

## Dreaming war: airmindedness and the Australian mystery aeroplane scare of 1918<sup>1</sup>

Brett Holman

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *History Australia* on 8 February 2016, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14490854.2013.11668467>.

I

While the Wright brothers achieved the first controlled, powered heavier-than-air flight in 1903, it was not until 1908 that the aerial age really began, with aeroplanes and aviators becoming the subject of widespread, even obsessive, interest from soldiers, journalists, writers, artists, and ordinary people everywhere.<sup>2</sup> In the historiography of the relationship between aviation and culture, this public response to the coming of flight is often analysed in terms of the contemporary neologism 'airmindedness'. For example, in his perceptive study of Russian aviation culture Scott Palmer uses

'air-mindedness' in reference to the particular set of cultural traditions, symbols, and markers that, combined with existing political culture and social institutions, constitute a given nation's response to the airplane ... Although Americans, Britons, Germans, and French may all be said to have been enthusiastic about aviation (or, air-minded), the specific manifestations of that enthusiasm (air-mindedness) were the products of those nations' unique historical and cultural traditions.<sup>3</sup>

Most definitions agree with Palmer in describing airmindedness as a largely positive quality — as an enthusiasm for aeroplanes, for aviators, for aviation and everything associated with it. It is true that just such an enthusiasm predominated in some periods and in some places, perhaps most: as Joseph Corn documents in the American context,

---

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank for their advice and assistance James Kightly, Michael Molkenin, Carroll Pursell, Phil Vabre and David Waldron, as well as the members of the Australian Historical Association's National Writing Cluster pilot, especially Fiona Davis, Kiera Lindsey and Sean Scalmer. He also gratefully acknowledges the receipt of an Australian Historical Association/Copyright Agency Limited Travel and Writing Bursary.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Wohl *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1908–1918*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Scott W Palmer *Dictatorship of the Air: Aviation Culture and the Fate of Modern Russia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006, 2–3. See also Joseph J Corn *The Winged Gospel: America's Romance with Aviation, 1900–1950*, New York: Oxford University Press 1983; Leigh Edmonds, 'How Australians were made airminded', *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture* 7, 1993, 183–206. Peter Fritzsche *A Nation of Fliers: German Aviation and the Popular Imagination*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press 1992, 4–5, does provide for both kinds of airmindedness in his definition.

the aeroplane was widely expected 'to foster democracy, equality, and freedom; improve public taste and spread culture; to purge the world of war and violence; and even to give rise to a new kind of human being'.<sup>4</sup>

But to define airmindedness in essentially positive terms misses a vital and widespread aspect of the cultural response to the coming of flight: *fear*. As Corn himself notes, the American response to aviation was exceptionally enthusiastic; other nations were more ambivalent.<sup>5</sup> Aircraft might transform society for the better, but it was also possible that they might destroy it. Alongside such positive forms of airmindedness, therefore, we also need to consider what might be termed negative airmindedness. This allows for a more balanced understanding of the cultural, social and political responses to aviation. As David Edgerton argues,

We tend to see aircraft, like other important technologies, as essentially civil in origin, even when their military uses are recognised. Aircraft appear as technologies of communication and of individual freedom, transcending the artificial barriers created by states. But aircraft, I argue, have been fundamentally a military technology, created by armed services and governments for national purposes.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, even such an apparently inherently pacific machine as the civilian airliner could be used for destructive purposes.<sup>7</sup> The concept of negative airmindedness reminds us that fear drove aviation as well as desire.

Britain perhaps provides the best example of negative airmindedness. While positive airmindedness always existed in Britain from, and even before, the earliest days of flight, it was soon overshadowed by a concern about the potential use of aircraft as devastating weapons of war.<sup>8</sup> From 1908, German progress in building Zeppelins led to widespread concerns that they could be used to attack Britain, resulting in political and press agitation for the creation of an aerial fleet for the defence of the nation.<sup>9</sup> During the First World War, Britain was indeed bombed by German airships and aeroplanes, killing nearly 1500 civilians.<sup>10</sup> The perception that

---

<sup>4</sup> Corn *Winged Gospel*, 34.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 44–46.

<sup>6</sup> David Edgerton *England and the Aeroplane: An Essay on a Militant and Technological Nation*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Academic and Professional 1991, xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Brett Holman, 'The shadow of the airliner: commercial bombers and the rhetorical destruction of Britain, 1917–1935', *Twentieth Century British History*, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Compare Rudyard Kipling, 'With the night mail', *Windsor Magazine* 23 (1905), 52–66 and H G Wells *The War in the Air and Particularly how Mr Bert Smallways Fared while it Lasted*, London: George Bell and Sons 1908. See also Michael Paris *Winged Warfare: The Literature and Theory of Aerial Warfare in Britain, 1859–1917*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press 1992.

<sup>9</sup> Alfred Gollin *The Impact of Air Power on the British People and their Government, 1909–14*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Barry D Powers *Strategy Without Slide-rule: British Air Strategy 1914–1959*, London: Croom Helm 1976, 11–74.

there was no adequate defence against air attack led to the theory of the knock-out blow from the air, in which London would be flattened by clouds of bombers in the opening stages of the next war, with hundreds of thousands of people dead from high explosive or poison gas or trampled in panic. By the 1930s Britain's vulnerability to bombing widely accepted as almost inevitable by politicians, public and press alike.<sup>11</sup> The perceived need to meet the aerial threat meant that far from corrupting a technology which was civilian in its pure form, the military aspect dominated British aviation from its earliest days.<sup>12</sup>

That negative airmindedness was a mass phenomenon in Britain is demonstrated by the episodes of panic which it could cause. The best-known of these is the fear of an attempted knock-out blow by the Luftwaffe during the Sudeten (or Munich) crisis in September 1938: while gas masks were distributed and trenches dug in parks, 150 000 people fled London for the safety of the countryside.<sup>13</sup> But perhaps even more telling — because they were not the product of official warnings of imminent danger — were the phantom airship panics. The first, in May 1909, was brought about by the realisation that Germany's Zeppelins were capable of reaching Britain, rendering it 'no longer an island'; people saw what they believed to be German airships flying at night over East Anglia and Wales, shining searchlights upon the ground.<sup>14</sup> The 1913 scare was sparked by the reported passage of an unidentified airship over the naval base at Sheerness in October 1912. The First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, had 'little doubt' that this was 'a German vessel', though he was more circumspect in Parliament.<sup>15</sup> By February 1913 more 'scareships' were being seen over Britain, usually at dusk, sometimes by crowds of thousands of people.<sup>16</sup> As in 1909, the mysterious visitors proved to be illusory and the scare subsided, but not before newspapers like the London *Globe* had argued that 'our country lies open not only to the incursions of the secret fly-by-night, but equally to the invasion by a determined enemy', demanding the immediate expenditure of £1 million on air defence.<sup>17</sup> Similar fears resurfaced in the early years of the First World War: a persistent rumour claimed that a Zeppelin was flying out of a secret base in the Lake District, leading the War Office to institute a

---

<sup>11</sup> Uri Bialer *The Shadow of the Bomber: The Fear of Air Attack and British Politics, 1932–1939*, London: Royal Historical Society 1980; Brett Holman, *The Next War in the Air: Civilian Fears of Aerial Bombardment in Britain, 1908–1941*, PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Edgerton *England and the Aeroplane*, 19–20.

