interests of the RNZAF at heart, and we will not

¹⁶¹ Cole, Hugh M., *The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge*, Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1965, pp.2-3.

¹⁶² *ibid.*

rush into print with any story, even mildly critical, without the fullest investigation, and the belief that, in publishing it, we are serving your interests also.’¹⁶³ This was one battle which Isitt won.

After his dream run in the months following his assuming the position of CAS, Isitt could not have faced a more difficult 1944. The American response to the Canberra Pact was unforeseen and created major complications for Isitt. The final solution was acceptable to all parties, but it took months of negotiation by Isitt, together with top-level assistance by Fraser and Nash, before it could be achieved.

After nearly five years of war, manpower shortages were becoming apparent, and pressure was coming on Isitt to reduce the size of the RNZAF. This involved him with major charges on his time. The position was compounded by press criticism of the RNZAF, alleging wastage and inefficient use of resources, which had the effect of lowering morale within the service. Isitt should have been allowed to respond publicly, but was prevented in doing so by the Government. The sudden collapse of the EATS actually assisted Isitt, because it reduced the manpower requirement and allowed a reduction of the training establishment within New Zealand, even though the RAF was most remiss in not foreshadowing the impending demise of the scheme. Isitt responded immediately, and was able to effect worthwhile manning reductions as a consequence, which diverted some of the pressure for reductions that had been applied to him.

¹⁶³ *ibid*, Green to Isitt, 8 January 1945.

Operationally, the year had been a quiet one, marked by the elimination of Japanese fighter activity in the South and South-West Pacific Areas of operations, and a consequent changing of emphasis for RNZAF fighters away from the classic air combat role. Question marks arose over the safety of the Ventura, which were never finally resolved. The Government imposed the four Sunderland flying-boats on the RNZAF, which the latter did not want and were not consulted in the purchase, and were then constrained in the manner of operating the aircraft. The final solution was again an apt one, but it was an unnecessary complication. While Fraser and Nash had assisted Isitt in his discussions with United States officials, in all other respects the Government made his life difficult. He was able to respond in an adroit and capable manner, but the pressures were high. Fortunately, there were no health problems at this time, and he was able to cope with these pressures.

CHAPTER 9: WAR'S END 1945

By the beginning of 1945, Allied pressure in the Pacific was having a significant effect on Japan, although nobody could foretell with any confidence that it was to be the last year of the war. Isitt was still casting around for a more active role involving the RNZAF beyond their present commitment, and was keen to exploit any avenue that offered the chance of success. While the cooperation with Australian forces was to grow, continuing newspaper criticism, combined with manpower difficulties, was to make life very difficult for Isitt in the concluding months of the war.

The year 1945 commenced with Isitt writing a long letter to Rear Admiral R.H. Portal, Flag Officer, Naval Air Station, Australia. This Portal, a brother of the Royal Air Force Chief of Air Staff, had written via the New Zealand Chief of Naval Staff, Commodore Sir Atwell Lake regarding the possible use of the RNZAF with the Royal Navy in the Pacific. Isitt commenced by outlining the current deployment of RNZAF Squadrons, with all units being in the South-West Pacific Area apart from the two flying boat squadrons still in the South Pacific. Isitt felt that he had a very definite commitment with Admiral Kenney until the conclusion of the present operations in the Northern Solomons - Bismarck area. What was to occur beyond that had not been decided, although if no alternative was offering, the Squadrons would remain under the Americans in the South-West Pacific area. However, he

did not feel he would be letting the Americans down if it were decided to transfer to U.K. Command.¹

Isitt then summarised for Portal the various steps taken in arriving at the present situation, outlining his efforts over the preceding months.²

The task allotted by General Kenney was to assist the Australians in the final stages of the campaign in the Bismarck area, but once that was completed, the RNZAF would be looking for further employment: 'Our major desire is to get into major active operations once more.' Portal had suggested that the New Zealand Government might offer the services of the RNZAF to the Admiralty through the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs. Isitt foresaw the political pitfalls in such an approach, and suggested an alternative solution. He would find it difficult to make this suggestion to the War Cabinet, as this could lead to possible accusations of 'peddling' the RNZAF, but if the request could come from Portal expressing interest in, and possible assistance from the RNZAF, Isitt would be helped considerably: 'A guarantee of a really active role for the RNZAF would carry great weight with the New Zealand Government.'³

Isitt was obviously feeling the heat from the barrage of unanswered newspaper criticism which had been continuing for some months. Similarly, accusations of 'peddling' the services of the RNZAF were difficult to refute

¹ ANZ Air 100/13 Pt. 3, Isitt to Portal, 9 January 1945,

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

as the services were gagged in terms of their potential responses.⁴ Because of the ambivalent attitude of the War Cabinet to the future employment of the RNZAF, any approach had to come from Portal, and could not be seen to be initiated by Isitt.

Isitt advised Portal that he had a force of eight Fighter Squadrons, three Bomber-Reconnaissance Squadrons and two Flying Boat Squadrons which could be made available, together with sufficient transport aircraft to operate between New Zealand and the forward area. Should Portal have no need for the Bomber-Reconnaissance squadrons, Isitt would consider re-equipping them with transport types for supply and support. Isitt was also prepared to visit Portal in order to discuss the situation, but stressed that he was not free to move until the whole problem had been discussed with General Kenney.⁵

By this action, Isitt was in effect offering the entire RNZAF Fighter Squadron component, together with transport aircraft to support them. This was a bold move, but hedged with enough qualifications to ensure that the RNZAF position would not be prejudiced without adequate consultation.

At this time a number of RNZAF officers in the forward area were compiling appreciations of the future RNZAF role in the Pacific, ostensibly at the request of Air Department, but there is little doubt that it was at Isitt's initiative. The first was by the Commander of the New Zealand Air Task

⁴ Bentley, pp.139-140.

⁵ ANZ, Air 100/13 Pt.3, Isitt to Portal, 9 January 1945.

Force, Group Captain Geoffrey Roberts, who produced an appreciation of the possible operational future of the South-West Pacific Area.⁶ He believed the American army and navy commanders now had only a passing interest in the area and wished to take units from it that would be useful in their forward drive.⁷ The RNZAF, together with the Australian army and air forces, would soon be the only garrison forces left in Bougainville, New Britain, Emirau and Green Island. By having all available New Zealand squadrons in the Northern Solomons area, it would be easier to ship them further forward, but the question was: to where?⁸ Roberts really had no significant proposals to offer, and exhibited a lack of strategic thinking.

At the same time, Air Commodore Sir Robert Clark-Hall, now Air Officer Commanding No. 1 (Islands) Group was offering suggestions of his own. He was of the opinion that although close liaison could be maintained with the commanders of the South Pacific Area, this was not so with General Kenney, who was unfamiliar with the Islands Group, which he had not visited. However, Clark-Hall hoped that the movement of Group Headquarters to Manus, thus allowing direct communication between Roberts and Kenney would prevent the RNZAF from being left behind in the cold. Clark-Hall also felt that both army and navy commanders of the United States were thinking only of moving forward, and were not very keen on leaving behind small packets of men to carry out a support role for the New Zealanders.⁹

⁶ ANZ Air 130/30/1 Pt. 2, Roberts to Air Department *Appreciation of the Possible Operational Future of COMAIRNORSOLS/ COMZEIRTAF Area in South-West Pacific*, 4 January 1945,

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*, Clark-Hall to Air Department, *Future of the RNZAF in the Pacific*, 15 January 1945.

Although Clark-Hall felt that he was handicapped in giving an accurate forecast, because the RNZAF in the Pacific worked with both army and navy commanders, he was prepared to suggest that by April, the area up to Bougainville would be as safe as New Zealand. After October, any New Zealand units in the area would be surplus to requirements, and for this reason New Zealand had to start thinking immediately about what could be offered to United States or even to British commanders. He felt that the RNZAF's main assets were good aircrew and maintenance personnel and, so long as New Zealand did not insist on their remaining integrated as a separate force, they would be welcomed anywhere. In this regard he differed from Isitt, who did not desire any break-up of the RNZAF into discrete components. Clark-Hall could think of little objection and plenty of advantage in allowing New Zealand personnel to work as necessary with different task force.¹⁰

A third Appreciation was provided by the Senior Air Staff Officer, Group Captain J.J. Busch. Busch was able to supply a very practical viewpoint to the problems facing the RNZAF in the Pacific. As the RNZAF moved forward, it was apparent they would not receive the same support and practical assistance that they had received from the Americans in the SOPAC area. In the future the RNZAF would have to provide to a greater extent, if not completely, for its own camp construction, service unit areas, maintenance work, hygiene and sanitary as well as material control. This could only be achieved by additional personnel. No reliance could be placed on American

¹⁰ *ibid.*

camps being vacated, and being left for immediate use. American units moving out required practically everything that could be taken with them, and always endeavoured to move intact. While it was very easy to fly in a squadron, the unit could not operate to its full functional capacity without the proper and complete support of base facilities, and unless these were assured, the squadron should not go forward.¹¹

Up until this stage of the War, the RNZAF had piggy-backed off United States facilities, supplying in effect only the aircraft, flying and maintenance crews, supported by an administrative staff. Virtually everything else was supplied by the Americans.

Busch emphasised that transportation was becoming a major problem. While air transportation could meet the requirements for aircrew, and probably ground crew as well, there was an increasing demand for numerous items of ground equipment. With the changes in routeing and the expanded demands for shipping needed to support the American forces in their forward campaign, it was becoming more difficult to for the RNZAF to obtain shipping space. In Busch's view, the time had arrived when the RNZAF had its own shipping which gave it control over space, priorities and routeing.¹²

Busch also had some telling observations about the practical benefits of the extended acclimatisation process adopted by squadrons moving to the Islands. Squadrons spent three weeks in the SOPAC area and this period,

¹¹ *ibid*, Busch to Air Department, 15 January 1945.

¹² *ibid*.

while ostensibly for garrison duties, was in fact the advanced training of the squadron. Squadron commanders were all in agreement that the three weeks' period put on the finishing touches, and the squadrons were then well trained units.¹³

Isitt attached a handwritten note to the Appreciation, calling it 'A good paper.' He also asked the following question: 'How about move of Group to Bougainville? It was to go to Manus to be near 7th Fleet Logistics. With move in of Adm. Bruce Fraser's Force, who is to say how long units of 7th Fleet will stay at Manus.'¹⁴

Within a few days Roberts was informing Isitt that the takeover by the RNZAF from COMAIRNORSOLS had been delayed until March or possibly April as a result of the First Marine Air Wing Headquarters also being delayed in their transfer to the Philippines:

It is appreciated that the delay in our assuming command will cause you considerable annoyance. We feel here that the "gilt will be off the gingerbread" before we assume control - meaning that the Bougainville campaign will be well under way and by that time also, the RAAF should be operating in New Britain and may even have assumed responsibility for that Island.¹⁵

Roberts thought that the long change-over had caused a delay in the release of official publicity, and he could well imagine 'the mighty New Zealand

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ ANZ Air 100/13 Pt. 3, Roberts to Isitt, 19 January 1945,

public may again start asking embarrassing, even if unjustifiable, questions.’ He thought it would be possible to step up publicity for the area without upsetting New Zealand’s allies because, although the Americans were still in control, RNZAF units now predominated in the area. He also felt that this might assist Isitt in his current political difficulties.¹⁶

New Zealand Air commanders were now in complete control at Piva and Green Island, while at Emirau and Los Negros they were actively controlling operations under a more senior American officer. In addition, General Mitchell had approved the absorption of several more New Zealand officers on his staff. The squadrons were all very keen and ‘on the ball’, particularly those engaged in ‘mopping up’ support work with the Australian army.¹⁷

At the same time Bostock was writing to Kenney suggesting that while the RNZAF were to have responsibility for the Northern Solomons and Admiralty Islands areas following the move of the American squadrons into the Philippines, it might actually be better for him to be in command. The RAAF was to provide all fighter control, air warning facilities, airstrip maintenance and scheduled air transportation, so he felt a simpler, cleaner and more efficient system of control would result if the RNZAF Air Task Force were placed under his operational control.¹⁸

Roberts was concerned at the potential degradation in New Zealand’s relative position, regarding Bostock’s suggestion as a potential takeover

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ B.J. Hewson, *Goliath’s Apprentice*, University of Canterbury PhD Thesis: 2000, p.168.

offer, so that the RNZAF was working 'for' rather than 'with' the RAAF. The existing arrangement in which the RNZAF served directly under Kenney was cumbersome, as RNZAF units were serving in a totally Australian area in which air operations were under the control of Air Vice Marshal Bostock, and Kenney had to consult with him before issuing instructions to the New Zealanders. To overcome this difficulty, Isitt was asked by Kenney and Bostock to agree to operational control of the RNZAF in the Pacific being assumed by the RAAF. This would have the effect that the general responsibility and operational policy for RNZAF units would be laid down by Bostock within the overall terms issued by Kenney, while their operational direction and work would still remain under RNZAF officers and staff.¹⁹ On 14 February Kenney's Headquarters informed Bostock that his proposal to place the RNZAF under his operational command had been accepted by Kenney, and New Zealand had concurred.²⁰

All of these letters reflected a period of continued intense activity by Isitt. His next Liaison Letter was not produced until 5 March 1945, and he apologised for not having written since 1 December 1944.²¹ During this period he had made two visits to the Pacific. On the first trip he had left New Zealand on 3 December, and returned on 12 December 1944. He had made brief calls at all RNZAF stations in the Pacific, as well as visiting the 7th Fleet Logistics Section in the Admiralties, before moving on to Hollandia, New Guinea to see the 7th Fleet Commander and the Commander, Allied Air

¹⁹ *ibid*, p.169.

²⁰ *ibid*.

²¹ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, 5 March 1945.

Forces (General Kenney). Unfortunately, Isitt missed Kenney, who had been called away at short notice. The chief purpose of the tour was to examine and re-organise logistic support and administration of No. 1 (Islands) Group and the New Zealand Air Task Force. However, most of the planning and decisions reached on this visit were subsequently negated by changes in the United States plans and intentions. This made a further visit necessary to discuss not only logistics and administration, but also operational control and the future role of the RNZAF.²²

Isitt went on to review the current situation in the Pacific, with No. 1 (Islands) Group, established at Guadalcanal, responsible for logistic support and administration of all the RNZAF in the Pacific North of 17 degrees South, and the operational direction of New Zealand Squadrons in the South Pacific area under the operational control of COMSOPAC. The New Zealand Air Task Force was established at Bougainville and was responsible for the operational direction of all operational RNZAF units in the South-West Pacific Area, under the operational control of COMAIRNORSOLS, who in turn was controlled by the Commander, Allied Air Forces. The situation had not altered from that which Isitt had negotiated in the middle of 1944. He was careful to stress the operational role of the New Zealand Air Task Force, and reiterated the administrative support given by the No. 1 (Islands) Group. For the first time, Isitt acknowledged that the whole RNZAF force in the Pacific was resting on United States support for logistics and most base facilities, such as water, power, strip control and maintenance, beach-heads, bomb

²² *ibid.*

dumps and fuel farms. But these cosy arrangements were about to change, and Isitt had found it necessary to devote considerable attention to future problems with logistics.²³

The expected move forward of United States naval forces made it necessary to arrange for the transfer of the supply responsibility for rations, fuel and bombs, and to arrange an alternative for the support of the operational RNZAF units. The RNZAF had found itself quite incapable of meeting the supply problems as it had no access to shipping, and could not provide the full base support for its units, arising from the manpower situation in New Zealand, and the lack of personnel trained in these duties. Isitt estimated that an additional 2500-3000 personnel would be needed to carry out this function.²⁴

Fortunately, as a result of representations Isitt was able to make to various Australian authorities; the United States Army and Air Force; the Commander, Allied Air Force GHQ South-West Pacific; and various U.S. Naval Commanders, he had arranged support for RNZAF forces in the Northern Solomons area. The United States Navy would continue to supply aviation gasoline, ammunition and bombs. The existing United States Army Air Communication Centres and Army Meteorological Service would remain as long as required, while the Australian Army would supply rations, canteen supplies and engineering stores, as well as providing base hospital facilities. The RAAF would maintain the flying strips, but the RNZAF had to meet all

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *ibid.*

other requirements. This meant from existing personnel resources subject to the current enlistment quota. Isitt was hopeful that these arrangements would suffice until well into 1945, but warned that any move forward would require the RNZAF to provide full base facilities.²⁵

Isitt then turned to the question of operational command. It had been intended that with the move forward to the Philippines of the 1st Marine Air Wing, the responsibility for the Northern Solomons Area should be assumed by the Commander, New Zealand Air Task force, acting under the operational control of COMAAF. In this context, Isitt defined operational control as covering operational responsibility, deployment and role. But as the New Zealanders were working in an Australian Army area and in direct support of the Australian Army, it had been agreed to place the RNZAF squadrons under the operational control of RAAF Command, as suggested by Bostock. However, this step would not take place until the 1st Marine Air Wing moved out of the Northern Solomons area.²⁶

Isitt was still in the same quandary of uncertainty when it came to forecasting the future employment of the RNZAF. The best he could manage was that RNZAF squadrons would continue in their existing role until the termination of operations against Japanese forces in the Northern Solomons.²⁷

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*

This led him into a description of his second trip forward, on a tour which embraced Australia, New Guinea, Leyte and other islands, before returning via Bougainville and Guadalcanal. All senior officers whom Isitt met were pleased with the progress which had been made in the Philippines campaign, and the general consensus was that the Japanese navy and air force in the Pacific Ocean area had been thoroughly defeated and reduced to a nuisance value only.²⁸

However, the Japanese army situation was completely different. There were half a million Japanese army personnel isolated in the Pacific Islands, and the need for the elimination of this threat to peace and security was still paramount. However, general planning was keeping ahead of what was considered possible even a few months previously, and within the capacity of the shipping and air transport available, which Isitt considered the key to successful operations in the area. The Japanese were to be given no respite.²⁹

New Zealand squadrons were still engaged in operations in the Northern Solomons area, working in close co-operation and in immediate support of the Australian division. The speeding up of land operations had added a great deal to the interest of the operation and Isitt felt that morale was high as a result. He then went on to describe in detail the types of operation carried out by a Bougainville based Corsair fighter-bomber squadron during its tour of duty, because he found the activities particularly interesting.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

These involved Dawn and Dusk Patrols; Dumbo escort of Catalina flying boats; standing patrols over Rabaul from first light until dusk; and occasional bombing strikes.³⁰

The amount of detail supplied by Isitt relating to the Corsair operations was exceptional, and no comparable coverage was supplied in any other Liaison Letter. At this stage of the war, his Liaison Letters were being circulated to the War Cabinet, and the inference is possible that he was writing for a wider audience than the normal Service recipients of his Letter.

Isitt then turned to a subject which was to have significant repercussions in subsequent months. Arising from the commitment to man additional Base facilities in the New Zealand Task Force Area, the need for additional personnel had developed. This required the raising of a draft for 200/250 airmen who were scheduled to proceed at an early date. Because of the manpower situation existing in New Zealand, a recent decision had been made to extend the period of the tour of duty in the Pacific from 12 to 18 months. However, this arrangement was not expected to affect those personnel already overseas. This caused considerable discontent among RNZAF ground crew stationed in the Pacific, and many felt that their tour of duty had been extended arbitrarily from 12 to 18 months.³¹

Even in the midst of war, New Zealand was not immune from industrial action and generated a typical Isitt comment. 'Arising out of a disruption of

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*

the North Island railway service in January, occasioned by certain sections of the railway employees striking, the Prime Minister requested the RNZAF to provide an emergency passenger and mail air service between Wellington- Auckland and Wellington - Gisborne, for the transport of priority passengers.’ To meet cases of National emergency, resulting in the complete or partial cessation of surface transport, an Air Transport Organisation had been set up in the RNZAF, supplying urgent requirements for air transport anywhere in New Zealand where suitable airfields were located. This organisation had proved its worth during recent South Island floods, carrying passengers and mail, and providing welcome relief to the affected areas.³²

At this stage of the war the RNZAF had twenty operational squadrons, the peak of its activity in the Pacific. Over 1,300 aircraft were on charge, while total personnel had dropped to approximately 35,000. Isitt reported that the role of the bomber-reconnaissance squadrons had not changed. However, the squadrons based at Green Island had been carrying out night ‘heckling’ flights against Rabaul in which 24 hour delayed action bombs had been dropped. The activities of the RNZAF Pacific Squadrons at this stage were full of action, and Isitt considered the time appropriate for the preparation of Press Releases covering these activities.³³ Although Isitt’s intentions were positive, and the releases had the potential to offset the recent press criticism, no approval was given for them to be issued. The Fiji area had become very much of a backwater, with no demand for anti-

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*

submarine patrols or convoy escorts. As a result the Fiji squadron was to be withdrawn to New Zealand.³⁴

The eight fighter squadrons had been kept fully occupied, with the main thrust being the manner in which they had co-operated with the AIF in the ground offensive against the Japanese at Bougainville. These operations had been most successful, with high praise being accorded to the RNZAF from Australian commanders. 'The cooperation is excellent and the mutual admiration and trust between the RNZAF and the Australian military would be hard to improve.'³⁵ Approval had also been received for the moving forward of the squadrons based on Guadalcanal and Espiritu Santo to the South-West Pacific Area. This move would mean that no RNZAF Fighter Squadrons remained in the South Pacific Area occupied with garrison duties. The two flying boat squadrons continued with long-range shipping escorts, local anti-submarine patrols and Dumbo missions.³⁶

Isitt then confirmed the arrival of the four Sunderland flying boats which had reached New Zealand in early December, and had been formed into a Flying Boat Transport Flight to supplement the existing transport organisation. They had been engaged on regular schedules between Auckland and Lauthala Bay and between Auckland and Second Channel. Additional crews were being trained in anticipation of special flights being carried out between New Zealand and Australia, and other areas of the

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*

Pacific not normally visited. While the aircraft were in transit to New Zealand, the War Cabinet over-ruled the RNZAF intention to have the Sunderland maintenance and engine overhauls carried out by TEAL, no doubt as a result of Treasury pressure. On 20 November 1944, War Cabinet decreed 'Maintenance and handling of the flying boats including complete engine and airframe overhauls to be carried out by RNZAF.'³⁷

Various minor mishaps delayed the Sunderlands during their journey, but eventually all four aircraft were together at Lauthala Bay on 29 November. For publicity purposes it was desirable that all aircraft should arrive in Auckland together. On Saturday, 2 December 1944, the four Sunderlands departed from Lauthala Bay for Auckland, carrying a total of 100 passengers for repatriation, of whom 30 were Army personnel. The plan was to rendezvous over North Cape, then proceed in a diamond formation down the east coast of the North Island, to Auckland. At Little Barrier Island they were to be joined by a fighter escort. Because of the publicity inherent with the occasion, a Lodestar was despatched from Whenuapai with two Air Force photographers and a cameraman from the National Film Unit to take photographs and films of the Sunderlands as they flew down the coast. Over the Hen and Chicken Islands, while manoeuvring to get a good camera position, the Lodestar collided with one of the Sunderlands. The Lodestar pilot was able to shepherd his badly damaged Lodestar back to Whenuapai, but the Sunderland had to make a forced landing in the open sea off Whangarei. There it was taken tow by a fishing boat to the shelter of

³⁷ ANZ Air 36/49/1, *Sunderland Aircraft Supply*, War Cabinet Minute, 20 November 1944.

Urquhart's Bay, where the propeller had to be replaced. The captain of the *Lodestar*, who had piloted *Isitt* on many of his Pacific flights, was not penalised for the accident, and post-war became an NAC captain. The three remaining *Sunderlands* carried on to Auckland, where they received a huge reception. Among the welcoming crowds were the Minister of Defence and the three armed forces Chiefs of Staff. Photographs exist of *Isitt* greeting the commander of the Delivery Flight.³⁸ The damaged *Sunderland* arrived two days later without fanfare.

One distinctive detail added to the aircraft in service, approved by *Isitt*, was the allocation of Maori names to the aircraft, representing four of the Maori migration canoes - *Tainui*, *Tokomaru*, *Mataatua* and *Takitimu*. This was a first for RNZAF aircraft.³⁹ The naming of civilian airliners was accepted practice at this time, with the flying boats of Pan American Airways, British Overseas Airways Corporation and Tasman Empire Airways Ltd being recognised in this manner. As the *Sunderlands* were operating regular schedules, naming them was an appropriate gesture, and provided individual recognition for the aircraft.

Meanwhile delays were starting to become apparent regarding the transfer of operational responsibility in the Northern Solomons area. *Isitt* had been forced to write Clark-Hall that a proposed meeting with Air Vice-Marshal

³⁸ Paul Harrison et al, *Golden Age of New Zealand Flying Boats*, Auckland: Random House, 1997, pp.165-7.

³⁹ *ibid*, p.165.

Bostock had been delayed owing to Bostock's absence from Brisbane.⁴⁰ Isitt was still anxious for Clark-Hall and Roberts to meet Bostock in order to discuss general details in connection with placing the RNZAF under operational control of RAAF Command. Within a few days, Bostock signalled Isitt to advise that he had been verbally informed at AAF Headquarters, Leyte that it was unlikely that the 1st Marine Air Wing would vacate NORSOLS for three or four months. He was also quite happy for Clark-Hall and Roberts to visit his Headquarters for a general interchange of ideas. Isitt immediately conveyed the text of this message to Clark-Hall, as Roberts was in New Zealand at the time, adding 'I suggest you do not disclose to COMAIRNORSOLS the origin of the information.' When forwarding the text of this message, Isitt also enclosed a letter, in which he considered that the only effect would be a delay in the transfer of operational control. However, he wanted Clark-Hall to check the question of logistic support and base facilities, as well as seeing if he could reduce his immediate demands for personnel. Isitt complained he was having a difficult time with personnel problems, and had been embarrassed by the demands for considerable assistance in the flooded areas of the South Island. Ever careful, Isitt wanted Roberts to check the Bostock information with General Mitchell before Clark-Hall and Roberts proceeded to Brisbane.⁴¹

At the same time, Isitt was writing direct to Mitchell advising that he had been informed, although not officially, that it was unlikely the 1st Marine Air Wing would vacate the Northern Solomons for three or four months. This

⁴⁰ ANZ Air 100/4, Isitt to Clark-Hall, 22 February 1945.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

would cause no problems so far as the RNZAF was concerned, but Isitt assumed that it would delay the transfer of operational control to RAAF Command.⁴²

Isitt's next letter was to Bostock, in which he felt that the only repercussion arising from this situation would be some delay in placing the RNZAF under Bostock's command. Isitt was of the opinion that the delay was caused by the American attitude to control, but he was unwilling to comment about the matter in writing.⁴³ Isitt was anxious to ensure that Mitchell was not upset by approaches from subordinate commanders, and there was no risk if the matter was raised verbally.⁴⁴

Isitt went on to comment that an early decision on the RNZAF future role had been considerably delayed by War Cabinet considerations of manpower resources and future employment of the New Zealand Army Division after the conclusion of the war with Germany. To this end, he proposed to recommend future employment on the lines he had discussed with Bostock, and he requested that Bostock come to New Zealand so that they could make a joint presentation to the War Cabinet.⁴⁵

Whilst strategic issues occupied much of Isitt's time, occasionally matters of a more personal nature came to the fore. Mr R. Hardie-Boys, a Wellington solicitor, had written to the Air Member for Personnel, seeking the early

⁴² ANZ Air 100/13 Pt. 3, Isitt to Mitchell, 28 February 1944.

⁴³ *ibid*, Isitt to Bostock, 28 February 1945.

⁴⁴ *ibid*.

⁴⁵ *ibid*.

release from the RNZAF of his partner, A.M. Haldane. Haldane was Isitt's Personal Assistant, a role which he performed most capably, and Isitt was loath to lose his services. In his response to Hardie-Boys, Isitt regretted that the indication he had given to Haldane regarding a possible early release had not materialised. The manpower situation had made it necessary to delay the release of many Administrative officers, particularly those with legal and business experience. Isitt concluded by assuring Hardie-Boys he would do all he could to facilitate Haldane's release, which would not be delayed a moment longer than was necessary in the interests of the Service and the war effort.⁴⁶ Hardie-Boys, in acknowledging Isitt's personal note, said that he appreciated the difficulties facing Isitt, and hoped that Haldane's early release could still prove possible.⁴⁷

Even more personal was a neck problem which was causing Isitt increasing concern. Nevill described the problem in a letter to Clark-Hall 'You may be aware that the CAS is at present in Rotorua endeavouring to cure the result of an old war injury which has led to arthritis in the neck. He is quite fit, but has taken a course of massage there in the hope of removing the stiffness in his neck which has developed lately.'⁴⁸ Two days later, Nevill was writing to Goddard. 'The CAS is at the moment convalescing at a very excellent medical centre at Rotorua from the results of an old war injury to his neck, which has produced an attack of arthritis. He expects to be away for some weeks yet, and no doubt would have written to you if he had been

⁴⁶ *ibid*, Isitt to Hardie-Boys, 9 March 1945.

