

APPENDIX No. 2.

CORRESPONDENCE RELATING TO FORMATION OF A.F.C.

Although the Australian Government did not of course attempt to prevent Australian civilians from enlisting in any British service, it came, mainly for national reasons, to set its face firmly against the policy, which for a short time had existed, of allowing privates or non-commissioned officers in Australian forces to apply for commissions in the British Army. Moreover, considerations of pay and administration induced both the British and Australian authorities to stop all transfers of men or officers between their respective forces. Such, however, was the importance of obtaining suitable men for the rapidly-expanding air service that the British authorities asked the Dominion Governments to allow the men of their respective forces to volunteer for promotion in the Royal Flying Corps. Although it had been made known to the British Government that this was contrary to the policy adopted by the Commonwealth, the request in this special case was urged in the following letter from the Secretary, War Office, to A.I.F. Headquarters, dated 11th July, 1916:—

I am commanded by the Army Council to inform you that, owing to the expansion of the Royal Flying Corps, a large number of officer pilots will be required during the ensuing year.

In view of the exceptionally good work which has been done in the Royal Flying Corps by Australian-born officers, and the fact that the Australian temperament is specially suited to the flying services, it has been decided to offer 200 commissions in the Special Reserve of the Royal Flying Corps to officers, non-commissioned officers, and men of the Australian Force.

In the interests of the Service, it is recommended that the policy regarding commissions in the Imperial Service being offered to non-commissioned officers and men of the Australian Expeditionary Force should be relaxed in the case of the Royal Flying Corps, as it is considered that a large number of valuable men would thus be available as volunteers for this most important branch of the Service.

I am to inquire whether there is any objection to this proposal; if not, the conditions of selection, appointment, etc., will be forwarded to you for communication to all concerned.

(Sgd.) B. B. CUBITT.

The consent of Australia was obtained, and on September 12th General Birdwood called for applications from the A.I.F. as follows—181 (21 officers, 160 others) from A.I.F. in France and Great Britain, 19 (3 officers and 16 others) from A.I.F. in Egypt; totalling 200.

The appointment was, in each case, to be on probation. The applications of 197 candidates were shortly afterwards forwarded by the A.I.F. Fourteen of the applicants, for various reasons—defects of eyesight, unsuitability, etc.—were not eventually appointed officers in the flying corps. The number of those who became officers in the R.F.C. in consequence of this invitation appears to have been 183.

Many of these served with great distinction in the British forces, but their record, along with that of many other Australians, belongs to the magnificent history of those services and could not be touched upon in these pages, even if—as is not the case—there existed in Australia any means of collating them.

Although the Australian Government was thus induced to make, in the case of the British flying arm, a notable exception to its general rule against cross-enlistments, the proposal subsequently made by the British Government, that the Dominions should inaugurate their own air services, was completely in accord with its policy.

The correspondence between the Australian Government and the British and Indian Governments provides an interesting description of the manner in which the Australian Flying Corps came to be formed, and traces its gradual growth from the first small beginnings.

Australian (Mesopotamian) Half-Flight, A.F.C.

Cable message dated 8th February, 1915, from the Viceroy of India:—"Could you provide any trained aviators for service in Tigris Valley? All our trained officers are in Egypt and England. If officers available, can you also send machines complete with motor-transport, mechanism, personnel, spares, etc.? We should prefer biplanes. If available, we should like particulars of machines. Should you be unable to send machines, we can obtain Maurice-Farman or Blériot types from England. Have you any aviators who have handled either type?" The Australian Government replied on February 10th, offering two airmen and necessary mechanics, but stating that no aeroplanes were locally available. The airmen would prefer Maurice-Farman machines because accustomed to Army-type machines.

In response to a further message from the Viceroy of India, the Australian Government cabled on February 26th:—"We will send four flying officers, about twenty mechanics and drivers, one motor-bicycle, one motor-car, three motor-lorries for tools and stores, two motor-vehicles fitted with repair machinery and tools, six waggons to carry spares and portable hangars for which it is proposed to supply mules. This provides a half-flight complete, and extra transport will only be required to send petrol, oil, and supplies along line of communications. Suggest an adjutant or staff officer be detailed from your troops. Five aeroplanes should be provided, Maurice-Farman pattern with Renault engines, but if Gnome engines only available, Blériot pattern best. Renault engine much more suitable to local conditions."

The details of the half-flight were communicated to the Viceroy of India in a cable message dated March 23rd:—"Personnel consists 2 captains, 2 lieutenants, flying officers; 1 sergeant-major, 1 staff-sergeant, 1 sergeant, 3 corporals, 12 others, total 18, all air-mechanics; 1 quartermaster-sergeant, 1 farrier-sergeant, 15 mule-drivers, 2 cooks, 4 batmen, total 23, all soldiers; 3 riding horses, 4 teams six mules, 2 teams eight mules, and 30 spare in case of difficulty with mechanical-transport in sandy country."

The Viceroy of India early in April requested "Very early despatch" of the half-flight to Bombay. In response to another request, for information as to numbers of, and ranks of, each trade—carpenters, blacksmiths, riggers—included in the eighteen air-mechanics, the Australian Government cabled on April 21st:—"Woodworker, 1 warrant-officer; woodworkers and riggers, 1 corporal,

5 privates; metal-workers, 1 staff-sergeant, 1 sergeant, 2 corporals, 6 privates; blacksmith, 1 private; total 18."

In May six more drivers and one wheeler were sent to the half-flight to complete revised establishment for the waggon section.

No. 1 Squadron, A.F.C.