<sup>13</sup> Richard M Titmuss *Problems of Social Policy*, London: His Majesty's Stationery Office 1950, 30; T H O'Brien *Civil Defence*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office 1955, 153–165.

<sup>14</sup> Gollin *Impact of Air Power*, 223–227, 238–244; David Clarke, 'Scareships over Britain: the airship wave of 1909', *Fortean Studies* 6, 1999, 39–63.

<sup>15</sup> The National Archives, CAB 38/22/42, minutes, Committee of Imperial Defence meeting, 6 December 1912; HC Deb, 27 November 1912, vol. 44, col. 1243.

<sup>16</sup> Holman, *The Next War in the Air*, chapter 7; F W Hirst *The Six Panics and Other Essays*, London: Methuen 1913, 103–118.

<sup>17</sup> *Globe* (London), 26 February 1913, 7.

fruitless aerial search.<sup>18</sup>

Britain's phantom airship scares were extensions of the concurrent dreadnought, invasion and spy scares, set in the context of the aerial age.<sup>19</sup> That is, they were manifestations of negative airmindedness. But equally, they were just one example of an international and perhaps transnational phenomenon, what we might call a Scareship Age. Mystery aircraft were seen in other times and other places: in the English-speaking world alone, there were waves of sightings in the United States in 1896–97, 1909–10 and 1914–16; South Africa in 1914; Canada in 1914–15; Australia and New Zealand in 1909 and 1918; and more.<sup>20</sup> Their value as indicators of airmindedness is enhanced by the fact that while most suggest the presence of negative airmindedness, some were much more positive: one conclusion aired in the Australian press regarding the mystery airships seen in 1909 was that they were the product of the 'astonishing number of inventors in these States ... at work upon aviation' who were vying for a government prize for 'the first Australian flying machine suitable for use in war'.<sup>21</sup> In general, in peacetime mystery aircraft could be seen as evidence for national technological aptitude, as was the case in the United States and, to a lesser extent, Australia. During times of national danger, however, they were nearly always believed to be hostile aircraft and hence signs of aerial vulnerability. The Australian mystery aeroplane scare of 1918 was very much a product of fear.

## II

In the autumn of 1918, after nearly four years of total war, Australia lay largely undefended. The vast majority of its military forces were far away, in western Europe and the Middle East, with most of the men in uniform at home engaged in administration, training or recruiting.<sup>22</sup> The nation's most capable warships were likewise on service in distant waters; those left behind were mostly colonial relics or

---

<sup>18</sup> David Clarke *The Angel of Mons: Phantom Soldiers and Ghostly Guardians*, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons 2004, 72–74; Christopher Cole and E F Cheesman *The Air Defence of Britain 1914–1918*, London: Putnam 1984, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Jan Rüger *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007; A J A Morris *The Scaremongers: The Advocacy of War and Rearmament, 1896–1914*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1984; David French, 'Spy fever in Britain, 1900–1915', *Historical Journal* 21, 1978, 355–370.

<sup>20</sup> Robert E Bartholomew, 'Phantom German air raids on Canada: war hysteria in Quebec and Ontario during the First World War', *Canadian Military History* 7, 1998, 29–36; David Michael Jacobs *The UFO Controversy in America*, Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press 1975, 32–33; Stephen Whalen and Robert E Bartholomew, 'The great New England airship hoax of 1909', *New England Quarterly* 75, 2002, 466–476. There are also examples of mystery aircraft scares from continental Europe, for example Scandinavia in the 1930s and in 1946, both, perhaps, attributable to fear of Soviet penetration. The UFO phenomenon, which began in 1947, may also be related. See Michael Swords et al. *UFOs and Government: A Historical Inquiry*, San Antonio: Anomalist Books 2012.

<sup>21</sup> *Mercury* (Hobart), 23 August 1909, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Ernest Scott *Australia During the War*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson 1941, 197.

civilian makeshifts.<sup>23</sup> From the youngest combat arm, the Australian Flying Corps (AFC), only a handful of aircraft were available, trainers with little combat capability.<sup>24</sup> None of this would have mattered if the war remained on the far side of the world. But on the afternoon of 21 March 1918, near Nyang, thirty miles from Ouyen in northwestern Victoria, Police Constable Wright saw something which suggested that it would not. As he stated in his official report the following day,

I saw two flying machines pass overhead. They were up an [sic] great height & appeared to be about twenty yards apart. I did not hear the noise of the machines. They proceeded in a Westerly direction & as the sky was particularly clear the machines were easily discernible.<sup>25</sup>

His account was apparently confirmed by Mrs Tilley of Ouyen, who saw two aircraft flying north at noon.<sup>26</sup> It was later reported that 'four independent witnesses have verified the sight of the machines'.<sup>27</sup>

This was only the beginning. Reports of mysterious aeroplanes from all around Australia first began to trickle, and then flood into police stations and intelligence units; around two hundred in all. On 18 April, a fourteen year old girl saw 'a balloon or zeppelin' near Bunbury in Western Australia; a man named Cave claimed that 'a seaplane' flew over Hobart on 30 April; employees at the butter factory at Kongwak in Gippsland watched 'an Aeroplane' fly overhead for more than three hours on the evening of 2 May.<sup>28</sup> While sightings diminished in number after the middle of May, they still continued to be reported right up until the end of the war: the minesweeper HMAS Coogee was still investigating a report that two aeroplanes had been seen from King Island a week after the Armistice.<sup>29</sup> What was going on?

The prevailing theory was that they were enemy aircraft, deployed by German merchant raiders operating off the Australian coast, or perhaps flying from secret aerodromes deep in the bush. Either way they were thought to be collaborating with German spies on shore, as evidenced by the lights sometimes seen flashing signals out to sea. It was feared that Germany was undertaking reconnaissance in preparation for an attack of some kind, perhaps on shipping or even on the nation's cities and industries. The war had come to Australia.

---

<sup>23</sup> Arthur W Jose *The Royal Australian Navy, 1914–1918*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson 1941, 373–374.

<sup>24</sup> F M Cutlack *The Australian Flying Corps in the Western and Eastern Theatres of War 1914–1918*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson 1941, 426.

<sup>25</sup> National Archives of Australia (NAA): MP1049/1, 1918/066, report, Constable J Wright, 22 March 1918.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., Directorate of Military Intelligence, General Staff, HB56, 'Aircraft, lights and objects reported seen in the air — summary and appreciation no. 3', 4 May 1918, 12.