⁴⁷ *ibid*, Hardie-Boys to Isitt, 12 March 1945.

⁴⁸ ANZ Air 100/4, Nevill to Clark-Hall, 21 March 1945.

still on deck.’ Nevill updated Goddard on current RNZAF activities, before bemoaning that he was still involved with civil aviation matters, ‘much to my disgust.’⁴⁹

Isitt himself was not so pessimistic about his condition, and wrote to Clark-Hall from the RNZAF Convalescent Depot, Rotorua. ‘I am unfortunately at Convalescent Depot for ten or twelve days, having some treatment for my neck which has been troubling me.’⁵⁰ This assessment was accurate, as before long he was writing to Clark-Hall again. ‘I am back in Wellington, and have benefited by my treatment in Rotorua, and am continuing the treatment here. My trouble is not serious, but is an inconvenience and, as one might say, “a pain in the neck.”’⁵¹

Isitt’s Liaison Letter for April 1945 was very short, consisting of a mere three pages. He apologised for the delay in its production, attributing it partly ‘to my absence in Rotorua during the latter half of last month for treatment to an old war injury.’ Fresh news was scarce, and the only matter dealt with in any depth was the reorganisation of the RNZAF in the Pacific. He was looking for COMZEAIRTAF assuming responsibility for administrative control and logistic support of all RNZAF units in the Northern Solomons - Bismarck’s area. The basis of operations and squadron deployments had not changed during the month, and all squadrons remained actively employed.⁵²

⁴⁹ ANZ Air 100/13 Pt. 3, Nevill to Goddard, 23 March 1945.

⁵⁰ ANZ Air 100/4, Isitt to Clark-Hall, 22 March 1945.

⁵¹ *ibid*, Isitt to Clark-Hall, n.d.

⁵² ANZ, Air 100/8 *Monthly Liaison Letters*, April 1945.

This apparent stability did not diminish Isitt's attempts to clarify the future role of the RNZAF, and in late April he wrote to Lieutenant General V.A. Sturdee, General Officer Commanding First Australian Army in Melbourne of his concern at the retention of the 1st Marine Air Wing in the Northern Solomons.⁵³ Whilst this was not affecting the satisfactory air co-operation with the 2nd Australian Corps, Isitt did feel that it was having an adverse effect on future planning, particularly in the employment of forces. With the move forward to Bougainville of an additional three squadrons, the RNZAF was over-established for the task in hand, and Isitt desired to assign at least three fighter squadrons further forward. He was faced with planning problems tied up with future intentions in both the Bismarcks and NEI areas, and had no definite information regarding either COMAAF or Sturdee's intentions. For these reasons, Isitt had suggested to COMAAF that a conference should be called at an early date to consider these matters, and also the question of control.⁵⁴

He then referred to a recent suggestion that the NEI should come under the operational control of South East Asia Command, and felt that this suggestion was getting back to the original plan of a combined British force in this area, which could act in both Australian and New Zealand's interests.⁵⁵

Isitt reiterated these concerns in a letter a few days later to Goddard, 'we are still struggling on in SWPA,' with the RNZAF doing a good job and having

⁵³ ANZ Air 100/13 Pt.3, Isitt to Sturdee, 23 April 1945.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

a happy association with the Australian Military Forces as well as, 'to some extent, with the RAAF.'⁵⁶ He was trying to get three or four fighter squadrons clear of the Bismarcks for operations with the RAAF Task Force in Borneo 'but was meeting with a little resistance.' The present chain of command from COMAAF to COMAIRNORSOLS to Isitt on matters of operational policy was too cumbersome. For this reason, he was anxious to come under COMAAF as soon as possible, either with full responsibility for operations or in conjunction with the RAAF Task Force. While there was no difficulty in day-to-day control or direction, neither COMAAF nor COMAIRNORSOLS was taking a sufficiently wide view, and too much strength was being retained in the rear areas. Isitt concluded by expressing the hope that a suggested extension of South East Asia Command to include NEI was capable of achievement. 'Here's hoping to meet you in Singapore or on the way to Tokyo.'⁵⁷

Isitt was concerned in opening his May Liaison Letter that there had been few happenings of interest since his last Letter, and this one would be briefer than usual.⁵⁸ He was writing on 7 May, and he expected that before his next Letter was due the war in Europe would have ended. Government plans for the cessation of hostilities had already been published which provided for parades and the general closing down on the day of victory and the day after. Stations were to observe Sunday routine. With the exception

⁵⁶ *ibid*, Isitt to Goddard, 27 April 1945.

⁵⁷ *ibid*.

⁵⁸ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, 7 May 1945.

of transport schedules, all flying was cancelled for the period of celebration, probably a very prudent move.⁵⁹

The Fighter Squadrons had been kept fully occupied during the period, and there could be no complaints about lack of action. While the activities may have been less glamorous than classic air fighting, nevertheless they were extremely useful and worthwhile in a relative backwater of the Pacific campaign. The fighter squadrons based at Espiritu Santo and Guadalcanal had moved forward to Bougainville, so that the deployment was four at Bougainville, two at Green Island, one at Emirau and one at Los Negros. The squadrons based at Bougainville and Green Island had provided invaluable support to the Australian infantry, and had succeeded in wiping out Japanese strong points, gun emplacements and artillery points which had been holding up the infantry advances. The Emirau based squadron had been carrying out fighter-bomber attacks against targets on New Ireland and New Britain, as well as harassing Japanese barge traffic. They had also escorted bombers attacking highways, bridges, road traffic and targets of opportunity in New Ireland and New Britain.⁶⁰

With the Bomber-Reconnaissance Squadrons little change in activity had taken place apart from increased anti-submarine patrols around Bougainville, where the Japanese had been endeavouring to use submarines to re-supply the beleaguered garrison on this island. However, as an

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

indication of their reducing role, one bomber-reconnaissance squadron had been disbanded during the month.⁶¹

Owing to the withdrawal of the 3rd Division from the Pacific, the RNZAF was now New Zealand's sole military effort in the area. The New Zealand Government was anxious to ensure that a military presence was retained, particularly as this could be of major assistance in any post-war negotiations.⁶²

With the ending of the war in Europe, on 30 May Isitt found it necessary to write to all Station and Squadron Commanders in New Zealand and the Pacific with the objective of keeping them informed about RNZAF developments and possible future policy. This comprehensive survey covered six pages of single-spaced foolscap, and represented Isitt's honest attempt to be as frank as he could with his Service. 'I feel, however, that at the present time you should know what is in my mind and the general lines along which planning is likely to move.'⁶³

Provided the Allied Chiefs of Staff and the Commander in Chief in the Pacific operational theatre continued to require the existing strength of the RNZAF, it was the Government's intention to maintain this effort. Isitt then summarised the operational responsibilities of these squadrons as required by COMAIRNORSOLS, which included supporting the Second Australian Corps

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² Ross, p.260.

⁶³ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, 7 May 1945.

operating in Bougainville. He referred to his last visit forward as far as Leyte in the Philippines, which gave him the opportunity to view most of the operations taking place in the South-West Pacific Area. At that time the Bismarcks had been the most active area, a position which still remained, and as they were British territory, they had to be cleaned up. The objective of all fighter pilots, 'air to air fighting' had disappeared, and their future chief role would be bombing and fighter-bombing of ground objectives.⁶⁴ Japanese front line air strength continued to drop, and in the whole of South East Asia Command there had been only seven airborne sightings in the last six weeks.⁶⁵ The estimated number of Japanese aircraft in the Philippines was now less than ten and the British carrier fighter pilots were saying that Japanese fighters were refusing combat.⁶⁶

During the last few months, discussions had been held with General Kenney (Commander Aircraft South-West Pacific); General Sturdee, who commanded the Australian land force, and Air Vice-Marshal Bostock, who commanded the RAAF Operational Command. As a result, a re-distribution of RNZAF Squadrons had been arranged and was then taking place. Three squadrons (two bomber and one fighter-bomber) were being transferred to Jacquinot Bay on New Britain, and a bomber squadron was to relieve the fighter-bomber squadron at Momoti in the Admiralty Islands. Three fighter-bomber squadrons were to remain at Bougainville until the end of the campaign, which it was hoped would be only a few more months, at which

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

point they were to move forward in conjunction with the Australian Air Task Force for operations in the Netherlands East Indies, organised as a New Zealand Wing. One flying boat squadron was to move forward immediately into the Bismarcks area, and it was hoped that the other, the only squadron left in the South Pacific, would be in a position to move forward within two or three months.⁶⁷

Since the early days, the Bomber-Reconnaissance Squadrons had done an excellent job, with their employment mainly against shipping, as that was the purpose for which PV1 and PV2 aircraft had been designed. Because of their success, the Japanese navy and merchant marine retained only one-seventh of their original strength.⁶⁸ In the very near future there would be little or no role for the PV squadrons, which were to be replaced by transport squadrons. The two transport squadrons to be formed from the bomber squadrons were to be trained and equipped for the role of Army transport squadrons involving the close support of troops by parachute dropping of personnel and material. If this could be arranged, it would give a better chance of getting forward.⁶⁹

The conversion of bomber reconnaissance squadrons to transport squadrons had been suggested six months earlier by Pirie. Isitt had not previously indicated that approval for the change had been sanctioned.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

Isitt then indulged in pure conjecture, which could well be termed wishful thinking, by suggesting the early possibility that the South East Asia Area could be extended to include the Netherlands East Indies.⁷⁰ He thought that such a move would benefit New Zealand, as the RNZAF had many friends in the South East Asia Command, and such an organisation would remove the line now drawn between SWPA and SEA, thus improving the prospects of moving forward.⁷¹

Within New Zealand, Isitt had assumed a probable date for the end of the war, which he understandably did not reveal. Planning was in place to roll up the training organisation, so that by the time the date was reached, only the nucleus would be retained which could be re-expanded if necessary. War Cabinet approval had not yet been obtained, but at this stage of the war there was little likelihood of any such application being declined.⁷²

Isitt was concerned that post-war plans were very indefinite. Armed Services planning was closely allied to the World Security Organisation, which had been meeting in San Francisco and from which evolved the United Nations Organisation. Owing to the small strength of the RNZAF at the beginning of the war, the Air Force now found itself in the position of having insufficient permanent personnel to deal with the interim period of demobilisation and rolling up pending the establishment of a Regular

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² *ibid.*

force.⁷³ For this reason it was intended to form an interim Air Force to handle demobilisation and the manning of the permanent Air Force.⁷⁴

In concluding his summary, Isitt could not resist quoting two tributes from senior American officers with whom the RNZAF had served. At a reception given by the War Cabinet to some visiting American journalists, one of the journalists quoted General Kenney, who said that ‘the RNZAF was the soundest and most efficient Air Force he had ever had under his command.’ An even more effusive tribute came from Major-General Mitchell who wrote to Admiral Kincaid, Commander of the 7th Fleet when the RNZAF transferred from the 3rd to the 7th Fleet:

It is as part of the American command that the New Zealanders have performed so brilliantly in supporting the successful campaigns in Guadalcanal, Russell Islands, New Georgia and are now engaged in Bougainville and Rabaul. I feel very strongly on the subject of the splendid service and remarkable record of these allies. The New Zealand Air Force is relatively small, but what there is of it has worked in perfect and harmonious co-operation with our American Air units. The fellows are uncomplaining, good-natured and cheery; they are also tough - in fact they seem to love the roughest sort of job which they enter into with magnificent enthusiasm and immeasurable perseverance second to none. Once having accomplished something, however, they are the most modest lads I have ever come into contact with; they are loath to talk and they invariably dismiss with a few words any reference to their notable and spectacular successes. As a result of these characteristics, they appeal greatly to the American serviceman, and in my long

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

experience I have never heard anything but the highest praise and admiration for their all round ability.⁷⁵

In his regular June 1945 Liaison Letter, Isitt referred to additional matters not covered in the broader release.⁷⁶ With the ending of the war in Europe, two unanswered questions had arisen. The first concerned the fate of New Zealand personnel serving in the European theatre, and the second related to the fate of the Article XV Squadrons which in this case were RAF Squadrons staffed predominantly by RNZAF personnel.⁷⁷ The decisions regarding these matters lay within the purview of Government and would probably not be made until the return of the Prime Minister from the United Nations discussions at San Francisco. The Air Ministry had indicated that they desired the retention of all New Zealand airmen who had not completed operational tours and were not eligible for return to New Zealand. Tentative proposals only had been floated which provided for all aircrew remaining at the disposal of the RAF until eligible for repatriation under existing policy of three years' service overseas, two tours of operations, or until they could be released by the RAF within that period. A further proposal was that New Zealand personnel would not be posted to South-East Asia Command unless they had at least twelve month's service to complete a total of three years.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, June 1945.

⁷⁷ Ross, p.51.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

As usual Isitt commented on Operations, with the fighter squadrons based on Bougainville and Green Island being completely occupied in providing fighter-bomber support for the AIF in their stepped up offensive against the Japanese on Bougainville. With the commencement of the offensive on New Britain by Australian ground forces, one of the fighter squadrons previously based at Green Island had transferred to Jacquinot Bay, New Britain, to supply the necessary air support for the offensive. With the addition of two squadrons at Bougainville, which had previously been based in the South Pacific, the offensive against the Japanese on Bougainville had been considerably increased, and it was now the practice to use between 30 and 40 aircraft in attacks against enemy artillery and strong points which were holding up the Australian infantry advance. The bomber-reconnaissance squadrons had continued to maintain regular strikes against targets on Bougainville, New Britain and New Ireland as well as searching for submarines running supplies to the beleaguered garrison on Bougainville. The flying boat squadrons were being kept fully occupied while the transport squadrons had been loaded to capacity with personnel, mail and freight in keeping units provided with fresh rations and maintaining the regular rotation of personnel. Isitt concluded by flatly acknowledging that there was not much general news.⁷⁹

Isitt's last Liaison Letter of the war was dated 11 July 1945.⁸⁰ He had recently made an extensive trip around the Pacific Area for the purpose of discussing affairs in relation to the command and organisation of the RNZAF

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ ANZ Air 100/8, *Monthly Liaison Letters*, 11 July 1945.

units. He commenced by visiting Air Vice-Marshal Bostock at Morotai, following which they jointly proceeded to Manila at the request of General Kenney; for discussions regarding the current situation and for when the New Zealand Fighter Wing moved forward into the Netherlands East Indies. In effect, the role of the RNZAF at that time was to support the 1st Australian Army, and the Army Commander, General Sturdee, while full of praise for the work of the New Zealanders, was resistant to moving forward any squadrons until after the end of the Bougainville campaign.⁸¹

At that point RNZAF operations were still under the operational direction of Commander Air Northern Solomons with operational control being exercised by the Commander, Allied Air Forces, South-West Pacific. After months of negotiations, Isitt had finally arranged that, as from 15 July 1945, the operational control would be exercised through RAAF Command, and the Air Officer Commanding, New Zealand Air Task Force would exercise direction of operations in this area. The RAAF Squadrons would be operating under his direction, while in an exquisite deference to semantics, squadrons of the United States Marine Air Wing would also be working in collaboration with him.⁸²

Agreement had been reached for the eventual move forward of a Fighter Wing to the Netherlands East Indies. However, this move was delayed owing to lack of available shipping, and two phases of movement were planned. The Australians were finding it impossible to support Emirau Island

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² *ibid.*

logistically, which required the Wing to fly to Los Negros initially, with the move to the Netherlands East Indies not taking place until shipping became available.⁸³

Because the command organisation was breaking new ground, Isitt was forced to spend two days at Morotai on his return trip, hammering out details with the RAAF Command. He then moved on to Bougainville, where he spent another two days with the 3rd Australian Divisional Headquarters, and was able to make a trip to the front lines, where the 15th and 29th Brigades were in action. Here he was able to see the effects of RNZAF bombing, and was pleased to hear the praise given by the Australians for the air support they had received.⁸⁴

Isitt then reviewed the activities of all squadrons, commencing with the fighter squadrons where, in general, there had been little change to the operations being carried out. On Bougainville, the four squadrons continued to support the Australian Infantry Forces, which were fighting an entrenched enemy determined to hold on at any cost. The RNZAF had proved invaluable, with their attacks being carried out in such a manner that the enemy either had to retire and regroup, or otherwise be completely annihilated. Even with air support, advances were very slow, as the Japanese were well dug in and difficult to dislodge. With the decreasing commitments for the bomber-reconnaissance squadrons, two had been de-

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

commissioned. The existing squadrons, however, had been kept occupied with strikes against targets in New Britain and New Ireland in assistance to Australian Infantry Forces, as well as numerous anti-submarine patrols, although no contacts had been made.⁸⁵

This concluded Isitt's last Liaison Letter of the war. Circulation had increased progressively, so that at the end just over 60 copies were being produced. However, when it was sent to all Stations and Units, the total run was 164 copies. The Liaison Letter fulfilled a need which was not met by the normal communication process, and for the last year of the War it was also being circulated to the War Cabinet. It provided an overview of RNZAF matters, supplying sufficient information for the reader to place all activities in context.

By any standards Isitt had a busy war. As AMP he had been called upon in the initial months of the conflict to deputise for Saunders as the Acting Chief of the Air Staff, while Saunders negotiated the framework of the BCATP in Canada. For the next two years, Isitt was involved closely in the administration of the BCATP in Canada. This was a demanding role, calling for extensive travel embracing the complete breadth of Canada, which placed a heavy physical load on Isitt. Purchasing duties also took up a considerable part of his time, as a suitable infrastructure had not been put in place to cope with the changing needs of a war footing. Although a proper structure was eventually established, it took a long time for it to be

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

implemented, and meanwhile Isitt was forced to struggle in a quickly changing environment without adequate support. Initially, nobody in New Zealand appreciated what was required, and did not anticipate the need for support.

Isitt's next two assignments, in Washington and London, were less demanding physically, although considerable travel was still involved. He now stepped up to a strategic level of operations, and the contacts he made were of inestimable assistance when he became CAS. When he returned to New Zealand in 1943, first as DCAS and then CAS, he had a comparatively straightforward year. The RNZAF was performing an active role, new squadrons were forming and American supplied aircraft were being delivered on a regular basis. Manpower problems were controllable as well, but everything changed at the beginning of 1944, and it took a massive effort to contain the myriad problems which manifested themselves for the remainder of the war. Isitt was able to do this while retaining the confidence of the Government. This required an able administrator, command leadership and astute political skills, all of which Isitt exhibited at this time.

CHAPTER 10: AFTERMATH OF WAR 1945-1946

Immediately prior to producing the July 1945 Liaison Letter, Isitt had forwarded a letter to the Minister of Defence in which he reported on his just concluded visit to RNZAF Units in the Pacific, the Commanding General Allied Air Forces and to RAAF Command.¹ He had returned to New Zealand on the evening of Saturday, June 30, having been absent from New Zealand for eighteen days. He had visited most stations at which New Zealand units were established and found that the men were fit, and well housed, while the food and recreation were satisfactory. Contrary to rumour, the general morale was good.²

Isitt had spent two days in the south of Bougainville, where the Australians were engaged against the Japanese on the Mibo River. An Australian Brigadier informed Isitt that that the work of RNZAF Squadrons was saving hundreds of casualties and greatly speeding up the advance.³ The transfer of squadrons to Jacquinot Bay was progressing well and was almost complete. At Guadalcanal and Espiritu Santo the re-organisation, evacuation and move forward were well in hand, with the intention of reducing the strength at Guadalcanal to 300 within a month, while further reductions were possible after the move forward of the Base Stores organisation.⁴

¹ ANZ Air 130/30/1 Pt. 2A, Isitt to Jones *Air Force:Deployment and Disposition*, 2 July 1945.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

Manpower pressures dictated that the tour of duty in the Islands required a progressive increase to eighteen months. Isitt had given instructions to retain the twelve month tour for as long as possible, and it appeared that the twelve month tour could be maintained until after moving forward of the Bismarck area. Included in the instructions was the directive that any men who had served twelve months in the area were to be returned to New Zealand as early as possible.⁵

Isitt confirmed that the duties of the Commander Aircraft in Northern Solomons would be taken over by the Commander of the New Zealand Air Task Force from 15 July 1945, who would have the operational direction of the Royal Australian Air Force squadrons in the area. He was scrupulous to point out that the operational control remained with the Commander, Allied Air Force in South-West Pacific through RAAF Command, as being in accord with the War Cabinet authority of 15 May 1945.⁶

RAAF Command was most anxious to move three RNZAF Squadrons forward to the Netherlands East Indies at the earliest possible time, with a target date the end of August. However, shortage of shipping would delay the move until late September. This met with the wishes of the Commander of the 1st Australian Army, who was most insistent that he required the support of all New Zealand squadrons in the Bismarck area.⁷

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*



Isitt and crew of Lodestar NZ3509 en route to Japanese Surrender Ceremony. (RNZAF Museum)

Isitt had been informed confidentially by General Kenney, that the command of all areas South and West of the Philippines would be transferred to the South-East Asia Area in the near future. Isitt did not know what effect this would have on planning, but felt it could assist a general speeding up of operations. ⁸

In his discussions with various Allied Commanding Officers, Isitt had raised the present need for employment of the RNZAF and the probable date when this effort could be reduced. He enclosed copies of the correspondence to

⁸ *ibid.*

General Kenney and General Sturdee,⁹ and their response left no doubt that in their opinion the RNZAF was essentially and fully employed, and at that time should not be withdrawn nor the number of squadrons reduced. Sturdee, in particular, did not consider any reduction would be possible prior to the end of December 1945. Kenney could not release any RNZAF squadrons until they had been replaced by other Allied squadrons, of whom none were available at that time nor were any anticipated in the near future. Isitt also wrote a similar request to the Commander, South Pacific Area, whose reply was not received until the end of July.¹⁰

In his letter to the Minister, and also in his July Liaison Letter, Isitt had referred to a number of matters which had consequences beyond the brief mention he accorded them. The first concerned morale and was triggered undoubtedly by the Managing Editor of the weekly newspaper, *Truth*, B.R. Connelly, who wrote to the Acting Prime Minister, Walter Nash on 18 May 1945.¹¹ Connelly felt that he would be failing in his duty if he did not bring forward matters raised by a Mr Trevor Lane, a *Truth* journalist who had been accredited as a war correspondent in the Pacific. Lane contended that morale in the RNZAF in the Pacific was at a low ebb, and unless the service could be convinced that they were serving a useful purpose in what they were being called upon to do, there was little chance of raising morale above that which persisted at the present time. Lane made a number of specific allegations claiming that the United States had washed its hands of

⁹ Lieutenant General Sir Vernon Sturdee 1890-1966. Australian Chief of General Staff 1940-42, Head of Australian Military Mission, Washington 1942-44, GOC First Australian Army 1944-45.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ ANZ EA 87/4/5 Pt. 2A, Connelly to Nash, 18 May 1945.

the New Zealand units in the Pacific; that in the back areas discipline was hard to maintain; and that food standards at some stations were poor.¹²

Connelly also enclosed a memorandum addressed to the Unit Personnel Services Officer, Field Headquarters, Bougainville by a number of Air Force personnel in February 1945. The memorandum requested information regarding changes to the tour length in the Pacific, and Connelly claimed that it had never been answered. He could 'conceive of no more sure way of depreciating morale than to accord such treatment as this to men who had sought information through official channels.'¹³ Connelly concluded by attempting to justify his letter on the grounds that the matter he had raised explained why morale at that time was so low in the RNZAF.¹⁴

Before any enquiry had been completed, Connelly had written to Nash again.¹⁵ He referred to a recent conversation with Nash about the numerous letters which *Truth* had received from disgruntled RNZAF personnel. A further letter had been received from an airman corresponding under the nom-de-plume of 'Disgruntled Airman.' According to Connelly, the establishment of the RNZAF, both within New Zealand and in the Pacific, had assumed a matter of paramount importance, and the views of 'Disgruntled Airman' reflected a growing belief among the people of New Zealand. This concern had been prompted by a recent Government announcement that New Zealand proposed to send a small land army into

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*, Connelly to Nash, 30 May 1945.

the Pacific. Connelly warned that the ‘public mind if not convinced in the fixed belief that our RNZAF is doing a necessary job, may be extremely sceptical of the need for an army land force.’¹⁶

The letter from ‘Disgruntled Airman’ made a number of questionable allegations, claiming that the Pacific forces had nearly doubled in strength during the preceding twelve months, during which time some 300 Corsairs had been lost, but no Japanese planes or ships had been contacted. Isitt was accused of stating to ground crews ‘that the Yanks don’t want us’, and of ‘hawking’ the RNZAF all over the Pacific. The assertion was also made that surplus officers had been posted to the Islands in order to avoid staff reductions on New Zealand stations.¹⁷

Nevill responded on behalf of Isitt in two memorandums to Acting Prime Minister Nash, incorporating replies to the accusations made by Connelly.¹⁸ Nash, in turn, utilized Nevill’s answers in his reply to Connelly, quoting significant passages verbatim.¹⁹

In his responses to the Acting Prime Minister, Nevill adopted a conciliatory tone in answering nearly all the allegations made, although he avoided the more pointed accusations about the over-manning of officers. Prior to Nevill’s reply being forwarded, Isitt had met with Connelly, and this meeting would have coloured the tenor of any correspondence. Nevill acknowledged

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*, Nevill to Nash, 12 June 1945 and 14 June 1945.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, Nash to Connelly, 21 June 1945.

that many airmen suffered from a sense of frustration and the feeling they were not being usefully employed. The food at Emirau had deteriorated when the RNZAF had transferred from American to Australian rations, which were below the standard to which the RNZAF had been accustomed.²⁰

One of the accusations had claimed that there were only 36 RNZAF aircraft on Bougainville, but Nevill was able to point out that the actual number was in the order of 80. In responding to the charges of 'Disgusted Airman', Nevill suggested that he had failed to realise that the role of the Air Force had changed from air combat to close support of army forces. The RNZAF aircraft losses were about one third of those stated in the letter, and the results obtained by the RNZAF in the close support role had been eminently satisfactory to the Army Commanders concerned.²¹ The statements alleged to be made by the Chief of the Air Staff in the letter had been referred to the CAS, who denied that such statements were made by him.²²

Nevill concluded by accepting that the views expressed by the Editor of *Truth* and his correspondents indicated fairly the opinions held by a certain proportion of serving personnel, even though they were based on erroneous facts, and the inferences were equally incorrect. The average New Zealander in the Forces was intelligent and critical, which made him less inclined to accept the uncertainties of modern war. Steps were being taken

²⁰ *ibid*, 12 June 1945 and 14 June 1945.

²¹ *ibid*.

²² *ibid*.

to ensure that the activities of the Air Force were more fully disseminated throughout the Service.²³

One immediate result of Connelly's letters was a Press Release covering the activities of the RNZAF. The fact that the Press Release was issued indicated a reversal of previous Government thinking, and it was printed in its entirety in the *Evening Post* of 20 June 1945. The Release concluded with a statement from United States Admiral Nimitz congratulating the RNZAF on the good work they were doing in the Pacific War, and confirming the need for their presence in the struggle to defeat Japan.²⁴

The defeat of Japan had formed the subject of a letter from Isitt to the Minister of Defence on 4 May 1945.²⁵ The Royal Air Force was organising a Very Long Range Bomber Force for operations in the Pacific against Japan, but it was hoped to make it a truly Empire Force, and the Air Ministry had enquired whether the New Zealand Government would permit the inclusion of No. 75 (N.Z.) Squadron in this Force. Isitt now asked that No. 75 (N.Z.) Squadron be made available for duty with the RAF Bomber Force in the Pacific, and recommended strongly the approval of this request.²⁶ Approval was duly made by War Cabinet on 16 June 1945.²⁷

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *ibid.*, *Evening Post*, 20 June 1945.

²⁵ *ibid.*, Isitt to Jones 4 May 1945.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ ANZ, EA 81/3/3 *War Cabinet Minutes*, 16 June 1945.

