

## LAUNCHING CIVIL AVIATION IN AUSTRALIA

I feel doubly privileged to be able to give this address today. First to be asked to speak, in a very small way, for the men and women who launched Australia's civil aviation industry on this day one hundred years ago.

Secondly because this ceremony is being broadcast as part of the fifth Aviation Cultures conference which is, as you know, being conducted virtually because of covid 19. That means I am the only speaker for the entire conference who has a real live audience. So I thank you all for coming today in what are, still, dangerous times. Our experience of the covid epidemic reminds me that a century ago the founders of Australia's civil aviation industry who were living with the Spanish Flue understood quarantines and lockdowns as we do, and as I think of them I wonder if any of them tried to imagine the impact that their work would have on Australia in the twenty-first century.

So here we are, today, celebrating the founding of an Australian industry which now employs more than 93 thousand people, has an annual revenue of more than 45 billion dollars, adds more than 18 billions dollars to the Australian economy and helps bind Australians to each other and to the rest of the world. A century ago none of that existed, so let me tell you a little about the people and the circumstances that launched this massive change to the way Australians now live and work.

Before the First World War flying in Australia was a scientific curiosity and public novelty that drew large crowds but little serious interest from government or business. During the war many Australians learned about flying in military forces overseas and when the war was over those who had survived came home to Australia during 1919. They included pilots, mechanics and officers, all experienced in flying, and in the organization of flying. Some returned with plans to create a civil aviation industry in Australia and a few also returned with the aeroplanes they planned to use to launch a new industry here.

They began promoting civil aviation with air shows and country tours; by selling joy-rides and doing anything else that would earn a quid and attract public attention. They set up aviation companies such as the Australian Aircraft and Engineering Company at Mascot in Sydney - which is now the site of one of the world's great airports - and the Queensland and Northern Territory Aerial Services - which is now one of the world's great airlines.

At the same time the Australian government began thinking officially about aviation in Australia. It was clear that Australia would need an air force for national defense, but it would be very costly so the Minister for Defense, George Pearce, suggested that a civil reserve could support the air force and make it less expensive. This led to consideration of what civil aviation could do for national development, activities such as helping to open up the outback and improve communications in the more settled areas. The possibilities seemed endless to those who thought about it and two politicians who did were the Prime Minister, Billy Hughes and George Pearce. Hughes, in his typical enthusiastic style, declared himself a 'fanatic for aviation'. Pearce was more taciturn but more practical, and together they pushed the idea of aviation in and for Australia.

(A reminder to overseas participants that Australia was a big, empty place. Australia is about nine tenths the area of the continental United States and in 1920 it's population was about 5.5 million, less than the population of New York alone at that time.)

Government plans for the future of aviation in Australia began to take shape in late 1919 but there was no significant development during the first half of 1920 because both Hughes and Pearce went to Britain to take care of government business there. In those days it took a month to sail to Britain and a month to return so people did not go to Britain for only a week or two, they went for months.

While Hughes and Pearce were away the government decided it would support aviation in Australia with an air force for national defense and civil aviation for national development. In May 1920 it decided to create an air force under the direction of an Air Board and to support civil aviation under the direction of a Controller of Civil Aviation, both arms of aviation to be directed by an Air Council. It decided that it would regulate civil

aviation to enforce safety and encourage it through the provision of services and facilities such as air routes, aerodromes and meteorological services. It decided to do these things because it believed aviation companies would have great difficulty in attracting investors to pay for them as well as the aeroplanes and other equipment and supplies they would need to start and stay in business.

Nothing came of the May 1920 decision until Hughes and Pearce returned to Australia later in the year. By then the fledgling civil aviation industry was about to collapse. It faced two serious problems, public attitudes to flying and lack of money.

It cost a lot of money to fly even a small aeroplane like an Avro trainer, around 16 Pounds an hour. To fund their flying aviators began by selling ten minute joyrides for 5 Pounds. This was profitable at first but at that time the average weekly wage was less than 4 Pounds a week so their market was rather limited. To make matters worse, after a customer had flown once there was little to encourage them to repeat the experience, so that source of revenue dried up fairly quickly. Aviators could raise a bit more by reducing their fares and getting occasional work carrying packets and newspapers, but towards the end of 1920 most civil aviators had either stopped flying or were on the verge of it.

The other problem was the public acceptance of flying as safe and useful because, as one early aviator put it, 'all the public reads about flying is about crashing'. By mid 1920 going to see an aeroplane fly had lost most of its novelty, but going in the hope of seeing a crash had not. And spectators were rewarded with reasonably frequent incidents to keep them interested, as were newspaper reporters and their readers. Reports of incidents, accidents and dangerous flying wrote headlines about the threat that flying posed to public safety and tarnished aviation's reputation. It became clear to everyone interested in aviation that the public would not entrust themselves or their goods to such a dangerous form of transport and that investors would not entrust their money to an industry that nobody wanted to use.