<sup>27</sup> *Ouyen Mail*, 10 April 1918, 1.

<sup>28</sup> NAA: MP1049/1, 1918/066, telegram, District Naval Officer Fremantle, 22 April 1918; *ibid.*, Directorate of Military Intelligence, General Staff, HB64, 'Aircraft, lights and objects reported seen in the air — summary and appreciation no. 4', 11 May 1918, 11; *ibid.*, report, Constable A E Duvanel, 8 May 1918.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, report, Lieutenant Commander George D Warren, 18 November 1918.

Except that the aeroplanes did not exist; neither did the raiders, or the aerodromes, or the spies. No claims of German espionage were ever substantiated, despite the internment of seven thousand German-Australians.<sup>30</sup> No German raiders approached Australian waters after the winter of 1917.<sup>31</sup> No German aircraft had the range to reach Australia from Europe without many intervening refuelling stops in hostile territory.<sup>32</sup> And only a handful of civilian aeroplanes existed in Australia at the start of the war; and even fewer remained operational by 1918.<sup>33</sup> The aeroplanes seen in 1918 were for the most part delusions, an example of what Michael McKernan calls 'manufacturing the war': the result of an emotional need on the part of Australian civilians to share in the struggle of their soldiers fighting overseas.

Many Australians seemed to regret that the battles were fought at such a distance; they longed for direct experience and meaningful war work ... The Australians needed to manufacture threats and crises to make the war real and immediate; the claim that Australia was to be the 'first prize' of a victorious Germany was a product of this atmosphere.<sup>34</sup>

Or, as Minister for the Navy Joseph Cook said in a speech just days before Constable Wright's encounter at Nyang, 'Perhaps a few planes over Sydney dropping bombs would help Sydney to visualise the actualities of war ... We should be acting war, thinking war, and dreaming war'.<sup>35</sup>

The mystery aeroplanes of 1918 have been little studied. The official historian of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) in the First World War, A. W. Jose, provides a brief account, but despite his own peripheral involvement in the affair as naval censor he obscures as much as he reveals, implying, for example, that the scare ended on 23 April when in fact it peaked a week later.<sup>36</sup> Otherwise only scattered references are available.<sup>37</sup> This little-known episode in Australian history deserves some attention,

---

<sup>30</sup> Scott *Australia during the War*, 141–144; Gerhard Fischer *Enemy Aliens: Internment and the Homefront Experience in Australia, 1914–1920*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press 1989, chapter 5.

<sup>31</sup> Jose *Royal Australian Navy*, 342–369; Paul G Halpern *A Naval History of World War I*, Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 1994, 372–374.

<sup>32</sup> By far the longest nonstop flight undertaken during the war was that of the Zeppelin L59 from Bulgaria to the Sudan and back in November 1917, little more than a third of the distance to Australia: Guillaume de Syon *Zeppelin! Germany and the Airship 1900–1939*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2002, 87.

<sup>33</sup> At least 12 aeroplanes and 3 balloons were registered under the Aerial Navigation Regulations 1915, though the records were apparently poorly maintained after 1916: John Hopton, 'The 1915 register of civil aircraft', *Man and Aerial Machines* (31), September–October 1992, 60–62. See also Trevor W Boughton, 'Establishment of aircraft registration in Australia', paper presented to Civil Aviation Historical Society, 11 May 1994.

<sup>34</sup> Michael McKernan *The Australian People and the Great War*, West Melbourne: Thomas Nelson Australia 1980, 150.

<sup>35</sup> *Argus* (Melbourne), 18 March 1918, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Jose *Royal Australian Navy*, 364–365.

<sup>37</sup> Chris Coulthard-Clark *McNamara VC: A Hero's Dilemma*, Fairbairn: Air Power Studies Centre 1997, 52–57; Richard Guilliat and Peter Hohnen *The Wolf: How One German Raider Terrorised Australia and the Southern Oceans in the First World War*, North Sydney: William Heinemann 2009, 288; Scott *Australia During the War*, 107.

however, as it provides us with an opportunity to peer into the fears of war-weary Australians in the final months of a war which still seemed very far from being won. It was the product of years of fantasising about a German enemy within who were supposedly undermining Australia's war effort; the sudden belief in the spring of 1918 that the war might be lost, thanks to the apparent change of fortunes on the Western Front; and a new appreciation of the new possibilities of aerial warfare, drawn from news from the war overseas and the spurious claim that a seaplane from the German merchant raider *SMS Wolf* had flown over Sydney in 1917.



Figure 1. Locations of mystery aeroplane sightings in southeastern Australia mentioned in the text.

### III

Constable Wright's encounter at Nyang was quickly followed by a series of similar incidents, some reported at the time, some only weeks later: a bright light seen through a window early in the following morning at nearby Walpeup; sounds of an aeroplane engine near Port Esperance in Tasmania and Meerlieu in Victoria; a light moving above

the sea observed from Terrigal on the New South Wales central coast.<sup>38</sup> More incidents took place in subsequent weeks, but the main phase of the scare began in mid-April, peaked about two weeks later and ended around mid-May: around one hundred reports date to this period, about half the total for 1918. Smaller waves of sightings took place in late May and early July. After this time mystery aircraft were seen only sporadically, with weeks sometimes passing without any being reported. The geographic distribution of the reports was similarly skewed. Many more came from rural areas than from the urban ones, even though more than two-fifths of Australians lived in the capital cities. The bulk occurred in south-eastern Australia: only five came from Western Australia, and only two from Queensland. While there were significant clusters of incidents around Adelaide, Hobart, Sydney, and the south coast of NSW, the majority — about two-thirds — were in Victoria. Here, only the central and north-eastern regions were largely free of mystery aeroplane reports, which were concentrated in the west of the state, suburban Melbourne, and above all the arc from the Kinglake Ranges northeast of Melbourne around the southeastern coast through Gippsland to the Latrobe Valley.