At this time communications from Isitt to the Minister of Defence were frequent, a typical example being a Memo entitled, 'Royal New Zealand Air Force: Manning Programme in Relation to End of War.'²⁸ Isitt considered that in view of the favourable war situation, coupled with the continuing manpower shortage, the RNZAF should plan its manpower requirements on the assumption that the war against Japan would terminate within a defined period. Taking all the circumstances into consideration, Isitt felt it a reasonable and justifiable risk to assume that the war would finish on or before June 1947. Planning on this basis would mean that all flying training schools and their supporting units would be progressively reduced so that by July 1946 would be down to a minimum basis. From this date onward, the training organisation would function on a token basis only, retaining a nucleus which could be expanded if the need arose.²⁹

Consistent with this reduction, Isitt again wrote to Jones, citing that as the RNZAF was now fully established, it was now possible to plan a re-organisation of Operational Training requirements, which would result in an overall reduction of approximately 20% of the previous output of these units.³⁰ He refused to forecast possible manpower savings, but substantial reductions in flying hours would provide considerable savings in both domestic and technical personnel.³¹

²⁸ ANZ Air 130/33/2 *RNZAF Policy Reduction of Commitments*, Isitt to Jones, 6 June 1945.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ ANZ EA 87/4/5 Pt. 2A, Isitt to Jones, 6 June 1945,

³¹ *ibid.*

Approval for these various actions was delayed, as the Administrative Instruction regarding Reduction of Training was not issued until 20 July 1945.³² With the cessation of hostilities in Europe and the selection of a provisional VJ Day, a revision of policy was necessary. War Cabinet finally approved changes which were very much in line with Isitt's recommendations. Approximately 1500 aircrew trainees would be released for ground duties, service in the Army or disposal by the National Service Department. As the flying training ceased and the closing of stations was completed, approximately 2000 ground staff would be released from service.³³

At the end of July, Isitt finally received a response from the Commander South Pacific Area, who had agreed to the release of a New Zealand Catalina squadron employed on shipping protection, for service in another theatre of war.³⁴ Isitt accordingly advised Jones that in his opinion there was employment for only one RNZAF flying boat squadron in conjunction with the New Zealand Air Task Force and recommended that representations should be made to the Commander in Chief, Pacific Ocean Area, that New Zealand should be permitted to withdraw the squadron from operations and be demobilised.³⁵

³² ANZ Air 130/33/2 *Policy - Reduction of Commitments, Administration Instructions* 135/1945, 20 July 1945.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*

Meanwhile, Isitt had continued his ongoing struggle with the Armed Forces Personnel Committee.³⁶ He wrote to them on 11 June 1945, on the subject of RNZAF future planning. Discussions with War Cabinet had suggested that the operational commitments of the RNZAF were not to be reduced, and he expected this assumption to be confirmed in a few days. This required a New Zealand organisation sufficient to support the operational squadrons, their base centres and the lines of communication in the Pacific. As a result, Isitt had come to the conclusion that the only way to make any real economy in manpower was to assume a probable date of victory against Japan of June 1947, and base planning on this date. Isitt had already put into effect a number of reductions. He estimated that the changes would allow a reduction in strength of the RNZAF within New Zealand by at least 15% in 1945, with an accelerated reduction in 1946.³⁷

Isitt was adamant that no re-organisation or reduction take place in the Manning and Personnel Branch, as he was sure that this would only confuse and delay, as well as defeating the main object, which was to return as soon as possible the maximum number of Service personnel to civil life. Consistent with this, establishments on all stations within New Zealand were to be on a continually reducing scale to meet changing commitments.³⁸

However, within a month he was back writing to Jones and complaining vehemently about a Report issued by the Defence Forces Personnel

³⁶ ANZ Air 130/33/2, Isitt to Armed Forces Personnel Committee, 11 June 1945.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid.*

Committee.³⁹ This letter was five pages in length, illustrating Isitt's concern, and was accompanied by a further five ancillary reports. The Committee had complained of delays by Air Department in actioning reports and recommendations, and of 'passive resistance' by certain senior executives, which Isitt did not agree was the case.⁴⁰ Isitt contended strongly that there had been no passive resistance, which he interpreted as unnecessary delays and avoidance of issues, but there had been resistance to what he considered were unsound recommendations.⁴¹

Isitt was in general agreement with the Committee's recommendation that the staffing in Air Department should be made with a general eye on post-war requirements, and this precept had been followed wherever possible. In this regard he referred to the Paper 'Policy and Staffing in Relation to Demobilization and Post War Air Force,' dated 10 April 1945.⁴² If this paper could be approved, it would enable much more to be done. The committee had requested immediate re-organisation of the Personnel, Organisation and Staff Duties, and Manning Branches. As the RNZAF depended upon these Branches for the proposed reductions in training and subsequent demobilization, Isitt could not agree to the re-organisation and re-staffing of these Branches.⁴³

³⁹ *ibid*, Isitt to Jones, 7 July 1945.

⁴⁰ *ibid*.

⁴¹ *ibid*.

⁴² ANZ EA1 Acc 2619 87/4/10 Pt.1, *Post War Air Force*, Isitt to Jones, 10 April 1945.

⁴³ ANZ, Air 130/33/2, Isitt to Jones, 7 July 1945.

During the next twelve months, the activities of the Air Force within New Zealand would be on a continually reducing scale, and with that in mind and the fact that the Committee had expressed confidence in him and his Inspector of Administration, Isitt recommended that the functions of the Defence Forces Personnel Committee's Inspectorate be suspended; that the staff of the RNZAF Inspectorate of Administration be slightly increased; and the RNZAF Establishment Committee be increased by one civilian member. The approval had been expressed in a Report of the Defence Forces Personnel Committee:

The Members of the Committee have the utmost confidence in A. V-M. Isitt and it is realised that he must rely on his senior executives for a lot of the decisions he is forced to make, but we are convinced that he is badly served by these same senior officers who probably are a vast improvement on their predecessors - a fact which has been pointed out to the Inspectorate on several occasions when they have commented adversely on their administrative efforts.⁴⁴

Isitt felt that if his recommendations were accepted, the same objective could be achieved without unnecessary administrative burden. If it was not agreed to, Isitt would endeavour to collaborate with the Committee as he had done during the past year, but so long as he was responsible for the efficiency and operation of the Air Force he must be given the right - subject to Government and Air Board direction - to control the organisation and administration of the Royal New Zealand Air Force.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ ANZ Air 118 81N *Manpower*, Appendix II FF.

⁴⁵ ANZ, Air 130/33/2, Isitt to Jones, 7 July 1945.

In this letter, Isitt had referred to the paper 'Policy and Staffing in Relation to Demobilization and Post War Air Force.'⁴⁶ This paper had been submitted with the object of obtaining early Cabinet approval to the retention and appointment of sufficient personnel to enable the RNZAF to discharge its responsibilities on the cessation of hostilities, both in relation to demobilization and the re-constitution of the post-war Air Force. Such steps were necessary owing to the lack of permanent staff in the RNZAF and the vulnerability of retaining 'duration of war' personnel for the period required.⁴⁷

However, the RNZAF (Regular Air Force) had only just been established on a permanent basis at the outbreak of war, with the result that there was virtually no permanent nucleus in the Air Force by 1945. It had to be assumed that an Air Force would be required. This meant that planning needed to proceed for the establishment of a minimum Air Force, and to seek staff on this basis, otherwise serious difficulties and additional expense would be involved in attempting to reconstitute the Air Force.⁴⁸

It was not possible at that point to submit for Cabinet approval any permanent post-war establishments, nor was it possible to effect the actual transfer of officers and airmen to the Regular Air Force until various War Emergency Regulations had been rescinded. It was, however, essential that personnel should be provisionally selected before the end of the war for

⁴⁶ ANZ, EA1 Acc 2619 87/4/10 Pt.1, *Post War Air Force* Isitt to Jones, 10 April 1945.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

post-war employment to ensure continuity of service and to avoid a breakdown in administration. Isitt sought general Cabinet approval for the broad issues raised in the paper, and proposed to submit further papers covering various aspects of the programme.⁴⁹ However, general approval was never given, and the matter dragged on, creating a serious manning situation in the early months of 1946.

Adverse press publicity continued to appear, particularly in the *New Zealand Herald*, and the Chiefs of Staff produced a Paper containing a number of recommendations to combat the practice. In typical manner, Jones dashed the Chiefs' hopes with a negative response in which he acknowledged that the observations and recommendations made in C.O.S. Paper 202 had been considered in War Cabinet on a number of occasions since March, and again at a meeting on 3 July.⁵⁰ It was the view of War Cabinet that any statements the Chiefs of Staff wished to make should be referred to Jones for approval, and this would extend to any Press releases. In the event that the Chiefs of Staff wished to speak orally to the Press on any matter, prior submission of the brief was required, followed by a subsequent minute of the discussion.⁵¹ At least there was a minor concession to the Joint Chiefs, but only on a rigidly controlled basis of operation.

Jones was again on the attack in a letter to Isitt of 27 July 1945.

I shall be glad if you will kindly supply me with the following information. This information is for the War Cabinet and is to be available by Monday next.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ ANZ Air 130/33/2, Jones to Chiefs of Staff, 26 July 1945.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

What would be the effect of a reduction in our Squadrons overseas? Would it be possible to estimate how many airmen would be released both overseas and in New Zealand if this took place in the following order?

1. Withdrawal of the Bomber Squadrons.
2. Withdrawal of Flying boat Squadrons.
3. Reduction in Transport Squadrons.
4. Reduction in Fighter Squadrons.⁵²

Before Isitt responded to this request, he enquired internally within Air Department, to ascertain the number of personnel involved in various squadron reduction options. The response indicated that eliminating a bomber squadron, the flying boat squadron, two fighter squadrons and reducing the size of the transport squadron would reduce staffing levels by approximately 2000.⁵³

Isitt examined the figures in the Minute very closely, and the original carries his hand-written amendments. However, he was very careful not to supply any precise figures for personnel reductions in his response to the Minister's request regarding squadron reductions. Instead, he emphasised that a considerable reduction in the strength of the RNZAF Operational Squadrons had already been effected and further reductions were under way and planned. Isitt concluded by mentioning his recent visit to the Pacific, in which he was aware that the Government was very concerned with the most effective employment of available forces against Japan, and had been assured by the Commander in Chief that the RNZAF was carrying out a most

⁵² *ibid*, Jones to Isitt, 27 July 1945.

⁵³ *ibid*, Minute No. 971, 28 July 1945.

essential role, and could not be released.⁵⁴ Acting on the instructions of the Prime Minister, McIntosh as Secretary of the War Cabinet, forwarded a copy of this Memorandum to the Leader of the Opposition, no doubt to facilitate discussion in the debates which lay ahead.⁵⁵

If Isitt thought that this Memorandum was going to be the end of the matter, events were to prove him wrong. In June 1945, he had written to the Chiefs of Staff Committee, at which time the strength of the RNZAF was as follows:

In New Zealand	22,040
In Pacific	8,617
In Europe, S.E. Asia and Canada	4,746
	<u>35,403</u> ⁵⁶

With the reduction of training, it was estimated that the strength of the Air Force in New Zealand would reduce by 1500 personnel by December 1945, with a further 2000 by July 1946, and the likelihood of an additional 2,000 by the end of 1946. Isitt recommended that the strength of the RNZAF overseas should not be reduced at that stage.⁵⁷

But a major shift in Isitt's attitude occurred at the end of July, after tremendous pressure had been placed on the various Service Chiefs for a reduction in their serving personnel. These changes were incorporated in a

⁵⁴ *ibid*, Isitt to Jones, 28 July 1945.

⁵⁵ *ibid*, McIntosh to Holland, 31 July 1945.

⁵⁶ ANZ Air 118 81N *Manpower*.

⁵⁷ *ibid*.

memorandum to Jones entitled 'Future Plans and Manning of RNZAF'.⁵⁸ An investigation indicated that it would be possible to reduce the total establishment of the RNZAF by 31 March 1946 to 21,500. The following operational units could be maintained: 10 Fighter Squadrons; 1 Flying boat Squadron and 3 Transport Squadrons.

The distribution of personnel would be as follows:

Attached to the RAF	1,100
In the Pacific	6,500
In New Zealand	<u>13,900</u>
	<u>21,500</u> ⁵⁹

Isitt admitted that this figure was 1,000 personnel less than his staff considered the minimum required.⁶⁰

The following day Isitt wrote to Wallingford, then Air Member for Supply, with a new date for the capitulation of Japan. The United Kingdom was now provisioning on the prospective date of capitulation as November 1946. All orders for material made in the future were to be based on this date, and all existing contracts were to be adjusted. In promulgating this directive, Wallingford added, 'It is possible, however, that the Japs may extend the date of this contract, and each quarterly provisioning should be reviewed accordingly in consultation with the AMS.'⁶¹

⁵⁸ ANZ EA 87/4/5 Pt. 2A, Isitt to Jones, 1 August 1945.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ ANZ Air 130/33/2, Isitt to Wallingford, 2 August 1945.

Meanwhile, the House of Representatives had been sitting on the 2nd and 3rd of August, and a resolution was passed unanimously in the House, giving general approval for the reduction of the New Zealand Armed Forces in New Zealand and overseas to 55,000. This in turn was approved by War Cabinet on 7 August 1945, with cuts applying to all services, and those relating to the Air Force being generally in line with Isitt's letter of 1 August to the Minister of Defence.⁶²

The establishment of the Air Force was to be reduced from 35,000 to 21,500 as follows:

Overseas	7,600
New Zealand	13,900

The operational force would consist of ten Fighter Squadrons, one Flying Boat Squadron and three Transport Squadrons. Reduction of establishments would be effected as rapidly as possible in order to be completed by March 1946, or earlier.⁶³

It would be difficult to overstate the significance of this War Cabinet decision. The unofficial Narrative History of RNZAF Manpower stated flatly: 'This decision to reduce the RNZAF is important. The CAS recommended a force of 8,500 in the Pacific and 22,000 in N.Z.; War Cabinet decided on a force of 6,500 in the Pacific and 13,900 in N.Z.'⁶⁴

⁶² ANZ EA1 87/4/5 Pt. 2A *War Against Japan - New Zealand Forces*.

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ ANZ Air 118 81 N, *Manpower*, Chapter 3, p.25.

Following the end of the war in Europe, there had been considerable correspondence between the U.K. and New Zealand regarding possible New Zealand employment with the British Commonwealth Force against Japan.⁶⁵ The Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs was back again on 4 August requesting an early indication of views regarding the number of New Zealand Mustang squadrons which could be provided for the British Commonwealth Force - Air Component as well as New Zealand officers for staff duties.⁶⁶ Isitt indicated that the RNZAF could supply three squadrons of Mustangs, subject to their release from their present role in the Bismarck area under the command of the Commander in Chief, South-West Pacific Area. Two squadrons would be available to move from the Admiralty Islands on 15 October, and the third squadron on 1 November 1945. Isitt welcomed the opportunity for inclusion of RNZAF Officers in an integrated British Commonwealth Staff, and suggested that four to six be made available.⁶⁷

A further indication of the difficulties being experienced by Isitt at this stage of the war related to the employment of RNZAF Staff Officers on the staff of RAAF Command. Isitt had written to the Minister of Defence that the Commander, New Zealand Air Task Force had assumed operational direction of air operations in the Northern Solomons area from 15 July 1945 and now had all Australian and United States Squadrons under his operational direction. RAAF Command was now responsible for the operational control of all air operations in the Pacific south of the Philippines. Air Vice-Marshal

⁶⁵ ANZ EA1 87/4/5 Pt. 2A, Shanahan to Jones, 30 July 1945.

⁶⁶ *ibid*, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to External Affairs, 4 August 1945,

⁶⁷ *ibid*, Isitt to Shanahan, 9 August 1945.

Bostock, Air Officer Commanding RAAF Command had requested that a number of RNZAF Staff Officers be posted for duty with his Command to work as a composite headquarters and to coordinate the work of the two forces. At a later date it was proposed that RAAF officers would be posted to the Headquarters of the New Zealand Air Task Force. Future plans indicated that the association of the two forces would become increasingly inter-related, and the principle of having combined staffs would result in more efficient coordination of planning and operation, as well as being very much in the interests of the RNZAF. ⁶⁸

Bostock had requested that the following appointments be made to his Headquarters:

<u>Branch</u>	<u>Rank</u>
Air Staff	Group Captain
Intelligence	Wing Commander
Supply (Planning)	Squadron Leader ⁶⁹

Isitt recommended that approval be given to these postings.⁷⁰

This letter was referred to both McIntosh and Shanahan, but no concrete action was taken, and Isitt was forced into writing again a month later. On this occasion he was again requesting approval for the same appointments to RAAF Command.⁷¹

⁶⁸ *ibid*, Isitt to Jones, 14 July 1945.

⁶⁹ *ibid*.

⁷⁰ *ibid*.

⁷¹ *ibid*, Isitt to Jones, 6 August 1945.

The War Cabinet decision of 7 August meant that it was no longer possible to support the two bomber-reconnaissance squadrons located at Momoti and Jacquinot Bay, with the result the Commander Allied Air Force, Manila was signalled and permission was requested for the withdrawal of these two squadrons.⁷² This signal was dated 7 August 1945, and as far as can be discovered, no reply was received prior to V-J Day. The *Manpower Narrative* speculates that the COMAAF knew of the atom bomb attacks and surrender negotiations, and accordingly took no action.⁷³

The Japanese surrender had come suddenly on 15 August, in the wake of two atomic bomb attacks, and Isitt had the pleasure of representing New Zealand at the signing of the Peace Treaty with Japan.⁷⁴ Isitt's selection to represent New Zealand was owed in his view to the good work and fine reputation of the RNZAF, particularly their work in the Pacific.⁷⁵ His departure from New Zealand was hurried, as it was expected that the surrender would take place immediately, and the information available on 14 August was very meagre. However, there were many unavoidable delays, and the surrender treaty was not signed until 2 September.

Isitt was told at 4 p.m. on Monday 13 August that an invitation had been received by the Government to send a representative to the official acceptance of surrender by Japan, and he had been selected to represent New Zealand. In interviews after his return, Isitt was vague about why he

⁷² ANZ Air 118 81N *Manpower*, Chapter 3, p.24.

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ Isitt *Visit to Japan*, Thodey Papers.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

was chosen, as well as the manner of his being told. When he left his appointment had not been approved by the War Cabinet, nor was the time and location of the ceremony known. His instructions were to join Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser, who was at sea with the Third Fleet, so he decided to leave immediately, and get further instructions on the way forward. This required leaving Wellington by car at midnight on August 13/14, intending to drive to Ohakea, flying to Whenuapai, and then leaving from there for Espiritu Santo. Two crews were supplied, so that the flight could proceed without resting.⁷⁶

The first delay was to find at Ohakea that the weather at Auckland had closed in and that there was a ground fog. Isitt spoke to the pilot, who said that he could get off and would come down to Ohakea. This was done, and the flight left in a Lodestar, at 8.30 a.m. on 14 August. The first stop was at Norfolk Island, before proceeding to Espiritu Santo, and then on to Guadalcanal. Next stop was Manus, where they received official word that Japan had accepted the Potsdam terms of surrender.⁷⁷

At Espiritu Santo, Isitt had been told to proceed to Guam, and a direct route was taken from Manus, although a diversion had to be made to avoid Truk. . An overnight stay was ordered at Guam, and then the flight would continue to Iwo Jima where Isitt would join the destroyer *Barton* which would take him to the Fleet. Isitt stayed with Admiral Murray, Commander, Marianas and learnt of Emperor Hirohito's broadcast to his people. Isitt had a busy

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

time on Guam, calling on General Carl Spaatz, who commanded the U.S. Army Strategic Air Force, and was shown photographs of the effect of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. On Thursday morning, August 16, he attended Admiral Chester Nimitz at his morning conference, and heard the score for the last day of the war.⁷⁸

The onward journey resumed later that night for Iwo Jima, where he joined the *Barton*. The vessel was under way soon after embarking, for what was a pleasant trip in calm weather. The Fleet was reached at 5.00 a.m. on the 24 August, and consisted of over 240 vessels, including 16 carriers and 8 battleships.

Isitt transferred to Admiral Halsey's flagship, the *Missouri* at 7.30 a.m. and was met by Admirals Halsey and Carney. It was intended that he would be aboard only for breakfast, but he was pressed to stay and gladly accepted the invitation, as the official ceremony had then been fixed for 28 August. It was then that the delays started, as the Japanese surrender envoys requested more time to disarm troops and remove them from areas they had been asked to vacate. The surrender date was set back to 31 August, and based on this it agreed that Isitt would remain on the *Missouri* until the 25th, when he would transfer to *H.M.S. Duke of York*. The programme was to enter Sagami Wan on 26th, then enter Tokyo Bay and anchor on 27th, before consolidating the position ashore and sign the Surrender Treaty on 31st. Isitt now settled down to a period of waiting, which included visiting the *Duke of*

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

York with Admiral Halsey and calling on Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser, while two days later he was transferred to the *Shangri-La* for lunch with Admiral McCain. He was catapulted from the *Shangri-La* in a Helldiver to have a look at the Third Fleet from the air. The landing back was on *Yorktown* and he returned to *Missouri* by destroyer.⁷⁹

Isitt paid a hurried visit to *H.M.N.Z.S. Gambia*, as the Fleet was moving fast and manoeuvring, and he had to transfer as the opportunity offered. Photographs of this visit were published in the *Weekly News* of 19 September 1945, and show him being transferred by boatswain's chair, as well as meeting the ship's captain. Isitt did not look comfortable with the transfer, and was no doubt grateful to reach *Gambia* without being dunked in the sea.⁸⁰ He thought the ship's company looked very fit, and the ship equally smart.⁸¹

Isitt remained on the *Missouri* until the afternoon of the 25th when he was transferred to the *Duke of York* as the guest of Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser. Movement was planned into Sagami Wan on the 26th, but owing to typhoons the programme was set back 48 hours. Before evening, word was received that they would move the next day, the 27th. The weather was excellent, with some cloud but good visibility as they steamed up the bay, *Missouri* leading. On the 29th the fleet moved into Tokyo Bay. The *Missouri* was under way at 5.00 a.m. followed by *Iowa* and *South Dakota*, the flagship of

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Weekly News*, 19 September 1945, pp.24-5.

⁸¹ Isitt, *Visit to Japan*, Thodey Papers.

CINCPAC Admiral Nimitz, with the *Duke of York* sailing at 7.00 a.m. in perfect weather.

The actual surrender ceremony, though short, was most impressive with the whole event being concluded by 9.30 a.m. The instructions were to be on board the *Missouri* by 8.15, and Isitt went in Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser's barge, with his staff. They were the last group to go aboard, and found all the U.S. Naval and Army representatives, and other Allied representatives already there. They were met by the captain of the ship, and shown to Admiral Halsey's cabin, where they met Admiral Nimitz. After a brief talk, they fell in their places on the deck. At 8.45 the Supreme Commander of Allied Powers (General MacArthur) came aboard. He was met by Admiral Halsey, who took him to meet Admiral Nimitz.⁸²

Shortly after this the Japanese envoys arrived and were brought to the deck. 'Three little gentlemen with silk hats, 11 Army officers, and a gentleman in a white mufti suit.'⁸³ They were kept waiting for about five minutes and then General MacArthur re-appeared, supported by Admirals Nimitz and Halsey. General MacArthur took over the microphone and opened the proceedings, before calling upon the Japanese representatives to sign. One top-hatted gentleman then approached the table, produced some papers which authorised the representatives to sign on behalf of Japan, placed them on the table and read the terms of surrender. 'Shigemitsu was a little man in a morning suit and spats, white waistcoat, cream gloves and

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ *ibid.*

a wooden leg.’ He took his place at the table and signed, to be followed by the senior Army officer, Umezo, who was the only one of the group who showed any emotion. MacArthur again spoke before signing himself. He called upon Generals Wainwright and Percival, United States and British Generals who had been prisoners of war since 1941, to support him, and gave them each a pen with which he had signed the surrender instrument.⁸⁴

MacArthur then called upon Admiral Nimitz to sign, followed by the other Allied representatives of Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser (Great Britain), General Hsu Yung-Chan (China), Lieutenant-General Derevyanko (Russia), General Blamey (Australia), Colonel Cosgrave (Canada), General Le Clerc (France), and Admiral Helfrich (Netherlands). Last to sign was Isitt. The procedure was to step out, salute General MacArthur, take the chair, and sign both copies of the Instrument, which consisted of two facing sheets approximately 24”x18”. On the left were the Terms of Surrender and on the right the signatures. One of the observers to the ceremony was Joseph (Vinegar Joe) Stilwell, who commented on the various participants:

Except for the American Admiral and the Chinese they appeared to Stilwell a ‘scratchy-looking crowd’: the Englishman ‘a fat red dumpling,’ the Australian ‘a tub of guts,’ the Canadian ‘an elderly masher of the gigolo type,’ the Frenchman ‘rather trim,’ but with a pair of ‘dirty-looking apaches’ as aides, the Dutchman fat and bald, the New Zealanders amateur- looking. ‘What a crew of caricatures in the eyes of the Japs. The human race was poorly represented.’⁸⁵

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ Barbara W. Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China*, New York: Macmillan, 1970.

After Isitt had signed, General MacArthur announced that that concluded the business, and walked off, followed by all the other signatories, returning to Admiral Halsey's cabin for a cup of coffee. While this was taking place, a mass flypast flew over at 1000 feet, which Isitt was able to witness from the Admiral's deck, and which he found a wonderful and moving sight.⁸⁶ Isitt had taken with him as Personal Assistant, Lieutenant J.D. Allingham, R.N.Z.N.V.R. from Auckland who served him well. Allingham was from *H.M.N.Z.S. Gambia*, and was the only other New Zealander present at the Surrender Ceremony. As each Allied representative prepared to sign the document, he was given two pens, one of which he retained, while handing the other to his personal aide. When it came to Isitt's turn, there were no more pens, and he was compelled to use his own. This pen now forms part of the Air force Museum Collection. Lieutenant Allingham later commented ruefully, in a broadcast from the *Gambia* relayed through the British Battleship *H.M.S. Duke of York*, 'I was therefore the unlucky aide.'⁸⁷

Isitt stayed on board *Missouri* until about 11.00 a.m. before returning to the *Duke of York*. All the British naval party came on board, and the celebrations were continued in the wardroom before a late lunch. After lunch, Sir Bruce Fraser decided that it would be fitting to close the day with what is known as a Musical Sunset, which Isitt found an appropriate ending to a memorable day.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Isitt, *Visit to Japan*, Thodey Papers.

⁸⁷ ANZ, Air 117/25 *Japanese Surrender*.

⁸⁸ Isitt, *Visit to Japan*, Thodey Papers.

Isitt arranged to go ashore in Tokyo, and was impressed by the physical condition of the people. The attitude of the civilians was not in the least hostile, being as interested in their visitors as the latter were of them. Isitt was surprised at the unkempt state of many military installations, and remarked that no attempt had been made to clean things up, resulting in a state of filth which seemed impossible.⁸⁹

When the time came to return to New Zealand, Admiral Halsey approved Isitt's Lodestar using the naval air base at Yokosuka, and this was the first British aircraft to visit the Tokyo area. The aircraft took off at 10 a.m. on 5 September and had a quick look at Yokohama and Tokyo from the air, flying over the Emperor's Palace. The flight proceeded direct to Okinawa. The next leg was to Manila, then on to Palau. Los Negros was the next stop and here Isitt talked to the officers and men, before departing for Bougainville. The succeeding leg was to Santo, where they stayed the night, then continued to Noumea, where Isitt had dinner with the Commander, South Pacific. Take off for New Zealand was at 11.00p.m., with a dawn arrival. The elapsed time from Tokyo to Auckland was 86 hours, which involved 44 hours flying.⁹⁰

He had arrived back on a Sunday, and attended a Press Conference in Wellington the following day. Over the course of the next few weeks, he gave several interviews and speeches on his experiences, and was asked his

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

views on the conditions in Japan as well as the future prospects of the nation. Articles appeared in the *Evening Star* (11 September), *Standard* (13 September), *Dominion* (21 September), while the *Press* featured the Musical Sunset on 17 September, and the *Weekly News* of 19 September had a pictorial summary of the Surrender Ceremony.⁹¹

Plans for the disestablishment of Pacific units were put into operation immediately upon the cessation of hostilities, and arrangements were made to carry out large-scale repatriations by air and sea. The first step was the disbandment of four fighter squadrons, followed shortly after by a further four. Its mission complete, the New Zealand Air Task Force was disbanded on 31 October 1945, and in its place a small administrative headquarters was set up in Fiji known as Islands Group. This was necessary to administer and ensure the welfare of those personnel left behind at various Pacific bases engaged in the guarding and disposal of equipment. The disbandment of Field Headquarters at Bougainville, Guadalcanal, Jacquinot Bay, Los Negros, Emirau and Green Island was effected, and finally the evacuation of disposal parties from these bases enabled the disbandment of Islands Group on 1 March 1946.⁹²

Most of the personnel in the Pacific were returned by specially augmented RNZAF air transport services, while the *SS Wahine* made three trips from New Zealand to Bougainville in rapid succession and repatriated a total of

⁹¹ ANZ Air 117/25 *Japanese Surrender*.