To solve these problems, aviators looked to the government for the support they needed in financial assistance and safety regulations. The government needed little encouragement and, with Hughes and Pearce back in Australia, events began to move quickly.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 1920 the government made a short announcement that the Minister for Defense was examining the question of civil aviation. Cabinet affirmed the May decision in the first week of September 1920, a few days later Hughes announced the decision in Parliament and Pearce elaborated in a speech a few days after that. The Air Navigation Act was introduced into the Senate by Pearce on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 1920 and passed after a very short debate. It then passed through the House of Representatives in short order on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November. Both second reading speeches emphasized the importance of safety regulations to the future of civil flying in Australia.

The Act was given Royal Assent on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 1920. It comprised four short paragraphs; the first three were administrative and the fourth empowered the Governor General to make regulations to control civil aviation in the Commonwealth and its territories. During the short debate one Member quipped that ‘All will be done by regulations,’ and so it was for many years.

On the same day that Pearce introduced the Air Navigation Act to Parliament, the 4<sup>th</sup> of November, he also advertised for applicants for the position of Controller of Civil Aviation, and Horace Brinsmead was appointed to that position on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December. He had been an experienced and respected officer during the war and had the support of almost everyone who mattered in aviation in Australia. Brinsmead attended the first meeting of the Air Council on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December 1920 at which Pearce agreed to his proposals regarding appointment of civil aviation staff and gave him the task of drafting the Air Navigation Regulations. Brinsmead may have already been working on them because he had a draft ready for consideration by the Attorney General’s Department in the second week of January 1921 and they were approved by the Governor General on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February that year.

Brinsmead also began gathering the staff for his organization. Advertisements inviting applications for the key positions of Superintendents of Civil Flying Operations, Aircraft and Aerodromes were published nationally from the 30<sup>th</sup> of December 1920, and the appointments were approved on the 10<sup>th</sup> of February 1921. They were; Edgar Johnson as the Superintendent of Aerodromes, Earnest Jones, the Superintendent of Flying and Frank Follett the Superintendent of Aircraft and Engineering. All three superintendents had served in the war

and were experienced pilots. The fourth key appointment was Stanley Crawford who had been promoted to become the Senior Clerk in charge of Branch's administration on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February. In addition there was a medical advisor, an administrative and clerical staff of six, a stenographer, three aerodrome inspectors and two engineering and airworthiness inspectors. They began work around the table in the Military Board Room of Victoria Barracks in Melbourne - and had to find other places to work when the Military Board met.

The Civil Aviation Branch of the Department of Defense began work officially when the Air Navigation Act came into force on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 1921. Civil aviation was placed under the control of the Department of Defense partly because of the close links that were to exist between military and civil aviation in Australia, partly because aviation was George Pearce's baby, and partly because doing so gave the Commonwealth the power to administer civil aviation under the Defense provision of section 51 of the Constitution. Nobody had thought to include Aviation in section 51 because it did not exist when many other powers were transferred from the States to the Commonwealth at Federation in 1901.

The Air Navigation Regulations were also gazetted on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 1921. They were based on the British regulations and comprised 98 sections that set standards for aeroplanes, pilots, flying, engineering, aerodromes and other aspects of aviation. They were not enforced until the 28<sup>th</sup> of June, however, so that pilots, mechanics, aeroplanes and aerodromes could first be tested or inspected and then licensed. Branch inspectors toured the country conducting examinations, tests and inspections and, by the end of October 1921, Australia had 60 licensed pilots, 96 licenced ground engineers, 18 licensed aerodromes and 50 registered aeroplanes - although only 38 had certificates of airworthiness.

Following the politicians and administrators came a third group vital to the development of civil aviation in Australia. In a speech to the Australian Aero Club in March 1921 Brinsmead spoke for the people and companies who would invest in Australian civil aviation when he said that they had one main objective in mind, making profits; 'as much as possible - and then more'. By the time the Branch began official operation it's staff were already hard at work on supporting commercial air services by planning Australia's first air routes and air services. On the day Edgar Johnson, a West Australian, was appointed as

Superintendent of Aerodromes he was still in Perth. There he received a telegram from Brinsmead instructing him to investigate the possibility of establishing an air service in Western Australia, which led to the launch of Australia's first regular public air transport service there in December 1921.

The government's civil aviation administration was created to support and nurture an Australian civil aviation industry but it would be up to Australians to invest in it if it was to succeed. Investors might have commendable motives for placing their capital in civil aviation, such as supporting an air force and national development, but they were unlikely to invest in loss making businesses. It was therefore the role of government to create an environment of aviation safety and an aviation infrastructure in which profits from flying could be safely made.

Australians invested more than capital in civil aviation, thousands upon countless thousands have invested their working careers, and sometimes their lives, in our civil aviation industry. They studied, they trained and they laboured to do the work necessary to build up and sustain civil aviation in Australia. From a workforce of less than 200 when the administration of civil aviation began on this day a century ago, they and the generations to follow created an industry that has enriched, enlivened and empowered Australia ever since.

So, while we cope with the problems that face civil aviation in the Twenty first century - and enjoy its many benefits - it is fitting that we remember and commemorate our humble origins, and the people who have, from that day a century ago, set us on the path we now follow.

Leigh Edmonds

28 March 2021