The mystery aeroplanes most often appeared at night, given away by the lights they were presumed to carry or the sounds they were presumed to make. This account, by a South Yarra mechanic named Harry McDonald, is representative:

On the 21<sup>st</sup> April 1918, with my wife I was satying [sic] at my wife's uncle's place, Mornington Junction, and from 9.15 to 10.30 p.m. standing at the side of Mr Clipperton's place watching towards over Langwarrin Camp, I saw an object at a low altitude over the camp, then this object travelled out to sea towards Port Phillip Bay. This object was emitting intermitent [sic] flashes of red, green, and white light, with a flash; sometimes a few seconds elapsed between these flashes, and sometimes up to 2 or 3 minutes. The altitude varied considerably, the low altitude appeared near the water, and then it would rise and appeared to come towards us and then would go away. I cannot give any information regarding noise.<sup>39</sup>

When he and his brother officers on board SS *Koolonga* saw 'a dark square object' off Kangaroo Island, South Australia, Chief Officer Elms exclaimed 'God spare my days, that's a b----y Aeroplane!'<sup>40</sup> Descriptions could be quite detailed. A K Moore, a former naval officer residing in Hunters Hill in Sydney, could 'state definitely' that the four aeroplanes he saw late one afternoon 'were Biplanes, with butterfly shaped wings, which gave them the appearance of huge insects. When these aeroplanes banked he

---

<sup>38</sup> NAA: MP1049/1, 1918/066, report, Detective F W Sickerdick, 1 May 1918; Intelligence Section, General Staff, 'Summary of war intelligence no. T.4', 30 March 1918; letter, Sam. R Dawson, 2 May 1918; report, Sergeant W Morris, 3 April 1918.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., statement, Harry A McDonald, 30 April 1918.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., statement, Captain T J Wilson, 31 May 1918.



got a good view of them and they appeared to be of a different construction to our machines'.<sup>41</sup> Sometimes, however, the details strained credulity: a Mrs Conway informed the police at Yarra Glen that one moonlit night 'she saw an aircraft fly over Christmas Hills, that there were two persons sitting side by side in the aircraft, that they had caps pulled down over their ears'.<sup>42</sup> Very rarely, traces of the mystery aeroplanes were found on the ground after their passing, such as a 'hole in sand and fresh marks' at Tarwin, or the 'piece of iron, stained yellow', found at Ballarat West the morning after a flash of light and a loud noise had been heard by the Lewis family.<sup>43</sup> A drover named Sutton even claimed to have seen an aeroplane land in the middle of the night, not far from Macarthur, in response to signal rockets fired from the ground; he and his two young apprentices then saw the pilot get out and meet another man, and later take off again.<sup>44</sup>

Those who reported seeing or hearing one of the mystery aeroplanes were typically male, white and from the working or lower middle classes. The bulk of reports were from working men and small business owners living in country towns: butchers, electricians, shopkeepers, publicans, railway workers, rangers, labourers. Very few individuals from the upper-middle or upper classes claimed an encounter with a mystery aeroplane: the Dromana doctor who watched a light flying towards Flinders Naval Base before dawn was perhaps exceptional in this respect.<sup>45</sup> There were a substantial minority of female witnesses, most often married women like 62-year old Emily Bell of West Footscray, the wife of a factory furnace operator, who 'saw an aeroplane flying very low down ... carrying a very bright light in front' early one morning.<sup>46</sup> Others were young white collar workers like the Twist sisters, one a book-keeper, the other a music teacher, who provided the Macarthur police with concise written descriptions of the two strange lights they saw moving in the sky after walking a friend home late at night.<sup>47</sup> The single most common profession of witnesses was teaching; one was headmaster of Melbourne's Trinity Grammar.<sup>48</sup> Farmers were also well-represented: in one case near Charlton in June, eight simultaneously.<sup>49</sup> Reports from children or teenagers were rarely recorded, except where corroborated by an adult. One such case involved two Nelson boys who saw and heard an aircraft flying out to 'a large vessel' off the coast, which was also heard by patrons of the local pub.<sup>50</sup> Overall, then, the mystery aeroplane witnesses were reasonably representative of

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., memo, Captain W S Hinton, 30 April 1918.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., report, Constable Ramsay, 20 April 1918.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., undated letter, A M Black; memo, George Macandie, 24 April 1918.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., report, Constable G T Moyle, 19 April 1918.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., report, Constable Joyce, 22 May 1918.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., letter, Emily Bell, 30 April 1918.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., statement, Adelaide Twist, 18 May 1918; statement, Maud Twist, 18 May 1918.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., letter, Frank Shann, 12 May 1918.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., report, Senior Constable Connolly, 3 June 1918.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., report, Constable McLean, 17 April 1918.

Australian society as a whole, being drawn neither from its margins nor its heights.

While some sightings were reported to local or state newspapers, most witnesses first informed the nearest police station of what they had seen. From there the report was passed up the police chain of command or directly to one of Australia's military or naval intelligence organisations such as the Intelligence Section of the Directorate of Military Operations or the RAN's War Staff and Intelligence Branch. These took a very close interest in the mystery aeroplane reports, analysing them and requesting more information from the local police. Where possible, the most credible reports were followed up by sending investigators into the field to interview witnesses and seek out further evidence. Thus Lieutenant Charles Kingsford Smith of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC), then on convalescent leave after being wounded in action over the Western Front, was sent by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Military District's Intelligence Section to report on persistent stories of mystery aeroplanes at Terrigal on the NSW central coast. In fact, on 8 May the future aviation pioneer himself 'saw a small black object rapidly going inland ... I know how easily one can be deceived at night by falling meteorites, and passing birds, but I certainly think it was a machine'.<sup>51</sup> The most substantial field investigation was carried out on behalf of 3<sup>rd</sup> Military District by Lieutenant A Edwards, another RFC officer, and Detective Sickerdick of Victoria Police. The pair spent more than two weeks travelling around western Victoria, talking to known witnesses like Wright and Sutton and diligently tracking down further leads. Unlike Kingsford Smith, Sickerdick concluded that there was nothing to warrant further investigation: 'I do not believe that aeroplanes ever flew over the Mallee, and I believe the objects seen at different times and by different people, were either hawks or pelicans'.<sup>52</sup>

By the time Sickerdick made his report at the beginning of May, the scare was at its height: virtually all operational air and sea combat units in Australia had been mobilised in a search for the source of the mystery aeroplanes. The RAN reactivated its coastal batteries and assembled a motley fleet of small craft and old ships in order to strengthen its existing patrols around the southern and eastern coasts of the continent.<sup>53</sup> On 20 April, the commander of the Central Flying School at Point Cook was ordered to detach two armed aeroplanes to search for the enemy, one via HMAS *Protector* to Twofold Bay on the NSW south coast, the other to south Gippsland, the first coastal reconnaissance ever undertaken by Australian aerial forces.<sup>54</sup> The latter detachment was placed the command of one of the few pilots with combat experience available in Australia, Captain Frank McNamara VC, with orders to 'reconnoitre Wilson's

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., report, Lieutenant C Kingsford Smith, 10 May 1918.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., report, Sickerdick, 1 May 1918.

<sup>53</sup> Scott *Australia during the War*, 198; Jose *Royal Australian Navy*, 373–374.

<sup>54</sup> David Joseph Wilson, *The Eagle and the Albatross: Australian Aerial Maritime Operations 1921–1971*, PhD thesis, Australian Defence Force Academy 2003, 6–7.