⁹² ANZ Air 39/1/3 *Annual Report Pt 45 1945/46* p.6.

1716 personnel.⁹³ At the same time large numbers of aircrew personnel were arriving by sea from England and the India-Burma theatre.⁹⁴

To carry out the procedure of release in New Zealand, three Non-Effective Pools were set up - one each in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, and with a capacity of 80-100 personnel per day each. These Pools arranged final medical and x-ray actions, made pay allowances and mufti grants, advised personnel of their rehabilitation prospects, issued travel documents and final discharge papers. In addition to the release of ex-overseas personnel, the Pools also handled large numbers of personnel from New Zealand units where speedier releases could be obtained from the Pools in preference to local stations. Between V-J Day and the end of March 1946, 26,928 personnel were released from the RNZAF.⁹⁵

The 1946 Annual Report went on to note: 'Personnel have been released in accordance with a uniform system of priorities throughout the service which cannot give special consideration to the value of individuals to the Air Force. Consequently the loss of key personnel must be accepted even to the impairment of the Service in respect of its residual flying commitments.' As Isitt signed the Report, he must have concurred with these statements, which were consistent with his position in various communications with the Minister of Defence. While the rate of discharge was in accordance with the Government's wishes, lack of clear government intentions also caused major

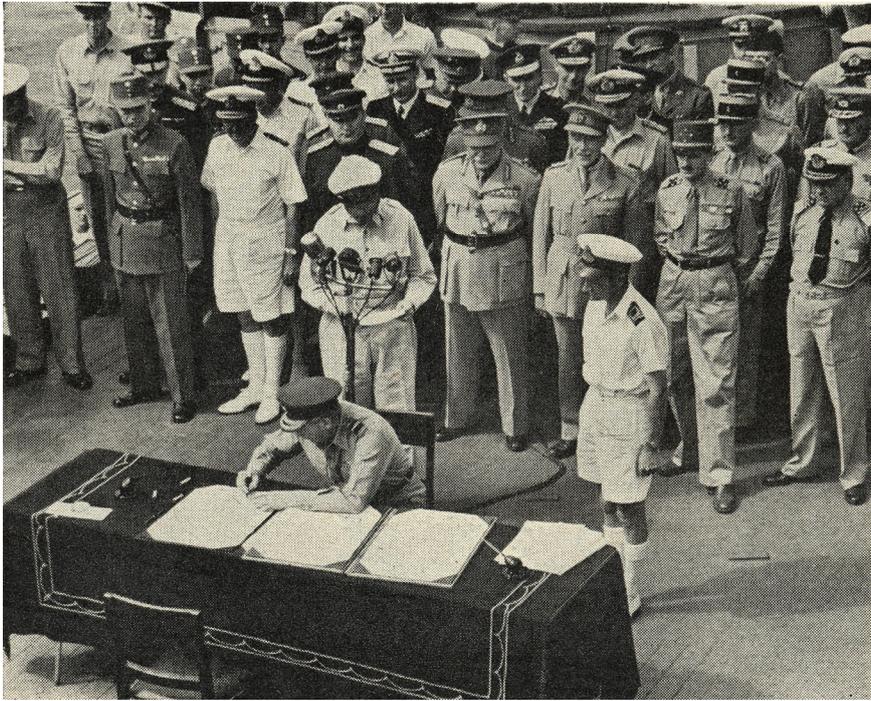
⁹³ ANZ EA1 87/4/5 Pt. 2A, Signal Isitt to RAAF, 6 September 1945,

⁹⁴ ANZ Air 39/1/3 *Annual Report Pt. 45, 1945/46.*

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

problems regarding the future composition and size of the RNZAF, creating many headaches for Isitt.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ *ibid.*



*'ANZ Air 118 64 Vol.20'
Isitt signing Surrender Document*



*Japanese Surrender Ceremony (Thodey Collection)
Isitt far right front row*



Isitt signing Surrender Document (ANZ, Misc 46)

Whilst the routine repatriation flights from the South-West Pacific Area were the priority for the Transport Squadrons, there was another humanitarian problem arising in South-East Asia. On 15 August 1945, the day that hostilities officially ended against Japan, Wing Commander de Lange, the RNZAF Liaison Officer in South East Asia, who was based in New Delhi, signalled Isitt suggesting that three RNZAF C47 Dakotas be made available for the evacuation of New Zealand prisoners of war from Singapore. De Lange pointed out that these aircraft would have a dual function, carrying medical supplies, food, clothing and other necessities for the prisoners of war on the outward trip, and evacuating the prisoners of war on the return trip.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ ANZ Air 118, 81L *Air Transport and Pacific Ferry*, Chapter VI, p.1.

Four RNZAF C47's were fitted as air ambulances and were ready to despatch from New Zealand after 21 August, but could not be despatched until the arrangements were confirmed by South East Asia Command.⁹⁸ On 24 August, South East Asia Command approved the RNZAF evacuation proposals, but pointed out that the airfield at Singapore was still not ready for use. In fact Allied forces did not land at Singapore until 5 September. In anticipation of this event, Wing Commander de Lange stated that he was endeavouring to go into Singapore with the first occupation forces, so that he could obtain a firm date as early as possible.⁹⁹

By 9 September the RNZAF aircraft had still not arrived in Singapore, nor had de Lange, and apparently both he and Air Department had omitted to inform the only New Zealand representative in Singapore that an evacuation was being planned. This representative was Junior Commander Dorothy Cranstone, who had gone to Singapore from New Delhi as a Public Relations and Welfare Officer. Junior Commander was a female Indian Army rank. Mrs Cranstone had met Group Captain Pirie, the former Director of Operations with the RNZAF, in Singapore, who had arranged for the transmission of the following signal to Isitt on 9 September:

Are you sending aircraft for our personnel stop If not expedite shipping stop Please raise all hell with Imperial Government about this stop Suggest reminding that half air personnel serving Malaya campaign New Zealanders stop...These men have

⁹⁸ *ibid*, p.3.

⁹⁹ *ibid*.

endured horrors so ghastly they cannot be told stop Therefore unable to stand strain this prolonged uncertainty now that fighting spirit which kept them going against the Japs no longer necessary stop...Prison camp doctors assure me food and drug position most serious...Please authorise me draw some money from RAF...I must have something tangible with which to sustain our prisoners.¹⁰⁰

The lack of liaison could probably be laid at the feet of de Lange, who finally arrived at Singapore on 12 September, the same day that the first two Dakotas of the RNZAF P.O.W. Evacuation Flight arrived in Singapore and landed at Kallang Airport.



Junior Commander Dorothy Cranstone, New Zealand journalist at New Delhi, and first New Zealand staffer at Singapore following end of war. (ANZ Air 118 64 Vol. 25 p.60)

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*, p.4.

Although the number evacuated was comparatively small, the speed of evacuation meant that the former prisoners, who were in poor physical condition, were able to return to New Zealand quickly and be in a position to receive proper medical care. The flights were an outstanding success, and the same praise could be bestowed on the post-war repatriation flights as well. Isitt was always unstinting in his approval of the Transport squadrons, and while the repatriation was a perfectly straightforward operation, it could not have occurred so smoothly if the transport system had not already been in existence. When the war ended, the RNZAF made determined efforts to return its personnel in the Pacific to New Zealand as soon as possible, and with the shortage of surface shipping it was decided to use air transport to maximum capacity. The majority of personnel in the area returned to New Zealand by air, and the Transport Squadrons did a remarkable job during the first four months after the war ended. Over 1000 men were brought back to New Zealand per month, and by the middle of December 1945, 4476 had been repatriated by air.¹⁰¹

This task, and its successful completion, ended the wartime activities of the Transport Squadrons, which the Narrative describes as ‘probably the most effective units operated by the RNZAF in the Pacific.’ However, the otherwise impeccable record of the Transport Squadron during the repatriation operations was marred by the loss of a Dakota on 24 September 1945 between Espiritu Santo and Norfolk Island. The aircraft was carrying

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

sixteen members of the RNZAF on repatriation beside the crew, and it disappeared never to be seen again.¹⁰²

The loss of this aircraft provoked an immediate reaction from the Leader of the Opposition, Mr S.G. Holland, who wrote to the Prime Minister about his concerns. He felt that by writing, he could urge that a comprehensive enquiry be instituted with a view to ensuring that every possible precaution was taken to avoid losses. While in war great risks were necessary, now that the conflict was over, every possible precaution should be taken, and speaking personally, Holland was doubtful whether any one or two engine aircraft should undertake long ocean flights with passengers. He was aware that the ratio of loss to flights undertaken was relatively small, but the hazards were still considerable. Holland concluded by offering cooperation in any enquiry.¹⁰³

Despite his disclaimer of political motives, it is extremely difficult to identify the reasons which prompted Holland to write his letter. He would have known that there was a shortage of surface transport, that the RNZAF was not equipped with operational four engine aircraft, and that the RNZAF would be holding a Court of Inquiry into the accident. There was a common bond of sympathy for the tragedy, and probably Holland was merely conveying the support of the Opposition to the loss.

¹⁰² ANZ Air 25/2/2336, *Loss of C47 Dakota 24 September 1945.*

¹⁰³ *ibid*, Holland to Fraser, 26 September 1945.

Isitt referred Holland's letter to Wing Commander E.A. Gibson, in order to draft a reply, which he did on 29 September 1945, entitled, *Notes on C47 Transport Aircraft*. These notes were incorporated in Isitt's response to the Minister of Defence on the same day.¹⁰⁴

This advised that a Court of Inquiry, with Group Captain C.E. Kay as President, had already assembled at Espiritu Santo to investigate and report on the loss of the aircraft. Isitt was personally most highly concerned at the very serious and regrettable loss of life, and every effort was being made to sift the limited evidence to determine the cause of the accident. At that stage, all the evidence pointed to some agency other than one attributable to a defect in the aircraft or engine being responsible for the loss.¹⁰⁵

Dakota aircraft were in use all over the world, and in the New Zealand Air Transport Service they had flown a total of approximately 38,250 hours to date, which represented 6,120,000 route miles, and until this happening, had been involved in no accidents injuring any passengers.¹⁰⁶

The problem which confronted the RNZAF was the evacuation of airmen and some Army personnel from the Pacific in the interests of early demobilization. There were still over 4,000 in the Islands and it was intended to evacuate the majority of these by air. The only aircraft then available were the Dakotas and Catalina flying-boats, both twin-engine

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*, Isitt to Jones, 29 September 1945.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*.

aircraft. The RNZAF was then also engaged in the repatriation of prisoners of war from Singapore and the Netherlands East Indies in Dakota aircraft, no other suitable aircraft being available. In addition, there were still in the Pacific 120 single engine Corsair aircraft which were held by the RNZAF under Lease-Lend. They represented approximately 20 million dollars, and were being flown back to New Zealand to facilitate their maintenance and storage, pending any decision as to their ultimate disposal. The Corsair return would limit the number of aircrew necessary to be retained in the Pacific, and these flights were escorted by twin-engine aircraft (Venturas), while an air/sea rescue organisation was maintained throughout the route.¹⁰⁷

The only alternative to flying aircraft and personnel back to New Zealand would be to wait until shipping was available, which would delay the return of a considerable number of Air Force personnel for many months. Isitt did not think that the hazard was such that it should not be accepted, but should the Government decide that aircraft and personnel be moved by ship, immediate action needed to be taken to reserve the necessary sea transport.¹⁰⁸

The Court of Inquiry could not establish any definite cause for the accident to NZ3526.¹⁰⁹ The Court considered it reasonable to suggest the probable cause of the accident was structural failure due to excessive stresses being

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*

imposed on the aircraft by turbulence as a result of flying into cumulus cloud.¹¹⁰

While the demobilization flights from the Islands to New Zealand continued, Isitt was concerned about the potential hollowing out of the RNZAF. Notwithstanding his papers of 10 April 1945 and 6 June 1945 addressed to the Minister of Defence, there still had been no positive response from Government regarding the manning of a post-war Air Force.¹¹¹ The other Chiefs of Staff had similar concerns, and the matter was fully discussed at the 149th Meeting of the Chiefs of Staff Committee held on Friday, 12 October 1945, under the heading, 'Post-War Defence Policy - Strength and Character of New Zealand Armed Forces.'¹¹² Among the matters discussed, Isitt claimed that the Air Force found itself without sufficient regular personnel to meet the immediate post-war problems of demobilization, care and accounting of equipment, occupational forces and air transport.¹¹³

Meanwhile, Isitt had forwarded to McIntosh a copy of a paper prepared by Nevill on the Post-War Air Force.¹¹⁴ Although authored by Nevill, it had been prepared at Isitt's request, and consisted of 37 pages, typed double space on foolscap. It embraced three Parts, with the first Part covering a General Survey of Post-War Security while the other Parts covered Organisation and Strengths of the RNZAF, and Administration.¹¹⁵ Isitt stressed that the report

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ ANZ EA1 Acc W2619 87/4/10 pt. 1 *Post War Air Force.*

¹¹² *ibid.*

¹¹³ *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, Isitt to McIntosh, 23 November 1945,

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*

at that stage could not be treated as official, but he was in general agreement with the proposals, and thought that if any matter touching on the post-war RNZAF was raised while McIntosh was overseas with the Prime Minister, the report could be of some value as a general guide.¹¹⁶

The copy submitted to McIntosh contained a number of hand-written amendments made by Isitt. Probably the most important related to the annual expenditure of running the RNZAF on a suggested five squadron basis. Nevill thought that this would be £1,250,000 rising to £1,500,000. Realising that this would place the RNZAF in a straightjacket, Isitt had amended these figures as rising to £2,000,000. Even though the war had been over less than three months, considerable emphasis was placed on Imperial defence in the Paper. 'It is sufficient to state that the Dominion of New Zealand, by reason of sentiment and self-interest, will contribute towards Imperial defence to the maximum of her resources.'¹¹⁷

This was a particularly important paper prepared by Nevill, who was going to succeed Isitt as CAS within six months. The paper set the framework for the post-war RNZAF, and foreshadowed the economic restraints which were going to be applied to the service.

In the 1946 New Year Honours Isitt was made a K.B.E.¹¹⁸ Isitt was presented with his award at a Ceremony in Wellington later in the year.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹¹⁸ C.M. Hanson, *By Such Deeds*. Christchurch: Volplane Press, 2001, pp. 271-2,

However, the manning problems of the RNZAF were not going away, and Isitt was again forced to write to the Minister of Defence.¹¹⁹ There was continuing discontent throughout the ground personnel of the RNZAF owing to the inability of the service to release some 3,500 airmen who comprised the remaining group who requested their immediate demobilization on the cessation of hostilities, some six months previously. At the time of writing, there was an unsettled dispute at Whenuapai affecting over one hundred airmen, arising from a deputation who had conveyed to the Commanding Officer the intention to refuse duty if immediate release was not granted. The increasing disciplinary problems arising from the attitude of personnel, coupled with the fact that the standard and output of work had deteriorated to a disquieting extent, had brought about a position which necessitated the introduction of such measures as would ensure the release of remaining personnel with the minimum of delay.¹²⁰

Isitt desired to see that such releases were given effect to by 31 March 1946, but was unable to ignore the fact that on the then current indications, less than 2,000 airmen would remain in the Service after that date. There was no assurance that those available would represent a balanced force capable of maintaining even a greatly reduced flying programme within New Zealand, without mentioning a reserve squadron for the occupation forces in Japan. In addition to the effect on flying activities, it was also evident that administrative matters such as the payment of gratuities and the custody and maintenance of stores would be seriously affected, as well as services

¹¹⁹ ANZ EA1 87/4/10 Pt. 1, Isitt to Jones, 28 January 1946,

¹²⁰ *ibid.*

upon which Civil Aviation depended. In view of these problems, the RNZAF was anxious to dovetail the releases with a programme of volunteers so as to ensure the provision of the minimum number of personnel to maintain the continuing commitments of the Service. By following such an approach, the Service could probably give effect to all demobilization requests by 31 March 1946.¹²¹

In order to implement this plan it was desirable to obtain a prompt decision reflecting the rates of pay which were to be substituted for the existing war rates. Rates of pay for the permanent post-war Air Force were then under consideration by the Uniformity Committee, which was seeking a greater degree of uniformity between the pay rates applying to the three Services. As the Committee was unlikely to reach a prompt decision, Isitt recommended that the Minister agree to the continuation of the current pay rates until 31 March 1947, with an indication of the approximate rates likely to be payable after 31 March 1947, in order to give prospective applicants some indication of their future position.¹²²

In keeping with these sentiments, Isitt asked for approval to call for applications for service in the Interim Air Force. Anybody enlisting in the Interim Air Force would receive priority for appointment to the Permanent Air Force, when conditions for the latter had been finalised. Isitt felt that his proposals would allow the Air Force to carry out an orderly and prompt scheme of demobilization, which would meet with the general approval of

¹²¹ *ibid.*

¹²² *ibid.*

the public and personnel concerned, while being the most economical method of achieving the result.¹²³

At that time Isitt was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, a meeting of which was called on 30 January 1946, at the request of the Minister of Defence following his receipt of Isitt's letter of 28 January. The proceedings of this meeting were conveyed by Isitt to Jones in a letter which advised that the Chiefs of the General Staff and Naval Staff were of the opinion that for the Air Force to accept a policy to release all personnel who did not wish to continue to serve, would be embarrassing to their Service.¹²⁴ However, Isitt accepted that the Air Force could conform to the Army position of release on priority within location, and was willing to adopt this approach. He accordingly requested the Minister to approve applications being called for service in the Interim Air Force up to the pre-war establishment approved by Cabinet of 220 officers and 1,800 airmen. The applications were to be in accordance with the terms outlined in Isitt's letter of 28 January.¹²⁵

The Chiefs of Staff Committee presented their deliberations in COS Paper No (46) 1, which was incorporated in a Cabinet Minute approved on 4 February 1946.¹²⁶ Jones issued a Press Release which was reported in the *Evening Post* of 5 February 1946, quoting that at the end of January, the strength of the RNZAF in New Zealand was between 7,000 and 8,000, while the Pacific

¹²³ *ibid.*

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, Isitt to Jones, 31 January 1946.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, C.O.S. Paper, 31 January 1946.

strength was 592. With Cabinet approval for the establishment of an Interim Air Force, the first recruits under the new recruiting policy entered camp at Hobsonville and Wigram on 25 March 1946.¹²⁷

The Annual Report of the Chief of Air Staff For the year ended 31 March 1946 was the first post-war Report to be issued on a non-restricted basis, and the opportunity was taken to review the development of the RNZAF throughout the war.¹²⁸ This review revealed that the peak strength of the RNZAF was reached in May 1944 at 42,488 which by 31 March 1946 had fallen to 7,154, of which 5,852 were in New Zealand, 721 in the Pacific and 581 with the RCAF and RAF.¹²⁹

With the establishment of the New Zealand Component of the joint occupation forces in Japan, a request was made for this area to be supplied by a Transport Squadron, and accordingly the existing squadrons were reorganised. No. 40 Squadron was tasked with the running of a quasi-civil service within New Zealand and the South Pacific pending the establishment of a civil operating agency. No. 41 Squadron was organised on the basis of maintaining a service to Japan. A decision was also made that the RNZAF should be represented in the occupational force in Japan, and No. 14 Squadron was reformed at Ardmore, where it underwent an extensive

¹²⁷ *ibid.*

¹²⁸ ANZ Air 39/1/3 *Annual Report Part 45 1945/46.*

¹²⁹ *ibid.*

training period. It embarked aboard *H.M.S. Glory* on March 8 and departed for Japan, after Isitt inspected the farewell parade.¹³⁰

From V-J Day onwards the main efforts of the Pacific squadrons were directed against rounding up the remnants of the Japanese forces within the sphere of operations of the South- West Pacific Area. This involved patrolling, supervising and enforcing the terms of surrender until such time as the enemy forces were brought under control. When this work was completed, the personnel and equipment were returned to New Zealand. At 31 March 1946 only three operational squadrons remained: a bomber squadron at Ohakea; a fighter squadron in Japan and a Flying Boat Squadron at Lauthala Bay, Fiji.¹³¹

During the year there had been a net increase of two in the number of aircraft on charge to the RNZAF, but the situation was completely different from the preceding year. In March 1945, out of a total of 1,328 aircraft over 1,000 were in use, whereas in March 1946 out of 1,330 over 1,000 were in storage. One hundred and fifteen aircraft had been received in the year, including 30 Mustangs, and 113 had been destroyed or sold. Only 38 aircraft had been lost overseas.¹³²

The RNZAF was divided into two sections at that time, comprising those desirous of service with National Airways Corporation, and those desirous of

¹³⁰ *ibid.*

¹³¹ *ibid.*

¹³² *ibid.*

permanent service with the RNZAF. Until the civil organisation was divorced from the RNZAF, administrative problems would remain unsolved.¹³³

Isitt had kept in touch with Prime Minister Fraser, who offered him the position of Chairman of National Airways Corporation, and the task of creating an airline from scratch. The same Gazette of 20 May 1946, announced the retirement of Isitt from the RNZAF and his appointment as Chairman of National Airways Corporation.¹³⁴

Following the end of the war, Isitt spent time on resolving a number of personal matters. In July 1945 the Director of Medical Services had referred him to an Auckland consultant, Selwyn Morris. Isitt had suffered with a history of pains in the cervical region, for which he had had received treatment in Rotorua. The pains were intermittent and variable, and were made worse by massage. In April 1945, Barrow as Air Secretary had approved massage treatment for Isitt from masseurs employed by Dr Gillies in Wellington. He was being treated three days a week, and the cost of treatment was borne by Air Department. Morris concluded that Isitt was suffering from irritable necritis of the third Cervical area, due to degenerative changes in the Cervical spine secondary to an old trauma.¹³⁵ The condition seemed more of a nuisance than a serious disability, requiring only placebo medication, but in the event of the symptoms becoming

¹³³ *ibid*, Directorate of Postings, p.6.

¹³⁴ Isitt *Personal File 1002*, NZDF Personnel Archives, Trentham.

¹³⁵ *ibid*.

incapacitating, an operation would be necessary to avulse the third Cervical nerve root.¹³⁶

In September 1945, Isitt also had an eye examination. He had worn glasses for some years, but now required stronger lenses for close work, which were duly prescribed.¹³⁷

The following year, in July, he had as part of his discharge, a Chest X-Ray which revealed no abnormalities, and a full medical examination. This listed two disabilities; traumatic arthritis-cervical of the spine and dermatitis. His medical grading was reduced from A1B to A2B but he was still assessed as being fit for limited piloting duties, ground duties in New Zealand and overseas, and for a light or sedentary occupation.¹³⁸ Following this examination, the Director of Medical Services (Air) issued a certificate stating that Sir Leonard Isitt was in good health.¹³⁹

There was also the matter of eligibility for medals. Air Commodore Bannerman had written to the Adjutant-General questioning Isitt's eligibility for the award of the New Zealand Long and Efficient Service Medal, which was finally awarded in July 1945.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ *ibid.*

¹³⁷ *ibid.*

¹³⁸ *ibid.*

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*

Bannerman also interceded on Isitt's behalf in October 1945, advising the administrative section of Air Department that Isitt qualified for the 1939-45 and Pacific Stars, and the Defence Medal.¹⁴¹

Isitt's next award was the American Legion of Merit (Degree of Commander), which was announced in the *New Zealand Gazette* of 10 January 1946. Isitt's final medal claim was made in April 1950, when he applied for the 1939-45 Star, Pacific Star, Defence Medal, War Medal and N.Z. War Service Medal, all of which were subsequently issued.¹⁴² When added to his 1914-15 Star, British War Medal and Victory Medal from World War One and 1935 Silver Jubilee Medal, he was able to wear thirteen decorations.¹⁴³

Although Isitt took regular leave during the inter-war period, when he returned to New Zealand in 1943, he took only three periods of leave until his final retirement from the RNZAF, whereupon he became eligible for three months' release leave which expired on 19 September 1946. Effectively, his active service with the RNZAF ceased on 15 May 1946.¹⁴⁴

He had joined the Public Service Superannuation Fund on 15 November 1919, with a retirement date of 27 July 1946, when he reached the age of 55. His retirement consequent to his transfer to the Retired List of Officers took place on 18 September 1946, at which point his annual salary was

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*

¹⁴² *ibid.*

¹⁴³ Errol W. Martyn, *Swift to the Sky*, Rosedale: Penguin, 2010, p.170.

¹⁴⁴ Isitt *Personal File 1002*.

£1418.0.0. Isitt's pension amounted to £610.7.0 per annum, commencing on 18 September 1946.¹⁴⁵

One of Isitt's final acts as Chief of the Air Staff was a letter to the Minister of Defence regarding his retirement. He referred to a conversation with the Minister that morning, and requested that he be allowed to relinquish his appointment as Chief of the Air Staff and Commander of the Royal New Zealand Air Force with effect from 15 May 1946 to permit his appointment as Chairman of Directors of New Zealand National Airways.¹⁴⁶ He also recommended that Air Commodore Nevill be appointed Acting Chief of the Air Staff pending final approval of the appointment. His final request was that he be posted to the Retired List in his present rank, with permission to wear the uniform of the rank on appropriate official occasions.¹⁴⁷ Cabinet approved Isitt's retirement on 17 May 1946, which the Air Board endorsed the same day.¹⁴⁸

The final entry took place in the *New Zealand Gazette* of 21 November 1946:

Retired List
Air Vice-Marshal Sir Leonard Monk Isitt KBE is placed on the Retired List.
Dated 18 September 1946
F. Jones, Minister of Defence.¹⁴⁹

After 31 years of service, Isitt was retiring from Air Force life, to take up new challenges as a civilian. He had never been separated from civilian

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, *New Zealand Gazette*, No. 83, 21 November 1946, p. 1769.

aviation, as it had been an integral part of his life during the inter-war years, and in his final period as CAS he ensured that planning was in place for post-war civil aviation, and the lessons learned by the RNZAF during the war years could be employed to positive effect.

However, the question must be asked as to how well Isitt performed in his role as CAS? Because the position is a political appointment, the main criterion must be how well did he serve his political masters? In general, it must be acknowledged that he succeeded very well, carrying out the role which he perceived that the Government required, and retaining their confidence in the process. The fact that at the end of his service career he was picked for the role of Chairman of the National Airways Corporation, reflects the level of reliance which the Government had in him. NAC was a political creation, and the potential existed for embarrassing political questions, so the Government wished to ensure that the corporation was in safe hands. Their experience of Isitt's performance in the war years, gave them the necessary confidence.

Isitt was always particularly proud of New Zealand's contribution to the Empire Air Training Scheme.¹⁵⁰ He had been involved in the Scheme since its inception, serving on the Advisory Board in Canada, and he always ensured that New Zealand over-achieved in respect of its commitments. Effectively, the whole of the output from the South Island stations was devoted to this cause, and during its operation nearly 10,000 aircrew were supplied to the

¹⁵⁰ I. McGibbon (Ed), pp.156-7.

RAF. This contribution of skilled personnel ranks very highly as one of New Zealand's major contributions to the war in Europe, and in some ways it could be argued that it was the most important.

In the Pacific the RNZAF again made a major contribution to the war against Japan. With 20 operational squadrons, nearly 45,000 personnel and over 1,100 aircraft by mid-1944, it had developed into a very large organisation, and it was Isitt's continuing concern that it was used effectively. Prior to this time, the RNZAF had had an active combat role, but as the war moved progressively north and west, Isitt had to work tirelessly to retain this role. It would have been very simple to allow the RNZAF to adopt a garrison role, which would have needed fewer personnel, and carried with it, reduced risk, but Isitt did not consider that this was appropriate as it did not reflect the Government's wishes. He kept the force balanced, and obtained for them a role in the South-West Pacific Area, which although a backwater, still contained large numbers of belligerent Japanese forces. A more active role was not possible, as this probably would have required converting the RNZAF to carrier operations. By this stage of the war, the Americans were amply supplied with combat squadrons, and the difficulties of fitting in the relatively small RNZAF were just too great. The political consequences of the Canberra Pact were such that so far as the Americans were concerned, the RNZAF was unlikely to operate in other than formerly mandated British territory. The RNZAF continued to be fully occupied to the end of the Pacific War, carrying out an active role in support of Australian forces, and ensuring that the spirit of Anzac was not dead.