Extract from despatch dated 20th September, 1915, from the Secretary of State for the Colonies:—"The conditions under which candidates from Dominions, who desire to serve in the Royal Flying Corps, can be accepted, are as follows:—

"(a) Officers must hold commissions in the forces of the Dominion, and must be recommended by the Dominion military authorities as suitable for service in the R.F.C. Should any be specially commissioned they should be appointed second-lieutenants of infantry. On arrival in the United Kingdom they will undergo a course of instruction in aviation, and, if they graduate as pilots, will be posted to the R.F.C., but if not, they will become available for service with the contingents of their Dominion.

"(b) Other ranks should belong to one of the trades (shown in schedule) and should be enlisted as 2nd Air-Mechanics (2/A.M.).

"It is thought that Dominions might wish to raise complete aviation units. Such units would take their place in the general organisation as units of the R.F.C., but will be given distinguishing designations. The most convenient unit would be a squadron. The advanced training of pilots and the instruction of the rank and file would be carried out in the United Kingdom."

Cable message dated 24th November, 1915, from the Secretary of State—"With reference to despatch dated September 20th, Army Council now states that, owing to completion of establishment of Royal Flying Corps, mechanics from Dominions cannot be accepted for enlistment. Above does not apply to men joining any complete aviation unit raised and paid for by your Government."

The first response by the Australian Government, dated November 24th, read:—"Reference your despatch of September 20th, Commonwealth Government desires to co-operate, but considers impracticable to organise complete squadron either in Australia or in conjunction with other Dominions. Two complete flights, total 12 officers and 68 other ranks of trained personnel, could be organised and despatched if acceptable, to be equipped and paid by this Government."

The Secretary of State replied on December 14th:—"Army Council suggest that if there are difficulties in forming complete squadron due to lack of suitable personnel, officers and men of Australian Expeditionary Force, many of whom have asked for employment in flying corps, could be used, and also some of personnel now in Mesopotamia. In this way Australian unit would be made identical with other units of Royal Flying Corps and could be probably kept wholly Australian."

This was approved by the Australian General Staff, and the Australian Government replied on December 27th:—"Commonwealth Government will organise a squadron, flying corps, 28 officers and 181 other ranks, for despatch in February."

Cable message, dated 12th January, 1916, from the Secretary of State:—"Army Council appreciate highly action of your Government in raising aviation unit. As personnel presumably will require further instruction before they can take the field, Army Council suggest that it would be most convenient if unit were despatched to Egypt, where training can commence at an earlier date than in England, and where also it may be possible to employ unit in same area as other Australian troops, though it is impossible to guarantee latter. Please telegraph when squadron will reach Egypt."

Cable message dated February 3rd, from Australian Government:—"Squadron, flying corps, with first reinforcements numbering twenty, will leave Melbourne about March 14th. Unit can disembark Egypt if so desired."

Cable message dated February 9th, from Secretary of State:—"Squadron should disembark at Egypt. Necessary equipment will be despatched to officer commanding 5th Wing, Royal Flying Corps, under whom squadron will be placed."

No. 2 Squadron, A.F.C.

Cable message from Australian Government dated 29th July, 1916:—"Australian Government offer personnel for a second flying squadron complete except seven observers and six pilots. Suggest deficiency be supplied by attaching officers Royal Flying Corps. Squadron could embark November. If accepted, please notify destination."

Reply from Secretary of State dated 15th August, 1916:—"Army Council grateful for personnel offered, but, in view of difficulty of training in Australia and urgent need of their services, consider very desirable that whole personnel should be despatched immediately to England to be trained. They recommend officers should be appointed to second-lieutenants only and non-commissioned officers for voyage only, and would propose to appoint Australian-born officer of R.F.C. to train and command squadron and select flight-commanders for winter training. War establishment of squadron is officers 36, warrant-officers 2, sergeants 18, rank and file 196"

Cable message from Australian Government dated August 22nd:—"Concur with proposal, but can send only some twenty-four officers. Personnel will be despatched October. Should first reinforcements accompany squadron, and are subsequent monthly reinforcements required for the two squadrons? If so, at what rate?"

Reply from Secretary of State dated September 2nd:—"Army Council would like flying squadron to be sent to England in September if transport can be arranged, and carry out whole training here. First reinforcements should accompany squadron, and these, with monthly reinforcements—two selected candidates for flying officers and twenty mechanics—should form reserve training squadron to fill wastage in two squadrons. Strength of reserve squadron might be kept up by volunteers from Expeditionary Force in England and France. Establishment of reserve squadron is 21 officers, 2 warrant-officers, 17 sergeants, 136 other ranks."

No. 3 Squadron, A.F.C.

This squadron was raised in Egypt and sent to England for training at the end of 1916.

No. 4 Squadron, A.F.C.

Cable message from A.I.F. Headquarters, London, to Australian Government, dated 22nd September, 1916:—"War Office desires to be informed total number of flying corps squadrons (service and reserve) which you might be able and willing to raise, and that for each two service squadrons one reserve squadron should be provided for training purposes and for replacement of wastage of personnel. Service squadrons, when ready, to be stationed on the various fronts to co-operate with their own troops. Mobilisation equipment of service squadrons to be provided by War Office, and resources of Royal Flying Corps will be made available for this purpose for training of personnel when training undertaken in Egypt and United Kingdom."

Reply of Australian Government dated October 2nd:—"Second Flying Squadron leaving October per *Ulysses*. Fourth Flying Squadron can be raised and despatched December, and monthly reinforcements at ten per cent. sent to build up two reserve squadrons for the four squadrons which will then exist, including Third Squadron already raised in Egypt. Is percentage of reinforcements sufficient? Squadrons and reinforcements will be incomplete as regards officers, majority of whom can receive only brief training aviation before embarkation."

Extract from cable message dated 2nd January, 1917, to A.I.F. Headquarters, London:—"Fourth squadron embarks *Omrah* 17th January, 1917."