Promontory and the vicinity for hostile raider or seaplanes'.<sup>55</sup> McNamara flew daily along the Gippsland coast and areas inland, keeping an eye out for 'hostile aircraft', 'floating mines' and 'signalling by persons of enemy sympathy'.<sup>56</sup> Despite his demand for his FE.2b to be equipped with bombs in case he found the enemy, McNamara did not encounter any resistance — apart from the aeroplane being hit by a stray bullet while flying over a rifle range at Welshpool.<sup>57</sup> The search along the NSW coast proved equally futile. On 9 May, the RAN informed the Admiralty in London that the 'Majority of aircraft reports have proved to have no foundation' and cancelled the precautionary order for coastal shipping to sail without displaying navigation lights.<sup>58</sup> By now the mystery aeroplane reports were starting to thin out; the scare was effectively over.

#### IV

The general assumption was that the mystery aeroplanes were enemy aircraft: as 'Anxious' of Brighton asked of the *Melbourne Herald's* editor, 'I would like to know if you thought this machine might be the German one that is about'.<sup>59</sup> But they were not always immediately interpreted as being German, or even aeroplanes. When Joseph Jenkin of Woomelang heard the sound of a motor shortly after 9am on 11 May 1918, he 'did not think to look into the sky for an aeroplane'. It was only later that he could 'feel confident that it was one', as he was unable find any fresh tire tracks in the muddy roads near his home.<sup>60</sup> This hints at the process all witnesses must have gone through as they tried to make sense of what they saw, sorting it through in their minds and piecing together information from various sources to form a working hypothesis.

---

<sup>55</sup> Coulthard-Clark *McNamara VC*, 54; NAA: MP1049/1, 1918/066, order, Major A J Boase (for Chief of the General Staff), 20 April 1918.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, memo, Major E L Piesse, 30 April 1918.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, letter, Petty Officer G Benson, 24 April 1918.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, telegram, Navy Office, 9 May 1918.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, letter, 'Anxious', 7 May 1918.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, statement, Joseph Jenkin, 16 May 1918.

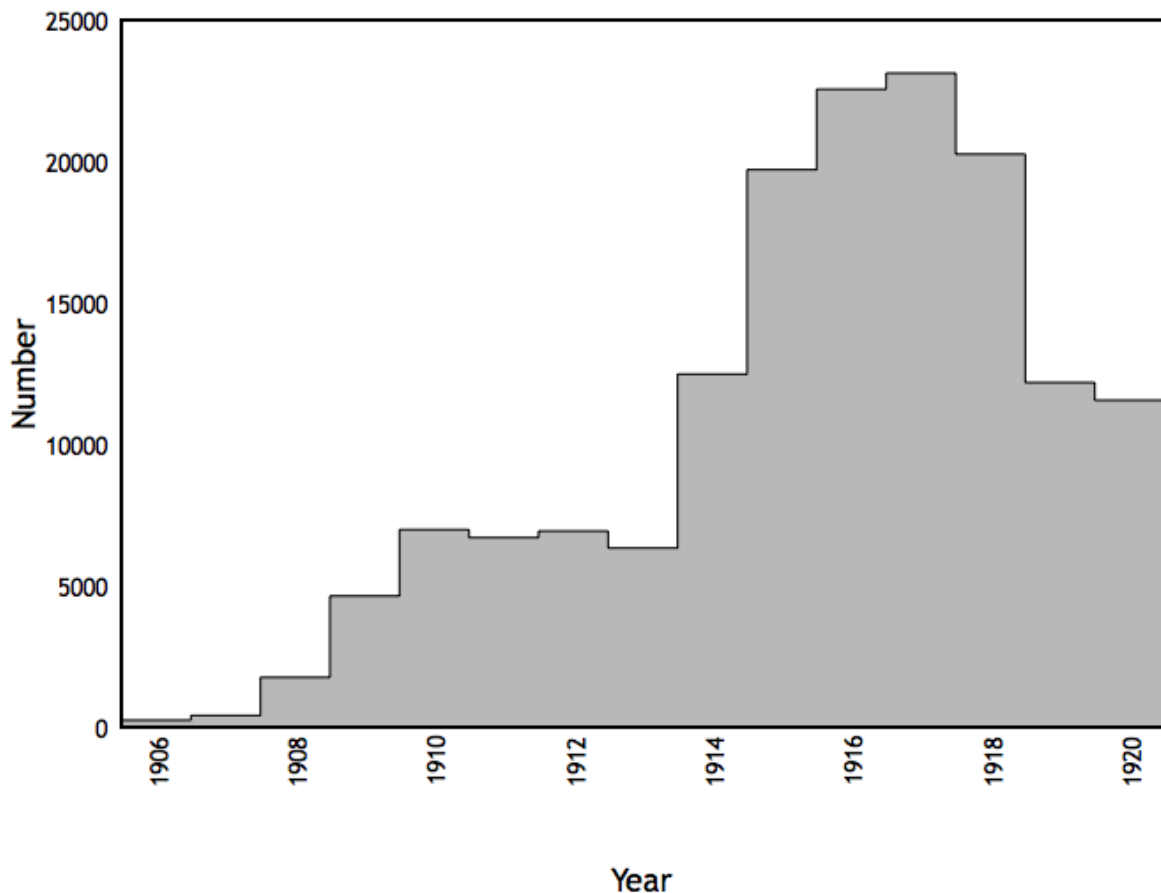


Figure 2. Occurrences of ‘aeroplane’ in Australian newspapers, 1906–1920. Data from ‘Trove Newspapers’, *National Library of Australia* via *QueryPic*. Accessed 15 February 2013. Available from [dhistory.org/querypic/5t/](http://dhistory.org/querypic/5t/).

The war years brought an increasing awareness of aviation and its possibilities. The first flights in Australia had taken place as recently as 1910, In the following years Australians began, in small numbers, to build and fly their own aircraft but the war largely grounded private flying. Some early barnstorming tours did take place and a flying school was established at Ballarat, but even these activities had ceased by the beginning of 1918.<sup>61</sup> While those living near the AFC training aerodrome at Point Cook and the NSW government aerodrome at Richmond, located outside Melbourne and Sydney respectively, would have gained some familiarity with aviation, very few people had yet seen real aeroplanes. The few witnesses who did have some experience were sure to emphasise this in their statements. But a lack of direct knowledge did not necessarily lead to doubt: one man admitted that ‘I have never seen an aeroplane before except in pictures’, but ‘was very firm about seeing the aeroplane and scorned

<sup>61</sup> Neville Parnell and Trevor Boughton *Flypast: A Record of Aviation in Australia*, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service 1988, 23–30; Des Martin and Bertha Carey *A Message From the Clouds: A Biography of Robert Graham Carey*, Australian Pioneer Aviator, Croydon: Edith Francis Martin 2004, 31.

the idea of seeing a flock of birds like one'.<sup>62</sup> The war itself taught Australians what aeroplanes were and what they were capable of. The press was a primary medium for this public education: thanks to the intense interest in the exploits of the 'knights of the air', the frequency of the word 'aeroplane' in Australian newspapers tripled between 1913 and 1918 (see Figure 2).<sup>63</sup> But the knowledge gained thereby was indirect, and the true capabilities of aircraft were therefore poorly understood. What seemed abundantly clear was their long reach and their destructive capacity. The German air raids on Allied cities like Paris and London proved, as the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted, that 'there are no more civilians, in the sense of non-combatants. All are now recognised as taking their part in the war'.<sup>64</sup>