During the last year of the war, New Zealand passed through a very difficult period. The pools of available manpower had almost dried up, and the active war had receded from New Zealand's shores. Increasing demands were being made for New Zealand's produce, and some politicians felt that New Zealand's contribution could be better met by concentrating in this area, rather than on the armed forces. Press criticism of the Air Force led to a falling off in public confidence in the Service, and during this period Isitt had a difficult balancing act to achieve. Some servicemen felt that they were underemployed, and that the RNZAF was not being utilised effectively, while there was a general public feeling felt that there were too many Air Force personnel in New Zealand not carrying out essential roles.

Many of Isitt's problems were brought about by the Government, either through action or inaction. The Canberra Pact of 1944 elicited significant negative reaction from the United States of America, who perceived the Pact as an attempt by Australia and New Zealand to carve up the Pacific after the war. Admiral King in particular, was very hostile, and there appears little doubt that his views were reflected in the State Department. The objectives of the Pact should have been explained and published in a better manner, but the repercussions were such that the RNZAF were never going to have a more active role than Isitt managed to achieve. The major American activity at this time involved the capture of islands to act as bases for the final invasion of Japan. Unless retrained in carrier operations, there was no way in which the New Zealand Fighter Squadrons could be involved, and the Americans were not going to allow this to happen. While he

retained his very close relationships with many top American commanders, the war had moved on, and he could not have obtained more for the RNZAF.

Another area in which the Government could have assisted was in combating the unfavourable press publicity which resulted in a lowering of public opinion about the RNZAF. The government would not approve any concerted response by the RNZAF and as result the service was diminished in the general public's eyes for the remainder of the war.

The Cabinet also failed to give any clear direction to Isitt in the over-hasty demobilization which took place at the end of the war. Notwithstanding Isitt's repeated pleas for some sort of indication as to the level of manning for the post-war RNZAF, no advice was given, and manning dropped to dangerously low levels without any regard for the needs of the RNZAF. It was not until Isitt proffered the suggestion of an interim air force that the Government reacted at all, and the rot was excised. Isitt conformed to the Cabinet's request for a speedy demobilization, but this should not have been effected without some appreciation of the consequences.

But perhaps the greatest cause for concern to Isitt related to the continuing manpower probes which were instituted in 1944. Isitt endeavoured to be as co-operative as possible, but he still had a war to run, and the conflicting demands on his time were enormous. There is no doubt that administrative procedures in the RNZAF from its inception in 1937, were not of a high order, and when combined with a general disinterest in management matters displayed by most station commanders, over staffing did take place

in many areas.¹⁵¹ The Air Force only received the lower medical graded personnel after the Army had had first choice, and the general low standard of fitness prevented many personnel from serving overseas, as well as causing complications when it came to rotating personnel for service in the Islands. Whilst he fought every measure which he thought was unproductive, Isitt had no qualms about accepting the Government directive of July 1945 to reduce staffing levels by approximately half. The War was nearly at an end, although at the time nobody knew just how close that was.

When peace came, Isitt was chosen to sign the Japanese Surrender document on behalf of New Zealand. It was a fitting tribute to the role which he undertook. He had commanded the largest New Zealand Air Force ever to be assembled, and had commanded it well. He had supplied leadership to a superb fighting force, which made a significant and positive contribution to the Allied effort in the Pacific war, as well as supplying personnel to the European Theatre of Operations. Whereas in previous conflicts in which New Zealand had been involved, the Army was the chief contributor, during World War II the RNZAF assisted to a major degree,

¹⁵¹ Bentley, pp.139-40.

Chapter 11: Post-War 1946-1976

When Isitt retired from the RNZAF in May 1946 to resume civilian life, there were a number of factors which had a bearing on his next seventeen years of service. First was the economic condition of New Zealand, which had not recovered from the Depression of the thirties before being plunged into the Second World War. The development of the country's infrastructure had been put on hold during the War, and post-war shortages of many critical items caused delays in the development of most projects. This was of particular significance in relation to airports, with only Whenuapai and Ohakea being capable of accepting international flights.

Another factor which had to be recognised was that Isitt had not been a civilian since 1915, with all his time during the intervening thirty-one years being spent in the armed services. In the simpler environment of the 1940's and 1950's as compared with today, Isitt's background enabled him to cope with the demands of the various positions he held.¹

The third over-riding factor was the prevailing political climate. The Labour policy of 'socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange' resulted in the nationalisation of New Zealand airlines during the

¹ Maurice Clarke, *Clarke Papers*, 'Now it can be told.'

period 1945-47,² coupled with two basic resolves. The first was to maintain the monopoly of Tasman Empire Airways Limited (TEAL) on Trans-Tasman services, and the second was to restrict Government participation in international airlines to partnerships. This policy had an over-arching effect on the three airlines with which Isitt became intimately associated - New Zealand National Airways Corporation (NAC), TEAL, and British Commonwealth Pacific Airlines (BCPA). He eventually became Chairman of both NAC and TEAL, as well as the New Zealand nominee director on the board of BCPA.

The genesis of NAC arose from a New Zealand Government committee created in 1943 to report on air transport, and to assess how it could be developed in the hands of a single authority. Legislation was finally introduced in November 1945 by the Minister in charge of Civil Aviation, the Honourable F. Jones, as the New Zealand National Airways Bill. The Bill, empowering a state corporation to acquire existing airlines and operate internal and external air services, provoked strenuous Opposition protests, requiring the government to apply urgency. It was passed on 28 November, and approved by the Legislative Council next day.³

While the passing of the National Airways Act created little reaction among the general public, it held wider interest for politicians and newspaper leader writers. As early as February 1946, *Whites Aviation* was speculating

² Driscoll, pp161-2.

³ *ibid*, pp.3-4; Aimer, pp.21-24.

as to possible NAC Board appointments, and in their opinion, Isitt was odds-on favourite for the position of Chairman:

Len Isitt has a name as a leader of men, as an organiser of considerable genius in the Service, and as the man whose firm but tactful handling of the Executive end of the Air Force has won wide admiration and immense popularity. Unlike many Service officers who fail to see any other side in aviation, Sir Leonard has kept up-to-date on world-wide air transport developments, and it is maintained that as his term as CAS will shortly be up, his wide knowledge and experience should not be passed over, but utilised in the critical early organising which will follow the selection of the board of directors.⁴

Finally, on 10 August, the long-awaited announcement took place. The four members comprised James S. Hunter (Wellington) deputy chairman, F.W. Mothes (Northland), H.Worrall (Canterbury), and W.W. Hynes (Palmerston North). The board brought with it varied experience in the transport industry and commercial aviation, as well as a reasonable geographical spread of representation.⁵

The first NAC Board Meeting took place in a room on the sixth floor of the Government Department Building, Stout Street, Wellington on 15 August 1946. Campbell reported that Isitt told his fellow board members:

We are on the verge of revolutionary changes in air transport. NAC is to operate services to Norfolk Island, New Caledonia, Fiji, Samoa, the Cook Islands, Tonga, the Chatham Islands and any other islands in

⁴ *Whites Aviation*, February 1946, p.7.

⁵ *Whites Aviation*, September 1946, p.2; Campbell p.6; Aimer p.29.

the Pacific of regional interest to New Zealand.

We are to amalgamate the functions of Union Airways of New Zealand Ltd, Cook Strait Airways Ltd, Air Travel (N.Z.) Ltd and of the RNZAF's transport services. Initially it will be necessary for the existing RNZAF air transport services to continue operating under service control till their aircraft can be converted for civil operation and they and their personnel can be absorbed into the corporation.⁶

Earlier in the day the Board had met the Prime Minister Peter Fraser, the Minister of Finance Walter Nash and the Minister in charge of Civil Aviation, Frederick Jones. Fraser indicated that the Corporation was to approach its problems from the viewpoint of a public utility rather than from that of a profit-seeking organisation. He also intimated that the Government wanted air fares to be reduced as soon as possible.⁷

Isitt had been very much of a one man band during the three months prior to the appointment of his fellow directors. He had acquired aircraft from the RNZAF, but acted in a scrupulously ethical manner to ensure that there was no conflict of interest. He did not institute any enquiries until after his retirement from the RNZAF took effect, and always ensured that he adhered to the proper channels of communication.⁸ Because of the housing shortage at the time, he had bought homes for station engineers, as well as engineering facilities at Palmerston North. In addition he had arranged

⁶ Campbell, p.7.

⁷ *ibid*, pp.7-8.

⁸ ANZ, Air 1 36/35/ 2 *Dakota Aircraft Disposal*.

contracts for aircraft overhaul and maintenance. At their initial meeting, the Board ratified Isitt's actions.⁹

It was not until 1 April 1947 that NAC aircraft 'officially' took the air, and in the fifteen months between the signing of the National Airways Act and the formal liquidation of Union Airways on 31 March 1947, there was a smooth transition to state control.¹⁰ Assisting in the transition was the continuing involvement of the Union Steam Ship Company at a managerial and operational level, overseen by F. Maurice Clarke, the General Manager of Union Airways.¹¹ Clarke accompanied Isitt on a tour of the country, visiting all the main trunk aerodromes to assess their facilities and the needs of the new airline,¹² as well as on a trip to Australia in May 1946, investigating Australian airlines as well as checking the availability of suitable aircraft.¹³ Clarke was subsequently appointed General Manager to the Corporation.¹⁴

The Committee which drew up the proposals for the government operation of flying services advised strongly against trying to dominate the whole air transport field, and should operate main trunk routes only. However, Government direction stipulated that NAC should serve the entire country.¹⁵ By 1948 NAC found itself with a disparate fleet of 39 aircraft. It created a low utilisation situation, resulting in inefficient use of capital, equipment

⁹ Campbell, pp.8-9.

¹⁰ Aimer, p.28.

¹¹ *ibid*, p.31; Campbell pp. 11-12.

¹² Aimer p.30; *Clarke Papers*, Press release, 31 July 1946.

¹³ *Whites Aviation*, July 1946, p.8.

¹⁴ *Clarke Papers*, Isitt/Clarke, 19 August 1946.

¹⁵ Campbell, p.18.

and labour.¹⁶ Losses started to mount and even though NAC was a statutory corporation, it did not have a warrant for economic profligacy.



*Isitt and Defence Chiefs greet Lord and Lady Mountbatten, Ohakea, 1945.
(ANZ Air 118 64 Vol. 20 p.141)*

¹⁶ Campbell, pp.26-7.



Isitt and Duke of Edinburgh c.1959 (Thodey Collection)

In 1949 a new Government came to power, wedded to private enterprise.¹⁷ Within three months of taking office, the new Minister of Civil Aviation, W.S. Goosman, was attacking the price of air travel. Goosman offered NAC for sale, 'lock, stock and barrel.' He announced that as soon as private enterprise was ready to take over after fulfilling Government requirements, the Government proposed to withdraw completely from the field of internal air services. The same day, the Leader of the Opposition, Peter Fraser told

¹⁷ Campbell, p.31.

Parliament that, if NAC was sold, Labour would buy it back on resuming the Treasury benches.¹⁸

To implement its decisions, the Government set up an interdepartmental 'Disposal Committee,' of which Isitt formed part, to work out procedures and conditions for the sale. The NAC directors had assumed that the proposals would conform to the Government's election policy of injecting private capital into the airline, and in January Isitt had supplied Goosman with a paper outlining methods of achieving this aim. From within the Government's Disposal Committee, Isitt defended the Corporation, by slowing down the action, and by arguing the case against dismemberment. He was confident that the Corporation would attain profitability, and suggested deferring moves to sell for say two years 'when the disposal could be undertaken under infinitely better financial conditions.' While the Committee failed to accept his two year deferral, they accepted his other proposals to maintain the integrity of the main trunk and major secondary routes, as well as not allowing overseas interests to take over and operate New Zealand's domestic services, and incorporated them in their recommendations.¹⁹

Behind the scenes Clarke was working strenuously to thwart a prospective sale or break-up of the Corporation, and put forward a proposal to purchase the Corporation outright.²⁰ However, the Government's aviation policy was

¹⁸ *ibid*, p.33.

¹⁹ Aimer, pp.50-2.

²⁰ ATL, Clarke Papers 1388, *MS Papers 679-053*, Clarke/Holland, 14 July 1950.

unsettling in the face of the Korean War and the uncertainty in industrial relations created by the waterfront strike. A new Minister of Civil Aviation, T.L. Macdonald had been appointed to replace Goosman. Macdonald did not hold the same unsympathetic views towards NAC. Finally in July 1952, the Government announced that the sale or reorganisation of NAC was off, and the existing system of Corporation control would continue.²¹

Because of NAC's mounting losses in this period of political manoeuvring, tensions had arisen between the Board and Clarke, which were exacerbated by Clarke's attempts to put together a takeover proposal. During the abortive sale process, considerable criticism had been levelled at the NAC Board, with charges that it lacked commercial expertise. It was expected that changes would be announced early in 1952, but nothing happened, and Isitt was forced to suggest to his fellow directors that they plan and act as though there was no limiting period to their tenure. Eventually, in May 1952, the Cabinet finally announced new appointments, replacing Mothes and Hynes with J.Seabrook (Auckland) and J.G. Jeffery (Dunedin). While two experienced businessmen had come onto the Board, the appointments suggested continuity more than change at the board policy level. By mid-1952 Clarke was convinced that the position would not improve as the Minister of Civil Aviation was 'overawed' by Isitt, while Seabrook was a great friend of Isitt and would do as he requested. In July Clarke resigned.²²

²¹ Aimer, pp.54-5.

²² Aimer, pp. 60-1; Clarke, *These are the Facts*, p.8.

Life was not easy for Isitt in the first seven years of NAC's life. It is significant that NAC's 1950 Annual Report contains a detailed account of the Board's stewardship. Equally significant was Campbell's comment that Isitt, 'unlike another aviation personality of the day', did not go near the then Minister of Civil Aviation until it became evident that the Government was veering away from its 'sell NAC' course. Instead he made frequent calls on the most influential of the Minister's aviation advisers.'²³ Campbell was obviously referring to Shanahan, without specifically naming him. During this period Shanahan was involved in all aviation matters at a Government level. Isitt knew him intimately, and Shanahan, in turn, had confidence in Isitt's handling of aviation matters. Isitt felt that the Government's decision to offer NAC for sale had not been thought through, and worked to have this decision overturned. In this he was successful.

However, better times were around the corner, as at last NAC had managed to obtain sufficient DC3's to commence its fleet rationalisation programme. Their introduction reduced the Corporation's loss in 1951 to £57,155, then came ten years of profits.²⁴

Back in 1946, at the first NAC Board Meeting, Isitt had told his fellow directors that it was hopelessly uneconomic to operate seven aircraft types as NAC was then required to do. 'We should aim for two aircraft types only.'

²³ Campbell, p.41.

²⁴ *ibid.*

In June 1952 the Corporation introduced its first brand new aircraft, a de Havilland Heron²⁵ for its Cook Strait services.²⁶ Although the Heron fulfilled a need, NAC engineers found it necessary to make more than 200 modifications to the type.

Meanwhile, further attention was being devoted to the question of a DC3 replacement on the main trunk routes, and an extensive evaluation process was set in train. Isitt confirmed NAC's interest in the Viscount,²⁷ and in August 1955, made the announcement that NAC wished to purchase three Viscounts²⁸ for main routes between Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.²⁹ However, this order prompted Worrall to resign from the NAC Board because of differences of opinion with his co-directors over their decision.³⁰

The actual signing of the order for the Viscounts took place at Vickers House in London. Two photographs in a contemporary magazine record Isitt arriving at the ceremony,³¹ and actually signing the Agreement.³² The first Viscount, did not arrive until 10 January 1958, and a welcoming ceremony was held at Whenuapai, at which Isitt gave an address, before Lady Isitt poured a glass of champagne over the nose to name the aircraft *City of*

²⁵ Eden and Moeng, p.563. The de Havilland DH114 Heron was a comparatively small four engine transport aircraft of United Kingdom origin. Four were operated by NAC from 1953-7.

²⁶ Campbell, p.57.

²⁷ *Whites Aviation*, July 1955, p.8.

²⁸ Eden and Moeng, p.1122. The Vickers Viscount V807 was a four engine turbo-prop transport of United Kingdom origin, and was operated by NAC 1958-75.

²⁹ Aimer, p.77.

³⁰ *Whites Aviation*, August 1955, p.18; Campbell, pp.58-60; Aimer p.78.

³¹ *Whites Aviation*, February 1956, p.3.

³² *ibid*, July 1957, p.24.

Wellington.³³ The second Viscount, *City of Auckland*, arrived in Auckland on 10 February 1959. One of the crew was A.C. Kenning, who eventually became Operations Manager for NAC. When Kenning disembarked from the Viscount he was wearing a bowler hat he had obtained in England in place of his crew cap, and this caused Isitt to send Kenning a letter of censure. Isitt thought that Kenning's action was most inappropriate.³⁴

But the stir caused by Worrall over the selection of the Viscount, was minor compared with the furore accompanying the purchase of the initial Friendship fleet. Part of the negative response was caused by Isitt's long standing publicly announced position of buying British. He was really reflecting the U.S. Dollar shortage facing New Zealand in the post-war period, and his dealings with successive Ministers of Finance had reinforced this approach. However, Isitt was sufficiently pragmatic to acknowledge that what British manufacturers were producing did not meet NAC's requirements. Essentially, the Viscount was a DC3 replacement on NAC's main trunk routes, but what was now required was a new generation DC3 for the airline's secondary routes, and the choice narrowed down to the British Handley Page Herald³⁵ or the Dutch Fokker Friendship.³⁶

³³ Richard Waugh with Peter Layne and Graeme McConnell, *NAC*, Craigs: Invercargill, 2007, pp.96-7; Aimer, pp.78-9; *Whites Aviation*, February 1958, p.16.

³⁴ Alan Kenning, *Behind the Scenes in New Zealand Aviation*, Kenning: Wellington, 2000, n.p.

³⁵ Eden and Moeng, p.801. The Handley Page HPR 7 Herald was a twin engine turbo-prop transport aircraft.

³⁶ Eden and Moeng, pp.716/7. The Fokker F27 was a twin engine turbo-prop aircraft, of which 18 100 and 500 series were operated by NAC from 1960-78.

At its meeting in May 1959, NAC's Board decided on the Friendship, although the Government withheld endorsement of NAC's decision for six months. Isitt defended NAC's stance, still mindful of the heavy and unexpected cost to the Corporation of the modifications needed to the Heron. Never again would he let the Corporation become an aircraft's proving ground. For this reason, he stated publicly that NAC's policy was to buy only aircraft which had established their economic and operational characteristics in airline service for at least two years before the Corporation took delivery. In addition they should also have been produced and sold in sufficient numbers to ensure continuity of supply of airframe and engine spares.³⁷

After a demonstration of the two competing types at the opening of Wellington Airport in October 1959, three weeks later the Government confirmed the decision to order Friendships. Isitt, in making the announcement of the order, commented that 'The need for replacements of the present fleet of DC3's was immediate, and the only aircraft able to meet the basic requirements of the Corporation, now or in the foreseeable future, was the Fokker F27 Friendship.'³⁸ With the benefit of hindsight, there is no doubt that the Friendship was the correct choice.

A sequel took place sometime later when the Duke of Edinburgh visited New Zealand, and when speaking to Isitt, castigated him for not ordering British.

³⁷ Campbell, pp.62-3; Aimer pp.

³⁸ *Whites Aviation*, November 1959, p.7.

Isitt was not impressed, and there was a local deterioration in New Zealand-UK relations.³⁹

The first Friendship was delivered to Rongotai on 12 December 1960, where it was splashed with champagne by Lady Isitt, and named *Kuaka*.⁴⁰

By contrast with earlier years, Isitt's final period with NAC was relatively calm. The gradual process of replacing the DC3's with Friendships began, and jet-prop services were extended as sealed runways became available at various provincial airports. Isitt eventually retired from the Board of NAC on 31 March 1963. *Whites Aviation* summed up Isitt's contribution as follows:

The National Airways Corporation had its growing pains endeavouring to provide regular services to all districts which were pressing hard politically to have air services. Operational facilities, workshops, city establishments and all that went with them required thousands of staff and millions of pounds of outlay. Treasury had to be convinced. The Chairman was now a man of a thousand parts and by the end of the 1950's the large civil air machine was in working order. New Zealand was near enough to standing on its feet in airline matters.⁴¹

Sir Leonard has participated on all angles, but throughout the complicated and often prolonged negotiating, organising and finalising of details, he has always been the typical New Zealander. His smile never changed and he proved that even the most serious of business could be helped with a grin.⁴²

³⁹ *Interview by author*: Peter Thodey, interviewed 23 May 2006.

⁴⁰ Aimer, p.124; Waugh et al, p.125.

⁴¹ *ibid*, March 1963, p.11.

⁴² *ibid*, p.10.

More than any other person, Isitt could be described as the founder of NAC. For the first few months of its existence he was very much a 'one man band', and with the appointment of the initial Board he was able to describe his vision for the airline. This vision was constrained by lack of resources and Government interference which delayed its implementation, but by the time of Isitt's retirement, NAC was a very successful operation serving the requirements of New Zealand in a safe, timely and affordable manner. Isitt identified the pathway to follow, and made sure that this was accomplished.

Isitt's second major airline involvement was as a New Zealand nominee Board Member of British Commonwealth Pacific Airlines (BCPA). This airline was set up as a result of decisions reached at the British Commonwealth Civil Aviation Conference held in Wellington between 28 February and 6 March 1946.⁴³ It was a Commonwealth airline to offer passenger services between Australia/New Zealand and Canada. In June 1946, BCPA was registered in New South Wales, with a share capital of £1,000,000, of which 50% was subscribed by Australia, 30% by New Zealand, and 20% by the United Kingdom.⁴⁴ Mr A.W. Coles, was appointed Chairman, while the other two Directors were Lord Knollys and Isitt.⁴⁵ To make an early start to the service, it was decided to charter Douglas DC4 Skymaster aircraft from Australian National Airways Pty Ltd (ANA).⁴⁶

⁴³ Laurence Kimpton, *British Commonwealth Pacific Airlines 1946-1954*, Solihull: Laurence Kimpton, 2005, p.6.

⁴⁴ Kimpton, p.6.

⁴⁵ H.M. Moore, *Silver Wings in Pacific Skies*, Brisbane: Boolarong Publications, 1993, p.6.

⁴⁶ Eden and Moeng, pp.603-4. The Douglas DC4/C54 was a four engine transport aircraft of American origin. After the Second World War, the type was employed widely by civil

The BCPA trans-Pacific service began in September 1946 between Sydney and Vancouver. New Zealand was brought into the network when the inaugural New Zealand-Canada service took place in April 1947, with the ANA Skymaster taking off from Whenuapai for Vancouver.⁴⁷ Isitt ensured that the occasion was marked with appropriate ceremony, as executive members of BCPA, including the Chairman, and the Australian Minister of Air, Hon. A.S. Drakeford were welcomed to a dinner and a ceremony at Whenuapai. Lady Isitt formed part of the welcoming party.⁴⁸ Because of the dollar restrictions at the time, outboard loadings from both Australia and New Zealand were low, but south-bound loadings were good, being fully booked three months ahead.⁴⁹

In April 1948, BCPA acquired its own aircraft, and operated henceforth under its own control. The first flight operated by BCPA from New Zealand departed Auckland on 5 May.⁵⁰ Isitt was at Whenuapai to see off the inaugural flight. He managed to have his photograph taken with two attractive BCPA hostesses, much to the envy of reporters assigned to the event.⁵¹

airlines on long range passenger and cargo routes, until new generation airliners became available.

⁴⁷ Kimpton, p.10; Moore, p.15.

⁴⁸ *Whites Aviation*, May 1947, pp.18-19.

⁴⁹ Moore, p.49.

⁵⁰ Kimpton, p.18.

⁵¹ *Whites Aviation*, June 1948, p.4.

Isitt left in August on a visit to the United Kingdom with the stated main purpose of his visit being to inspect British aircraft on display at the Farnborough Airshow staged by the Society of British Aircraft Constructors. While in Canada en route to the United Kingdom, Isitt visited Canadair, later reporting his impression of the Canadair Four.⁵² Isitt also arranged a meeting with Howe, the Canadian Minister of Transport, to discuss the possibility of Canada becoming a partner in BCPA, which would have the effect of spreading losses. However, Howe was opposed in principle to inter-Government partnerships, which he regarded as unwieldy.

While Isitt was in the UK, developments affecting BCPA were occurring to which he was not privy. Coles became aware that four new DC6⁵³ airliners were available and sought Prime Minister Chifley's support for a BCPA purchase, using government advances to buy the aircraft.⁵⁴

Obviously, Coles did not keep Isitt fully informed on these matters, as the following telegram attests:

21 September 1948

Personal for Shanahan from Isitt

Have Australia consulted you proposal Australia to purchase DC 6's in sterling and lease to BCPA. I have advised Coles I do not favour as:

1. Still maintain principle of use of British aircraft.

⁵² ANZ, *EA1 W2619 110/2/15 Part 2 TEAL aircraft*, Isitt/Shanahan.

⁵³ Eden and Moeng, p.605. The Douglas DC6 was a development of the DC4, with a longer fuselage which was pressurised. It was regarded as a very reliable aircraft.

⁵⁴ Moore, pp.66-9; Kimpton, p.23.

2. Believe our overall loss if we re-equip will be greater than if we remain on DC 4 due dollar problems and poor traffic offerings.
3. It introduces new type into area.⁵⁵

Nash and Shanahan, although accepting that the DC6 purchase was a fait accompli, hoped to mitigate any collateral damage by informing the Australian Government that before New Zealand could agree to BCPA taking delivery of the aircraft, they would request a report from the Directors of BCPA, which would be considered at the forthcoming South Pacific Air Transport Council (SPATC) meeting. SPATC had been set up at a 1946 Wellington Commonwealth Civil Aviation Conference, as a result of decisions reached at the 1944 Montreal Conference. The SPATC was charged with supplying a practical infrastructure for the consortium of the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand operating BCPA.⁵⁶ This meeting of SPATC, which Isitt attended, took place in Wellington commencing on 30 November. The BCPA team argued strongly in favour of the DC6, putting forward a detailed analysis of their proposal, and delegates to the Conference had no difficulty in endorsing the purchase of the DC6's.⁵⁷

The first DC6 service from Auckland commenced on 22 February 1949. Isitt and Jones, the Minister in charge of Civil Aviation, were at Whenuapai to mark the occasion. Jones was photographed making pleasantries with an air

⁵⁵ ANZ, EA1 W2619 110/2/15 Part 2, Isitt/Shanahan.

⁵⁶ Driscoll, Ian H., *Flightpath South Pacific, Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1972, pp. 103-5.*

⁵⁷ Moore, pp. 71-2.

hostess, while Isitt characteristically was inspecting the flight deck of the new airliner.⁵⁸

With the introduction of the Douglas DC6 fleet, BCPA continued to operate the trans-Pacific route for over five years. The airline built a reputation for efficiency, combined with a high standard of service, and by 1950/51 was carrying twice as many passengers as PAA and CPA combined. From mid-1952 passenger loadings began to decline. The three government ownership of BCPA was causing increasing difficulty and matters eventually came to a head at a full meeting of the SPATC held in Christchurch on 14/15 October 1953. The UK wished to dispose of its shareholding in BCPA and TEAL, and the Australian Government was agreeable to taking up both packages, as well as New Zealand's 30% shareholding in BCPA. BCPA's trans-Pacific routes would be taken over by Qantas, while TEAL would become jointly owned by Australia and New Zealand and would receive the DC 6's to operate services between Australia and New Zealand, as well as between Auckland and Fiji.⁵⁹

Thirteen days after the Christchurch Conference, one of BCPA's DC6's had flown into a mountain near San Francisco. Isitt was in San Francisco at the time, returning from the UK, and was able to act in a liaison capacity, representing the airline. All 19 on board were killed, and the crash was a sad finale for the airline.⁶⁰ The last flight by a BCPA DC6 from Auckland took

⁵⁸ *Whites Aviation*, April 1949, p.4.

⁵⁹ Kimpton, p.43; Moore, pp.136-8.

⁶⁰ Kimpton, p.42; Moore, pp.138-9.

place on 11 May 1954, and so ended the story of one of the smallest airlines ever to operate a major international route.⁶¹

The third airline with which Isitt played a pivotal role was in TEAL. It was a creation from a time when inter-Governmental associations were perceived as the appropriate framework for international airlines. TEAL had been incorporated in April 1940 with an authorised capital of £500,000. The issued capital was £250,004, subscribed as follows: Qantas Empire Airways 23%; British Overseas Airways Corporation 38%; and Union Airways of New Zealand 39%. The New Zealand Government demurred with Union Airways holding the majority of the New Zealand shares, and took up 20% of the New Zealand allotment. TEAL's affairs were administered by the Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand Ltd from Wellington, with N.S. Falla as the original Chairman.

Services commenced on 30 April 1940, with an inaugural flight from Auckland to Sydney performed by a Short S30 flying boat, and flights continued for the remainder of the War, providing the only civilian external link which New Zealand had during this period. TEAL did not benefit from Falla's vision and experience as he was called to active service.⁶² His position as Chairman was assumed by A.E. Rudder.⁶³ After the war Falla was

⁶¹ Kimpton, p.43.

⁶² Driscoll, p.140.

⁶³ *Whites Aviation*, February 1947, p.18.

returning to New Zealand when he died at sea between Ceylon and Australia.⁶⁴

With the ending of the War, the need to replace the original S30 flying boats became pressing, while steps were taken to streamline the administration of the company, with the creation of Head Office in Auckland.⁶⁵ Eventually, in July 1946, TEAL obtained on hire from the United Kingdom Ministry of Supply, three Mk IV Short Sandringham flying boats, which were basically civil conversions of the wartime Short Sunderland, while a fourth Sandringham was acquired in October 1947.⁶⁶ The Sandringhams, while never anything other than an interim type, did increase the capacity of the airline from two aircraft with seating for 38, to four aircraft with a capacity of 120.⁶⁷

With the establishment of the TEAL headquarters in Auckland, the first Board Meeting was held there in December 1946. A photograph in *Whites Aviation* recorded the occasion,⁶⁸ and reflected the final attendance by C.G. White, as he resigned shortly afterwards. T.A. Barrow took White's position as Deputy-Chairman, and Isitt was appointed to fill White's vacancy in March 1947.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ *ibid*, p.160.

⁶⁵ *ibid*, June 1946, p.21; I.A. Thomson, *A History of TEAL*, M.A. Thesis University of Canterbury, p.63.

⁶⁶ Thomson, p.67.

⁶⁷ Thomson, p.67.

⁶⁸ *Whites Aviation*, February 1947, p.18.

⁶⁹ *ibid*, April 1947, p.23.

TEAL had been searching actively for new aircraft to replace the Sandringhams. Their considerations were governed by two over-riding factors at the time - the first was the parlous dollar situation, and the second was the lack of suitable land aerodromes. New Zealand, in common with other Commonwealth countries, had virtually no United States Dollar reserves following the war. The other major constraint was the lack of aerodromes, as Whenuapai was not approved at the time by the Civil Aviation Administration to service regular scheduled overseas flights. With these two major constraints in mind, the choice of aircraft available to TEAL was limited in the extreme.

In January 1947, a Short Bros. and Harland Ltd team had visited New Zealand in order to discuss their new flying boat design, the Solent.⁷⁰ BOAC had purchased 18 Solents, but the performance of these aircraft, particularly with one engine out, was marginal, so Shorts offered TEAL the improved Solent 4. This was equipped with more powerful engines and had a longer range than the BOAC Solents.⁷¹ The TEAL Board considered their options and finally decided upon the Solent 4. This decision was discussed at a Conference in Wellington to determine the future of TEAL, attended by representatives of the New Zealand Government, BOAC and members of the TEAL Board of Directors. A photograph of those attending shows Barrow (TEAL), Foss Shanahan (External Affairs), Lord Knollys (Chairman BOAC), Rt

⁷⁰ C.H. Barnes, *Shorts Aircraft since 1900*, Putnam: London, 1967, p.408.

⁷¹ G.R. Duval, *British Flying-Boats and Amphibians 1909-1952*, Putnam: London, 1966, pp.234-5.

Hon Peter Fraser, A.E. Rudder (Chairman TEAL), P.D. Hood (BOAC), Whitney Straight (Managing Director BOAC), with Isitt, Roberts and Bolt from TEAL.⁷²

The outcome of this meeting was a letter from Rudder to Fraser:

The Board has given a great deal of consideration to the type of replacement aircraft and we had the benefit of the advice of Lord Knollys and Mr Whitney Straight, and has decided that there is no more suitable aircraft available for the Tasman Service than the 'Solent' flying boat built by Short Bros in the United Kingdom.

Rudder then went on to advise that a change in the ratio of shareholdings had been agreed at the Conference to New Zealand 50%, Australia 30% and the UK 20%.⁷³

Rudder concluded with the following plea:

The Company trusts that you will be good enough to seek the approval of the governments of the United Kingdom and of Australia to place an order at once for the purchase by the Company of four Solent aircraft.⁷⁴

Responding to Rudder's request, cables were sent to the UK and Australia seeking their approval for the Solent purchase.⁷⁵ The response from Australia was not positive.⁷⁶

⁷² *Whites Aviation*, July 1947, p.5.

⁷³ ANZ EA1 W2619 110/2/15.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

The prospective Solent purchase was revealed to the New Zealand public by *Whites Aviation* in July 1947, no doubt from a controlled leak, with the information being regarded as fairly definite, but an official announcement would be withheld until the proposal had obtained the approval of the British, Australian and New Zealand Governments. *Whites Aviation* headlined their article as a '£1,000,000 Deal', and considered that the purchase of the Solents represented by far the biggest aircraft deal ever made in the history of New Zealand civil aviation. They also felt that the facts showed that the company could not buy anything else but flying boats.⁷⁷

However, Australian support was conditional, and their concerns were subject to considerable debate at a Conference in Canberra during August.⁷⁸ At this Conference, Australia had insisted on performance guarantees for the Solent which had to be met prior to acceptance. Shorts requested a two and one half per cent tolerance in respect of the guaranteed figures, but produced estimated performance figures suggesting that no difficulty would be experienced in meeting them⁷⁹

On 3 December 1947, the Sandringham flying boat *New Zealand* was forced to return to Sydney on three engines, after setting out for Auckland. A

⁷⁵ Ibid, External Affairs New Zealand/External Affairs Australia/Secretary for Commonwealth Relations, 10 June 1947.

⁷⁶ ibid, External Affairs Australia/External Affairs New Zealand, 10 July 1947.

⁷⁷ *Whites Aviation*, July 1947, p.5.

⁷⁸ ANZ EA1 Acc 2619 110/2/15 Pt 1, Shanahan/Jones, 13 December 1947.

⁷⁹ ibid, UK Ministry of Civil Aviation, 24 November 1947.

considerable amount of freight and luggage had to be jettisoned before the aircraft limped into Sydney.⁸⁰ Although the aircraft was repaired within a few hours, and returned to Auckland the following day, the event was to have major repercussions.

Isitt became Chairman of TEAL following the retirement of A.E. Rudder, as Chairman in November 1947. The appointment of Isitt as Chairman of TEAL, and Barrow as Vice-Chairman meant that New Zealand held the two top positions in the Company, and reflected that New Zealand held the majority of the shares.⁸¹ As a result of this appointment, Isitt was chosen as one of the Personalities in New Zealand Aviation for 1947.⁸²

Early in January 1948, Hudson Fysh, Managing Director of Qantas, Australia's international airline, and an Australian nominee on the board of TEAL, had written to Isitt, addressing him in his capacity as Chairman of TEAL:

I am attaching copy of an analysis made by QEA Operations Department on the Solent Flying Boat data ...As no doubt you are aware, I have always felt unhappy about the operation of these boats already obsolete and outmoded, and which it is proposed to only commence within 1949. However, I realise that questions of Government policy on a high level must be the dominant factor and should the proposition be gone on with, the Board can rely on me to assist in any way possible to make the operation successful.⁸³

⁸⁰ Thomson, pp.71-2.

⁸¹ *Whites Aviation*, January 1948, p.4.

⁸² *ibid*, p.19.

⁸³ *ibid*, Fysh/Isitt, 5 January 1948.

Matters were coming to a head regarding the Sandringham problem. TEAL, with the concurrence of the New Zealand Civil Aviation authorities, suspended service between Australia and New Zealand on 23 February 1948.⁸⁴ The decision to ground the Sandringhams was due to the large incidence of engine failures, together with the apprehension that more than one engine may fail on any one flight. On 17 February another engine failure had occurred, and when combined with previous failures, the company had no spare overhauled engines.⁸⁵ TEAL engineers came up with a solution to the problem, which involved re-engineering the engine cowlings and baffles.⁸⁶ Eventually, in June 1948 the Sandringham returned to service.⁸⁷

Between 18-21 May 1948, a meeting of the SPATC was held in Wellington, attended by Isitt. One of the major topics discussed at the meeting was the future of the Tasman service, and the advisability of adhering to the Solent contract, as Australia had still not agreed the Solent purchase. Before a decision was reached, Isitt received a telegram from P.G. Taylor, a fellow director of TEAL, regarding Australia's position. 'Cabinet meeting Canberra next Tuesday and shall endeavour to secure Solent decision at meeting. Am reasonably confident decision will be favourable and personally appreciate urgency.'⁸⁸ It was at this SPATC meeting that E.A. Gibson revealed for the first time that Whenuapai could be licensed for regular commercial land-

⁸⁴ ANZ EA1 Acc 2619 110/2/15 Pt 1, External Affairs Wellington/External Affairs Canberra/Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, 23 February 1948.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁸⁶ Ewing and Macpherson, p.169.

⁸⁷ ANZ EA1 Acc 2619 110/2/15 Pt 2, Barrow/Jones, 8 June 1948.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, Taylor/Isitt, 28 May 1948.

plane services. This created an entirely new dynamic relating to the proposed Solent purchase, and prompted Shanahan to initiate action for modification of the contractual arrangements.⁸⁹

Taylor was accurate in his predictions and within a few days Australia signified their qualified approval of the Solent order.⁹⁰ Shanahan had departed on an extended overseas visit directly after the SPATC meeting, but on his return he immediately wrote to Minister Jones seeking approval to send a telegram to the UK, with the object of avoiding purchase of the Solents, and obtaining a hiring arrangement in its place, thus providing maximum flexibility for TEAL.⁹¹

In London for the Farnborough Airshow, Isitt utilised the services of RNZAF Headquarters to type a letter to Shanahan setting out his own personal views on the matters raised by Shanahan. Isitt had arranged meetings with Cribbett and the Minister of Civil Aviation for later in the week, and was writing in advance of these meetings. While he was happy with the approach to take the Solents on lease, he felt that the additional suggestion of securing a landplane for interim operations had the potential for trouble, as no suitable British aircraft were likely to be available in less than two years.

⁸⁹ *ibid*, Shanahan/ Minister of External Affairs, 1 June 1948.

⁹⁰ *ibid*, External Affairs Canberra/External Affairs Wellington, 9 June 1948.

⁹¹ *ibid*, Shanahan/Jones, 16 August 1948.

On the same day Isitt also wrote to Shanahan about his visit to Belfast and the latest news on the Solent. Roberts and Isitt had spent three hours in a BOAC Solent and they were pleased with the aircraft. ⁹²

Isitt attended the SBAC show the following week, and then reported back to Shanahan following his meeting with Cribbett. He put forward the Government's views, to which Cribbett unsurprisingly advised that the UK would not support the cancellation of the Solent order in favour of landplanes, as Treasury would not be prepared to absorb the large expenditure that had already been incurred. Cribbett was aware of TEAL's desire to lease the Solents and was taking up the proposition with the UK Treasury. These proposals were eventually rejected.

Shanahan acknowledged Isitt's last telegram from London, admitting for the first time the necessity of carrying on with the Solent order, and was grateful that Isitt had pressed for early completion and delivery. Shanahan expressed how glad he was that Isitt was in London and in a position to represent New Zealand's interests. ⁹³

When Isitt returned to New Zealand he was interviewed by the *Evening Post* newspaper, and responded to the inevitable question that landplanes had been considered for the trans-Tasman service, but no suitable aircraft were available. No landplanes could be delivered within 12 months, and expectations were that the Solent aircraft would be delivered within the

⁹² *ibid.*

⁹³ *ibid.*, Shanahan/Isitt, 20 October 1948.

next few months. 'I flew in a Solent while in Britain' he said, 'and I am convinced that there is no aircraft in the world that can match it for passenger comfort and reliability.'⁹⁴ Isitt's comments about Solent passenger comfort and reliability were repeated in a *Whites Aviation* article reporting his trip. He was forced to highlight the very few plus factors which the Solent possessed, there was no basis for claiming reliability as being better. At that point the Solent IV's for TEAL had not flown, and there was only a hope that the Sandringham troubles had been overcome.⁹⁵

However, some progress was being achieved and the Secretary of the Trans-Tasman Committee of SPATC was able to inform Shanahan that the Solents had met the guarantee requirements which were a pre-condition to acceptance. Shorts were obviously concerned about the meeting of these requirements, and their Managing Director was relieved to write to Isitt about the success of the flight trials - 'it really is a cheerful document. You need have no fear about our having met our guaranteed performance. We have met them with a handsome margin and that alone should put up the share of the British Aircraft Industry.'⁹⁶

The first Solent arrived in New Zealand in September 1949,⁹⁷ to be welcomed by Isitt, and was followed at short intervals by the other three.⁹⁸ Scheduled Solent services commenced on 14 November, with Isitt being on

⁹⁴ *ibid*, *Evening Post*, 28 October 1948.

⁹⁵ *Whites Aviation*, December 1948, p.21.

⁹⁶ ANZ EA1 Acc 2619 110/2/15 Pt 3, Fraser/Shanahan, 11 August 1948.

⁹⁷ *Whites Aviation*, November 1949, p.24.

⁹⁸ ANZ EA1 Acc 2619 110/2/15 Pt 3, *Dominion*, 30 September 1949.

the flight and participating in appropriate ceremonies at Auckland and Sydney.⁹⁹ The withdrawal of the Sandringham fleet took place on 19 December.¹⁰⁰ During the intervening period several Solent proving flights took place, including a visit to Wellington over 18/19 October. The Solent flew to Wellington in 1 hour 55 minutes from Auckland, leaving at 6.49 a.m. and circling Hamilton and Palmerston North en route. It arrived at 8.55 a.m., and then undertook two 50 minute demonstration flights to invited guests. Among the passengers were the Governor General Sir Bernard Freyberg and Lady Freyberg. Isitt and his wife escorted the Governor General and his party on the launch taking them to the flying boat.¹⁰¹ Made in perfect weather, the flights were from Wellington to Blenheim, over the Sounds to Stevens Island, and back to Evans Bay.¹⁰² Further demonstration flights took place including flights around Auckland, a major exercise around New Zealand, and a flight to Sydney. Isitt did not travel to Sydney on this occasion, but was part of the welcoming ceremony in Auckland on its return.¹⁰³ As usual he worked the guests, and renewed friendships with old service acquaintances.¹⁰⁴

Whites Aviation consistently recorded Isitt's aeronautical activities during this period, including the visit to New Zealand by Sir Miles Thomas, Chairman of BOAC, in February 1950. Thomas was accompanied by Isitt on a tour of TEAL's engineering base, and subsequently met with airline

⁹⁹ *Whites Aviation*, December 1949, pp.20-1.

¹⁰⁰ Thomson, pp. 80-1.

¹⁰¹ *Whites Aviation*, December 1949, p.16.

¹⁰² ANZ EA1 Acc 2619 110/2/15 Pt 3, *Southern Cross*, 19 October 1949; *Dominion*, 19 October 1949.

¹⁰³ *Whites Aviation*, November 1949, pp.14-5.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*, January 1950, p.3.

officials.¹⁰⁵ Isitt also hosted a dinner with Thomas as principal guest.¹⁰⁶ While BOAC was busy withdrawing flying boats from service, citing the costs of maintaining suitable bases where they were the sole operator, Thomas felt the Tasman was ‘tailor-made for flying boats.’¹⁰⁷

The introduction of the Solents had opened new opportunities for TEAL to expand their operation beyond the basic Sydney daylight service. A Wellington-Sydney service was not introduced until 3 October 1950, being delayed by the requirement for the necessary facilities at Evans Bay.¹⁰⁸ The Minister of Civil Aviation announced that only ‘minimum requirements’ would be provided,¹⁰⁹ which had to be enhanced by TEAL, after Isitt had predicted failure if any attempt were made to operate a regular service without passenger, technical and operational facilities.¹¹⁰ The Wellington flights were very popular, with high passenger loadings. This month also saw the opening of Christchurch International Airport, with Isitt and Lady Isitt being among the distinguished guests at the ceremony.¹¹¹ Services from Christchurch did not commence until 29 June 1951, with flights to Melbourne. Isitt was an honoured guest for the inaugural Melbourne flight, which was operated under charter on a weekly basis by Qantas Skymasters.¹¹² There is no doubt that the Christchurch service was initiated

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*, March 1950, p.5.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*, April 1950, p.5.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*, March 1950, p.5.

¹⁰⁸ Thomson, pp.81-3.

¹⁰⁹ *Whites Aviation*, September 1950, p.26.

¹¹⁰ Thomson, p.84.

¹¹¹ *Whites Aviation*, January 1951, p.17.

¹¹² *ibid*, August 1951, p.4.

in response to political pressure, as passenger volumes in the early years were low.

The Solents were introduced without difficulty and gave solid service for four years as principal fleet type, although they were used for a further seven years on secondary routes. McGreal was one of the TEAL Solent pilots during this period, and gives a vivid description of encountering a violent front while en route between Sydney and Auckland. The flight took place on 11 November 1950, and carried a full complement of passengers including Isitt:

Sir Leonard climbed the ladder to exchange a few words with the crew. He was a fine old gentleman with a lifetime of experience as an airman since the earliest days of flight. He parted the folds of the blackout curtain and poked his head through, gripping the backs of our seats. Jim Kennedy was the skipper and Sir Leonard looked with interest at the signs of the fireworks ahead as he chatted.

Suddenly the aircraft was hit by lightning, and flew through a period of intense turbulence. The pilots wrestled with the controls as the aircraft flew through the thunderhead. Eventually the turbulence subsided, and McGreal:

glanced across at Sir Leonard who was still standing semi-crouched as he hung on for grim life to the structure of our seat pedestals. Things remained still for a few minutes and he took his chance to say his thanks to the skipper and, turning to

leave, he added, 'This is no place for Directors,' and the engineers helped him climb down through the hatchway.¹¹³

Later that year TEAL established the Coral Route to Tahiti via Suva and Aitutaki with the first flight on 28 December 1951. However, an earlier proving flight had taken place between 29 November and 6 December, on which Isitt was a passenger.¹¹⁴

In May 1953 the announcement was made that Solents were to continue on the Tasman run for a further three years.¹¹⁵ At this time the Commonwealth Relations Office was complaining that the TEAL Board should consider replacing the Solent with a more suitable type of aircraft; 'In view of the current rate of losses it is clearly desirable to effect replacement at the earliest possible date.'¹¹⁶ Obviously the financial situation with TEAL was causing widespread concern, and Isitt was tasked to produce a paper evaluating the effects of liquidating TEAL and relying on 'Foreign flag' carriers, as well as the capital loss and consequent ongoing costs. In Isitt's view, the figures supplied made out a case for the company's retention. The paper covered five broad headings: the cost of winding up TEAL; direct recurring annual costs to Government; cost of aviation facilities; the value of TEAL to the New Zealand Government; and defence, prestige and trade. Isitt estimated that the capital loss would be nearly £720,000, while 570

¹¹³ McGreal, pp.114-5.

¹¹⁴ *Whites Aviation*, January 1953, p.8.

¹¹⁵ ANZ EA1 Acc 2619 110/2/15, *Dominion*, 21 May 1953.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, Commonwealth Relations Office/ New Zealand Government, 22 May 1953.

people would be put out of work, with many of them being lost to New Zealand.¹¹⁷

Isitt had left New Zealand on 29 August 1953 to attend a series of meetings in Paris, London, San Francisco and Sydney. He also attended the SBAC annual airshow at Farnborough and visited a number of aircraft constructors in the UK before returning to New Zealand on 20 October.¹¹⁸

The winds of change were starting to blow, with Prime Minister Holland holding discussions mid-year in the UK with Lennox-Boyd and Cribbett on the future of TEAL and BCPA. Holland cabled T.L. Macdonald, the New Zealand Minister for Civil Aviation, 'It appears that reconstruction of both services is inescapable.'¹¹⁹

There is no doubt that the demise of BCPA was the salvation of TEAL, as the agreement from the Christchurch meeting, subsequently approved by the three Governments, was for the purchase by the Australian and New Zealand Governments of the three DC6 aircraft and spares with these items being transferred to TEAL.¹²⁰ With the UK disposing of their interests in TEAL, the Board composition altered to reflect the 50:50 shareholding of New Zealand and Australia, with each country nominating a further director so that there were three nominees from each country. Isitt remained as

¹¹⁷ *ibid*, *TEAL Liquidation Paper*, L.M. Isitt, April 1953.

¹¹⁸ *Whites Aviation*, December 1953, p.26.

¹¹⁹ ANZ EA1 Acc 2619 110/2/15, Holland/Macdonald, 3 July 1953.

¹²⁰ *ibid*, Johnston/Bass, 10 March 1953.

Chairman.¹²¹ TEAL did not waste any time introducing the DC6 into its route structure. At the time it was the largest change which had occurred in the company's operations. The first DC6 flight took place on 14 May 1954, while the Solents were progressively withdrawn from all routes save the Coral Route and to Tonga, carrying out these services until 1960.¹²²

That the DC 6's were a success is undoubted, as they immediately turned around the fortunes of TEAL. While small operating profits had been made in 1951 and 1952, this situation changed to an operating loss of £144,113 in 1953 and £146,400 in 1954.¹²³ An operating profit of £60,000 was recorded in 1955,¹²⁴ but against this was the loss incurred on the sale of the Solents. By today's accounting standards, this loss would have been written off in the accounts during the year in which the loss was incurred, but by the more relaxed standards of 1955, the loss of £505,546 was capitalised and written off over the next four years.¹²⁵ In retrospect, the whole saga of the Solents was caused by a misunderstanding as to the use of Whenuapai by regular airlines, and Gibson was undoubtedly in a position to clarify the situation. He did not, and was subsequently prepared to criticise the Solent purchase decision. By his attitude, the transfer of TEAL to landplanes and profitability was set back at least seven years.

Isitt was most often recorded at social gatherings in connection with TEAL, and was very much the public face of the airline. For example in July 1956,

¹²¹ *Whites Aviation*, June 1954, p.20.

¹²² Paul Sheehan, *The Aircraft of Air New Zealand*, Wellington: transpress, 2003, pp.22-5.

¹²³ ANZ, EA1 110/2/2 Pt 2, *TEAL Finances*.

¹²⁴ *Whites Aviation*, June 1955, p.1 and p.18.

¹²⁵ ANZ EA1 Acc 2619 110/2/15 Pt 4, *Report of Officials Committee May 1963*.

he was happy to present 10 and 15 year service pins to TEAL staff at a Mechanics Bay function, and in turn received an honorary pin for himself.¹²⁶

In October 1956 he substituted for Hudson Fysh and opened the Qantas Information Centre in Auckland.¹²⁷

Although the DC 6's had been operating for little more than two years, the question of a replacement had to be faced, and discussions were held in Melbourne in November 1956, when the Governments sounded out possibilities, although at the time it was felt that DC 6 replacement would be 3-4 years away.¹²⁸

For their July 1957 issue, *Whites Aviation* honoured Isitt with a full page article in which he quoted the contribution to New Zealand aviation of many notable personalities. To Isitt, the history of New Zealand aviation was the story of the men in the industry, and he knew them all. The article was written from the perspective of his role as NAC Chairman, but he also mentioned the close association of TEAL with NAC.¹²⁹

The whole process in choosing a replacement aircraft had become convoluted, with the decision being driven by political considerations, rather than the technical merits of respective aircraft. A sub-committee, as

¹²⁶ *Whites Aviation*, August 1956, p.3.

¹²⁷ *ibid*, December 1956, p.8.

¹²⁸ *Whites Aviation*, December 1956, p.22.

¹²⁹ *ibid*, July 1957, p.12.

part of inter-governmental talks, was set up at a Wellington conference in April 1958 to examine the matter.

TEAL had carried out their own type evaluation, and in March 1958, the TEAL Board publicly announced that they would recommend the purchase of three Comet IV's.¹³⁰ The decision had been made at an earlier time, but was not unanimous as the Australian directors dissented in favour of the Lockheed Electra,¹³¹ which Qantas wished to purchase for operations on its secondary routes.¹³²

The *Dominion* obviously had a controlled leak when it published that the Wellington Conference was understood to have chosen the Electra as the replacement aircraft for TEAL.¹³³ This was confirmed a month later by the joint announcement from the Australian and New Zealand Ministers of Civil Aviation that TEAL would purchase three Electras.¹³⁴ The announcement created significant press criticism, and it became known as the 'Teal Deal.'¹³⁵

Although the day would come when New Zealand would operate independently its own external airline, such an action was not possible at

¹³⁰ Thomson, p.133; Eden and Moeng, pp.560-1. The de Havilland Comet I was the first jet powered passenger aircraft to enter commercial operation in 1952. A series of crashes meant that four years elapsed before the revised Comet IV was able to resume commercial operations. By this time the market was dominated by the American Boeing 707 and Douglas DC8.

¹³¹ Eden and Moeng, p.912. The Lockheed Electra L188 was a four engine turbo-prop transport aircraft of American origin. The production run was relatively short as passenger confidence was lost after early crashes and only 170 were built.

¹³² *ibid*, pp.133-4.

¹³³ ANZ EA1 Acc 2619 110/2/15 Pt. 4, *Dominion*, 12 April 1948.

¹³⁴ *Whites Aviation*, June 1958, p.24.

¹³⁵ *ibid*, p.1.

that time. The capital outlay for an aircraft fleet was in the order of £4.5 million, while New Zealand would have to purchase the other half of TEAL, making a total of £5.5 million from overseas exchange reserves when they were at their lowest ebb. It was felt that the apparent differences between the Comet and the Electra had been placed in too strong a light, as the choice of aircraft was not the main issue at stake, but the preservation of TEAL in its present form as an economic unit. The result of all the discussions was to preserve TEAL in its current position for a further 6-7 years.¹³⁶

As a welcome relief from these political manoeuvrings, Isitt played host at the opening of TEAL's new office in Suva during July. TEAL entertained 300 guests at a buffet luncheon on the lawns in front of the Grand Pacific Hotel. The occasion illustrated the evolving importance of tourism, and the growing role it was to play in the development of TEAL.¹³⁷

The contract for the three Lockheed Electra turbo-prop aircraft for TEAL was signed in early September by Isitt and Reeves. This contract called for the delivery of the three aircraft by the end of 1959, and Isitt said that TEAL expected to have the aircraft in full operation by 1 March 1960.¹³⁸ Right on schedule, the Electras arrived in New Zealand, and TEAL continued their tradition of offering courtesy flights from their route centres. The *Dominion* finally acknowledged that the Electras were a shrewd purchase. It had

¹³⁶ ANZ EA1 Acc 2619 110/2/15 Pt 4, *Notes for Press Release TEAL Re-equipment*, 1 May 1958.

¹³⁷ *Whites Aviation*, August 1958, p.7.

¹³⁸ *Whites Aviation*, October 1958, p.28.

performed economically and operationally better than specification, whilst the reduction in flying times had been so marked that any additional benefit offered by the increased speed of the Comet would have been marginal.¹³⁹

In July 1960, after a gap of six years, trans-Tasman flights were re-introduced from Wellington, using the Electra. Flights to Wellington had ceased following the withdrawal of the Solent, which coincided with the rebuilding of Wellington Airport. It was not until after the re-opening of the airport, followed by the introduction of the Electra, that Tasman services could be resumed. Two days of courtesy flights led to the inaugural Wellington-Sydney flight on Tuesday 26 July. Isitt played a prominent role in welcoming guests to the occasion.¹⁴⁰

In November 1960 a Historical Aviation Week was held in Auckland to celebrate twenty five years of regular airline service with multi-engine airliners. Pioneers from 1935 were honoured at various functions which culminated in a dinner at the Mandalay. Isitt was top-table guest at this dinner, where he hosted the distinguished RAF pilot Group Captain James Pelly-Fry.¹⁴¹

Finally, after negotiations which had taken place over a period of a year, it was announced that New Zealand had purchased Australia's half -share in TEAL with effect from 1 April 1961.¹⁴² This was a culmination of a series of

¹³⁹ ANZ EA1 Acc 2619 110/2/15 Pt. 4, *Dominion*, 30 December 1959.

¹⁴⁰ *Whites Aviation*, August 1960, p.15.

¹⁴¹ *Whites Aviation*, December 1960, p.13.