This new sense that airpower could strike anyone, anywhere was vividly brought home to Australians early in 1918. In February, the German merchant raider *Wolf* returned to its home port of Kiel after a fifteen month-long cruise, which had taken it into Australasian waters in the southern autumn of 1917.<sup>65</sup> Not only had it completely evaded Australia's maritime defences and sunk a number of Australian and Allied cargo vessels, but the story soon emerged that its Friedrichshafen FF.33 seaplane had brazenly flown over a defenceless Sydney Harbour, unseen and unheard. This sensational, and probably untrue, claim was published in many Australian newspapers on 16 March 1918.<sup>66</sup> The *Melbourne Herald*, recalling rumours during the 1917 conscription campaign 'that a coach-driver in Gippsland and some other persons had seen an aeroplane circling over the country at a great height', asked 'WAS HUN RAIDER'S SEAPLANE OVER VICTORIAN BUSHLAND?' just three days before Constable Wright saw his aeroplanes at Nyang.<sup>67</sup> As another policeman wrote when reporting an aeroplane sighting at Terrigal: 'The rumour that a seaplane was seen over Sydney in connection with the German raider "WOOLF" [sic] will be remembered and this is a likely locality for a seaplane to hover and locate ships in the harbour and elsewhere'.<sup>68</sup> The claim that the *Wolf's* seaplane had flown over Sydney was clearly the immediate inspiration for the mystery aeroplane scare.

Another critical factor was the sudden change in fortunes on the Western Front, which unfolded in parallel with the scare in Australia. The German spring offensive which was launched on 21 March — actually a series of offensives spanning several

---

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, report, Lieutenant K O Mackenzie, 13 May 1918.

<sup>63</sup> John H Morrow *The Great War in the Air: Military Aviation from 1909 to 1921*, Washington, DC, and London: Smithsonian Institution Press 1993; Michael Molckentin *Fire in the Sky: The Australian Flying Corps in the First World War*, Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin 2010.

<sup>64</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 March 1918, 7. See Susan R Grayzel *At Home and Under Fire: Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2012, chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>65</sup> Guilliatt and Hohnen *The Wolf*; Jose *Royal Australian Navy*, 343–352.

<sup>66</sup> E.g. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 March 1918, 13. The seaplane was non-operational when the *Wolf* was in Australian waters: see Jose *Royal Australian Navy*, 347; Coulthard-Clark *McNamara*, 54.

<sup>67</sup> *Herald* (Melbourne), 18 March 1918, 6.

<sup>68</sup> NAA: MP1049/1, 1918/066, report, Morris, 3 April 1918.

months — at first gained an unprecedented amount of ground and at times threatened Paris as well as the Channel ports upon which the British and Australian armies depended for supplies.<sup>69</sup> By the end of the month, politicians in Australia could openly speak of the danger of defeat. Augustus James, the NSW minister for education, warned an audience of schoolboys that ‘At any time we may hear of the British forces being broken’:

The safety of Australia depends on England. Where will Australia stand if England is beaten in this war? What would we be able to do in the event of an invasion by a foreign army? We have neither the rifles nor the trained men, nor have we a submarine or aeroplane capable of use in any attempt to drive off any enemy.<sup>70</sup>

It suddenly appeared possible that, after nearly four years of stalemate and sacrifice, the war would be lost after all. The alarm only intensified when Field Marshal Haig issued his famous ‘backs to the wall’ order of the day of 11 April, first published in the Australian press two days later.<sup>71</sup> If Germany was ever to strike directly at Australia, it seemed that now was the time; and it was now that the most intense phase of the aeroplane scare began. The *Ouyen Mail* pointed out that ‘It is a rather remarkable coincidence that Constable Wright and the four others should have seen the machines the very day the present big offensive started’, asking the reader to ‘Think it out’.<sup>72</sup> In June, as the latest German offensive was drawing to a conclusion, the police at Healesville noted that the suspicious signals seen flashing from a nearby hill ‘are always shown when a big move is being made by the opposing armies in France’.<sup>73</sup> Germany’s resurgence simultaneously highlighted Australian weakness, especially in light of the failure of the second conscription referendum in December 1917 and the disappointing recruiting figures, and made an attack on the home front seem plausible.<sup>74</sup>

The idea that the enemy had extended its grasp to such unlikely places as Nyang and Healesville made sense only in the light of the improbable but widely-held conspiracy theory in which Germany was attempting to subvert the Australian war effort by every means in its power.<sup>75</sup> The RAN initially believed that SS *Cumberland*, which sank after hitting a mine laid by *Wolf* off Gabo Island, near the NSW–Victoria border, was in fact destroyed by saboteurs. The federal government offered ‘a reward of £2000 for information leading to the conviction of those responsible’, a sum increased

---

<sup>69</sup> David Stevenson *With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918*, London: Penguin 2012, chapter 1.

<sup>70</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 March 1918, 12.

<sup>71</sup> E.g. *Daily News* (Perth), 13 April 1918, 2.

<sup>72</sup> *Ouyen Mail*, 10 April 1918, 1.

<sup>73</sup> NAA: MP1049/1, 1918/066, report, T. W. C. Deeby [Deeley?], 3 June 1918.

<sup>74</sup> Neville Meaney *Australia and World Crisis 1914–1925*, Sydney: Sydney University Press 2009, 236–240.

<sup>75</sup> Fischer *Enemy Aliens*, 97–98.

by several state governments and other organisations.<sup>76</sup> Even after the true cause of *Cumberland's* loss was determined, suspicion persisted that *Wolf* had received information from a covert organisation in Australia, and that other raiders might make use of the same source:

Is there somewhere in this country a wireless apparatus at work that might keep a German rover in the Pacific aware of all that is going on amongst Commonwealth shipping. There is every likelihood of such being the case. What one thinks of is a well-appointed wireless station in some out of the way place, among unfrequented hills, probably, the operator being fed with information by contingents of German spies in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane.<sup>77</sup>

Those who reported mystery aeroplanes sometimes also volunteered information about suspicious locals, usually of German extraction, who they believed might be responsible. For example, the Minister for Defence, George Pearce, received a letter in connection with the 'two aeroplanes ... seen flying over Nyang', informing him that 'a late Officer in the German Army, by the name of Schefferdecker' lived nearby. The anonymous informant hoped that Pearce would 'see that the enemy officer is interned and not allowed to enjoy the same privileges as the parents of the boys from that district who are now at the front fighting'.<sup>78</sup> The subsequent investigation by Sickerdick and Edwards found no evidence of disloyalty on the part of the farmer, a naturalised German.<sup>79</sup> Similarly baseless accusations of espionage and subversion had been levelled at German-Australians since the early months of the war, sometimes linked with reports of mysterious lights seen in nearby hills or on the coast.<sup>80</sup>

Stories about *Wolf's* exploits, news of the reverses in France and fears of German spies all converged in the autumn of 1918 to produce the mystery aeroplane scare. This complex of rumour and supposition is well illustrated by a letter from James French, Maffra Shire secretary, informing the 'Intelligence Department' in Melbourne that the stationmaster at Maffra had seen an aeroplane 'going at a good bat with bright lights, making very little noise and there was no mistaking it'.<sup>81</sup> He further claimed that

For some time the residents of Seaspray on the Ninety-Mile Beach see bright lights westward of that place; supposed to be in the Carrajung Hills, and it was from here that Mr. J. M. Maclachlan, M.L.C., saw the raider 'Wolf' standing out

---

<sup>76</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 July 1917, 7. The rewards were not withdrawn until the following year: *Victoria Police Gazette*, 18 April 1918, 211.