¹⁴² Thomson, pp.161-4; *Wings*, May 1961, p.2; *Wings*, June 1961, p.1.

factors, including the improving New Zealand economy, sustained profitability by the company, the increasing scale of international travel following the introduction of jet aircraft, and the development of Auckland International Airport.

In addition to representing TEAL on social occasions, Isitt was called upon as guest speaker as well. Few copies of these speeches survive, but one of the most significant he made was delivered in Invercargill on Commonwealth Day, 24 May 1962. The speech comprised twenty five pages of text, and Isitt felt that it was sufficiently important for him to refer it to Hudson Fysh for the latter's comments. The speech traversed the history of TEAL, and made the telling observation that in 1960 the movement of people became the biggest single item in international commerce.¹⁴³

For this reason he contended that a country's air rights were as much part of the national assets as tangible assets such as oil, fish and pasture and needed to be used to the best advantage of the country as a whole. While the Government set down the broad principles of aviation policy, it was necessary for the TEAL Board to interpret this into specific points of TEAL policy. The Government had recently announced a target of £10 million per annum in overseas exchange from earnings of foreign tourists visiting New Zealand. This target was three times the current level, and Isitt saw this as a great opportunity for TEAL. With the pending opening of Mangere, there

¹⁴³ Hudson Fysh Papers, *Commonwealth Day Speech, Invercargill, 24 May 1962.*

would be a conversion to big jets with the requirement to extend services to North America, Japan and the Far East.¹⁴⁴

Isitt concluded his speech:

And now, if an old man approaching the end of his aviation career might be permitted to moralise for a moment. I believe New Zealand's answer to the economic problems of today, and to the challenge presented by the European Economic Community, is for New Zealand to build its own EEC - Enterprise, Effort and Courage.¹⁴⁵

This speech was regarded by Isitt as being very important, because it signalled a change of direction for TEAL, and was pitched for wider circulation than the Invercargill audience alone. TEAL was going to be an international player, and would no longer be limited to trans-Tasman operations.

Over the years Isitt had formed a close association with Hudson Fysh which developed into a deep friendship. They shared a common background and both had a passion for fishing, using every opportunity to indulge their passion. Fysh acknowledged Isitt at the opening of the new Qantas sales office in Christchurch in October 1962, praising his great pioneering record. Fysh also highlighted his long association with Isitt in their common

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*

dedication to the advancement of New Zealand - Australian air transport interests.¹⁴⁶

However, Isitt's working life was coming to a close and he announced his retirement from the Boards of NAC and TEAL with effect from 31 March 1963. With their customary flair, TEAL held a farewell dinner in Auckland on 24 March 1963, with Geoff Roberts as Master of Ceremonies. A number of speakers covered various aspects of Isitt's life, with John Seabrook concentrating on the early days and service years. The main speaker was Hudson Fysh, who pitched his address at exactly the right level, being humorous as well as profound in his observations.

In saying something fitting, Fysh found it 'a very difficult job, as each one of us will realise that we have before us here, not only a man of great achievement but what is even more important, one of matchless integrity, given to straight dealing, a real friend, and who I feel has been an example to all of us as to how we should try and conduct our lives.'¹⁴⁷

Fysh went on:

We are both products of the old school and the old ways, and both started our careers in the shearing shed instead of the University. We forsook sheep, beating our shears into swords, to go to the first war on the days when a chap with good

¹⁴⁶ *ibid*, Speech Christchurch, 24 October 1962.

¹⁴⁷ *ibid*, Speech Auckland, 26 March 1963.

hands and a horse, and not too big to squeeze into the cockpit of a Nieuport scout, was thought to have the makings of a good pilot.¹⁴⁸

Fysh acknowledged that the development of TEAL had been a study in cooperation, 'because no one has done more to foster good relations and cooperation between New Zealand and Australia than our friend, Len Isitt, with his forceful but pleasant character and his ability to attract confidence and friendship. Let us take it on from where he has left us.'¹⁴⁹

In conclusion, Fysh quoted a magazine article which stated that Isitt, when he retired as CAS, 'has never had to make money out of airline operations.' Fysh was not sure what was implied by this comment but he thought that both NAC and TEAL had been quite successful financially as airlines.¹⁵⁰

Within a few days of Isitt's retirement, TEAL submitted to the Government a proposal to purchase Douglas DC 8 pure-jet airliners. As usual this proposal was submitted to an Officials Committee, and their report vindicated Fysh's remarks:

In the eight years since the Company converted from flying boats to landplanes, the airline has not shown a loss. Without Government subsidy of any description, and based on a shareholders' capital of £1.62 million, it has earned profits of £1.36 million; absorbed a loss of over £.5 million on the Solent flying boat realisation; paid Company taxes of £.3 million; paid dividends of £.29 million, and DC 6 and

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*

Electra aircraft have been purchased from airline resources. At present the Company has £.4 million invested in government securities.¹⁵¹

While, as Fysh said, the company was 'going through the painful experience of ceasing to be a monopoly',¹⁵² there is no doubt that Isitt left TEAL in a very sound position.

Whites Aviation devoted two pages to Isitt's retirement, covering his career with appropriate photographs and a written summary of his achievements. It made the point that Isitt retained the confidence of changing governments and government representatives, as being a man with whom one could reason. The publication also credited Isitt with a superb performance relating to the most difficult time of any war; the latter stages and the final rehabilitation. 'In terms of human time and in the mind, it requires something far above the average to adjust a complicated war machine to the days of peace and progress. Len Isitt did his share of that adjustment...These times required all the patience and the famous smile.'¹⁵³

Isitt was aged 72 at the time of his second retirement, and was still in generally good health. However, Elsie's health was continuing to deteriorate, and Isitt vowed to look after her.¹⁵⁴ They continued to occupy the Stowe Hill apartment in Wellington for some years after the war, but in the early 1950's he purchased a section at Golf Road, Paraparaumu and

¹⁵¹ ANZ EA1 Acc 2619 110/2/15 Pt 4, *Report of Officials Committee on External Aviation Policy*, May 1963.

¹⁵² Fysh Papers, Speech Auckland, 26 March 1963.

¹⁵³ *Whites Aviation*, March 1963, p.11.

¹⁵⁴ *Interview by author*: Peter Thodey, Interviewed 23 May 2006.

erected a comfortable residence on it. He devoted considerable time to developing the garden, and was rewarded with two 'Garden of the Year' Awards.¹⁵⁵ In addition, he became involved with the Paraparaumu Beach Golf Club, through his association with James Hunter. Hunter was a keen golfer, and was part of a group who were developing the Paraparaumu Beach links course into one of championship standard. Although not a golfer himself, Isitt was happy to assist the group in their endeavours, and gave them a great deal of support.¹⁵⁶ Very often the pattern of Hobsonville Sundays was re-created at Paraparaumu, with a houseful of friends or relatives enjoying the Isitt's hospitality.¹⁵⁷

When Isitt retired from NAC and TEAL he did not relinquish completely his commercial interests, becoming Chairman of Standard-Triumph New Zealand Ltd, Motor Assemblies Ltd and Leyland Motors of New Zealand Ltd until his final retirement in 1966.¹⁵⁸ In this capacity he hosted Lord Tedder, who was then chairman of the parent UK Company, Standard Motors Ltd, when Tedder visited New Zealand to view the car assembly operations. Photographs exist of the occasion, and the subsequent social gathering.¹⁵⁹ Out of loyalty to the brand, Isitt drove a Triumph motor car during his time as Chairman.

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Interview by author:* Yvonne Mark, interviewed 22 June 2006.

¹⁵⁷ *Interview by author:* Peter Thodey, interviewed 23 May 2006.

¹⁵⁸ C. Orange (Ed), *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography Volume Five 1941-1960*, pp.252-3.

¹⁵⁹ Thodey Papers.

Whilst he was still involved in the airline industry, he attended numerous conferences of the International Air Transport Association (IATA)¹⁶⁰ and the Pacific Area Travel Association (PATA).¹⁶¹ He served on the executive committee of IATA,¹⁶² and proposed his friend Hudson Fysh for the Presidency of that organisation.¹⁶³ Isitt served as President of PATA in 1959/60¹⁶⁴ and in this capacity was a guest on the inaugural Boeing 707 Qantas flight Sydney-San Francisco. Isitt was interviewed in San Francisco, and forecast that the reduction in transit time gained by the 707 from 28 hours to 14 hours would bring 20% of the world's tourists to the Pacific area by 1965.¹⁶⁵

Isitt was called upon on occasion to continue his pre-war advice regarding airport construction. He was closely involved with the committee which recommended the development of Wellington Airport in its present form.¹⁶⁶ In addition, Isitt was also consulted in regard to Nadi Airport, and the developments required to maintain international status.¹⁶⁷

Because Isitt lived in Wellington, he was occasionally featured in the Wellington papers as a local personality. One of these features was in the *Dominion* of August 1954, which supplied a potted history of Isitt's life together with some telling remarks about his character. It explained Isitt's decision to become an Air Force pilot:

¹⁶⁰ *Whites Aviation*, December 1950, p.15.

¹⁶¹ *ibid*, March 1952, p.7; April 1953, p.3.

¹⁶² *ibid*, November 1952, p.22.

¹⁶³ *ibid*, November 1960, p.28.

¹⁶⁴ *ibid*, September 1959, p.22.

¹⁶⁵ ANZ EA1 Acc 2619 110/2/15 Pt 4, *San Francisco Examiner*, 31 July 1959.

¹⁶⁶ *Whites Aviation*, September 1948, p.29.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, September 1949, p.37.

His real desire was to go farming; for four years before the war he had been a sheep station cadet in North Canterbury. But he had no money - or not enough at any rate to buy a farm. So he joined the New Zealand Staff Corps for air duties...his old love of farming has transmuted itself by force of circumstances into a passion for gardening at his Paraparaumu Beach home...

Yet for a man who has climbed high and stayed at the top, he has remarkably few enemies, or even critics who might be called harsh. He seems incapable of bearing a grudge and the concomitant of such an attitude has had the satisfying result in his case that grudges are not borne against him

Heavily built, with a rubicund countenance, a mild manner and often slow to speak, he has the qualities of wisdom and perception rather than those of brilliance or cultivated charm. He is a man who waits. He is a master of delaying tactics when the omens, in his view, are not favourable.

In his Air Force days, as a junior officer, Group Captain or Air Vice Marshal, he was never the stiff and formal type. Associates of those days say he thought of the men under him before he thought of his own position. Even when he was Chief of the Air Staff, an AC2, the lowest rank, could get in to see him.¹⁶⁸

The *Evening Post* of this era also used to run a weekly feature on handwriting analysis. The analysis, although non-dated, suggests a 1955 origin, as it was based on the submission; 'The second decade of the post war travel boom opens this year on a note of great...'

'Karaktus' interprets the character of this week's subject, a former distinguished service figure and now a prominent business man, thus:-

The keynote of this writing is rhythm; a harmonious alteration between tension and relaxation.

¹⁶⁸ ANZ, *Isitt Papers Misc 46, Dominion*, 21 August 1954, p.13.

People possessing this characteristic usually make their mark on society. It signifies the taking of a full part in life; a readiness for personal experiences, and a smooth solution of conflicts.

Note the crossing of the initial “T”; this indicates a spirit of protection.

The disconnected writing speaks of many ideas, intuition, and good observation.¹⁶⁹

Also from this era was Gordon Whyte, who acted as Isitt’s secretary when he was CAS, and again in the early NAC years. Whyte found Isitt a very quiet man, with a dry sense of humour. He was articulate, although in dictation could be uncertain until he covered an area with which he was familiar, when he could be very fast. Isitt always arrived at work early, and always behaved as a gentleman, never rebuking any subordinates in Whyte’s presence.¹⁷⁰

Also, it must not be forgotten the type of man Isitt was, as seen by his contemporaries. Driscoll, who knew Isitt well, first having been employed by him, and then working under him at NAC, assessed him in a revealing pen portrait. ‘Isitt was a man of consistently high principle and almost but not entirely inexhaustible patience. He had the appearance of a gentleman farmer, a disarming geniality and an astute appreciation of the political mind gained from a father who had been a member of the New Zealand Upper House.’¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ *Thodey Papers.*

¹⁷⁰ *Interview by author:* Gordon Whyte, interviewed 14 March 2006.

¹⁷¹ Driscoll, p.164.

In the late 1990's, an NAC 50th Anniversary Oral History Project was carried out, and interviews were conducted with several former NAC executives, including R. Kirkham, G. Growcott, A.C. Kenning and M.A. Ramsden. A common series of questions were put to each interviewee, and opinions were sought of Isitt and the early NAC Board. Kirkham thought that Isitt was a kindly man, but with a bearing which exuded his ability to command. Kirkham also thought that Isitt, with his service background, gave the appearance of wanting directions from the Government. However, Kirkham qualified this opinion, stating that he could be doing Isitt an injustice.¹⁷² In this regard, Isitt was always attuned to the Government's wishes, and this tended to colour his behaviour. He was not averse to employing delaying tactics when he thought the Government was wrong.¹⁷³ Kenning, in his interview, acknowledged that he had little contact with Isitt in the early NAC years, but this changed in Isitt's last years as Chairman. He always found Isitt fair, and a real gentleman. Kenning also made the telling observation that the Viscount was the only aircraft which NAC acquired which was not subject to political argument. The early Miles Marathon,¹⁷⁴ although manifestly unsuitable, attracted significant political pressure, while the economic pressures then facing New Zealand, muddled the decision regarding the Friendship. Nash, who was then Prime Minister, favoured the Herald for trade reasons, and instructed the NAC Board to buy this aircraft after having told the UK Government that this would happen.

¹⁷² ATL, OHInt-0439/3, Interview with Roger Kirkham, 14 September 1998.

¹⁷³ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Eden and Moeng, p.80. Originally designed by Miles Aircraft, production was taken over by Handley Page, after the Miles company suffered financial collapse. The aircraft, a four engine transport, was not a commercial success, and few were sold.

Strenuous lobbying about the safety concerns which NAC engineers had with the Herald's structure eventually caused Nash to change his mind.¹⁷⁵

Ramsden had a greater association with Isitt than the other interviewees and regarded him as a very capable and fine man. He thought Isitt was extraordinarily capable in his dealings with politicians of both persuasions, and had the ability to do the right thing. Ramsden thought the Chairman had a delicate role, but Isitt performed it well, being a charming man and very good for NAC. The NAC Board consisted of political appointees, and if there was a change of Government, Board changes were likely to follow. As a result the Board was closely aware of both Government thinking and that of the Minister. 'If the Minister sneezed, the Board got a cold, and management got pneumonia.'¹⁷⁶

It would be difficult to over-rate Isitt's contribution to New Zealand aviation and commercial airlines. Between the wars he was involved in every facet of activity - proving flights, aerodrome evaluation, instructing, licence assessment and aero club supervision. This was very much hands-on, ensuring that grass roots operations were viable, and could provide a continuing source of support for the cash-strapped Air Force.

Post World War II, Isitt's contribution was immense. He created a national airline out of a few fragmented operations, which was eventually able to

¹⁷⁵ ATL OHInt-0439/2, Interview with Allan Kenning, 17 September 1998.

¹⁷⁶ ATL, OHInt-0439/5, Interview with Matthew Ramsden, 13 September 1998.

offer regular services for the major population centres in New Zealand in modern aircraft. This evolution was far slower than Isitt desired, owing to Government parsimony in the development of airfields capable of servicing modern aircraft, but when Isitt retired NAC was poised to order its first pure-jet airliners. Similarly, under Isitt, TEAL developed from a three-way partnership operating a limited trans-Tasman operation, to the point where it was wholly New Zealand owned, and was poised to order pure-jet aircraft destined for international operations. Delays in airfield development were again the key to the slowness of this progression. It was not lack of vision or leadership on Isitt's part, as he was again constrained by political considerations in taking his preferred path. But when Isitt retired, both NAC and TEAL were rated very highly by international travellers, and he was the major contributor to the achievement of this rating.

Isitt's health became frailer with advancing age, and one of the last public functions he attended was the opening of the NAC Leonard Isitt Training Centre in Christchurch on 17 June 1974.¹⁷⁷ Photographs from this ceremony show him requiring the use of a zimmer frame so that he could stand to speak.¹⁷⁸ Elsie Isitt had died in 1970, and Isitt's slow physical deterioration took place thereafter. Circulatory problems in his legs necessitated the amputation of toes, and it was necessary for him to move into a nursing

¹⁷⁷ Waugh et al, p.311.

¹⁷⁸ *Thodey Papers*.

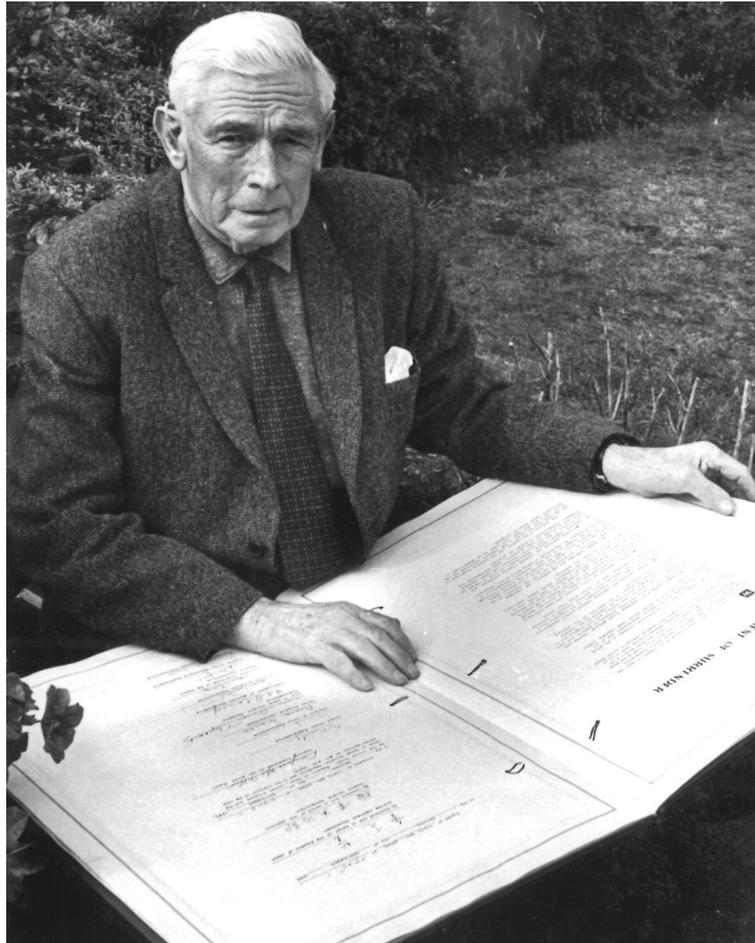
home at Maungaraki, Lower Hutt.¹⁷⁹ Lady Elliott recalled visiting him on several occasions, and he was invariably cheerful on these visits.¹⁸⁰



Isitt returns from fishing (Thodey Collection)

¹⁷⁹ *Interview by author:* Peter Thodey, interviewed 23 May 2006.

¹⁸⁰ *Interview by author:* Pauline Elliott, interviewed 31 May 2006.



Isitt with his copy of Japanese Surrender Document. (Thodey Collection)

The end came finally on 21 January 1976. A full military funeral was held at Wellington Cathedral at 1100 hours on 23 January 1976. Following the conclusion of the service at 1130 hours, the casket was uplifted by bearers and placed on a gun carriage for the funeral procession to Stout Street. The gun carriage was escorted by the current, and five former Chiefs of the Air Staff. A flypast of four RNZAF Skyhawk aircraft took place during the initial stages of the procession. At 1205 hours the procession departed for Karori Crematorium, arriving at 1220. A short service of committal then took

place, followed by three volleys from the Firing Party, and concluded with the Last Post and Reveille.¹⁸¹

Isitt had made his will in 1968, in which he appointed Chief of the Defence Staff, Leonard Whitmore Thornton, his nephew, as being sole executor. He left his estate to his wife, but in the event of her pre-deceasing him, two-thirds to daughter Annie, and one-third to elder daughter Nina. In 1973, Isitt made a codicil to his will, leaving a cash bequest to his housekeeper for her services, but in all other respects confirming his original will.¹⁸²

His house at Paraparaumu Beach still stands, and even today there are other legacies of his life. Wigram and Hobsonville have ceased to be RNZAF Bases, but Whenuapai and Ohakea remain active as the two major RNZAF flying stations. The RNZAF organisation and rank structure remains very much as it was when Isitt planned it in the 1920's. Air New Zealand, as the combined successor to TEAL and NAC still operates vigorously in a very competitive environment, both nationally and internationally. Two streets are named after him - one on the old Wigram station and another which is the main entrance to Auckland International Airport. Even today, rugby teams from RNZAF bases play for supremacy recognised by the Isitt Trophy.

Isitt had two separate careers, one in service aviation and the other in commercial aviation. While the detailed requirements in each may have been different, nevertheless in each case he had to answer to political

¹⁸¹ *Thodey Papers.*

¹⁸² *ibid.*

masters. The fact that he was able to do this with politicians of different political persuasion indicates how successful he was in his various roles.

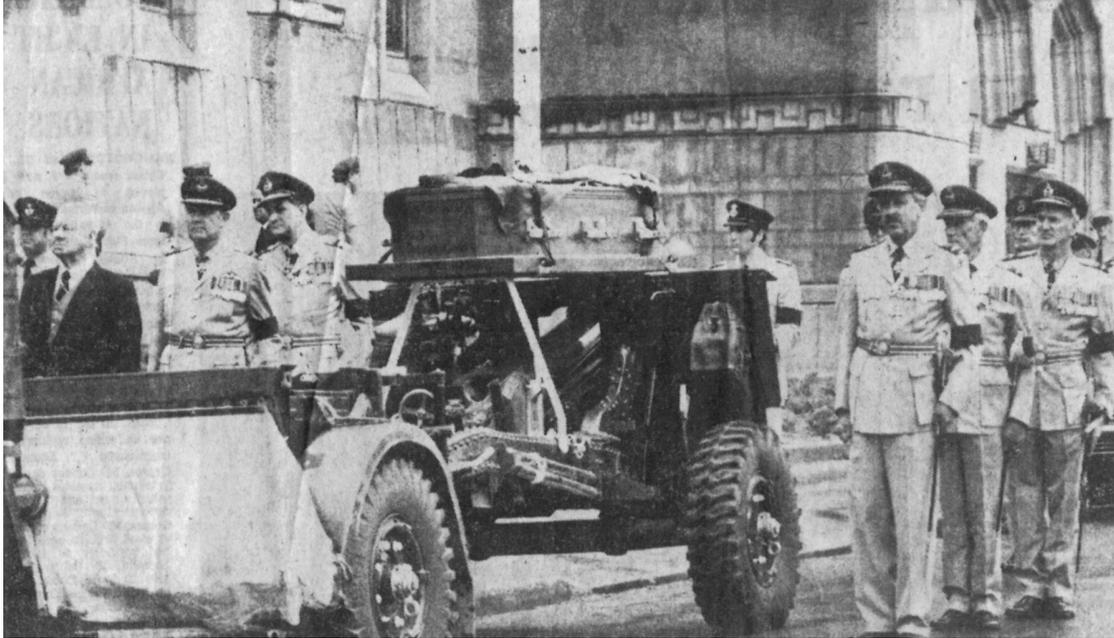
When talking to aircrew trainees or to his family, Isitt was fond of quoting aphorisms. One of his favourites was ‘You may think you are something at the office but always remember you are just a husband and father at home.’¹⁸³

But his greatest epitaph could be summarised as ‘Sustained effort throughout.’



Isitt at last public engagement, NAC Engineering Workshop opening, 17 June 1974. (Thodey Collection)

¹⁸³ Interview by author: Peter Thodey, interviewed 23 May 2006.



*Funeral Gun Carriage escorted by six former Chiefs of the Air Staff.
From left: A. de T. Nevill, C.A. Turner, C.L. Siegert, I.A. Morrison,
R.B. Bolt,
D.F. St. George. (Thodey Collection)*

CONCLUSION

By any standards Leonard Monk Isitt lived a very full life. He had been born into an influential family, with roots extending back prior to the first organised settlement in Canterbury. This gave him the opportunity to meet all levels of Christchurch society, and fostered a political awareness which he used effectively throughout his career. After leaving school he joined the Territorial Army, attaining the rank of Corporal, and enlisted in the Rifle Brigade in April 1915. He was immediately promoted sergeant and while on active service was selected as one of a handful of non-commissioned officers from the New Zealand Division chosen to return to New Zealand for officer training. He declined the opportunity in order to transfer to the Royal Flying Corps and become a pilot.

Isitt was trained to be a reconnaissance pilot, a role which fitted his temperament, and meant that he always flew with other crew members as opposed to the solitary endeavours of the scout fighter pilot. Reconnaissance aircraft carried out a vital role in spotting the effectiveness of artillery shoots, but they were also exposed to attack by enemy aircraft and anti-aircraft fire, as they had to remain at a position for extended periods of time. The RE8 which Isitt flew on his first tour of operations, had a reputation for high aircrew losses, but if flown skilfully had the ability to defend itself. In fact, Isitt's combat success was cited in the Official War

History, *The War in the Air*, as an exemplar in the handling of this aircraft.¹ In his second tour, Isitt was a flight commander, displaying leadership qualities in an effective manner. The fact that he survived two combat tours, confirms that he was not only a very able pilot, but he was also a lucky one, as casualty rates were very high.

After the war, Isitt stayed on in the United Kingdom for a period of nearly twelve months. During this time he undertook courses in aerial navigation, requiring the assistance of New Zealand political figures for him to obtain a place. He was seeking a career in New Zealand post-war aviation, hopefully in a New Zealand Air Force, but the possibility of commercial aviation could not be ruled out. Over seven hundred New Zealanders served in the RFC/RAF during the war, but the opportunities to continue in aviation were few. Isitt was fortunate in that he held command roles during the war, he was a qualified flying instructor, had enhanced his skills by taking the navigation course, and the majority of his flying had been in multi-seat aircraft. These were the type of aircraft with which the fledgling New Zealand Air Force was equipped, and assisted his application to join the service. Isitt probably had more useful experience than any other potential candidates at the time. Coupled with his desire to serve in a potential Air Force, together with his political connections, there was a compelling case for his selection.

¹ H.A. Jones, *The War in the Air*, Volume IV, p.175.

Isitt did not return to New Zealand until November 1919, and obtained the position of Military Equipment and Instructional Officer in the New Zealand Air Force, serving at Sockburn which in June 1922 became the New Zealand Air Force Depot, Wigram Aerodrome. He was in control of the aircraft and spares donated by the UK for the creation of an air force, and he took his responsibilities very seriously. This caused his strenuous reaction when MacGregor criticised the storage condition of some of the donated aircraft. Isitt took his complaints to the highest level, and was cleared of any malpractice, with the vigour of his protestations reflecting his determination to ensure that he was free of any unwarranted criticism. Isitt oversaw the establishment of New Zealand's first air force station at Wigram, creating an effective training base.

The Salmond Report was undoubtedly the genesis for Isitt's secondment to the RAF in 1926-27. Salmond had recommended the creation of a coastal - reconnaissance squadron in the Auckland area, and Isitt was sent to the UK with a brief not only to study this type of activity, but also to become involved in wider matters affecting air force administration. This tour provided him with the opportunity to gain experience in all facets of air force administration, and served as a practical substitute for a Staff College course. Isitt's approach to this assignment was one of dedication and effort, which resulted in the notoriously difficult to please Marshal of the Royal Air Force, Lord Trenchard, issuing Isitt with a very favourable report. Trenchard was known to be a hard taskmaster who seldom gave praise even when it may have been warranted. Such comments from a man of this character

speaking volumes for Isitt's achievements.² By the conclusion of his secondment, Isitt was well qualified for higher office in the event that any opportunities arose.

Isitt returned to New Zealand to spend the next ten years in charge of Air Force Station Hobsonville, then in the early stages of construction. He oversaw every aspect of the project, personally signing off each stage as it was finalised. Economic conditions caused delays in the progress of the works, but it was eventually completed as the first operational station equipped with bomber-reconnaissance aircraft. As Station Commander, Isitt was in a position to co-ordinate and effect initial relief efforts for the Napier Earthquake, and during the thirties co-operated to the full in joint activities with the Army in artillery shoots, and in fall of shot gunnery exercises with the Navy.