<sup>77</sup> *Cairns Post*, 6 April 1918, 7.

<sup>78</sup> NAA: MP1049/1, 1918/066, anonymous letter, 25 March 1918. The accused's name was actually Schifferdecker.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, report, Sickerdick, 1 May 1918.

<sup>80</sup> Scott *Australia During the War*, 106–108; Fischer *Enemy Aliens*, 124–136; John McQuilton *Rural Australia and the Great War: From Tarrawingee to Tangambalanga*, Carlton South: Melbourne University Press 2001, 161–165.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, letter, James French, 24 April 1918.

for many hours one day ... It is quite evident that the material is carted into the bush and the planes are there fitted up. A friend of mine here met a lady from Healesville, who said she frequently noticed cars going up into the bush in that direction loaded up and returning empty.<sup>82</sup>

As bizarre as French's theory may seem, the Navy Office's working hypothesis at the end of April was along similar lines: 'Accepting all the reports as correct, and assuming that some or all of the aircraft are from vessels at sea, there must be at least four such vessels ... If the aircraft come from land bases, the number of bases must be at least four, and almost certainly several more than four'.<sup>83</sup> As it reported to the Admiralty on 27 April: 'Reports are being received daily of Aeroplanes seen in Victoria and South Australia ... King Island indicated as a possible base ... Aeroplanes may be in connection with some inland organisation'.<sup>84</sup>

While these theories were put forward with due caution by the Navy Office, there is evidence that Australia's political leaders were, for a time, seriously concerned by the possibility that Australia was menaced by German raiders and aircraft. On 23 April, three days after the start of the aerial search along the coast of Victoria and NSW, a number of newspapers published the following story under the dramatic headline 'WAR IN AUSTRALIA':

Within the past 48 hours information has come to hand which points to the probability that the realities of war will soon be brought before Australians in a most convincing fashion. Steps have been taken by the Defence authorities to cope with a situation which may at any moment assume grave proportions. More than this cannot be said for the present.<sup>85</sup>

That this vague warning was connected with the aeroplane and raider scare is evident from an article published the following day, which quoted Senator Pearce as saying in reference 'to the rumours, which were in circulation ... there was nothing that need alarm the public, but it had been thought advisable to take certain action [sic] of a precautionary nature to guard against any interference with our shipping'.<sup>86</sup> He then discussed 'the various reports of aeroplanes having been seen in certain places in Victoria' and ended by explaining how British and Australian aircraft could be distinguished by their markings from German ones.<sup>87</sup> Censorship of press reports about

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 'J. M. Maclachlan, M.L.C.' was actually J W McLachlan, MLA, a regular correspondent with the government on the subject of suspicious signals.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., Directorate of Military Intelligence, General Staff, HB53, 'Aircraft, lights and objects reported seen in the air', 28 April 1918, 12.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., telegram, Navy Office, 27 April 1918.

<sup>85</sup> E.g. *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 23 April 1918, 7; *Age* (Melbourne), 23 April 1918, 5.

<sup>86</sup> *Argus* (Melbourne), 24 April 1918, 9. This was apparently a reference to orders for merchant vessels to proceed without navigation lights.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. See also *Register* (Adelaide), 25 April 1918, 5.



mystery aeroplanes appears to have been imposed on this date: nearly all newspaper articles about the scare were published before 23 April, whereas the converse is true for notifications from the Censorship Office regarding suppressed reports.<sup>88</sup> If these actions were intended to calm public fears about mystery aeroplanes and raiders they took time to have an effect, for the scare was yet to reach its peak and the air and sea search continued for another two weeks: indeed, the reconnaissance aircraft were themselves the cause of a number of 'mystery' aeroplane reports.<sup>89</sup> It was not until 9 May that the Navy Office reported to the Admiralty that there was, after all, nothing to the scare and that in its view 'news of initial reports in spreading caused people to anticipate aircraft thus stimulating imagination'.<sup>90</sup>

## V

Even as imaginary as they were, the mystery aeroplanes may have played a part in the formation of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). One of the key documents in RAAF history is the request by Major-General J G Legge, Chief of the General Staff, that Cabinet immediately authorise a citizen air force comprising 300 officers, 3000 other ranks, 200 aeroplanes and 12 balloons. This initiative is usually presented as the result of the alarm caused by the German successes in France and the consequent fear of falling prey to Japan in the event of an Allied defeat.<sup>91</sup> But the timing suggests that the defence emergency at home at the very least strengthened Legge's case. He made his request on 29 April 1918, right at the peak of the scare. Nine days earlier, he had ordered nearly all of Australia's combat-ready aircraft, a pitifully small number, to search for the raiders presumed to be the source of the mystery aeroplanes. Just prior to this, on 18 April, he spoke about the aerial danger at a confidential meeting with senior newspaper editors in Melbourne:

These raiders are knocking about and some of them have sea planes. Supposing one came over Melbourne and said 'I will drop bombs on your banks I will give you such and such a time to send your money down to a certain place on the beach. If you do not do that I will blow you to smithereens.' You have not got a single gun here to shoot at them and you would either have to have your public buildings knocked about or give them your money. That is the position at present.<sup>92</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> E.g. NAA: MP1049/1, 1918/066, memo, Captain Finlayson, 23 April 1918. See Kerry McCallum and Peter Putnis 'Media management in wartime: the impact of censorship on press-government relations in World War I Australia', *Media History* 14, 2008, 17–33.

<sup>89</sup> E.g. NAA: MP1049/1, 1918/066, telegram, Hastings police, 20 April 1918.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, telegram, Navy Office, 9 May 1918.

<sup>91</sup> C D Coulthard-Clark *The Third Brother: The Royal Australian Air Force 1921–59*, North Sydney: Allen & Unwin 1991, 1–2; Meaney *Australia and World Crisis*, 421–422

<sup>92</sup> NAA: MP367/1, 437/1/115, Part 1, 'Press Censorship Conference', 16–19 April 1918, 221.