The election of the Labour Government in 1935, coupled with an improvement in economic conditions, led to an increase in defence spending within New Zealand. The Labour Government favoured aviation as a key component of defence activities, and initiated the Cochrane Report on air defence policy. This Report, by Wing Commander, the Honourable R.A. Cochrane, led to the creation of the Royal New Zealand Air Force in 1937, giving it independence from the Army. Also created was an Air Board, with

² Boyle, Andrew, *Trenchard*, London: Collins, 1962, p.110. Boyle commented on Trenchard's qualities as follows, 'Hence his ruthlessness in judging aptitude and character. He prided himself, not without reason, on being able to read people like books. His mind worked like the fixed blade of a guillotine, slicing people down to size. Yet, by and large, his verdict on men, arbitrary and intuitive as they mostly were, proved accurate.'

Cochrane as CAS, and Isitt as Air Member for Personnel. This was a demanding role, as expansion plans for the RNZAF were in full swing. Isitt sat on numerous selection committees for potential aircrew, both RNZAF and RAF, and had an extensive knowledge of most officers in the RNZAF, as at that time total officer numbers were less than one hundred. Through this knowledge he was able to ensure that officers with the appropriate skills were used to maximum advantage.

Cochrane was replaced by another RAF officer, Saunders. At the time of his two year appointment, Saunders had been informed that Isitt was to be his likely replacement. Because of the rapid build-up of the RNZAF, there was a shortage of suitable New Zealand officers to hold key roles in the service, and reliance was necessary on loaned RAF officers in many positions. This was accepted as a temporary solution to an existing situation, but the Government, working through Barrow, the Air Secretary, wished to reduce the long term dependency on RAF officers, seeing it as an avenue to enhance New Zealand's independence and growing maturity.

Saunders was quick to appreciate Isitt's qualities, and recognised that his one major deficiency was attendance at a Staff College Course. Hence the announcement in May 1939 that Isitt was to attend a Staff College Course in the UK later that year. Had everything gone to plan, Isitt would have attended Staff College, and spent some time in the UK at the Air Ministry, as well as visiting various RAF Commands, before returning to New Zealand near the end of Saunders' tour. However, these plans were overtaken by the

declaration of war in September 1939, and the creation of the Empire Air Training Scheme, which arose from discussions held in Canada during late 1939, attended by Saunders and Barrow. During Saunders' absence, Isitt served as Acting Chief of the Air Staff, and acted as a conduit for the numerous signals coming from Saunders. Most of the signals had financial implications, and Isitt took them direct to Nash, who was Minister of Finance, and bypassed Jones, the Minister of Defence. Although Isitt kept Jones informed of all developments, Jones developed a reticence in his subsequent dealings with Isitt, rarely offering wholehearted support.

The creation of the Empire Air Training Scheme necessitated New Zealand representation on the Advisory Board, which required Isitt's posting to Canada in early 1940 to oversee New Zealand's contribution, ostensibly for a period of two years. This posting was difficult, with the sheer size of Canada placing heavy physical demands on Isitt in coping with the travelling involved. In the early days there was a limited support infrastructure, and he was called upon to perform many tasks outside the scope of his assignment. As his posting in Canada neared its end, Isitt became concerned by lack of information as to his next assignment.

Although Saunders was anxious to return to the United Kingdom, and already had his term extended, War Cabinet felt that Isitt was still lacking current Air Ministry experience, and a third RAF officer, Air Commodore R.V. Goddard was appointed as CAS to succeed Saunders for a short eighteen month term. With Goddard was in place, Isitt had the opportunity of serving

in Washington and with the Air Ministry in London. When Isitt returned to New Zealand in early 1943, it was as DCAS, and he was ready to assume the mantle as CAS when Goddard's term came to an end.

One of the key questions of this thesis is to examine why Isitt was chosen for this position. The RAF had supplied the first three Chiefs of the Air Staff, as well as other officers in staff positions, and the time was now appropriate for a New Zealander to take the role of CAS. It was in keeping with the Government's desire to steer a more independent diplomatic policy, with a lesser dependence on UK influence. Barrow alluded to the desire to have New Zealanders in the key roles in Air Department. Another minor factor was the appointment of an RAF CAS to replace an Australian in the RAAF. The appointee fell out with the Australian Labor Party, and the New Zealand Labour Party was wary of a similar situation in New Zealand. The other deciding factor was that Isitt was undoubtedly the most experienced and capable officer in the RNZAF at the time. While Wilkes was senior to Isitt, he did not have the depth of experience which Isitt had accumulated, and his vitality had been blunted by the years of struggling to obtain funding for the Air Force. Although exceptionally able, Nevill also did not have Isitt's experience, so Isitt's appointment was a logical one in terms of the requirements of the time.

The Government wanted a commander who could ensure that the RNZAF made a positive contribution to the war in the Pacific. Manpower difficulties limited the effectiveness of the role which could be played by the 3rd

Division, leading to its eventual withdrawal and disbandment. During the early stages of Isitt's tenure, he worked closely with Admiral Halsey, commander of the South Pacific Region, and the RNZAF was an active participant in offensive operations. However, the situation changed in 1944 following the signing of the Canberra Pact which generated a negative reaction in the United States; the transfer of Halsey to command a Task Force; and the decimation of Japanese air forces in the South and South-West Pacific. It appeared that the RNZAF was destined for a purely garrison role, but Isitt was able to negotiate an active participation in the South-West Pacific Area. This may have been a relative backwater, but there was still a considerable Japanese force in the region, and the clearing operation took a lot longer than was originally envisaged. At this stage of the war the Americans had ample aircraft at their disposal, while there was also the difficulty of integrating the RNZAF squadrons into a different command structure.

The next key question relates to how well Isitt performed in his role as CAS. In general he carried out the requirements of Government in a capable and professional manner. Any differences were of a minor and transient nature. He always kept the Minister of Defence informed of any planned actions, and obtained advance approval for any changes. When manpower shortages became apparent, Isitt worked to ensure that staffing reductions were controlled by discharging surplus personnel without diminishing key capabilities. Wherever possible surplus RNZAF Stations were not held unnecessarily, but were closed and returned to civilian use. Isitt always

responded promptly to any requests for information, and submitted regular reports following his overseas visits.

In many ways the performance of the RNZAF during World War II was exemplary. The 1939 commitment to provide trainees for the EATS so that RAF aircrew requirements could be achieved, was met in full. This was a major contribution to the war in Europe. Second was the quality of support supplied by RNZAF squadrons serving in the Pacific. As fighter escorts they were peerless, but they performed with an equal capability as bombers, 'dumbo' rescue missions or as convoy escorts. While many of the RNZAF activities in the Pacific may not have been glamorous, they were very necessary duties, and were well appreciated by American and other Allied commanders.

Isitt developed excellent relations with other Allied Force commanders from the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. He represented New Zealand most ably in these dealings, and had the reputation of always making good on his promises. This also applied to the Empire Air Training Scheme, where New Zealand consistently met or exceeded its quotas, whereas Australia fell behind. While the strain on the New Zealand economy to maintain the structure of the RNZAF was high, the Government was prepared to accept this structure until Germany had been defeated and the Japanese surrender was only a month away. Following the end of the war, Isitt conformed to Government requirements of ensuring that maximum

discharge rates possible were achieved, even though this raised the possibility of hollowing out the force of essential personnel.

On balance he was a success as CAS, ensuring that the RNZAF carried out an active role and making a positive contribution to the war in the Pacific. He maintained the framework which provided New Zealand's contribution to the Empire Air Training Scheme, and supplied the RAF with over 7,000 trained aircrew, for the war in Europe. In political terms, he performed ably in the context of the conditions which he faced.

The fact that Isitt retained the confidence of the Government was illustrated by his being chosen to represent New Zealand at the Japanese Surrender Ceremony; his knighthood in January 1946; and his selection as Chairman of both NAC and TEAL. With the two airlines, the Government wanted a safe pair of hands whom they could trust to carry out their wishes without fuss. Isitt was mindful of the Government's desires, and ensured that their wishes were met. While these critical appointments were made by a Labour Administration, when the National government came to power in 1949, they had the opportunity to replace Isitt if they so wished. The fact that they did not do so, although changes were made to other Directors, indicates that they were satisfied with his performance. When Isitt retired, both NAC and TEAL were in sound shape financially and were performing an effective role in a difficult environment. Notwithstanding his lack of previous commercial experience, Isitt overall steered these two companies in a successful manner. He met the Government's expectations admirably.

By the end of his career, Isitt had amassed very few enemies. There were instances of people not agreeing with him, but generally they did not bear grudges. Even Clarke, although he felt that he had not been supported by the NAC Board, bore Isitt no long term rancour. Seabrook was another example, being disappointed when Isitt refused him command of a Station on his return from the United States, but who rebounded to join Isitt on the Board of NAC, and to propose a major toast at Isitt's Farewell Dinner. Gordon Whyte said that he never heard Isitt reprimand anyone in public. This did not any lack of firmness and Isitt could be quite steely if required. While his command style was relaxed, in no way did this diminish his demands for high standards. Driscoll described him as having great but not inexhaustible patience. His patience wore thin when people did not conform to his own standards of behaviour, or when he was criticised in what he perceived was an unfair manner.

His political skills were always well honed, and this assisted him during World War II to play the perfect double role. The Government wanted reductions of staffing in the armed services, and Isitt co-operated on the one hand, but slowed everything down at the same time. This applied to the Manpower review of the RNZAF, where he served on the Committee carrying out the review, and was successful in applying delaying tactics to avoid savage cuts in manning. He ensured that reductions in staffing levels were achieved in a structured manner, without prejudice to the effectiveness of the service. Another example occurred when the National Government

attempted to sell NAC in 1950, and Isitt worked behind the scenes, speaking privately with Prime Minister Holland, but more importantly working with Shanahan, who was in the Prime Minister's Department, and had access to all the Ministers involved. Goosman was the chief proponent of the sale, and much of the pressure for sale departed with him when he was replaced by T.L. Macdonald. Isitt had achieved his objective of ensuring NAC's survival without dismemberment.

Isitt did not hesitate to roll up his sleeves, and his first hernia was caused doing just that - assisting a mechanic to remove a heavy and awkward engine from a motor vehicle. When the Napier earthquake struck, he was among the first to enter the stricken zone, in order to provide assistance in a practical manner. Isitt also organised the initial Air Force Day at Rongotai in 1938. This was the first opportunity to display the RNZAF and its capabilities in public. The day was an outstanding success, and proved that the RNZAF had come of age. During the Second World War, when he visited Pacific Stations, he always made a point of listening to the problems being experienced. If it was in his power, he would endeavour to overcome these problems. Wherever possible he would carry out thorough inspections of the facilities, so that he could ascertain the conditions for himself, but also to ensure that standards were being maintained.

But there was one quality of Isitt which transcended all others, and that was his ability to make long-standing and deep friendships. One example was Hunter, whom he had met in the UK in 1926, and with whom he inter-

related consistently in later years. Hunter became Deputy-Chairman of NAC, and deputised for Isitt when the latter could not attend meetings or had to travel overseas. Clarke complained that Hunter's loyalty to Isitt was an impediment, but Clarke's chagrin emanated from frustration arising from his own inability to control the Board. Another person with whom Isitt established a rapport was Admiral Halsey, as well as with Halsey's Chief of Staff, Carney. During a difficult period of the War, Isitt was able to make promises of support, which he fulfilled in every instance. Had Halsey not been posted to command a Task Force, the role of the RNZAF in the latter stages of the war in the Pacific could well have been different, but Isitt had to work within the confines of the hand which he had been dealt. He did not have the opportunity to develop the same relationship with the American commanders, such as MacArthur and Kenney, as he had with Halsey. Their responses were correct and polite, but the Japanese Air Force had been eliminated from the South and South-West Pacific Area, and it was difficult to establish a finite role for a niche operation such as the RNZAF.

Isitt also had a good working relationship with the three RAF officers who preceded him as CAS. Cochrane was the most remote, but even he maintained contact after he returned to the UK. Both Saunders and Goddard were less remote, and were happy to correspond on a consistent basis after their New Zealand terms had expired.

In general, Isitt related positively with bureaucrats, especially Shanahan and Barrow. Although Shanahan's official titles were relatively prosaic, in

practice he fulfilled a vital role in the development of New Zealand's commercial aviation. Shanahan always exhibited a high level of confidence in Isitt, and utilised him to obtain delicate information from informal contacts which could be used as a basis for determining policy. This was especially the case when Isitt visited Australia, Canada and the UK, when on many occasions he was placed in a quasi-diplomatic role, especially in the case of BCPA, when he had to negotiate the early bi-lateral agreements with Canada. Barrow worked closely with Isitt for the whole period in which he served as Air Secretary, and was of valuable assistance in the post-war era when he served as Deputy-Chairman of TEAL. He was the counterpart of Hunter at NAC, supplying Isitt with constant support. Barrow was succeeded as Air Secretary by Rae, who had served with Isitt in Canada. Rae admired Isitt's capabilities, and wherever possible he supported Isitt when their activities intersected.

Isitt never had the privilege of commanding a squadron in action, being too junior in World War One, and too senior in World War Two. However, he did have the honour of commanding a service which reached its zenith in 1944, with a strength of over 44,000 service men and women, and operating over 1,300 aircraft in twenty squadrons. He ensured that the RNZAF performed an offensive role, and made an effective contribution to the war in the Pacific, besides supplying over 7,000 aircrew to the RAF for service in the European theatre of operations. This was certainly a very creditable performance.

In a continuum exceeding forty years, Isitt was intimately involved in New Zealand aviation. He fulfilled roles requiring leadership skills allied with patience. His greatest challenge came in wartime, when uncertainty and fear prevailed, he provided reason and confidence. He was a pioneer in New Zealand aviation, first as an aviator himself, and then as a leader. He always had a vision of that which he wished to accomplish, and then he fulfilled his goals with determination, tenacity and skill. Isitt is a classic illustration of the truth that the sum of a man's life is not measured by its accomplishments, but by how it is lived.³

³ Simon Nasht, *The Last Explorer*, Sydney: Hachette, 2005, p.xv.

APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY

ABDA - Acronym for 'American British Dutch and Australian - a command arrangement entered into after the Japanese attack of 7/8 December 1941, intended to coordinate Allied defence against Japanese aggression in South East Asia. The arrangement collapsed after the fall of Singapore and the battle of the Java Sea.

ADC - Aide de Camp - a military assistant to an officer of high rank.

Adm - Admiral.

AG - Air Gunner.

AMP - Air Member for Personnel.

Avenger TBF - US single engine aircraft manufactured by Grumman, used primarily for torpedo and bombing operations by the RNZAF and USN.

B25 Mitchell - Twin-engine medium bomber produced by North American. Used by USAAF and RAAF.

BCPA - British Commonwealth Pacific Airlines. An airline formed in 1946, with UK, Australian and New Zealand shareholding, to operate scheduled services between Australia and Canada.

BPF - British Pacific Fleet. The Royal Naval fleet commanded by Admiral Fraser in 1944, which was used in the Indian Ocean and later in the Pacific attached as a Task Force with the USN.

Canberra Pact - 1944 Defence Treaty signed between New Zealand and Australia recognising common defence interests.

CAS - Chief of the Air Staff.

CASP Chief of Air South Pacific.

Catalina PBV - US twin engine flying boat manufactured by Consolidated and used by the RNZAF for patrol, air-sea rescue and anti-submarine work. Also referred to as 'Dumbo' after Disney's flying elephant, when used on air-sea rescue missions.

CGS - Chief of the General Staff.

CinC - Commander in Chief.

CINCPAC - US Commander in Chief US Pacific Fleet (Admiral Nimitz).

CNS - Chief of Naval Staff.

CO - Commanding Officer.

COMAAF - Commander Allied Air Force.

COMAIRNORSOLS - Commander Aircraft Northern Solomons.

COMAIRSOLS - Commander Aircraft Solomons. Established on Guadalcanal on 15 February 1943 to control all USMC, USN, USAAF, RNZAF and RAAF units based in the Solomons. The main combat command for COMAIRSOPAC controlling air activities in the Solomons.

COMAIRSOPAC - Commander Aircraft South Pacific. Commander of all Land Based aircraft in South Pacific Command area. Responsible to Admiral Halsey and SOPAC.

COMINCH - Commander in Chief (USN - Admiral Ernest King).

COMSOPAC - Commander South Pacific Area - initially Ghormley and then Halsey.

COMSOUWEST - Commander South-West Pacific Area.

COMZEAIRTAF - Commander RNZAF Air Task Force.

Corsair - USN fighter aircraft designed by Chance-Vought which replaced the Kittyhawk/Warhawk previously equipping front-line RNZAF fighter squadrons. It was the most numerous aircraft type in the RNZAF, with 424 entering service in 1944/45.

COS - Chiefs of Staff.

Dakota C47 - a twin-engine transport aircraft, manufactured by Douglas, used extensively by the RNZAF.

Dauntless SBD - a single engine dive bomber, manufactured by Douglas Aircraft Corporation, which equipped only one RNZAF squadron.

EATS - Empire Air Training Scheme. A training scheme devised by the British Commonwealth to produce aircrew for the air offensive against Germany.

EFTS - Elementary Flying Training School.

ETO - European Theatre of Operations.

GOC - General Officer Commanding.

Harpoon PV2 - a USN twin-engine bomber-reconnaissance aircraft built by Lockheed as a successor to the Ventura PV1. Delivery delays meant that only four were supplied to the RNZAF.

Hudson - US twin-engine aircraft manufactured by Lockheed, and used by the RNZAF for patrol reconnaissance, anti-submarine and transport activities.

ITS - Initial Training School.

JATP Joint Air Training Plan.

JCS - Joint Chiefs of Staff. A Committee consisting of US Service Heads, Admiral Ernest King, General George C. Marshall and General Hap Arnold tasked with the co-ordination of US military strategy.

Kittyhawk P40 - the first modern fighter to be supplied to the RNZAF. It was manufactured in the US by the Curtiss Corporation in large quantities, with later variants being renamed as Warhawks. Deliveries comprised 297 aircraft.

Lethbridge Mission - a Military Mission (No. 220) despatched by the British Government in 1943 to the 'Pacific and Indian Theatres to investigate measures for the prosecution of the war against Japan.' It sent small parties into the forward area to gather information.

Lodestar C60 - a twin-engine airliner, manufactured by the Lockheed Corporation, and used by the RNZAF as a fast transport.

Manpower Commission - organisation in New Zealand tasked with the efficient use of personnel.

MAW - Marine Air Wing.

ME - Multi-engine.

NAC - New Zealand National Airways Corporation. Government owned corporation established in 1946 to operate scheduled air services in New Zealand and overseas.

NAS - Naval Air Station.

NAVS - Navigators.

NZEF - New Zealand Expeditionary Force.

NZAF - New Zealand Air Force.

NORSOLS - Northern Solomons.

NZPAF - New Zealand Permanent Air Force.

No. 1 Islands Group - the main administrative and command organisation of the RNZAF in the South Pacific.

Oboe One - Australian code name for the amphibious invasion of Tarakan by the Australian 26th Brigade Group.

OTU - Operational Training Unit.

PoW -Prisoner of War.

RAAF - Royal Australian Air Force.

RCAF Royal Canadian Air Force.

RFC Royal Flying Corps.

RNZAF - Royal New Zealand Air Force.

SE - Single-engine.

SEAC - South East Asia Command. Allied Command arrangement.

SFTS Service Flying Training School.

SOPAC - South Pacific Area of Operations. A US command that encompassed the Solomon Islands. From October 1942 to mid-1944 Admiral Halsey commanded this area. He was in turn responsible to the Commander, Pacific Fleet, Admiral Nimitz.

Sunderland - Four flying boats, manufactured by Short Brothers and Harland Ltd in the UK, were operated by the RNZAF from early 1945 on transport services to the Islands.

SWPA - South West Pacific Area.

TEAL - Tasman Empire Airways Ltd.

Thirteenth Air Force - (13th USAAF) - the USAAF unit that operated in conjunction with the 5th USAAF in the Solomon Islands.

USAAF - United States Army Air Forces.

Ventura PV1 - A USN medium bomber, built by Lockheed Aircraft Corporation, as a replacement for the Hudson's, with 139 being supplied to

the RNZAF. Included in these deliveries were 23 B34's, an early USAAF version of the PV1.

WAAF - Women's' Auxiliary Air Force.

Walrus - Single engine flying boat trainer, built by Supermarine in the UK, used in small numbers by the RNZAF.

WO - Wireless Operators.

Appendix B - RAF Courses 1926-27.

The list of courses undertaken by Isitt illustrates the capable and comprehensive manner in which he undertook the directive supplied to him by Wilkes:

M.A.E.E. Felixstowe	26 July-2 August 1926	To study latest types of
A. and A.E.E. Martlesham	3 - 9 August 1926	aircraft, land and sea

School of Photography	10 August- 13 September	Short Course
Farnborough	1926	

Calshot	14 September 1926-	Coastal Reconnaissance
	28 February 1927	Pilot's Course

HAD and Parachute	7-20 March 1927	Parachute Course
Section, Henlow		

No. 1 Stores Depot	21-27 March 1927	To study organisation
Kidbrook		and administration

Nos. 2 and 4 Stores	28 March-10 April 1927	
Depots		

Auxiliary Air Force	11-24 April 1927	
---------------------	------------------	--

Central Flying School Wittering	25 April-12 July 1927	Flying Instructors Course
RAE and School of Photography	18 - 31 July 1927	To study latest developments
A and A.E.E, Martlesham	1 - 14 August 1927	
M.A.E.E, Felixstowe	15 - 28 August 1927	
School of Army Cooperation Old Sarum	29 August - 30 September 1927	Short Course
HMS Furious	1 - 14 October 1927	Attachment
Calshot	15 October - 12 December 1927	To study organisation and administration of Seaplane Base ¹

¹ ANZ , AD1 Box 1057, 39/2/25 Isitt Reports.

Appendix C - Award Citations

In the 1946 New Year Honours Isitt was made a K.B.E. the citation for this award read as follows:

Chief of the Air Staff and Air Officer Commanding Royal New Zealand Air Force since July, 1943, Air Vice-Marshal Isitt has been associated with Service aviation since 1917, and with the New Zealand Air Force since 1919, when he was appointed military equipment and instructional officer. In the intervening 26 year he has occupied with distinction a wide variety of posts, both within New Zealand, and as a representative of the RNZAF in Britain, Canada and the United States, and since his appointment, to the senior post in the RNZAF over two years ago, has succeeded in maintaining personal contacts both with Allied Air Commands and RNZAF personnel in scattered theatres of war. His liaison with senior United States officers has been of special value. Appointed Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, in 1940, Air Vice-Marshal Isitt has continued to serve both his country and Service well, and his wise leadership, extensive experience and keen personal interest in all Service matters, have contributed to the success with which he has discharged his responsible duties in command of the RNZAF. The first New Zealander to occupy the post of Chief of the Air Staff Air Vice-Marshal Isitt, who served with the NZEF and the RFC and RAF in the last war, has again given distinguished service in the past conflict. He has visited many theatres of air war, both in Britain and in the Pacific, and he has applied the extensive knowledge he has gained to the best advantage of the force he commands. Its efficiency is a tribute to his leadership. Air Vice-Marshal Isitt had the distinction of representing New Zealand at the Japanese surrender ceremony at Tokyo at the conclusion of the Pacific war.¹

In the *New Zealand Gazette* of 10 January 1946:

His Majesty the King has granted unrestricted permission for the wearing of the under mentioned decorations conferred upon the officers of the Royal New Zealand Air Force named, in recognition of valuable service rendered in connection with the war:-

Conferred by the President of the United States of America
Legion of Merit (Degree of Commander)

Air Vice-Marshal Leonard Monk Isitt C.B.E. Chief of the Air Staff (NZ1002) of Lower Hutt²

The citation for this award was as follows:

For exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services to the Government of the United States while serving as Chief of Air Staff, and Air Officer Commanding, Royal New Zealand Air Force, from July 1943 to June 1945. With the concurrence of the Commander Allied Air Forces, Air Vice-Marshal Isitt was responsible for the formation of the New Zealand Air Task Force which, as an offensive air unit, has achieved an illustrious combat record during the crucial phases of the Solomons-Northern Solomons-Bismarck Campaign. A skilled and

¹ C.M. Hanson, *By Such Deeds*, Christchurch: Volplane Press, 2001, pp.271-2.

² *Isitt Personal File 1002*, NZDF Personnel Archives, Trentham.

forceful leader, exercising strong initiative and decisive judgement in handling the diverse and complex problems incident to the joint planning and execution of aerial operations in this theatre. Air Vice-Marshal Isitt contributed essentially to New Zealand's participation in the comprehensive Empire Air Training Scheme and, by his tact, brilliant professional ability and tireless devotion to duty, aided immeasurably in the successful co-ordination of Allied air activities in the prosecution of the war against our common enemy.³

³ Hanson, p.271.

Appendix D

RNZAF Aircraft on Charge

	31/3/43	15/3/44	29/3/45	31/3/46
Ventura PV1	-	61	83	74
Ventura B34	-	22	22	22
Harpoon PV2	-	-	3	-
Catalina	-	19	51	48
Avenger	-	46	21	12
Hudson	80	59	54	50
Corsair	-	-	249	277
Kittyhawk/Warhawk	76	162	132	123
Mustang	-	-	-	30
Dakota	-	6	27	45
Lodestar	-	9	9	7
Dominie	-	11	9	9
Harvard	105	133	155	149
Oxford	158	202	194	191
Anson	14	22	19	19
Tiger Moth	230	233	236	220
Hinds	26	-	-	-
Dauntless	-	-	22	22
Vincent	55	24	9	-
Walrus	4	3	6	4
Gordon	14	-	-	-
Sunderland	-	-	4	4
Singapore	2	-	-	-
Miscellaneous	<u>30</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>25</u>
	794¹	1035²	1328³	1330⁴

¹ ANZ, Air 103,20, *Annual Report 1944*

² *ibid.*

³ ANZ, Air 1 39/1/3 Pt. 44, *Annual Report 1945.*

⁴ ANZ, Air 1 39/1/3 Pt. 45, *Annual Report 1946.*

Appendix E: Japanese Surrender Document

INSTRUMENT OF SURRENDER



e, acting by command of and in behalf of the Emperor of Japan, the Japanese Government and the Japanese Imperial General Headquarters, hereby accept the provisions set forth in the declaration issued by the heads of the Governments of the United States, China and Great Britain on 26 July 1945, at Potsdam, and subsequently adhered to by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which four powers are hereafter referred to as the Allied Powers.

We hereby proclaim the unconditional surrender to the Allied Powers of the Japanese Imperial General Headquarters and of all Japanese armed forces and all armed forces under Japanese control wherever situated.

We hereby command all Japanese forces wherever situated and the Japanese people to cease hostilities forthwith, to preserve and save from damage all ships, aircraft, and military and civil property and to comply with all requirements which may be imposed by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers or by agencies of the Japanese Government at his direction.

We hereby command the Japanese Imperial General Headquarters to issue at once orders to the Commanders of all Japanese forces and all forces under Japanese control wherever situated to surrender unconditionally themselves and all forces under their control.

We hereby command all civil, military and naval officials to obey and enforce all proclamations, orders and directives deemed by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers to be proper to effectuate this surrender and issued by him or under his authority and we direct all such officials to remain at their posts and to continue to perform their non-combatant duties unless specifically relieved by him or under his authority.

We hereby undertake for the Emperor, the Japanese Government and their successors to carry out the provisions of the Potsdam Declaration in good faith, and to issue whatever orders and take whatever action may be required by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers or by any other designated representative of the Allied Powers for the purpose of giving effect to that Declaration.

We hereby command the Japanese Imperial Government and the Japanese Imperial General Headquarters at once to liberate all allied prisoners of war and civilian internees now under Japanese control and to provide for their protection, care, maintenance and immediate transportation to places as directed.

The authority of the Emperor and the Japanese Government to rule the state shall be subject to the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers who will take such steps as he deems proper to effectuate these terms of surrender.

Signed at TOKYO BAY, JAPAN at 0904. I
on the SECOND day of SEPTEMBER, 1945.

重光葵

By Command and in behalf of the Emperor of Japan
and the Japanese Government.

梅津美治郎

By Command and in behalf of the Japanese
Imperial General Headquarters.

Accepted at TOKYO BAY, JAPAN at 0908 I
on the SECOND day of SEPTEMBER, 1945,
for the United States, Republic of China, United Kingdom and the
Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and in the interests of the other
United Nations at war with Japan.

Douglas MacArthur
Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers.

W. H. H. H. H. H.
United States Representative

徐永昌
Republic of China Representative

Bruce Fraser
United Kingdom Representative

Sergei-Lavrentievich Popyand
Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
Representative

H. R. Blaney
Commonwealth of Australia Representative

Charles G. G.
Dominion of Canada Representative

Leclerc
Provisional Government of the French
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M. M. M.
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