Legge was barely exaggerating. Baseless or not, the scare had cruelly exposed Australia's inability to defend its own shores from raiders and aeroplanes and hence the need for Australian air defence, in much the same way as London's vulnerability to the (very real) Gotha raids in 1917 had led to the formation of Britain's Royal Air Force on 1 April 1918.<sup>93</sup> Senator Pearce approved Legge's request almost immediately, though in the event the RAAF did not come into being until 1921.<sup>94</sup>

This cycle of threat and reaction is highly reminiscent of the pattern set during the colonial period, when periodic eruptions of anxiety about the possibility of French, Russian, Chinese or Japanese invasion led to fitful defence preparations such as the raising of militia units or the construction of harbour fortifications. The press played a critical role in initiating and sustaining these invasion scares, which ultimately resulted from a worsening international situation.<sup>95</sup> During the war, the possibility of a German invasion of Australia was used repeatedly to mobilise popular opinion and increase recruitment.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, in many respects, the mystery aeroplane scare was simply the invasion scare in an aerial form. But while the fears generated during the invasion scares were real, the threat was perceived to be imminent, but not actually present: few imagined that they saw foreign armies on Australian soil.<sup>97</sup> In 1918 the enemy, it was believed, was not without but within. Here the aeroplane scare overlapped with and merged into another, newer kind of scare, the spy scare.<sup>98</sup>

But while the mystery aeroplane scare had some of the characteristics of invasion scares and spy scares, it was also something quite different. There had been earlier mystery aeroplane scares in autumn 1917 and, provoked by concerns over the safety of the first ANZAC convoy, in October 1914, but these appear to have merely anticipated the 1918 scare on smaller scales.<sup>99</sup> More interesting is the 1909 airship scare, because it was not a scare at all. While it too involved nighttime sightings of aircraft of unknown origin — all the more mysterious because the first flight in Australia did not take place until the following year — they were not greeted with alarm but with curiosity and even enthusiasm.<sup>100</sup> Rather than heralding an attack on Australia, the mystery airships were generally seen as symbols of the forthcoming aerial age, perhaps even testimony to the ingenuity of Australian inventors lured by a £10 000 prize for the

---

<sup>93</sup> Powers *Strategy Without Slide-rule*, 90–93; Holman, *The Next War in the Air*, chapter 9.

<sup>94</sup> C D Coulthard-Clark *No Australian Need Apply: The Troubled Career of Lieutenant-General Gordon Legge*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 178–180.

<sup>95</sup> Robert Hyslop, 'War scares in Australia in the 19th century', *Victorian Historical Journal* 47, 1976, 23–44; Peter Stanley, "'Soldiers and fellow country-men" in colonial Australia' in M McKernan and M Browne (eds) *Australia, Two Centuries of War & Peace*, Canberra: Australian War Memorial 1988, 78–91.

<sup>96</sup> McQuilton *Rural Australia and the Great War*, 23, 31–32, 35, 143.

<sup>97</sup> For a wartime counter-example, see *ibid.*, 81.

<sup>98</sup> Fischer *Enemy Aliens*, 124–125; McQuilton *Rural Australia and the Great War*, 20–21.

<sup>99</sup> NAA: MP1049/1, 1918/066, memo, Piesse, 16 May 1917. See also McKernan *Australian People*, 159.

<sup>100</sup> E.g. *Western Mail* (Perth), 11 September 1909, 33.

design of 'an Australian airship capable of use in war'.<sup>101</sup> By contrast, the phantom airships seen several months earlier in Britain were generally assumed to be German and hostile, as were the ones seen in 1913 and, less surprisingly, during the war itself.<sup>102</sup> Similarly, New Zealand experienced numerous mystery aircraft sightings at around the same time as Australia in both 1909 and 1918; intriguingly, while the latter were interpreted in much the same way as across the Tasman, the former were often suspected to be of an airship flying from a German warship known to be in the South Pacific.<sup>103</sup> But in the United States, mystery aircraft were viewed benignly in 1896–97 and 1909–10, only becoming problematic during the war years when the large German-American community suffered the same kind of suspicion as their counterparts in Australia.<sup>104</sup> That is to say, Australian airmindedness in the first decade of flight appears more like airmindedness in the United States than in Britain or New Zealand: largely positive, except in wartime.

The mystery aeroplane scare of 1918 thus revealed a negative airmindedness on the part of the Australian public, an unease about the potential danger of the new technology of flight, as well as fear of the possibility of defeat and invasion. It was part of an international Scareship Age in which ordinary people repeatedly projected their fantasies and fears about aviation and the nation onto the sky. When combined with the increasing rapidity of communications by the late nineteenth century, new technologies, as yet little understood and hence unstable in meaning, were ideal screens upon which to project popular fears.<sup>105</sup> People saw what they expected to see, and when times were dark they saw dark things. The years of manufacturing war at home when the real war was so far away had primed Australians for dreaming war when it briefly threatened to touch their shores. While there were episodes of hysteria involving spies, raiders and aeroplanes earlier in the war, they only reached a climax in 1918, a year which is often portrayed as a relatively uneventful, if exhausted and war-weary, postscript to the second, more dramatic and divisive, conscription campaign in 1917.<sup>106</sup> Instead we should perhaps see it as the year when homefront morale began to

---

<sup>101</sup> *Mercury* (Hobart), 23 August 1909, 4. See C D Coulthard-Clark, 'Formation of the Australian armed services' in McKernan and Browne (eds) *Australia*, 137–138.

<sup>102</sup> David Clarke *The UFO Files: The Inside Story of Real-life Sightings*, London: Bloomsbury/The National Archives, 4–12.

<sup>103</sup> E.g. *Colonist* (Nelson), 2 March 1918, 4; *Poverty Bay Herald*, 8 April 1918, 2. See Peter Cooke 'The poor cousins: New Zealand's home defence', in John Crawford and Ian McGibbon (eds) *New Zealand's Great War: New Zealand, the Allies and the First World War*, Titirangi: Exisle Publishing 2007, 426–446.

<sup>104</sup> E.g. *Crawfordville Review*, 2 November 1915, 7. See Jacobs *The UFO Controversy in America*, 32–33; Whalen and Bartholomew, 'The great New England airship hoax of 1909', 466–476; Francis MacDonnell *Insidious Foes: The Axis Fifth Column and the American Home Front*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995, chapter 1.

<sup>105</sup> Carolyn Marvin *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 1988; Paul Boyer *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press 1994.

<sup>106</sup> E.g. McKernan *Australian People*, 8–9.

crumble under the shock of German military and naval successes in western Europe and Australasia, and ask what might have happened had the war continued for 'another ten or twelve years', as seemed so very likely.<sup>107</sup>

---

<sup>107</sup> NAA: MP367/1, 437/1/115, Part 1, 'Press Censorship Conference', J V MacDonald (editor, *Daily Standard* (Brisbane)), 148a.